

A Future in Chemistry

Your career starts here

Researcher (internship)

Jonathan Gellette

What is a Researcher?

I'm currently studying for my Masters in Chemistry (MChem), which is a 4 year course with 3 years at university and a one year placement in industry. For my industrial placement I am working as researcher for Procter & Gamble. A researcher is the person who is closest to the action – we're responsible for producing the scientific results and making recommendations based upon our findings for things like formula changes, or the immediate direction of a project e.g. a project to produce a new hair product or shower gel.

What do you do in your job?

I'm in the laboratory for the majority of the day; a lot of my work revolves around making samples which ultimately would be used for consumer testing. Before we get to that stage though, there is a lot of analysis, and fine-tuning of formulas and ingredients. Some of this work can take place outside the lab, around a table amongst your peers in meetings; with suggestions coming from colleagues who have had similar end goals but with products in mind. It's always great to get other perspectives before starting a lengthy piece of work! There's a fair amount of 'paper work' in the form of COSHH (care of substances hazardous to health) forms, lab notebooks and the logistics involved with organising studies and tests.

As an intern on an industrial placement, travel is relatively limited. However there's a fair bit of travel between sites and visiting academics associated with the business to use specialist equipment.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

The fact that in a few years I could see some of my work on the shelves in shops – that for me is a massive incentive. I really like the idea that I could one day design something that consumers could come to love.

What attracted you to becoming a researcher?

In general, most placements offer roles at similar levels (Graduate entry level or just below). The extent of responsibility and individual function will vary from company to company. For me, this role enabled me to take complete ownership and responsibility for my project, but still allowed a vast support network should the need arise. It was also reflective of the entry standard expected upon graduation.

Why did you choose your course?

I wanted to do a course that offered good employment prospects after graduating, and gave me the option of doing a year in Industry. I'd always been a fan of science and enjoyed the practical side of chemistry, so it seemed the natural choice was to do a Masters in Chemistry with a year in industry.



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How did I get started?

Initially it was all about making sure my CV was current and up to scratch. My university helped with researching appropriate content for the role and formatting my CV. I then began trying to find the names of potential employers, and looked through Chemistry World magazine for job adverts from companies I'd not heard of. I Googled as many of the companies as I could looking for their recruitment links or internship programs, filled out application forms and sent off my CV and cover letters. In total I think I must have applied to ten or so companies.



Of all of the industry placements I was offered, this placement gave me the greatest opportunity to develop not only as a chemist but as a prospective employee. I was also interested in working for a company that gives back to the community and has a pre-established, recognised and well-organised placement program.

I had decided I wanted a campus university and ideally wanted one with some greenery! I was really impressed with Reading – it's extremely leafy and natural and on the open day something just clicked. The Student Union was very well organised and seemed like one of the more proactive ones from the universities I'd visited.

How did you get in to your job?

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What are the opportunities for career progression?

Most people go on to do further study (a doctorate – PhD) or go back into industry once they have completed their degree. However, some people do find that working in a laboratory isn't quite for them and go on to other opportunities outside of Research and Development, such as graduate

What advice would you give for people wishing to enter your career area?

Excellent scientific communication skills and a willingness to learn new things is a must. A readiness for embracing change is key, as the consumer market changes rapidly and the variety of consumer needs is scarily big!

Developing your skill set is just as important as developing your scientific knowledge. Make sure you spend time developing your employability, be it public speaking, ICT know-how or time keeping. The saying 'Not all chemists wear lab coats' is completely true. You could spend all day in the lab, yet the next day need to present your results to peers and management. I found anything that exposed me to meeting new people – be it university societies or part-time jobs – prepared me the most for this year in industry.

With regards to starting work at a company like Procter and Gamble there are normally specific entry levels based on your education. One for those with a Bachelor of science degree (BSc – a 3 year undergraduate course) and another for those with a Doctorate (PhD – further study into a smaller aspect of chemistry) or Masters in science (MSc/MChem – 4 year undergraduate course), depending on the university you graduated from. This may be something you want to consider when you're thinking about what type of degree to do. The work generally requires a strong scientific understanding. Whilst specific reaction mechanisms do not need to be memorised by rote, you need to be able to analyse data. An appreciation for variables and knowing what makes a good experiment different from a poor one is also useful knowledge/experience to have.

Career progression

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Skills used

Writing concisely, Listening attentively, Reporting information, Analysing, Being punctual, Managing time, Attention to detail, Meeting goals, Organising.

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