



# Q&A : Jennifer Peake, winner of the 2018/19 Young Ambassador

**The R&D Chemist from William Blythe talks careers, innovation and perceptions of the industry.**

**Congratulations on being crowned the new Young Ambassador! How did it feel when your name was called?**

I didn't realise my name had been called! I was sat at the table with all the other finalists, all of whom were fantastic and I was just happy to be a part of the evening. I am so pleased that so many of the finalists offered to join the Leadership Team this year as well – I think that we have a great combination of backgrounds and roles which will hopefully form a strong team to drive the Future Forum forward this year.

**As part of the selection process, you had to give a presentation, what did you choose to give yours on and why?**

Having worked as part of the Research and Development (R&D) team at William Blythe for the last few years, I decided to share a broad outline of the types of materials we have been working on and the areas that I have been trying to set up new projects in. It is well known that the chemical industry has not always had the best reputation and while a lot of work has been done to repair the public's perception of the industry, I think people don't really associate chemistry with being essential to their everyday lives. Not only that, but as an industry, we are actively researching the materials that will enable society's requirements of the future, be that battery research, novel medicines or water purification. At William Blythe, we have been working on a broad range of projects, including several for the renewable energy sector so I really focussed on how materials research is enabling these applications.

**Exciting stuff! Tell us a bit more about your background...**

I decided I wanted to be a R&D chemist before I took my GCSEs and so naturally I studied Chemistry when I went to University. I chose to study at St Andrews and had a fantastic experience, both socially and academically. I had the opportunity to learn so much while I was there, but I also had the chance to do an Industrial Placement (IP), something I would recommend to all students. If nothing else, I think it is a great opportunity to find out whether you might enjoy a career in research. I personally found the experience of researching on a chemical manufacturing site absolutely fascinating and I was delighted to return to William Blythe after graduating.

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**Which kind of opportunities have been giving to you since you started your career?**

I have had a couple of different roles since I started here and have been able to work on a broad range of business activities, including R&D, marketing, IP and business development. One

of my larger projects meant that I had the opportunity to work on the commercialisation of graphene oxide – while I expect this will be an ongoing activity for several years, building the foundation and a network of contacts was a fantastic experience. We also set up an online webshop, GOgraphene, to supply our graphene oxide to the wider research community. Establishing this and watching the sales grow has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have had so far.

### So what first interested you about the chemical industry and what do you think can be done to promote it?

I remember reading through a huge file of job descriptions in a careers session at school. There were plenty that looked quite interesting and plenty more that sounded a long way from enjoyable. I found an entry for working as a R&D chemist and it just sounded like the best job in the world. I have always loved to learn and I think that is why working in R&D suits me so well – I get paid to learn about materials, how they are made, how they are used, what the important factors are when used in an application and I don't think it will be possible for me to run out of things to learn in this environment. I might be biased, but working in the chemical sector has been a fantastic experience for me so far and I think if young people understood the opportunities the industry could provide them with we would see more people choosing Chemistry. Rather than wait for them to stumble across a page in a large file, I think we need to be more active in taking the information to those people, so continuing to build on STEM activities is of course vital.

### If you could give one piece of advice to someone considering a career in the sector, what would it be?

I think it would be to take the opportunities and enjoy them – the chemical industry is so big and there are so many roles that make up the whole industry and businesses within it. If you have the opportunity, participating in an Industrial Placement scheme is a great way to try working in the industry before graduating.

### You will be the face of the Future Forum over the next year. For those that don't already know, what exactly is the Future Forum?

The CIA Future Forum is a network of young professionals working within the chemical industry. As Young Ambassador, I will chair the Forum and represent the views of its members at CIA Council meetings. With support from the Leadership Team, we have the chance to participate in CIA policy groups and in turn, influence lobbying strategies. Primarily, it is the engagement of the wider Forum members that creates a strong and impactful network and there are numerous ways for people to get involved.

### There are some exciting plans in place for the Future Forum over the coming year – so how can people get involved?

The first thing to do would be to register online to become a member. It is completely free, you just need to work in a role within the chemical industry and be in the early stages of your career. Once you are signed up, you will start to receive our monthly newsletter, you will also be able to access our social media platforms and participate in any surveys we are carrying out. You will receive information about any upcoming developments and networking events. Whether you are looking to broaden your skills, share your experiences and accomplishments or get your opinions heard, this is an ideal platform to become engaged with.

### Anything you hope to achieve as Young Ambassador?

I think that by accepting this role, I have a responsibility to pass on the thoughts and opinions of the young professionals working in the industry today. In order to achieve this, I really think we need to increase both membership within the Future Forum and engagement of those members. There are a few ways to approach this, but personally I think the first step is really to raise awareness of the Future Forum and present what the network offers. Building upon the great work done by the previous Ambassadors, including Stephen last year, I am very much looking to build on this and try to create a step change in engagement to really drive through new ideas and create a sustainable future for the industry.

### And finally, what do you see as the biggest challenges facing the Chemical Industry at the moment?

An interesting question and I think it depends on how broadly you interpret the question. In a global context, the uncertainty of what will happen after Brexit is obviously a challenge for the industry, but I think the detail of the challenge is yet to be defined. There are other challenges facing the industry irrelevant of the deal made. For example, energy costs in the UK are higher than in other countries, this can make some manufacturing in the UK un-competitive. Another issue is around IP and really using it in the most constructive way, to drive innovation and in turn drive the chemical industry forward. I also think we face challenges over encouraging people to select careers in the chemical industry. I think some people perhaps have the expectation that you have to wear a lab coat and work in a laboratory to work in the industry. I really appreciated the 'not all Chemists wear white coats' campaign that the Royal Society of Chemistry ran a few years ago and as an industry I think we need to build on this.



### Inspired by Jennifer?

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