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● Embedding a learning culture for food safety





Moving from 'food out' to 'food out safely'

In production facilities across the world, food is handled, prepared, created and packaged every second of every day. And typically, there are multiple people involved in that process.

Traditionally, many food production facilities have had a core unit of long-term employees who steadfastly uphold safety processes, procedures and standards, passing on knowledge and advice to people who join the business – whether permanently or as short-term, transient workers.

However, the global pandemic prompted an exodus of those more experienced staff members. For some, retirement was viewed as an attractive proposition and consequently, huge amounts of knowledge, and a great number of role models, were lost.

“With the risk of these consequences comes great opportunity and responsibility for organizations to enable their people by embedding a learning culture of food safety.”

Knowledge and experience often underpin good habits, and many businesses have had to ask themselves the question: how do we replace the natural learning that came from observing good habits and best practice?

After all, while a good set of instructions will tell you how to make a product, it won't tell you why certain things happen - and what happens if you get it wrong.

The challenge of how to replace that knowledge and learning is one many food businesses are currently juggling.

It's not an easy one to solve, but it's an important one to get right, because

if that knowledge isn't ingrained, passed on and cherished, it can lead to shortcuts being taken, mistakes made, and bad habits learnt in the belief they're actually correct.

This is a major problem because where people are involved, there's scope for human error. The common factor in every non-conformity, product recall or quality issue is people – 95% of non-conformances are caused by us.

And human error in food production can have huge consequences.





The need to create a culture focused on continual education

As consumers, we trust that the food we buy has been prepared to the highest safety standards – and if that trust is even notionally threatened, it can have significant repercussions.

The extent of the knowledge challenges facing food production companies was underlined by the 2022 Global Food Training Safety Survey, which found that just 40 per cent of companies surveyed could confidently say their employees always followed food safety training on ‘the floor’. That means, 60 per cent of companies are not training adequately, leaving them exposed.

In reality, the vast, vast majority of food is produced safely. And in almost every other industry, a 99.992 per cent rate of success would be seen as a gold standard.

However, the Global Food Training Safety Survey reveals that there are 600 million incidents from foodborne illness annually – and last year, those 600 million incidents led to 420,000 deaths.



For the large majority of companies in the food production industry, safety standards and processes are a fundamental part of how the business operates.

And, food safety is the foundation on which a strong, successful food business is built.

After all, by prioritising food safety, businesses can help protect their reputation and profitability – as well as the health and wellbeing of customers.

Financial stability and profits are, of course, important, and sometimes an investment in training and education can be viewed as an unnecessary expense – particularly in tough and

challenging business times. In reality, it's an investment to safeguard the future of the business.

Here, the quote from Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company rings true: "The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave, is not training them and having them stay."

It demonstrates and recognises the critical importance of qualified and trained people to ensure delivery of work that results in product quality and safety, and it's as true today as it was when the Model T was rolling off the production line.



The directors and owners of businesses that don't invest in food safety learning are playing a game of roulette – with lawsuits and potential imprisonment waiting if the gamble doesn't pay off.

Ultimately, without a skilled, knowledgeable team who lives the food safety values of the business, it is very difficult to deliver safe products to market with absolute consistency.

The only way to minimise food safety risks is to create an environment with food safety at its core, ensuring continual learning is part of its day-to-day and prioritising education to fill in knowledge gaps.

Your people need to be trained, qualified and kept up to date to remain effective, relevant, and empowered.



Creating a culture of education and food safety

That culture of learning, which for decades happened relatively organically, has to be nurtured. And while knowledge has departed the industry, there are still a lot of experienced people left in many businesses.

Add to that the pace of change we experience today – new information, new ways of working, new technology, new processes, standards and workflows are part of our everyday. Expecting staff just to ‘keep up’ isn’t enough. After all, a standard, process or procedure has no value unless it is effectively implemented.

The key, of course, lies in training.

By establishing a regular pattern of learning activity – for example, formal mentoring, lunch and learn sessions, sharing insights, tips and best practices on internal vlogs and blogs, hosting workshops and role-playing certain scenarios – that knowledge can be shared and drip-fed into the minds of staff.

Desired behaviours should be reinforced. For example, posters and signs regarding certain elements of food safety should be clearly visible – constantly supporting the messages and behaviours the business needs – while verbal reinforcement helps ensure learning continues every day.

By supplementing this activity with more formal, continual learning, empowering people with the knowledge and skills to understand their roles fully, and taking pride in sharing that knowledge, a genuine culture of food safety can be established.

Of course, that opportunity begins as soon as new staff enter the business.

By being inducted thoroughly, learning on the job from colleagues that take pride in the role they play in keeping food safe for consumption, and having a structured learning programme in place, the risks of misinformation being shared and bad practices role modelled are reduced.



Taking a company-wide approach

To create a culture that prioritises food safety, a company-wide focus on its value and importance is essential – and extends far beyond ‘the factory floor’.

Learning has to become an integral part of the day-to-day – and the standards the business operates to must be role modelled from the very top. Culture and accepted behaviours are learned from senior people within any organisation – the behaviour that leaders accept, ignore or overlook quickly becomes the norm, as do the behaviours they display.

Leaders need to walk the talk. And everyone has their role to play.

HR, for example, is responsible for selecting people with the right skills and appetite for learning. How

applicants adhered to rules and processes in previous roles is a key reference point.

The marketing team has a role to play in how food safety is communicated internally; procurement is responsible for not introducing new risks without thorough consultation, while logistics have to ensure food is transported and stored correctly.

It’s everyone’s job to be informed, and take pride in the work they do.

“Leaders need to walk the talk. And everyone has their role to play.”



Important questions to ask yourself regarding your learning culture

- What are the main challenges your staff face every day?
- Are your training methods appropriate, affordable and effective?
- How do you induct and train new employees? Is it effective?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you like to do to improve the effectiveness of your training, upskill your workforce and empower your employees?
- What is your staff attrition rate? (It’s important to know this to identify the best training path.)
- How do you ensure your people in critical roles are specialised, qualified, effective, kept up to date and remain empowered?
- What is best practice in the industry? (Try asking your industry association or external company auditors, who visit thousands of different production facilities every year.)

Creating the right environment from day one

Given that 95 per cent of non-conformances are caused by people, it's logical to continually train, and repeat processes until they become second nature – and then keep on reinforcing them.

Getting the food safety training culture right is critical in keeping food safe and protecting your brand and business. It also puts your organisation in a strong position to establish other important training cultures in the food production ecosystem, such as sustainability, waste, people and wellness. Occupational health and safety, data and information security – topics that are all becoming increasingly important.

To create this environment, having a structured training and induction programme for new employees is essential. Of course, this is an investment, and, of course, they may leave. However, by giving them the necessary training, retention in the longer term becomes more likely.

Formalised learning is incredibly valuable – it fills in knowledge gaps, gives definitive answers and creates mutual understanding about what 'exceptional' looks like.

However, it must be supplemented by continual reinforcement, through building a learning culture – via formal

and informal mentoring, sharing knowledge, passing on tips, reinforcing positive behaviour and, maybe more importantly, constructively holding peers to account.

Food safety has to become a source of pride and motivation for all who work in food production.





Measure what matters – and food safety matters

Measurement frameworks are also important – after all, how can any business improve if it isn't measuring the things that matter?

Cleanliness data and the number of incidents are just two criteria that can be measured and used as motivation to improve – while company rewards can be given to those who meet expectations.

Excellence is a habit – and if businesses can arm employees with the knowledge they need while instilling a sense of pride in everyone doing things in the right manner, a culture of food safety can be established.

Ensuring staff have the knowledge to perform

By establishing a company-wide responsibility for food safety, it becomes easier to create a culture that believes in the importance of every last detail.

Typically,

70%

of workplace learning comes on the job, this is an opportunity for there to be a genuine focus on food safety every single day.

Of course, this should be supplemented by regular training – both internal and external – to reinforce behaviours and develop learning.



“When learning is part of the every day, it can have a hugely positive impact right across the business.”

In-person and online training can be utilised in tandem, and for multi-site businesses, bringing teams together to learn and workshop challenges can be hugely beneficial. For those who are new to the food industry, the Food Safety Foundation Qualification is an essential starting point.

Ultimately, getting food safety right is imperative.

When learning is part of the every day, it can have a hugely positive impact right across the business.

The challenge is creating that environment. A structured education programme, complemented by a culture that encourages continual learning, holds peers to account and cherishes high standards, is essential for food safety – and business longevity.



Food safety training goes beyond formal learning

- A culture that prioritises food safety is led from the top – leaders must role model the behaviours expected throughout the business.
- A culture that enables and encourages peers to maintain each other’s food safety standards must be encouraged – learning on the job is crucial.
- Visual reinforcement of food safety best practice helps reiterate key messages and processes.
- In a workplace, people often live the behaviour they see. Make sure new employees are inducted into the business with a focus on food safety.
- An ongoing training programme is critically important to educate staff, reinforce key behaviours and keep them up to date.
- Training doesn’t have to be onerous or expensive – bitesize learning is very effective and budget-friendly.

Why BSI?

Setting the standard

We know clients want training from tutors who have a passion for the food industry. BSI are able to bring food training to life with knowledge and enthusiasm so that you can take what you've learnt and enhance your performance.

You can have your training delivered in-person or virtually, with many of our courses available as on-demand e-learning options, allowing you to train when and where suits you.

We've worked with many companies to provide training through needs analysis to ensure learning is the best fit for your team. BSI believes training is more than ticking a box, it's key to your success in the food industry.

Discover more about our trainings and how we can help your organization progress towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

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