Food safety audit readiness

3 focus areas

Focus on hygiene standards

A food safety audit can cost your business if you're not prepared for it. Make sure your people are ready, and your facility is hygienically clean at all times – here's how.

Danger is in the air

You can be sure that there's a lot going on at any site where food is produced, packaged and dispatched. Spores, germs and bacteria are present, lubricants and ingredients end up in the air, and dust is produced at the production and packaging stages as well as being brought into halls and warehouses when goods are being loaded and unloaded. And yet even minuscule levels of contamination are hazardous for consumers and employees – not to mention the reputation of your company.

+ Industry challenges

Let's take the example of a modern bakery where flour dust is part of day-to-day operations. A high concentration of flour dust has a detrimental effect on the appearance of products and premises. Plus, a "floury" environment attracts a lot of pests and endangers the health of employees – flour dust can trigger allergies and even cause "baker's asthma".

Companies that process fruit and vegetables have the huge risk of spores, germs and mould to deal with on top of the dust problem. Infested produce goes off more quickly and attracts bugs.
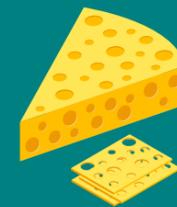
In cheese factories, meanwhile, the humidity creates the perfect conditions for "unwelcome" mould to take hold. All in all, there are some serious stumbling blocks that make it hard to comply with the legal hygiene regulations.

Particles eat through your budget

Stopping the torrent of particles requires intensive cleaning, which will occupy your valuable workforce.

In the worst-case scenario, entire systems will be brought to a standstill while elaborate cleaning processes are carried out. Specialist companies may even need to be hired in for complex tasks and they don't come cheap.

But it's not just cleaning processes that eat through budgets. The general effects of dust, mould and the like have an impact here too, with spoiled produce being returned or not selling in the first place.

The adverse effect of poor air quality directly influences employee absenteeism in the workplace. According to a recent study, contaminated air can even reduce staff productivity levels, bringing about costs that all food companies could do without.line

Dust on systems can disrupt workflows, cause machine downtime and even increase the risk of fires and explosions.

HACCP – Your Secret weapon for exemplary hygiene standards

The key to getting to grips with the particle load lies in your HACCP strategy. Although the applicable hygiene regulations vary in different countries, they all have one thing in common: the authorities monitor compliance with the rules in place in the relevant country.

Strict regulations

Food production companies have to adhere to stringent regulations. Their products have a direct impact on people's health so there is simply no room for error. Each country has its own legislation, and government body tasked with ensuring compliance and conducting food safety audits.

Most countries require food producers to follow the HACCP (Hazard analysis and critical control points) approach. As explained by the US Food & Drug Administration, HACCP is a management system that addresses food safety through the analysis and control of biological, chemical, and physical hazards from raw material production, procurement and handling, to manufacturing, distribution and consumption of the finished product.

Seven principles

The HACCP process is based on seven principles:

- Conduct a hazard analysis.
- Determine the critical control points (CCPs).
- Establish critical limits.
- Set up monitoring procedures.
- Define corrective actions.
- Create verification procedures.
- Administer record-keeping and documentation procedures.

Most authorities test for and enforce compliance to local legislation by conducting a food safety audit. To make sure your company's food production processes pass the safety audit every time, you need to focus on the following areas:

Maintain a hygienic production

For your production facility to meet food safety standards, it has to be completely clean and hygienic. The simplest way to achieve this is to design a work environment that is easy to clean. Make sure the machines you use are easy to clean, accessible from all angles and don't let any dirt, dust or lubricants build up. Establish a regular cleaning schedule that does more than a superficial wipe, but cleans down to a microbiological level.

A proper waste management strategy is crucial. This will help prevent contamination and keep pests out of your facility. Consider having designated clean zones, or clean rooms in your facility where no waste is allowed to be kept. Processing food items in these clean zones will reduce the risk of contamination.

Clean water and air is also critical to ensuring a clean facility so make sure that your people and processes have access to these elements at all times.

Once you're sure your production area is hygienic you also have to look after your general product hygiene. Ways to do this includes keeping food at proper temperatures and working on a first-in, first out freshness principle to make sure no food stays in your facility longer than it's supposed to.

Train your staff

Your employees are key to ensuring that your food production processes meet legislative requirements. As noted by Rentokil, food production facilities need to put measures in place that control how staff handle food products. It's important that you train your staff on the following personal hygiene standards and food handling directives.

Employees must keep their hands clean and use effective hand washing techniques after using the kitchen or bathroom. Nonetheless, food – especially raw food – should never come into direct contact with hands. Your staff must use utensils and disposable gloves.

To ensure that your facility passes a food safety audit, make sure that your staff cover their hair with hair-nets. They must not sneeze or cough over food so to be safe, provide them with disposable surgical masks. If they have any cuts or sores, then they need to cover them up. Furthermore, if an employee is ill, they must report it and only come back to work once they have a clean bill of health.

Production staff must not wear jewellery or nail polish at work. Instead, they must wear protective clothing and anti-slip shoes to prevent any cross-contamination between work areas.

Get the necessary documentation

You might know that you're running a hygienic food production facility, but the authorities will want proof. To be ready for a food safety audit, you need to have all the relevant documentation in place. Managers should regularly conduct documented reviews of food safety practices with clear action plans on how to address any shortcomings. Similarly, you should file your pest control records and detailed cleaning schedules somewhere easy to access.

If you make sure your workplace and staff are geared to produce food in a safe and hygienic way - and you have all the documents to prove this - you are well on your way to passing your food safety audit. You can also take a look at Zehnder Clean Air Solutions. Our air purification systems can help you minimise the amount of airborne pollutants in your facility – and keep your food production facility even cleaner.

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