



Ready or not...

Guy Kurkjian, President, World Food Safety Organisation, on how to get ready for a food safety audit.

The best discipline in a food processing establishment is that in everyday food handling practices, delivery of safe food to customers is the main focus. To ensure delivery of safe food, management should provide all the necessary resources and ensure that all employees are both competent and motivated. Provided that management commitment is in place and the policy to ensure food safety is well communicated, then training of personnel according to their responsibilities gives a company the confidence to go for a food safety audit. The first step when requesting an audit is to decide the criteria against which the company should be assessed. Identifying the terms of reference documents is a must and this forms the basis of the audit programme.

Once an audit date has been issued, there are various ways a company can prepare itself. Responsibilities are critical at this point – who is going to do what and what are the timeframes for accomplishing these set duties? Management skills play an integral role in the preparation.

The starting point is the set of criteria against which you will be audited. Every criterion should be evaluated and corrective actions scheduled. This is done not only in the case of the first assessment but also with reference to previous audit reports if these are available. It is imperative to schedule any corrective action indicated in previous reports, since they need to be closed by the auditor during the next audit. Failure to do that means the auditor is in a position to suspend and reschedule the audit upon confirmation of closure of pending issues.

It is always possible to issue a corrective action list as a result of the review of reports and to present this to the auditor

here they come

immediately upon opening of the audit. This gives the auditor confidence as well as evidence of commitment and management review. Communication should be channelled to the auditor through one leading person, and make sure to involve all key personnel in the audit to avoid misleading information. Whenever possible, it is best to take the lead, and make sure that you give a good overview of the food safety management system with prepared examples to indicate clearly the use and strength of the system. At all times provide evidence and make sure to support all your statements with records. When available, make use of official reports, which evaluate the system in place with reference to meeting legal requirements; inspection records by governmental officials and licensing of premises for food preparation.

Give the auditor a clear understanding of what is being discussed. For instance, open the discussion of system verification and validation by giving the auditor clear evidence of the quality targets of the company. It is toward these targets that the system is being evaluated and reviewed internally. Support the audit with records of internal audits and self-assessment of the system and procedures, making sure you point out the competence of the internal auditors.

Cross-referencing of self-assessment schemes and check lists with the terms of reference documents makes it easier during the audit to indicate records for any questions arising. Make use of cross-referencing of documents and anticipate the need of appropriate filing of records to minimise problems in finding whatever is being asked for. For example, the auditor might ask for internal auditing records of a particular HACCP plan. In such a case, having incident reports organised in such a way to identify those that arose from HACCP plan reviews enables you to find all necessary records as efficiently as practically possible.



But, even in such a case, you might encounter problems. It might also be the case that a particular plan did not need the issue of an incident upon review. In this instance, having a list of planned internal reviews and a list of archived reviews is important. Make sure that you can address the retrieval of information from the food safety system in multiple ways. Train the key personnel to make use of the system, and give clear evidence to the auditor that the system is not a one-man system, but is being used by competent personnel. Inter-departmental auditing ensures review of possible overlooked issues.

No audit is the same, and it is therefore your prerogative to be given a time layout of the audit. In addition, at the end of the audit, it is possible to ask for a conclusion session, during which the auditor points out the non-conformances. It is also possible that some conclusions are not agreed upon and differences in opinion at this point can be raised and possibly resolved by evidence. Make sure you also know the timeframe for receipt of the report – the sooner the better, so that preparation for the next audit can start right away. Never prepare for an audit at the last

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL AUDIT

- Give evidence that key personnel are fluent with the system and that the system is under control and giving results against your targets.
- Show leadership qualities to the auditor and be fluent when it comes to issues regarding the terms of reference documents.
- Be efficient in retrieval of information from the system.
- Give evidence that there is continuous dialogue with competent authorities and the system is updated in accordance to all regulations.
- Give evidence of self-assessment and validation of the food safety management system.
- Make sure that all outstanding issues from previous reports are addressed and if not closed, planned to do so.
- Give emphasis to commitment of the company for training of competent personnel in accordance to responsibilities.
- Make sure that the housekeeping of the premises and delivery fleet is in order.
- Show that the criteria you are assessed against in the audit are addressed in the system.
- Provide evidence of effectiveness of the HACCP management system.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDITOR IS TO:

- Explain the purpose of the audit and confirm the scope.
- Explain to the company that the audit is based on sampling and is not a 100 percent analysis.
- Build a rapport with the auditee and allow the auditee to recognise areas for improvement. Hence the audit process is seen as a constructive session and not an exam.
- Not only to concentrate on recording non-compliances but to verify continuous improvement and effectiveness of the food safety management (HACCP) system.
- Have a good knowledge of the business that is being audited and practical application of the standard.

minute and make it a must to always work under assessment conditions to ensure safe food for the customer. Remember, it is the right of the customer to receive safe food from any food processor/handler.

An audit visit is often met with apprehension and a certain amount of trepidation. This is often due to misunderstanding of its purpose or due to being ill prepared.

Auditing should not be confused with inspection. Traditionally, an inspection is carried out against a 'check list', whereas auditing is carried out against a 'standard'. Although, both exercises are valid, they serve a different purpose.

It is worth remembering that a highly qualified food technologist is not necessarily a good auditor. Auditing is a profession and not a hobby. In fact, experience shows that an inexperienced auditor who might be a highly qualified technician, is easily swayed into an intellectual discussion and may forget that the purpose of the visit is to carry out an audit. Imagine an enthusiastic IT person carrying out an audit on an IT business and ending up discussing the merits or weaknesses of software (does this sound familiar?). This is a natural phenomenon – but it is not an audit. It is not the intention to offend any person or profession, but merely to illustrate a point. A first division footballer is not necessarily a good trainer or manager.

There is no perfect system and hence the main objective is to make sure that the auditor leaves the premises with a clear picture of continuous improvement in the system as a result of self-assessment, system verification and validation programmes.

The ultimate purpose of the audit is to verify the effectiveness of the system. ■

Full details of the Food Lead Auditor programme and the HACCP management software are available on www.worldfoodsafety.org