

# Career spotlight: Rosie Russell

In this interview, Rosie Russell shares her career path and advice on successfully managing risk and making an impact at work to inspire those up and coming in their careers.



## How did you get into health, safety, risk management as a career?

By accident. Literally.

Two things led me into health and safety as a career. Firstly, when I met my wife, she was studying for a Master's Degree in Reliability Engineering and Safety Management so I was aware of health and safety by association. She did not pursue this as her career but my interest was piqued.

A few years later I was involved in a serious laboratory accident which put me in hospital for four nights. On returning to the lab, I was certain that, not only would this not happen to myself again, nor would it happen to anyone else, so I volunteered to take on

### Name:

Rosie Russell

### Position:

Head of  
Environment,  
Health and Safety

### Organisation:

MeiraGTx

### Industry/ Sector:

Pharmaceuticals

the coordination of health and safety in the lab. In my following job in a small biotech, I took on health and safety as an additional responsibility which effectively defined the rest of my career as, when I ceased working as an Organic Chemist, it was health and safety roles that interested me most.

From there, I have been keen to be able to apply my scientific background so have worked in areas with radiation, chemical and biological hazards. In the area of biological hazards, I have significant expertise at Containment Levels 2,3 & 4.

Finally, being involved in the aftermath of the 2007 Foot and Mouth Disease Outbreak, I became interested in both the normal and abnormal psychology of work, that is both human error and mental health developing significant experience in the investigation and management of human error and writing my Master's Thesis on the relationship between occupational stress and safety culture.

## What Qualifications do you have, which have proved most valuable and what advice would you give those starting out or considering a career in risk management?

I have achieved the following:

### BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

Rosie Russell started her career in 1995 as an Organic Research Chemist spending seven years in the laboratory during which she took a strong interest in health and safety following a laboratory accident. Since then she has had multiple roles in health and safety, gradually increasing in responsibility, working in and around research, manufacturing, pharmaceutical and highly technical environments dealing with chemical, biological and radiation hazards.

Over the last 20+ years, her work has ranged from dealing with Improvement Notices from both the HSE and Environment Agency, remediation of land contaminated with radionuclides, >>>

BSc (Hons) - Chemistry  
NEBOSH General Certificate  
ISTR Biosafety Practitioner  
Certificate of Professional Development in  
Radiation Protection  
MSc - Occupational Health and Safety  
Management  
IIRSM Fellow (by portfolio)

In addition to the above I have completed a number of topic-specific short courses (1-6 days each) such as First Aid, Expedition First Aid, Leadership Skills, Noise Measurement, Laser Protection, Radiation Protection, Stress Risk Assessment, Human Error Investigations, Mental Health First Aid etc. I have also attended conferences with ISTR, USHA, RSPH and EBSA.

I found that the NEBOSH General Certificate was a great introduction however, working in a highly technical area, the Biosafety Practitioner and Radiation Protection courses were the most relevant to my area of practice. In addition, attending conferences has allowed me to meet with people

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working in similar areas and discuss common problems.

My advice would be to seek to practice in an industry that you know well, start with the fundamentals (such as the NEBOSH General Certificate) and build on your technical knowledge with short, topic specific, courses. These are often easier to get your employer to fund and are directly applicable to your current role.

Secondly, my advice would be to read. There are many free resources out there such as the HSE Guidance and ACOP series and the HSE Research Reports. There are also many great authors out there such as Sydney Dekker, Carsten Busch, James Reason etc. who have published books that will get you thinking about the theory behind the practice of health and safety.

Finally, find a mentor. There are a number of good mentoring schemes out there and the ability to chat with someone independent of your workplace who is further along in their career can provide both support and inspiration.

### BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

>>> introducing, building and rebuilding management systems, investigating and training others on human error as well as managing occupational stress in organisations.

Rosie is a Fellow of both the International Institute of Risk and Safety Management (IIRSM) and the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), and a member of both the Institute of Safety in Technology and Research (ISTR) and the European Biological Safety Association (EBSA).

For IIRSM she has chaired the Membership and Branches Committee, the Fellowship Assessors Panel and been Secretary of the East of Scotland Branch.

In her personal time, Rosie loves cooking (especially Thai & Vietnamese cuisine) listening to a bewildering array of music, reading books, running book groups and attending the theatre and opera.

### What are the benefits of joining professional organisations such as the International Institute of Risk and Safety Management (IIRSM)?

The main advantage of joining organisations like IIRSM is the ability to get involved. By attending Branch Meetings, attending webinars and conferences you get to know others in the profession and learn from them.

IIRSM also runs a mentoring scheme which can help you find a mentor.

In my first years as a member, I took much more than I gave. I drew on the expertise of fellow members and listened to talks, absorbing information.

Over time, the tide turned and I find myself joining committees and working groups or giving talks at Branch meetings.

We all need help to develop in our careers, joining in with other professionals speeds your development. Put simply, I would not be where I am now without my memberships and getting involved with my membership organisations.

### **What advice would you give to build a strong professional network and how important is this for someone starting out on their health, safety and risk management career?**

Join an appropriate membership organisation like IIRSM and smaller, sector specific ones like ISTR or EBSA then get involved and attend meetings.

There are also excellent discussion forums on LinkedIn that can be a good source of virtual networking.

### **What does a typical week look like for you?**

Each day starts with the management huddles for Manufacturing and Quality - Was it a safe day yesterday? What quality issues do we have? What does the schedule look like?

After this, I will look over the open EHS events to ensure that any investigations are progressing and that remedial actions are on track.

Afternoons are typically characterized by project meetings, time to work on projects

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and answering requests for assistance, either in-person or via Zoom, Teams or e-mail.

At the moment I have a number of projects running around the implementation of an electronic management system for EHS, Occupational Health provision (working with HR), reviews of PPE, Gas Safety and Biosafety and an application for an Authorisation under the UK REACH Regulations.

On top of this I am a member of our UK & Ireland Senior Leadership Team and the EHS Board for our EUR 100M construction project in Shannon, Ireland. This requires weekly meetings for both and monthly visits to the site in Ireland.

Since joining in February 2020 I have delivered our COVID-Secure working arrangements (manufacturing does not stop for a pandemic), Crisis Response Plan, Mental Health Strategy & Support Groups, Mental Health Awareness Training across four countries, training on managing human error (in two countries), ergonomics training, a basic EHS Intranet, several in-depth investigations, trained two further Biosafety Practitioners and hired an EHS Advisor for our Irish Site.

While there is a degree of routine from the daily meetings, it is fair to say that there is no such thing as a typical day, week or month in my role.

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**What is your approach to leadership and what advice you would give to those starting out on their career to develop their leadership skills?**

"A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world" - John le Carré

We all need to get out from behind our desks and both see where the work is happening and talk to those doing it. Also, when talking to those doing the work, it is vital to seek to understand before we presume to give advice. After all, the employees performing the tasks understand the reality of the workplace far better than we ever will. By approaching the workplace with empathy and a wish to understand, you can tease out where the real opportunities for risk reduction are in collaboration with those doing the work. This means that real-world, workable solutions can be found that will have an impact as they are owned by the employees and will be implemented when we are not there.

**What is the biggest career challenge you have faced, how did you approach the challenge, what was the outcome and would you approach it differently with hindsight?**

When working for a University Department as the Health and Safety Manager, it was Department Policy that all Fieldwork Risk Assessments had to be signed off by the Health and Safety Manager.

I undertook to change this as, the risk is created and owned by those doing the fieldwork and their supervisors. I successfully introduced better training for the academic staff and their students resulting in a better quality of risk assessment being received.

I then tried to have Supervisors review and sign off risk assessments however the push back was that they did not feel that they had the expertise to do this.

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Over time, I understood that Academics are actually time poor and that what I needed to influence was their working time model where tasks are assigned a value and make up part of their official workload. If a task is not in the model, it is seen as 'optional' or 'voluntary'.

I never succeeded in getting Supervisors to really take responsibility for this aspect of the work. In hindsight, I needed to better understand how work was assigned in the Department and gain the backing of the Senior Academics first. This would have stood a better chance of succeeding.

**How do you manage client/stakeholder expectations whilst encouraging commitment to continuous improvement in risk management?**

In my last few roles I have taken time to learn what works and where the gaps are. I have then crafted this into an overall strategy document with a costed delivery plan spanning a few years. Presenting this to the management of the organisation and communicating with key players in the business has allowed me to communicate my vision and obtain buy-in from the organisation.

The Delivery Plan is then the key document to show progress, maintain enthusiasm and drive improvement. This, along with some quick wins and fixing common problems that are causing friction early in my tenure established credibility.

It is also vital to have an engaged EHS Committee up and running. Do not make the mistake of populating it with like-minded people. You need a Committee that will hold you to account and challenge your thinking. Use them wisely to show progress and discuss your plans. They will then help guide you through what is really happening on the ground and help set your priorities. Engage openly and honestly with them and they will bolster your reputation.

Finally, if an initiative is taking too much time due to lack of enthusiasm - kill it quickly. Come back to it later with different people. This fail fast methodology shows your flexibility and that you are willing to be wrong.

#### **What is your proudest achievement so far?**

This has to be the EHS Professionals that I have mentored and trained. There are several EHS Professionals who I had the honour to work with early in their careers. Either directly as part of the team I was working in or more remotely in more of a mentoring role.

Helping guide and form their thinking around risk and inform and shape their training is a great responsibility. Watching them grow and detach from you as they become more confident and competent in their own right is the most fulfilling thing I have done in my career.

#### **What/ who inspires you and why?**

My wife. She has a Master's degree in a health and safety discipline but chose another career path as she did not enjoy working in health and safety. Like me, she changed career, in her case more than once, and made a success of whatever path opened in front of her. She has adapted and changed, learned new disciplines and flourished. We support each other but she is a continual reminder to me that you should never let an opportunity

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pass you by and that a door closing, or being slammed in your face, usually means that there is a better direction to take. It is her inner strength that has inspired me to work in different topic areas, take risks and, most of all, keep learning, keep reading, keep studying in the pursuit of being the best that I can

#### **What are your most important tips for someone starting out on their health, safety, risk management career?**

Stick to what you know, at least initially. Early in your career, the sectors that you have experience in will benefit from your passion and enthusiasm the most as you already know the culture, the mindset, the risks.

Volunteer to help in your current workplace, even if that means putting in a few extra hours a week. Most health and safety professionals will be willing to give you a little time and perhaps a project around risk reduction. Two people have joined the teams I was working with in this way.

Ask for training and, if that is not forthcoming, be prepared to study in your own time, on your own endeavour.

Finally, find a mentor. Your relationship with them need not be long term. Indeed you will need several mentors through your career as you grow. The conversations that you will have with your mentors will help unlock the potential that you already have. Being patient, and taking other parts of your business (in particular, risk and safety teams) with you will nearly always lead to even more impact in the end - and no doubt give you greater exposure as a professional as you get to lead on the improvement/initiative outside of your own site/geography.

#### **What are your career aspirations now?**

To grow with my current employer. We are a small, but growing, pharmaceutical

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company and there is real opportunity over the next five to ten years to build a team as the company grows and implement my vision for EHS where there are subject matter experts across the business, embedded in departments so that most of the knowledge sits close to the risks being managed. Doing this, I will also have the opportunity to build, and train, a small team of EHS Professionals and also unlock talent across the workforce such that I can grow EHS talent from within the organisation.

I also want to find more ways to be involved with IIRSM and my other membership bodies while remaining thirsty for knowledge, growing my existing expertise and learning new areas or risk management.

**Please share any other details you feel relevant**

Health and safety was never my intended career path yet it has given me the opportunity to use all of my skills, all of my knowledge and all of my passions in a way that none of the other paths ahead of me could have done. I have the opportunity to get involved in some amazing organisations at all levels and effect change. From the boardroom to the shop floor, I can touch lives and make a difference. A career in risk management is challenging, engaging and fulfilling.

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## About IIRSM's Emerging Risk Leaders Network

The IIRSM Emerging Risk Leader Network (ERLN) is a working group of ambitious professionals who are proactively looking to get ahead in their careers or support others to do so. The purpose of the Network is to:

- Support its members in developing their influence and profile within their place of work and the wider risk community.
- Empower members to build career success by learning from and supporting others from different industries, risk disciplines and geographical locations to cross-pollinate ideas, knowledge, best practice and lessons learned.
- Facilitate opportunities to showcase member capabilities through delivering informative and novel ideas and solutions through different channels.
- Promote the importance of developing risk and leadership skills early on in careers.

**To find out more and for sponsorship opportunities, visit:**

[www.iirsm.org/iirsm-emerging-risk-leaders-network](http://www.iirsm.org/iirsm-emerging-risk-leaders-network)