

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

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## Introduction

Despite many positive advances in food safety management systems for the small food business, such as the Food Standards Agency 'Safer Food for Better Business' pack<sup>1</sup>, foodborne diseases remain an important cause of illness in the United Kingdom (UK). Estimated at a cost burden of £1 billion in 2008<sup>2</sup>, food related illnesses are thought to affect more than 1 million people in the UK every year<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, during 2017/18, in excess of 150,000 food establishments across Wales, Northern Ireland and England received written warnings or formal enforcement action relating to hygiene malpractices<sup>5</sup>.

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 food behaviours<sup>6</sup>.

## Purpose

This pilot study explored food handler perceptions and attitudes towards food safety training practices in a small food business operation. 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 job function/role was identified prior to conducting interviews. As all employees worked on a rota-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 business.

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

## References

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## Results

Participant job function and responsibility at the business varied with hierarchy. This included a general manager with overall responsibility for the business operation (food and drink) on a day to day basis alongside two distinct 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 at the business (in their respective areas), however, new employees were required to do most learning 'on the job'. Themes arising from the data-set were as follows:

### Hierarchical perceptions

Perceptions relating to food safety matters differed between and within the sub-cultures (kitchen/bar). Figure 1 illustrates that while the general manager believed food hygiene principles should be embedded from the top down, the head chef stated that food hygiene was the responsibility of everyone at the business whether preparing food directly or not.

Most participants described the head chef as a role model (Figure 1) for food safety standards that had influenced their own behaviour despite not being a direct line manager, having responsibility for their training or ever crossing-over in function (i.e. working alongside bar staff front of house).

"It's the people at the top. The people at the top. All the managers. 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? You know, just a one-day thing..." **Head Chef**

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

"... he's very hygienic [head chef]. Yeah so you know its even more important with him." **Bar Staff 2**

Figure 1: Participant comments relating to learning perceptions

### Training consistency

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

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

"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! That's the difference."

"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."

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

"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."

"Like I say, in that sense, because they're not trained, that switch in there, where they go 'is this going to hurt somebody?' - and that has to be the core of every kitchen."

Figure 2: Example participant comments relating to preconceived training assumptions

### 'Time' as a barrier to training and monitoring 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 to collect meals, condiments or when clearing down tables.

"... we don't watch them every time because there's always stuff going on... I can't see them all the time ..." **Sous 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, make sure they understand... I think that goes a long way." **Bar Staff 2**

"... 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**

Figure 3: Participant comments relating to time as a barrier

## 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 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 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, discursive and frequent to avoid overwhelming the learner.
- Time planning for future training purposes is a key consideration; allowing 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<sup>7</sup>. Small food business operators should be clear about food safety expectations and provide 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 standards which are adopted as the 'norm' from the outset.