

Career in Energy Management

The Energy Managers Association aims to encourage and enable more professionals to enter the world of energy management and environmental roles. Being an environment and energy manager may not seem like the most obvious career for many. The EMA has taken on a challenge of changing the perception of energy management and associated fields, by raising the sectors' profile and sharing insights into the career progress and achievements of leading energy management professionals.



In this issue, we have asked Laura Howlette, Environment Team Manager at Rushcliffe Borough Council about her career in energy management.

What made you to choose environment and energy management as a career?

I started my career working in a customer service call centre for an energy company, I didn't have a degree, or even A-levels and I was particularly useless with computers – the only thing I could remember from school IT lessons was how to save onto a floppy disk – a skill that was no longer in demand!

The company I worked for had an online training academy with lots of free courses, I really wanted to learn more but didn't have a computer at home, so I started staying behind for an hour a day to do the online courses and taught myself excel, PowerPoint – stuff that seems so simple to me all these years later, but back then it was a real challenge.

A manager from an entirely different department saw me, asked what I was doing, when I explained, her response was "there's a role on my team, I want to see your application by the end of the week". I got the job and started working for a department that covered projects and data analysis, the

opportunity was a turning point for me. I developed skills in project research, how to analyse basic data trends and put together business proposals – looking back, all skills that you need in an Environment Managers role. I joined the 'Environmental Champions' – an internal volunteer group whose focus was promoting recycling and energy efficiency in the office.

A year or so later a role for a Sustainability Coordinator became available – under 'requirements' was the line 'must have relevant degree or equivalent', but I didn't let that put me off, as a Champion I'd already done a lot of work with the members of the team who knew my capabilities. I gave a good interview and was hired for the role. Over the next 4 years I was involved in a wide variety of sustainability projects – water saving initiatives, energy, and waste reduction, I spent a lot of time collecting environment data and finding new and interesting ways to communicate it to staff. I was pushed out of my comfort zone doing roadshows and public speaking – something that used to scare me so much it made me feel sick! But I did well, and the company

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paid for training and additional environment qualifications. I even won an award for the company for one of my water saving campaigns.

I then applied for a secondment at a Power Station, it meant moving nearly 100 miles away but it was one of the best decisions I've made, I learnt about energy generation and was able to do external training to become a qualified waste manager. After the secondment ended, I moved back to my previous office, but not before taking time off after having my first child. While still on maternity leave, I applied for a role as an Environment advisor. I remember writing my interview prep and the presentation they'd requested with my baby asleep in one arm – not the easiest of things to juggle, but worth

it, as I was offered the role. My career at the energy company lasted a total of 13 years, at which point I was ready to move on, so when voluntary redundancy became an option, I said my goodbyes. Shortly after, the pandemic hit and the whole country was in lockdown.

I was lucky, I was contacted by a recruiter for a temporary maternity cover contract for Environment Manager at Ferrero Thornton's Chocolate Factory. At first, I was intimidated by the role; I'd never been an Environment Manager in my own right before and it was a lot of responsibility, but I quickly fell into the work and the variety of experiences from my previous roles really helped. There was a lot to do, the site had just been issued with a new Environment Permit and their environmental management system needed reviewing and updating, they had also just started on the course of installing their own CHP heating system. The challenges taught me a lot about leadership and the kind of manager I wanted to be, I found real confidence in myself and my abilities for the first time – it was definitely a case of learning to swim by jumping in at the deep end!

Shortly before my contract came to an end, I applied for my current role as Environment Team Manager for Rushcliffe Borough Council. My colleagues at Ferrero were so happy for me when I told them I'd been offered the job, it was sad to say goodbye, but I was excited by my new challenge of working in local authority.

What does your role at your organisation entail?

My role at Rushcliffe Borough Council is exciting and varied, I have a small team of direct reports and the key thing that falls under my remit is the council's commitment to being

Carbon Neutral for our own operations by 2030. I was really impressed at just how much focus is given to environment initiatives in Rushcliffe, under their overarching 'Carbon Clever' campaign there are activities such as LED lighting in buildings, looking into greener options for refuse vehicles, how to make events more sustainable or installing EV charging in council owned carparks – every department in the council operates with sustainability in mind.

In my own department I oversee an ecologist who's developed a robust Biodiversity action plan and 'tree-planting' plans, as well as a Country Park Manager whose park is about to undergo an ambitious re-development to become more sustainable, including the installation of solar PV and sustainable heating solutions to provide the energy needs of the site as well as adopting electric tools and vehicles to replace the petrol ones.

I'm currently leading on the government funded 'LAD2' project, with an aim to install energy saving options such as external wall insulations, loft insulation and solar panels in qualifying houses within the borough to improve the energy efficiency of those buildings for the residents. We've also partnered with other Local Authorities within Nottinghamshire to develop a 'Green Rewards' scheme to get local residents taking action to reduce their carbon footprint and win prizes.

What is the most exciting part of your job?

For me it's all about the people I get to meet. Environment roles are unique in that they touch onto almost every other department – procurement, fleet, buildings, communications. You end up getting to know almost everyone internally as well as engaging with the public, local businesses and MPs. I really enjoy

getting to know people and learning about their jobs, their life, what they're passionate about – almost everyone has an opinion when it comes to environmental issues and it's always interesting to hear from other people's experiences and points of view.

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What is your biggest achievement to date?

During my time at Ferrero Thorntons, I made a commitment to qualify the factory for ISO 14001 – something Ferrero group were keen to have for all their sites. It meant I had a year to take a factory from the bare bones of a management system to compliance with the ISO Standard, the whole time during a global pandemic, with all the associated stress and people shortages. It was a hard year, I had to make a lot of changes to processes and policies, and I had to bring the whole factory on that journey with me through huge amounts of training and communications.

Due to timing and covid relating issues our pre-audit got cancelled, so, six weeks before my contract came to an end, we went straight into the certification audit, with no pre-audit – a decision that was labelled 'brave' in that 'it's your funeral' kind of way at the time! I'm pleased to say we were certified with zero non-conformities. I will always be so grateful to every person in the company; all who worked so hard, especially the maintenance and facilities teams. The day we passed the audit was

such a great day, so much relief and pride. They really did deserve that certification and I'm honoured that I had the opportunity to lead such a complex but ultimately rewarding project.

What was the most exciting project that you worked on and why?

Possibly the most exciting project is one I'm currently working on; we're refurbishing buildings at one of our country parks to supply a hot food café, improve the education centre and make the park more sustainable and accessible. As a result, I've been getting involved in work around solar PV, air source heat pumps and how to provide a sustainable café – things like biodegradable takeaway consumables, but then I've also been involved in things that don't traditionally fall under 'environment'. Such as how do we provide healthy food options and applying for funding to install a 'Changing Places' toilet to make the park more accessible.

Looking into these aspects starts to give you a clearer understanding of the everyday challenges for those with mobility issues and you realise that we need to take responsibility, not just to provide a more sustainable future, but a more accessible one.

What is the most frustrating part of your job?

I'm sure every role feels this way; budgets! Though I have to admit in recent years investment in environment initiatives has become so much better, but there's still always so much more that could be done if finances were there.

If you had the opportunity to change one thing that would make your job easier, what would you change?

Climate change deniers: I think most

people now are aware of the climate crisis facing us all, but you still get the odd pocket of people who either don't 'believe' it's a thing or simply think it's someone else's problem.

The truth is everyone needs to play their part in reducing emissions; government, corporations, councils, individuals at home - we all need to be working together.

If you could recommend three things to have success as an environment and energy manager, what would you recommend?

People skills - this is not a job that can be done in isolation, you'll need to train, encourage, communicate, and challenge in a way that makes progress and not enemies!

Analytical mindset – you'll need to make decisions on what will provide the most benefit with the resources you have.

Enthusiasm – if you don't believe in what you're doing, then how can anyone else.

What advice would you give to someone looking to become an environment and energy manager?

If you already work for a company that has an environment manager or team have a chat with them, find out what the day to day looks like and get on their radar, you'd be surprised how many skills are transferable – data analysis, project management, financial management. You may find, if a vacancy comes up, that you have skills they need and they might be willing to provide training in other areas.

If you don't have an environment person then go to your leadership and ask why. Offer to become an environment representative, you may find the company eager to reward you with the training courses you'll need to progress further.

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The bottom line is that you should not be put off if you don't have an environmental background already, it's a job that takes a lot of different skills and qualities, many of which you may already have.

What is the most absurd statement that you have heard in your job?

"If it were up to me, you wouldn't be on the (environment) team; you don't have a degree in environmental sciences" – unfortunately said to me by a manager. The joke's on them, a short time later I was an Environment Manager in my own right.

Don't ever let someone else's opinions put you off something you're passionate about.

What are your long-term motivations in the company or the position?

I enjoy working in Local Authority because it gives me the chance to have a direct impact within a community. I'd perhaps like to expand the work we do into 'Green' education in schools as this is a subject that will affect the next generation even more.

Long term I just want to be able to look back and know that I have made a positive difference, to know that my actions have helped in some way to reduce carbon emissions or to improve someone's life in some small way, I can be proud of who I am and what I've achieved.