

# Hierarchical perspectives on training culture among food-handlers

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## Introduction

In 2014, approximately 43% of all consumer food and drink expenditure in the United Kingdom (UK) was at one of 453,000 registered restaurant and catering outlets<sup>1</sup>. As 96% of all UK businesses fall into the micro category (i.e. employing 10 or less)<sup>2</sup>, it is probable that a high proportion of those food outlets are independently responsible for their own food safety training programmes. Evaluating food-handler factors that may increase food safety risks is often overlooked<sup>3</sup>.

Inevitably, these factors are often indistinguishable components that contribute positively or negatively to the prevailing food safety culture<sup>4,5</sup>. Insufficient or inadequate training content, training that fails to address food handler capability or a management culture that underestimates repeated food safety malpractices can sustain poor behaviours without remedy<sup>6</sup>. Time barriers (e.g. due to service demands or high staff turnover) and inconsistent training delivery across sub-cultures<sup>7,8</sup> may result in unsuccessful food safety learning outcomes despite repeated endeavours.

With a growing consumer appetite for eating away from home (often at premises assessed for food hygiene by 'general appearance')<sup>9,10</sup>, food operators alongside their legal requirements have a moral duty to ensure that food training mechanisms are fit for purpose. As such, understanding more about food handler attitudes and perceptions toward food safety training may highlight future opportunities that are conducive with the business' food safety education needs.

## Purpose

This study explored food handler perceptions and attitudes towards food safety training practices in a small food business operation.

## Methods

**Data Collection:** To conduct a study representative of attitudes and perceptions across the business as a whole, a purposeful sample by job function/role was identified prior to conducting interviews. Those present during the pre-appointed interview period matching 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. 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 business.

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

## Results

Participant job function and responsibility at the business varied with hierarchy, including a general manager with overall responsibility for the business operation (food and drink) alongside two apparent sub-cultures. The head chef, sous chef and junior chef formed one co-existing but separate culture while two assistant bar managers and one food service/bar person formed another. Bar employees were responsible for collecting and serving meals (prepared by chefs) as well as condiments and cutlery from the kitchen area. The general manager and head chef were predominantly responsible for all training (in their respective areas), however, new employees were required to do most learning 'on the job'. Ages ranged from 21-45 and only one participant was female. Themes arising from the data-set were as follows:

### Hierarchical perceptions towards training

Attitudes towards food safety varied across sub-cultures (kitchen/bar) and between employees in senior positions. Figure 1 illustrates that while the general manager believed food hygiene principles should be embedded from the top down, the head chef perceived food safety as the responsibility of all.

One senior bar staff employee was aware that training was divided between the general manager and head chef. However, despite working at the venue in excess of 6 months, could not provide further detail as he was yet to be trained; indicating a detachment between role and appropriate food safety function training.

Most participants (bar and kitchen) regarded head chef as the food hygiene role model at the business, a positive influence on behaviour and standards.

"It's the people at the top... If the manager's are not doing it, the staff definitely won't do it." **General Manager**

"There should be a basic standard for anybody serving food... you have to be trained to do it. So why aren't bar staff, wait staff?" **Head Chef**

"... [Head Chef] teaches kitchen staff. [General Manager] you know teaches bar staff. And, umm, so yeah, I'm not really sure how that process works yet. I suppose in time I'll find out." **Bar Staff 2**

"... head chef here is quite full on ... he knows what he wants ... like a headmaster sort of thing..." **Bar Staff 1**

Figure 1: Participant comments relating to learning perceptions

### Reported training practices

"If they last 6 or 7 months then we start bringing them to the fold then." **General Manager**

"I think the younger chef's generally, who are coming in now ... they will take things on board. The older grumpier ones are generally a bit ... we're not stuck in our ways. We have our routine. We do our thing. And that's it." **General Manager**

"You get the 'I've been in the trade for five years'. That's fine. But have you been in the trade and been trained in it!" **Head Chef**

"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." **Sous Chef**

Figure 2: Participant comments relating to training practices

As indicated by Figure 2, on-the-job training would be provided to new starters after 6 months, a decision predominantly influenced by previous staff turnover. Mature employees (with formal food training) were perceived as having established attitudes to food safety which were less adaptable to new processes or ideas.

No formal training structure existed at the business as a whole (for kitchen or bar staff). New chefs would be given the menu and observed preparing orders intermittently during induction until the process was completed correctly.

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 sub-cultures, with kitchen staff frustrated by lack of knowledge and resultant behaviours when food was being served.

### 'Time' as a barrier to training and behaviour

Figure 3 provides examples of how 'time' was perceived as a barrier. Kitchen staff remarked that during busy service it was difficult to monitor or observe bar staff behaviour when they entered the kitchen.

One kitchen staff member commented that hygienic practices (such as handwashing) were an unrealistic expectation during busy service; indicative of an established behaviour, but contrary to the attitude expected of a trained direct food-handler.

Some participants bemoaned the paperwork necessary to maintain food safety management as well as reiterating that information to employees; suggesting shorter, informal training would be beneficial.

"... we don't watch them every time because there's always stuff going on... I can't see them all the time ..." **Sous Chef**

"... 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**

"... 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... I think that goes a long way." **Bar Staff 2**

Figure 3: Participant comments relating to time as a barrier

## Significance of study

- It is acknowledged that this study is indicative of only one small food business. However, consistent coherent approaches to training (across front of house and kitchen) may ensure that employees are aware of risks relating to their specific responsibilities as well as those that are cross-functional.
- This study highlighted sub-culture attitudes and perceptions that would otherwise go unnoticed, an issue potentially common to many busy food service environments.
- Identifying and capitalising on influential 'role models' (those perceived by others as an 'expert') may enhance future training delivery, as would training mechanisms which are short, discursive and frequent to avoid overwhelming the learner and reduce pressure on management.
- Time planning for future training purposes is a key consideration; allowing for monitoring, discussion, supervision, feedback and continual positive improvements across the business.
- The UK Food Standards Agency defines a 'food handler' as any person entering a kitchen environment whether preparing food directly or not<sup>11</sup>. Small food business operators should be clear about food safety expectations and provide timely adequate training provision, regardless of pre-existing experience and training. This may have a positive influence on the food safety culture at the business, demonstrating leadership and commitment to food safety expectations which are adopted as the 'norm' from the outset.

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