

Food hygiene training in the 21st Century – living in a world of standards

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One of the major changes which management systems have experienced during the last decade is the increasing calculability of key elements.

Setting up a hygiene management concept in the 20th century was basically a matter of 'What can we afford?' 'What do our clients require?' 'How far do we want to go?' Special subjects such as personal hygiene rules, cleaning concepts, hygienic maintenance of equipment have been based on interpretation rather than definite applicable regulations.

Legislation has not been very helpful; paragraphs with reference to food hygiene are full of phrases such as 'adequate', 'appropriate', 'reasonable' and 'commensurate'.

So how do we know what we need to set up a hygiene concept? This question was picked up by a typical stakeholder in the food sector – the retail industry.

It is faced with the fact that it is at the end of the food chain and therefore the focus of customers' anguish when it comes to complaints and casualties. It has the challenge of needing to satisfy itself of the standards achieved and maintained across a very large

Meeting the challenges of international training to internationally recognised standards.



Break out groups provide an opportunity to practice and show understanding.

and varied supply base. This need for standardised systems quickly led to precisely defined requirements for all suppliers.

Today hygiene management systems are less influenced by the law than by typical trade requirements such as the British Retail Consortium standards and their European brother, the International Food Standard.

These are based on the idea of the ISO

9001 that the efficiency of a management system is based on measurable key figures – so-called process indicators – the key elements of food hygiene are now described in detail – and this includes training.

Today training requirements, training contents and training evaluation are precisely defined and leave little room for guessing. Food businesses certified under the BRC scheme, the IFS standard or ISO 22000: 2005 are regularly audited for compliance – which means that their training content will be assessed by independent experts.

But even non-certified companies are bound to accept that the principles set up by international and industry guidelines have an impact on the expectations of their clients and will therefore influence their own systems.

Setting up training

There is no question that all food handlers must have basic training before they even start work.

It is a general requirement that all personnel must be appropriately trained prior to commencing work and adequately supervised throughout the working period. Induction training needs to include both

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 5

general requirements and the individual company hygiene rules.

This has also to be applied to temporary personnel and subcontracted staff (for example warehouse staff) who need to be trained either by the company or by the subcontractor.

The training contents and the duration of training must be orientated towards both working activities and responsibility of the trainee. Following the requirements of EC 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs all staff responsible for the development and maintenance of the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point management system have to receive adequate training in the application of the HACCP principles.

This means that basic food hygiene training (hand hygiene, work station control, cleaning and disinfection) is definitely not enough. Machine operators handling a critical control point (and being responsible for monitoring procedures, corrective actions and record keeping) are required to provide a basic understanding of the risk management philosophy behind their activities. Quite a challenge for the average person on the work floor!

To maintain a functioning training concept the company must equally routinely review the competencies of staff and provide relevant training as appropriate. Determining training needs is not always straightforward and a company may need to draw on many different sources for help.

Written job descriptions, interviews with staff and managers or a round-table discussion with the people doing the job can all help at this stage.

This means training is not a 'one-off' program. Not only must a programme of refresher training be in place but also a continuous qualification scheme.

This means planning ahead: every year a company needs to evaluate their 'status quo' of knowledge and decide which employees will need to be promoted, which training modules need to be up-dated and which new training subjects might need to be introduced (for example new legislative requirements, new food safety hazards, new test procedures or GMP strategies).

Training performance

This is good news as the training aids now available for food hygiene training are better than ever.

This includes a large choice of commercial training materials such as videos, CDs, posters and brochures as well as professional 'hardware' such as moderations media applicable for all training levels.

This also means that training needs a budget and it is important to plan ahead: how many employees will need to be trained (to be effective, a training session should address no more than 20-25 participants), how much time has to be invested, who will



A break from the usual work environment helps students to focus and remember.

be acting as trainer, what training facilities can be provided etc.

As mentioned above training is not a one-off event but a way of life. As well as dealing with immediate needs a training strategy should incorporate plans for follow-up sessions and annual refresher courses. Some staff may need or want more advanced instruction or instruction on particular aspects of their job.

This may require different ways of performance like workshops, case studies or brainstorming sessions. Train-the-trainer courses may help to qualify supervising staff as training providers.

The best way to structure material is in modules – thematic chunks that can be taught in several sessions of approximately 45 minutes.

This will provide a scale of core module topics which can be addressed at every training level and can be adapted depending on the needs and professional background of course attendants. It can also be extended and intensified for intermediate and advanced training levels by giving more time and more scientific content to each module.

Training documentation

In every standard quoted above we find the requirement of training records. During the course of every system audit of the hygiene management training documentation will be on trial. This will include lists of trainees as well as performance records.

A company is well advised to create standardised formats providing information on

trainer, training times/duration of training session, training topics and follow-up.

Companies operating a quality management system also need to provide evidence that training has been effective and this is yet another challenge – training evaluation. This can be done by making use of written exams such as multiple choice tests or learning quiz.

There is also the alternative option, especially for companies who do not have in-house trainers, of employing computer based 'learning-by doing' training media which can be used by the trainee at his/her own learning speed and will provide acceptable results. The real effectiveness, however, can only be verified after time has passed and shows whether or not personal hygiene awareness has been increased.

Defined key figures such as customer complaints, internal hygiene incidents, statistics about root causes for non-conforming products and waste balance figures may support the evaluation process.

Training on trial

Last, but not least, here is some advice for all internal auditors who have training on their check list:

- Is there a continuous training program or does the company arrange training 'as needed'?
- Is an annual training schedule in place?
- How does your company identify the necessary competencies for personnel whose activities have an impact on food safety?
- How is it ensured that all personnel responsible for monitoring, corrections and corrective actions of the food safety management system are effectively trained?
- What are the training resources and media?
- What is the average duration of a training session?
- Are training records maintained?
- How explicit is the training documentation?
- Is there a qualification matrix which allows assessment of the level of knowledge of every employee?
- How does the company verify/validate the efficiency of training?

Quite a job! Still, at the end of the day it is the personal interview which will provide evidence that people are aware of the relevance and the importance of their individual activities in contributing to food safety.

Training is not only a legal requirement but a quality element. The ISO 9001 scheme makes a point here by putting training into the chapter 'Resource Management' which means: the more a company is willing to invest in the improvement of staff qualification the more likely is the chance for the continual improvement of their work and by definition the continual improvement of the company. ■

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