

An Interview with Faye Allison, Team Leader for Chemicals North at SRG

Despite the initial shockwaves of last year's pandemic causing unprecedented disruption to the sector, most UK chemicals companies are now well on their way to recovering pre-COVID revenue and profit levels. With the industry slowly getting back on its feet, the chemicals recruitment market is once again starting to flourish.

To take stock of the current recruitment climate within the North West chemicals sector, we gathered the thoughts of Faye Allison, Team Leader for Chemicals North at the STEM recruitment agency, SRG.

1) What impact has COVID-19 had on the North West chemicals sector? COVID initially caused a huge slowdown due to delays and shortages of raw materials. In response, most companies halted their recruitment processes, with many utilising the government furlough scheme or making redundancies. Some even had to enforce temporary shutdowns.

Overall, though, the sector has emerged favourably from the pandemic. From H2 2020 onwards (and especially throughout 2021), the industry experienced a phenomenal recovery. Companies have quickly adapted working practices and diversified products when certain raw materials have been unavailable.

This dynamism has caused the number of job vacancies to rise significantly, particularly within segments that have been supplying raw materials to the vaccine effort (such as speciality chemicals and fine chemicals).

2) What are the key hiring challenges for the sector in the post-COVID world? The main challenge, of course, is finding the right talent. With the sector recovering so quickly, competition for talent remains fierce. Attracting the right individuals and moving quickly enough to keep them engaged will increasingly be a strategic priority for hiring managers.

With the chemicals recruitment market once again being candidate-led, people can now afford to be more selective about where they move. Indeed, most candidates will be involved in four or five recruitment processes, with potentially two or three offers already on the table.

As employee responses to SRG's annual STEM Survey demonstrate, flexible or agile working is also recognised as crucial to overall job satisfaction levels (even before the pandemic). Chemicals companies that can offer some form of flexible working for employees – when practicable, of course – will therefore stand out to candidates.

This comes with one major caveat: with most chemicals work being laboratory-based, offering flexible working requires striking a balance with operational efficiency.

3) Which factors do chemicals companies need to consider when looking for talent? Aside from forcing salaries up, the rising number of vacancies is casting a spotlight on factors such as flexibility, benefits, working environment, and progression prospects. Companies therefore need to consider what makes them attractive when hiring. They need to keep recruitment processes moving forward without big gaps between interviews, and, crucially, temper expectations when it comes to the calibre of candidate they are able to attract.

Waiting for the perfect technical fit in the current climate could mean waiting forever. In the long run, it may prove more cost-effective and beneficial to target people based on cultural fit, and then invest in upskilling and training to hone their technical capabilities.

4) Which trends will shape the industry in the near future? Based on recent hiring trends and common industry talking points, sustainability will be a huge driver of change as companies of all sizes strive to tackle the ongoing climate crisis.

A domino effect is taking place. As more firms adapt to societal trends and evolving industry standards, larger multinationals are beginning to streamline their supply chains and select chemical suppliers based on their sustainability credentials.

This sustainability drive can also be seen in companies switching their attention to Green Chemistry, which involves cleaner energy production (hydrogen evolution), bio-produced chemicals, plant-based chemicals, recycled plastic, and the commercialisation of bi-products.

5) Why does working in chemicals represent a great career choice? Even before COVID, the chemicals industry was a major contributor to the UK economy and a key part of the country's manufacturing output. Post-COVID, the industry will continue to boom and demonstrate just how crucial it is to society.

The robust and innovative nature of the sector means constant change and technological advances are inevitable, creating a genuinely exciting and dynamic environment for scientists to learn from and contribute to at any stage of their career. Chemicals is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, so offers real longevity for STEM graduates entering the job market.

SRG is the leading recruiter of permanent and temporary STEM talent for the UK, Europe, and the US visit srgtalent.com for more information.

Faye Allison

