

CAREERS CASE STUDY - THORNTONS

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'Egg-cellent' career options in food and drink

If you're already sick of the sight of supermarket shelves stacked with Easter eggs, spare a thought for workers at top chocolate manufacturer Thorntons, who've spent the past eighteen months developing this year's range of Easter eggs and treats. More than 6 million chocolate eggs will have rolled off the production line at the company's Derbyshire factory in time for Easter Sunday, and few have been closer to the action than chocolatier David Brealey.

As part of the company's new product development (NPD) team, David is in charge of purchasing the moulds that shape Thorntons' seasonal treats – from Easter eggs and bunnies, to chocolate Santas and Valentines' hearts. It's a job that requires creative flair and scientific understanding, as well as excellent communication and liaison skills. As David explains: "My job puts me right in the middle of the action, working with the whole chain of people responsible for devising new products. I help develop new recipes, work with the factory floor to make sure the finished product can be mass produced, and liaise with packaging designers and the marketing team to ensure the product can be easily wrapped, and will appeal to the public.

"I'm also in constant contact with the manufacturers of the moulds. I give them an initial brief, and they send me back a prototype that I use to make a one-off product, before modifying the mould design and sending it back for alterations."

After leaving school following his A-levels, David worked in retail for two years before joining Thorntons as a temporary worker when he was 20. Eleven years later, he's still there – having worked his way up from line manager to senior technician on the factory floor, he joined the new product development team six years ago. David has undertaken extensive training to equip him for his current role, including a business management course, an accountancy course, a BTec in sugar and confectionery, and a degree in food science and nutrition, which he completed last year.

“The quick route into my current job would have been to do a food science degree once I’d left school,” David explains. “But at that time, I had no idea this was what I wanted to do. I think working my way up and training while on-the-job has been beneficial, as I gained practical experience at the same time as I was learning the technical side of things. I won’t say it’s been easy – while doing my degree, I had one day off work each week to attend university, and I had to do the remainder of my studying during evenings and weekends.

“Ultimately though, it’s well worth it. I’m a complete foodie and love to learn about the science of food, and gaining a degree has certainly helped to further my career.”

A chocoholic’s idea of heaven, a large part of David’s job involves tasting new products. “When we’re inventing new recipes, or refining old ones, tasting is obviously an important part of getting the products just right. We always do it in the morning, before the tastebuds have been contaminated with lunch or too many cups of coffee.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, David is now something of a chocolate connoisseur. “People always ask me if I get sick of chocolate – and the answer’s no! I love it more now than I did when I started this job. I’ve travelled the world and sampled some of the finest chocolates, so my taste has got a lot more refined – for example, I can recognise a chocolate’s country of origin by its taste.”

You might think there would be huge competition to bag a job where you get paid to eat chocolate, but you’d be wrong. According to Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, the industry is suffering from a shortage of food scientists and technologists, and one in four jobs remain unfilled due to lack of appropriately trained candidates.

The problem stretches back to school – with fewer pupils choosing to study science after GCSE, the number of people undertaking food science degree courses is dwindling. In an effort to reverse this trend, Improve is working with universities in Wales to develop a Food Science and Technology conversion course at Masters level, which will offer graduates with a generic science degree a stepping stone into the industry. It’s hoped the scheme will eventually be rolled out across the UK.

Some food companies are also joining the drive to help address the problem. Northern Foods is one company that now offers bursaries to young people choosing to study food science at university, as an incentive for students to consider a career in the industry.

Meanwhile, David is keen to disprove the negative image that many young people have of the food and drink sector. "If you love food, this is a dream job. The work is never a chore – I never feel depressed on a Sunday evening knowing I have to get up for work the next day. It's exciting working at the forefront of such a fast-moving industry. There are always new challenges and opportunities - consumer demand constantly changes and, as food technologists, we have to respond to those changes. For example, we've recently removed all hydrogenated fats from our chocolates, so had to find alternative ingredients that didn't compromise the taste or shelf-life. We also help drive consumer trends – identifying what flavours are going to become popular, and working out ways to incorporate them into our products.

"Now is a great time to move into the food and drink industry – it's crying out for bright young people and there are massive opportunities. I'd recommend my job to anyone."

FACTFILE – CHOCOLATIER

Benefits

Aside from the never-ending supply of chocolate, there are plenty of opportunities to travel. Chocolatiers working in new product development are expected to visit suppliers, carry out competitive shopping in Europe and America, and attend international trade fairs to keep up with the latest developments. This year, David has already been to Chicago, Berlin and France and, while he's there to work, it's nevertheless something he enjoys. "There aren't many jobs that enable you to travel the world tasting top-quality chocolate," he says.

Downsides

The job is not good if you have to watch your weight. Says David: "Some of my colleagues watch what they eat outside of work to compensate for the chocolate we eat on-the-job, but I stay in shape with regular gym visits."

Salary

Salaries for research and development scientists and technologists range from £25,000 to £35,000. Food scientists and technologists in senior management positions could earn over £65,000.

Getting there

A degree is the preferred route, ideally in food science or technology, although a general science degree may suffice. It is also possible to start as a laboratory or factory floor technician and work up the career ladder, although this route is only feasible if you and your employer are willing to invest in further training.

Further information

www.improveltd.co.uk.

Ends

Note to editors

Improve is one of 25 sector skills councils established by the government to take the lead in driving up skills in the workplace in order to promote higher productivity and stronger competitiveness for UK businesses in the global market. Funded primarily by the government, sector skills councils are also supported by employers in their sectors, whose needs they represent when stimulating change among the providers of education and skills. Sector skills councils work closely with employers to promote greater commitment to improving skills in their workforces, and with schools, colleges, universities, and private training organisations to improve the provision of basic skills training and to make vocational and occupational training more relevant to the modern commercial climate.

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