

Skills & Knowledge in Food Safety - Managing the Risks

We've all heard the term "it must be something I ate". In fact each year a considerable proportion of the Australian population are affected by food poisoning.

As a food business owner or manager, food law requires you to ensure your staff obtain and sustain skills in food safety that are commensurate with tasks performed and that you can manage your food safety and business risks.

There is currently no requirement for formal training such as by attendance at an approved course of learning. Food handlers may therefore develop appropriate skills and knowledge in food safety by viewing videos, reading appropriate material on this topic, observing a demonstration in the workplace, or by having a procedure explained to them by more experienced staff.

Informal "on-the-job" learning is convenient **BUT** there are risks associated with this type of learning that you need to be aware of in terms of managing your overall food safety risks and more importantly, in being able to prove due diligence.

For example, if your business has adopted the above approach, how are you going to determine whether or not staff have understood the information and concepts presented and what mechanisms will you use to determine competence? Will this informal learning approach satisfy the Courts, who in the end will be the ultimate judge?

Likewise will your insurer be satisfied with this approach or will your premiums increase because of unmanaged risk? What procedures do you have in place for inducting new staff and what procedures do you have in place for re-training and up-skilling staff? Have you identified staff with language and literacy needs and how will you manage these issues if job performance impacts on food safety? Do you use some form of competency assessment with your particular method of training?

Environmental Health Officers and other regulatory agencies will be looking for evidence that food handlers are demonstrating food safety competencies that are commensurate with tasks performed.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Have we got the latest industry knowledge?
- Have we documented the attendance of staff at training sessions and skills updates for all food handlers? and;
- Who will monitor staff performance to ensure skills are current and safe food is being produced?

Demonstrating due diligence is a means of managing your business risks. Failure to observe due diligence may come at a significant cost in the longer term.

