

Who are you?

Katy V Hebditch



What do you do?

Environmental Scientist, Amec Foster Wheeler

What does your job involve?

As a consultant, my job is incredibly varied as – each day I might work on several projects in various countries (virtually – as office desk-based studies!), from Europe to West Africa and South Africa. In terms of technical knowledge, I have now become more specialised in Geochemistry, GIS & Remote Sensing, Water Quality, Socio-economic Research, and thereby contributing to the many aspects of Environmental Impact Assessment. I work for the Environment & Infrastructure and Clean Energy part of the business within AMEASE (Africa, Middle East, Asia and Southern Europe) – we work in all sectors, from Mining, Oil & Gas, Clean Energy to infrastructure and water projects. Currently I'm based in Accra, Ghana, representing the business in West Africa.

The types of activities I am involved in span the whole lifecycle of projects:

- Business Development – market research, identifying prospects, visiting potential clients, presenting and networking events;
- Proposal Writing which often includes managing a team to prepare the proposal, including identifying subcontractors and local consultants to act as project partners
- Project Management throughout the life of the project, including financial tracking and analysis, procurement of data, laboratories, sorting out logistics (getting samples across borders can be quite hectic!),
- Reporting – including data QA/QC, analysis and interpretation, report writing (technical and non-technical) and attending meetings with the client, other technical specialists, stakeholders and regulatory bodies.

From time to time field work is required – which for me has ranged from a greenfield site in the jungle in West Africa to an underground mine in Southern Europe! Consultancy is a different world to academia – the real world of data (and often lack thereof), the style of report writing, the need for practical solutions quickly – a different challenge and this was a steep learning curve when I first started.

How did you get there?

During my time in the RSM, I carried out internships, summer placements and short-term consultancy roles to try and discover what was really interesting to me – I had a clue that I was interested in practical applications of earth sciences, so I worked in a small bespoke environmental consultancy in the UK, then a ground engineering department of a large engineering firm. Between my third and fourth years, I travelled to Liberia carrying out socio-economic baseline surveys and mapping for an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) for a large mining project + rail + quarry + port. This basically meant walking around the jungle and using Remote Sensing to map communities and infrastructure, trying to find communities, and talking to village chiefs and randomly selected people in the population. This was based on a survey we had designed in advance, followed by data input, analysis, interpretation, reporting and display. The reporting for this continued throughout my final year, which was a bit challenging at times but taught me time management! I

realised how there is such an interesting interface between industrial development (extractive industries like mining) and the physical and social environment. My skillset leant me well to translating between the different parties involved in these ESIA and feasibility studies, and I realised it's quite interesting and could involve some travel and a nice application of geology and environmental sciences to development.

With a PhD offer and a couple of OK-sounding job offers, I was still looking for something more adventurous and challenging than what I had on the table. I was offered an interview with AMEC through contacts at Imperial (I think they had also heard about me from previous work placements – the mining industry is a small, close-knit community!). A few hours of informal discussion later and I was offered a job for a position that didn't yet exist- so think that was a fairly successful "chat". From my first week I jumped in the deep end getting involved in "chargeable work" and getting into the swing of consultancy. Key strengths I have found in my career have been a willingness to learn and take on new tasks (always give it a go, but speak up if you need help!), attention to detail, ability to communicate with technical specialists in many different disciplines, from engineers to social scientists – translating the jargon! It's these skills and a keenness to diversify my career that lead to discussions which resulted in my recent move to Accra, Ghana to represent the business in West Africa on the ground.

How do you use your skills in geology and geophysics?

Direct skills in terms of technical geochem, geology research, water quality, Remote Sensing, GIS etc. Transferable skills – technical writing, non-technical writing, proposal writing, presentation and communication skills, data analysis and research skills.

What do you love about geology/geophysics?

It's interdisciplinary nature – I was indecisive about what to study, and still am to some degree – hence I love my varied job too! Earth Sciences are so diverse, and also applicable to everything in life – the more you find out, the more you realise there is to learn. Also, it makes going on holiday so much more interesting, though perhaps not for less enthusiastic friends!

Your best and worst moments?

Best - being selected for the Advance programme - Amec Foster Wheeler management training course – one of 15 candidates from over 9000 employees in my division of Amec Foster Wheeler. The programme is an accelerated career development course, initially focussing on building soft skills (I still think it is amazing that a large corporate engineering consultancy is investing in emotional intelligence and leadership skills) and enabling exposure to different geographies and parts of the business (currently working in a team of 5 with colleagues in Italy, Dubai, India and Singapore). The programme, whilst challenging, is helping me to improve my leadership skills, especially across geographies and cultures, and enabling me to explore my future career options within the business – so perhaps I may end up down a path I had not envisaged being possible 4 years ago.

Worst – rather than “worst”, I think hardest is more apt – moving to Ghana – saying goodbye to colleagues of 3 years in a close knit office was tough (though we are of course still in touch on projects), as is moving your life to be full-time somewhere on your own. This has been emotionally exhausting, but incredibly rewarding at the same time – I have learnt so much about myself, my strengths and weaknesses. With the move has come a slightly different job role, so the challenging learning experience is both personal and professional – but I've always thrived on a challenge! Experiencing these different roles within the business really opens your eyes to many opportunities and improves visibility and awareness.