

Q&A: The Importance of Food Safety Training

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Interview with Jeff Eastman, chief executive officer, Alchemy Systems, LP

Since the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) has placed a greater emphasis on training as a preventive control, *Food Manufacturing* asked Jeff Eastman of Alchemy Systems for his views about training's impact on food safety, its role as a preventive control under FSMA and how to ensure employees comprehend and apply their training at all times.

Q: How can the quality of employee training impact the level of food safety at a facility?

A: The manufacturing process is typically people-intensive, so the quality of employees is everything when it comes to food safety. As far back as 1996, a study showed that 97 percent of foodborne illnesses could be attributed either to a process or employee training breakdown. Unfortunately, I don't think much has changed. For example, employees may not be doing something correctly, whether it's cleaning equipment or product handling. Another problem is that companies do not measure the quality of their training and that has to change. The industry is acknowledging the need for training and testing comprehension and applying the appropriate behaviors every day in the workplace.

Q: How has FSMA changed how food companies view their training methods?

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A: The difference is that prior to FSMA, many companies viewed training only as essential for regulatory compliance, but now it is seen as a preventive control. You can see the changes throughout the industry in which there is more awareness of the importance of effective training.

FSMA has actually memorialized the best practices of industry, particularly by the larger companies, and those will certainly affect the smaller companies and importers into the U.S. But FSMA also means that as a preventive control, training and its comprehension have to be validated. For many companies, this major shift applies to the “qualified individuals” who oversee food training.

Q: What types of training should companies make sure all employees receive?

A: While we all recognize that employees need training to successfully execute their job responsibilities, the training must go significantly beyond that standard. It's not enough to train people to perform their specific jobs. You also have to understand the role of substitutes and plan for those times when your operation is short of personnel. That is probably inevitable when you consider the exodus of senior baby-boomers and their cache of knowledge. When they leave, there are going to be problems, particularly if their wealth of knowledge has not been documented for future training.

Training is based on knowledge-retention and the same is true for cross-training employees. Training should be a collection of best practices starting with understanding how each job is performed. The more you can get that in a fully documented and easily distributable fashion, the better off you will be in delivering a safe product.

Q: How can plant managers ensure that employees comprehend training and apply it properly?

A: You start by raising the bar of accountability. If you have to train the same person five times for the same thing, a red flag should be raised on the quality of your training and if you have hired the right person for the job. Create the training tools and conduct observations of those trained behaviors on the processing floor. Have you really ensured total employee comprehension or have you left everyone at risk by assuming that a certain grade is good enough? One of the things we emphasize is setting up corrective observations, which identify needs and then require prompt action to correct. And it's not just the training but a continuous improvement process that training represents, which is most important.

Q: What do you consider some of the best methods of employee training for food manufacturers?

A: Training has to be interactive and engaging so people can remember it. It also has to be repetitive, consistent and defensible throughout the organization. If training is delivered differently throughout the company, you're causing inconsistencies. Training has to be designed and delivered to match the employee

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demographics. How many times have we heard the phrase “one size doesn’t fit all?” Instructors have to be cognizant of the complexities associated with adult learning so that everyone can understand the content. Plants that try to do their own training without considering all of these important elements probably do not recognize the various educational levels or cultural differences of their employees. That is why our software is multi-lingual for those people whose primary language is not English and delivered at an education level optimized for the hourly worker.

Q: What steps can companies take to create a food safety culture at their facilities?

A: A food safety culture has to start at the top or it’s not going to happen. Executives have to be fully committed and believe in it. Once you set that tone from the top, then the systems and tools can be made available to create a food safety culture. Frontline workers can’t make these judgment calls.

Take, for example, the experience of Maple Leaf Foods of Toronto. In 2008, a listeria outbreak that led to 23 deaths was attributed to lunch meat at one of its plants. The company’s response was to rewrite its food strategy with an emphasis on food safety training, and commit everyone to a food safety conscious culture. Maple Leaf makes sure its supervisors are qualified and the training is standardized. This company is a great example of what a food safety culture should be.

The number one priority is to make sure the food is safe and the right processes are followed. Your people have to hear this day in and day out. You must have a true focus on food safety and keep that topic front and center with employees.

Jeff Eastman is chief executive officer and co-founder of Alchemy Systems, LP, a leading developer of an interactive food and workplace safety training platform since its founding nearly 10 years ago. In 2012, Alchemy delivered six million safety training courses, all of which are electronically documented, at more than 1,400 food manufacturer, distributor, processor and retail locations worldwide.

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