Spotlighting sub-culture attitudes to food-safety in the service-industry: A small-food-business perspective on training needs

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Abstract

This pilot study explored food handler perceptions and attitudes towards food safety training practices in a small food business operating in Wales. Identifying training inconsistencies and gaps could be utilised to inform future food safety training procedures, which may contribute favourably to food safety culture.

Introduction

Despite many positive advances in food safety management systems for the small food businesses (e.g., Food Standards Agency’s ‘Safe Food for Better Business’ pack), foodborne diseases remain an important cause of illness in the United Kingdom [1]. Estimated at a cost burden of £1 billion in 2008 [2], food-related illnesses are thought to affect more than 1 million people in the UK every year [3].

The Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (where food establishments following inspection are issued with a risk-based rating or ‘score’ by local authority officers) has also had a positive impact on driving food hygiene and food safety compliance [4]. Nevertheless, during 2017/18, in excess of 150,000 food establishments across Wales, Northern Ireland and England received with inspections or formal enforcement action relating to hygiene malpractices [5].

Risks relating to cross-contamination (such as poor handwashing or ineffective cleaning practices) are often implicated as a root cause in food incidents or food outbreaks. Indeed, a recent study analysing the association between food hygiene ratings, microbiological assessments and foodborne illnesses highlighted the importance of understanding the food safety ‘human element’. The study also called for a greater understanding of how a food business’ culture may influence the way in which food-handlers acquire and apply knowledge that leads to safe foodbehaviours.

Purpose

This pilot study explored food handler perceptions and attitudes towards food safety training practices in a small food business operating in Wales. Identifying training inconsistencies and gaps could be utilised to inform future food safety training procedures, which may contribute favourably to food safety culture.

Methods

Data Collection: In order to conduct a study representative of attitudes and perceptions across the business as a whole, a purposeful sample by function/job role was identified prior to conducting interviews. As all food handlers worked on a rotating system, those present during the pre-appointed interview period (1 week) who matched the identified job function or role were invited to participate (n=7).

Data capture: A semi-structured interview guide was developed prior to qualitative interviews being undertaken (piloted with individuals (n=2) from the hospitality and food industry). Informed consent was obtained from each participant before conducting the interview.

Data analysis: Thematic analysis using NVivo software identified common patterns across the data set relating to training practices at the establishment.

Ethical Approval: Approval was obtained from the Food and Health Sciences Ethics Panel at Cardiff Metropolitan University (Reference no: 9396).

Results

No formal training structure existed at the business as a whole (for kitchen or bar staff). Identifying training inconsistencies and gaps could be utilised to inform future food safety training procedures, which may contribute favourably to food safety culture.

Figure 1: Participants comments relating to training perceptions

Identification of training needs

No formal training structure existed at the business as a whole (for kitchen or bar staff). Identifying training inconsistencies and gaps could be utilised to inform future food safety training procedures, which may contribute favourably to food safety culture.

Figure 2: Example participant comments relating to unrecognised training assumptions

Data from interviews included narratives on the following identified training needs:

‘Time’ as a barrier to training and monitoring behaviour

Staff employed in serving positions were often young (18-25 years) without any formal food safety training. As indicated by Figure 2, on-the-job training would be provided to new starters following 6 months employment. Mature employees (with formal food training) were perceived as having established attitudes to food safety which were less adaptable to new processes or ideas. Chefs received little ongoing or additional training in relation to food hygiene. Food handlers with previous hospitality experience were assumed to possess the necessary skills and abilities (aligned with the business’ food safety expectations) without any formal assessment. This occasionally caused conflict across subcultures, with kitchen staff frustrated by the lack of knowledge and resultant behaviours when food was being served.

Significance of study

It is recognised that this is a pilot study, indicative of only one small food business. However, a consistent approach to training (across front of house, kitchen and any support functions such as cleaning operatives)) would ensure that employees were aware of risks relating to their specific responsibility areas (as opposed to the cross-functional). This study highlighted sub-culture attitudes and perceptions that may otherwise go unnoticed in a busy food service environment.

Identifying influential ‘role models’ (those perceived by others as an ‘expert’) may enhance future training delivery, as would training mechanisms which are short, succinct and frequent to avoid overwhelming the learner.

Time planning for future training purposes is an important consideration; allocating time for monitoring, discussion, supervision, feedback and positive improvements across the business.

The Food Standards Agency defines a ‘food handler’ as any person entering a kitchen environment whether preparing food directly or not. Small food business operators should be clear about food safety expectations and provide adequate training provision, regardless of pre-existing management or training. This may have a positive influence on the food safety culture at the business, demonstrating leadership and commitment to food safety standards which are adopted as the ‘norm’ from the outset.

References


4 You get the ‘I’ve been in the trade for five years’. That’s fine. But have you been formally trained and been in it? That’s the difference.”

5 “I think the younger chef generally, who are coming in now... they will take things on board. The older grumpier ones are generally a bit... we’re not sick in our ways. We have our routine. We do our thing. And that’s it.”

6 “Food wait staff can’t be under the impression that they can bring food, a meal, back and let it sit for 15-20 minutes before going back out.”

7 “Like I say, in that sense, because they’re not trained, that switch in, when they go ‘oh my god, I’ve got to go hunting to somebody?’ - and that has to be the core of every kitchen.”

8 Figure 2: Example participant comments relating to unrecognised training assumptions

9 “No-one ever reads like a bunch of papers, but I think if the head chef or head barman or manager takes the staff aside and gives 10, 15 minutes to talk to them about it, make sure they understand... I think that gives a long way.” Bar Staff 2

10 “... so between the time they’ve put the steak on, they’ve got to go wash their hands, come back, garnish the plate, turn the steak, change gloves, everything... it just won’t work.” Head Chef

11 Figure 3: Participants comments relating to time barrier