



FOOD SAFETY SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & TRAINING (FOR FOOD SERVICE BUSINESSES)

Qualitative Research

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Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary	1
2. Background & Objectives	6
3. Methodology	7
3.1 Overall approach	7
3.2 Screening of participants	8
4. Key Findings	9
4.1 Drivers of Food Safety	9
4.2 Level of commitment required	11
4.3 Key barriers to practicing 'good' food safety	13
4.4 A segmentation	17
4.5 Priorities for training	19
4.6 Common types of training	20
4.7 'Best practice' in knowledge transfer	21
4.8 Training materials	25



1. Executive Summary

The following report presents the findings of a qualitative study based on a series of group discussions with Food Safety Supervisors (FSSs) and junior food handlers working in take-away, fast food and dine-in food businesses. The overall aim of this study was to explore knowledge transfer in relation to safe food handling practices, including the motivations and barriers to practicing food safety, approaches to food safety training, usefulness of current communications and training material, and key training needs.

Motivations for practicing food safety

This study identified the **key motivations** for adhering to safe food handling practices as being:

- To safe guard the reputation of the business
- Pride in the quality of food served to customers
- Fear of getting caught.

Owners and proprietors of food businesses defined as ‘best practice’ in food safety training shared the belief that the success of their business was dependent upon the quality of the food it provided. This was a key driver for ensuring appropriate food handling procedures, as an outbreak of food poisoning could ruin their futures in the industry. All levels of staff in these organizations also had a strong sense of pride in the place where they worked and in the job they were undertaking.

By contrast, staff working in businesses defined as ‘poor practice’ were more likely to be motivated by the fear that they would be ‘caught out’, than a genuine desire to be serving good quality food. In some cases, they were not convinced that the stringent food regulations in their place of business were truly necessary.

Level of commitment required

A significant commitment was required to establish and maintain good food safety practices. In businesses defined as ‘best practice’, management, in conjunction with the FSS, had generally invested a considerable amount of time and money in:

- understanding the rules
- establishing and/or reviewing procedures (including the Food Safety Program)
- training and supervising staff
- monitoring temperatures and
- ensuring records are kept.

A key difference in poor practice and best practice businesses was the ‘corporate’ attitude towards food safety practices. Best practice organisations took regulations seriously, established clear guidelines and procedures, shared responsibility for food safety amongst staff, and admonished those who did not do their job as required. Poor practice organisations, on the other hand, were less likely to have formal guidelines, and ‘turned a blind eye’ if records were sloppy or incomplete. Several openly admitted to falsifying their records.

The barriers to practicing food safety

A number of barriers to practicing food safety and training staff in food safe procedures and techniques were identified in this study. These were:

- Poor understanding of regulations, and the reasons why they are in place
- Conflicting time-pressures... staff ‘cut corners’, especially during busy periods
- Diminished sense of responsibility amongst junior staff
- The structure of the work force...in particular, the large numbers of casual staff and high staff turnover
- Multi-tasking... in small food businesses, staff are often required to serve customers, handle money and clean, in addition to preparing food.
- Lack of control over food suppliers and their food handling practices
- Poor access (in some food businesses) to cleaning products, hot water, and other materials required to maintain high standards in food safety.

Often, the extent to which these barriers were present in food businesses, was dependent upon management’s overall ‘commitment’ to food safety. However, there were also differences as a function of the type of food business:

- **Up market restaurants** appeared to have high standards in food quality and customer service. They were less likely to see food safety as a nuisance, and more as a fundamental part of running a successful business. Staff were generally recruited to work in one main aspect of the business (ie. front of house, bar, or kitchen) and formal training in their specialist area is looked upon favourably by management. Their key challenge was finding motivated and conscientious staff, who genuinely understand and care about food safety.

- The owners of **small businesses** (take-away stores, sandwich shops, and coffee shops) were likely to have ‘hands-on’ involvement in the day to day management of the business, but did not always have training or prior experience in food handling. Staff were often expected to be a ‘jack of all trades’... preparing food, serving customers, cleaning, and handling money. Training is on the job, and limited resources are available for formal training. Procedures for handling food safety may be in place, but are not always communicated clearly to junior staff members. Moreover, staff may not have a full understanding of the ‘science’ behind these rules and procedures. The key challenges for these businesses are: learning the rules, establishing systems, and training staff within the limited resources available. Record keeping is a low priority.

- **Fast food and restaurant chains** tend to employ a large number of casual and inexperienced staff, and have a high staff turnover. The culture tends to be hierarchical and highly disciplined. Staff are allocated set tasks, and given clear procedural guidelines for their work area. Training may be a combination of on the job and off-site training, using tools and systems provided by head office. The biggest challenge for the FSS tends to be motivating and supervising staff, to ensure correct procedures are followed.

The areas in which FSSs had most difficulty training staff were:

- **Personal hygiene, and hand washing.** Whilst it was felt this should be common sense for anyone working with food, FSS complained that staff continually need to be reminded to wash their hands. Posters and stickers placed near washbasins and toilet areas help to reinforce the expectation that hands must be washed regularly.

- **Cross-contamination.** There was widespread confusion about cross-contamination, including what it means, and how it can be avoided. Practical guidelines (such as the use of different coloured cutting boards for meat, fish and vegetables) were felt to be useful, along with simple explanations of why cross-contamination is an important issue in food handling.

- **Temperature regulations and food storage.** Both FSS and juniors struggled to remember storage rules for different types of food. Simple visual summaries of appropriate temperature ranges, and how long certain foods could be kept at certain temperatures were highly valued.

- **Stock rotation.** Stock rotation helps prevent food wastage, as well as increase food safety. But while some businesses had tightly regulated systems in place to ensure stock was rotated correctly, others found it difficult to train staff in procedures, and to discourage staff from taking stock within easiest reach, whatever it's use by date. Practical tips on how to set up and train staff in effective systems of stock rotation would be welcomed by food businesses.

Training

On the job training was considered crucial in initiating new staff in the systems and procedures unique to a particular food business. Whilst 'shadowing' was deemed the most common and practical way to show staff 'how things need to be done', the standard of training in food safety issues is clearly dependent on the trainers' level of knowledge and experience, personal attitude and commitment to food safety, and their ability and willingness to share their skills and knowledge. According to junior staff, this was highly variable.

Not all FSSs taking part in this study had formal training in food safety and, by their own admission, this was a limitation in their ability to educate and motivate junior staff. Several felt that formal training should be compulsory for all staff, to reduce the burden on FSSs to educate juniors in the basics of food safety. But whilst those who were interested in making a career in food industry agreed it was worth their while to complete a certificate course in food safety, others lacked interest or argued that they couldn't afford to do it.

Best practice in knowledge transfer

A clear finding of this study was that best practice in food safety is not just a matter of effective knowledge transfer and 'good training'. It is also influenced by the 'corporate culture', accountabilities, and systems that are in place. Indeed, the key differences between organisations defined in this study as 'best practice' and those defined as 'poor practice' were:

- **Corporate 'culture' and attitude of management towards food safety...** Best practice organisations shared a strong commitment to food safety, starting at a managerial level, and filtering down to junior staff.
- **Allocation of responsibilities....** 'Best practice' organisations were likely to share the responsibility for food safety amongst all members of staff, not just managers or FSSs. Often, junior staff were involved in the monitoring of safety procedures, and were held responsible if irregularities were not reported. Not only does this help to spread the work load around, it encourages junior staff members to embrace correct food safety procedures as part of their day to day job.

- **Systems and procedures...** Having ‘fool proof’ systems in place was considered the easiest way to ensure that staff consistently practiced food safety. Examples included:
 - Using different coloured chopping boards for cutting fish, chicken, meat and vegetables
 - Labelling all incoming food with use by dates
 - Simple and clearly communicated rules and guidelines
 - Checklists
 - Internal auditing systems
 - Clearly communicated stock rotation procedures.

- **Deeper understanding of the science of food safety..** some argued that best practice was also dependent upon staff having a deeper understanding of the reasons *why* certain procedures were in place.

Training tools and aids

Useful tools for educating staff included posters, fridge magnets, and stickers that contain simple messages about food safety, such as the correct temperatures for food storage, or reminders to wash hands, keep fridge doors closed, use older stock first, and store raw foods away from cooked foods. These could be strategically placed on fridge doors, above bench tops, and near washbasins, to remind staff of procedures and convey the message that ‘management is serious about food safety’. More detailed brochures and handouts were also valued as resource materials for FSSs seeking background information and practical advice on establishing safe food systems in their place of business.

There was some interest in web based training materials, or interactive cds that guide staff through the basic facts in food safety. Ideally, information should be tailored specifically for key business types (ie. Take-away, vs dine-in, vs delivery). To be effective, they should be accompanied by short quizzes to test staff on facts, as part of their training. Training aids and materials also need to be available in languages other than English, to cater for the large number of people in the industry from non-English speaking backgrounds.



2. Background & Objectives

In December 2003, TQA Research was commissioned by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to undertake independent market research to measure shifts in the level of skills and knowledge of both food handlers and their Food Safety Supervisors (FSS) since the food laws were amended in May 2001 as measured against the 2002 Baseline Survey.

The study involved two key components:

Phase 1: Quantitative assessment of food safety knowledge

- This was based on a **CATI (Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing) survey of 300 randomly selected registered food businesses**, to determine if there has been a shift in the level of skills and knowledge of both food handlers and their managers (Food Safety Supervisors (FSS)) since the introduction of the new food laws. The data collected also determined where Victorian food businesses currently source information about food safety issues, and identified gaps in business and staff knowledge related to food safety issues.

Phase 2: Qualitative exploration of how knowledge about food safety is transferred in food businesses

- This comprised of a series of **focus group discussions** to explore the transfer of knowledge about food safety between Food Safety Supervisors and junior staff members working in in take-away/ fast food and full service restaurants. The aim was to better understand the attitudes of Food Safety Supervisors and Juniors towards:
 - Food safety training, particularly knowledge transfer between Food Safety Supervisors and Junior Staff members
 - Challenges/ barriers in food safety knowledge transfer
 - Approaches to food safety training
 - The perceived role of the Food Safety Supervisor
 - Usefulness of current communications and training material
 - Suggestions for improving training.

This report reflects the outcomes of the qualitative phase of the research.



3. Methodology

3.1 Overall approach

A total of four group discussions were conducted with Food Safety Supervisors (FSS) and juniors working in take-away, fast food, cafes and full service restaurants.

Two of the group discussions (one with FSS and one with Juniors) represented food businesses that had been defined as ‘best practice’ in relation to food safety training. Where possible, the FSS and one junior staff member were recruited from the same organization.

The other two groups represented food safety businesses that had been defined as ‘poor practice’. Again, one of these groups involved FSS, whilst the other involved juniors.

	“BEST PRACTICE”	“WORST PRACTICE”
FOOD SAFETY SUPERVISORS	Group of 8 FSS 24 th May 2004, 10am-12pm	Group of 8 FSS 31 st May 2004, 10am-12pm
JUNIORS	Group of 8 Juniors 24 th May 2004, 3-5pm	Group of 6 Juniors 31 st May 2004, 3-5pm

The discussions were conducted in May 2004 by Lisa Bannon and Fiona Collis at the Carlton Crest Hotel in Melbourne.

3.2 Screening of participants

The definition of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ practice was based on the knowledge of *junior* staff in relation to food safety and food handling practice. Three screening questions were used to ascertain junior staff members’ knowledge of food safety:

- How long can chilled food be left at room temperature?
- Is this statement true or false... “Food that makes someone ill will *always* smell off”.
- Is this statement true or false... “Cooking destroys all food poisoning organisms”.

FSSs working in businesses where a junior member of staff was able to answer the above questions correctly, was defined for the purposes of this study as ‘best practice’, on the grounds that the transfer of knowledge about basic food safety facts and procedures had been successful.

FSSs working in businesses where a junior member of staff was unable to answer the screening questions correctly, were defined for the purposes of this study as ‘poor practice’.

Constraints: *The aim of the group discussions was to provide insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the size of the groups, the special recruitment methods adopted and the study objectives themselves, the findings should be viewed in a qualitative frame of reference and as being directional only.*



4. Key Findings

4.1 Drivers of Food Safety

Food safety was considered by Food Safety Supervisors (FSSs) and most junior staff members to be an important part of any food business. The **key motivations** for practicing good hygiene were:

- **Protecting the reputation of the business**

Owners and proprietors of food businesses, especially full service restaurants and large fast food chains, were acutely aware that the success of their business was dependent upon the quality of the food it provided. Cases of food poisoning that could be attributed to their kitchens or food handling procedures could be extremely damaging to their reputation and long term future in the industry.

*“It means everything to our business. If word got out that we made somebody sick, we’d be out of business in no time”
(FSS & restaurant proprietor)*

*“The consequences of serving food that is bad are huge”
(FSS & Manager, fast food chain)*

*“It’s part and parcel of running a restaurant”
(FSS & Manager, restaurant)*

Senior managers and chefs were also highly conscious that their personal reputations were at stake, if someone got sick from the food that was served from ‘their’ kitchen.

*“No-one would give you a job if they found out that you had given somebody food poisoning”
(Chef & FSS, restaurant)*

- **Pride in the quality of food served to customers**

This was also a key driver behind ‘good’ food safety practices. Indeed, a common element amongst junior staff working in food businesses defined as ‘best practice’, was a strong sense of pride in the place they were working, and in the job they were undertaking.

“Serve and give immaculate service, you get satisfaction from that, that’s where the positive attitude to food safety comes in - working towards high standards”

(Junior, Best Practice Group).

“If you’ve got pride in the job you’re doing, you’ll take care with food safety”

(Junior, Best Practice Group).

■ **Fear of getting caught**

Concerns about ‘getting caught’ for breaking council regulations, and being given a hefty fine, was an incentive for FSS to practice food safety. Juniors were also concerned, but more so about getting caught out by the boss and risking their job security.

“You get in trouble if you don’t”

(Junior, ‘poor practice’ restaurant)

Interestingly, staff working in businesses defined as ‘poor practice’ were more likely to be motivated by the fear that they would be caught out, than a genuine desire to be serving good quality food. In some cases, they were not convinced that the stringent food regulations in their place of business were truly necessary.

“The minute the boss turns his back, everyone runs amok. It’s all for show”

(Kitchen hand, ‘poor practice’ restaurant)

“They (the staff) just don’t care. They just do it because they have to”

(FSS, ‘poor practice’ fast food chain).

4.2 Level of commitment required

It was felt that a high level of commitment is required to establish and maintain good food safety practices. A considerable amount of time is invested in:

- understanding the rules
- establishing and/or reviewing procedures (including the Food Safety Program)
- training staff
- supervising staff
- monitoring temperatures and
- ensuring records are kept.

*“It’s a major commitment... watching staff, to make sure they’re doing their job...reminding staff not to cut corners”
(FSS, ‘best practice’).*

*“A significant amount of time is required.”
(FSS, ‘best practice’)*

*“It’s cumbersome”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’)*

Interestingly, both FSS and junior staff expressed frustration with government requirements to keep a detailed log of refrigerator and food temperatures. Several felt that the requirements to log temperatures several times a day were unrealistic and pointless. They couldn’t see the value of keeping detailed records, as long as the temperatures were checked fairly regularly and within an acceptable range. They often complained that they didn’t have the time to write in the log book, and many admitted to falsifying the records.

“There is such a big checklist that you have to do, its so time consuming and its like, ‘I can see that its ok, so why should I have to write it down’? Having to do it twice a day is ridiculous...if you see that the fridge is out of order you change it, its stupid having to write it down in case someone comes in, as if they look at the past six months of temperatures anyway”! (Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)

*“I’ve never done it in any of the places I’ve worked. Certainly not every hour”
(Junior, Take-away food business)*

A key difference in poor practice and best practice businesses was the ‘corporate’ attitude towards food safety and record keeping. Best practice organisations took record keeping seriously, had clear rules on the monitoring procedures, allocated responsibility for monitoring temperatures to a number of staff members, and admonished those who did not do their job as required.

*“It’s just part of the job”
(Junior, ‘best practice’ restaurant)*

*“I missed one of the temperatures, and got into huge trouble for it”.
(Junior, ‘best practice’ fast food chain)*

Poor practice organisations, on the other hand, were less likely to have formal guidelines for monitoring procedures, and ‘turned a blind eye’ if records were sloppy or incomplete.

“It’s not a big deal at our place” (Junior, ‘poor practice’ take-away store)

*“It’s (temperature recording) the easiest thing to bodge up. We didn’t fill it out for the whole summer in the busy period, the minute the weather turned cold we sat down and made up the figures”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’ group)*

4.3 Key barriers to practicing ‘good’ food safety

A number of barriers to practicing food safety were identified in this study. These are explained in the section below.

Poor understanding of regulations, and the reasons why they are in place

One of the fundamental barriers to ‘best practice’ in food safety and challenges in knowledge transfer is poor understanding of what ‘good food safety practice’ is. Whilst many argued that food hygiene is ‘simple common sense’, both FSS and juniors who had no formal training in food safety often had a poor grasp of more complex concepts in food safety such as cross-contamination, and temperature control. In particular, there was considerable confusion about correct storage temperatures and storage procedures.

*“It’s really hard knowing what the rules are”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ group)*

In some organisations, there was also poor understanding of why certain food safety guidelines were in place. Some food handlers clearly underestimated the consequences, at a human level, of compromised food safety.

*“It’s not like food poisoning is going to kill anyone”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)*

Concerns were raised over ‘small, new start-up businesses’ coming into the market with limited food handling experience. There was particular concern about food businesses being set-up by immigrants from countries that have lower standards in food safety

*“I thought it was reckless when I received my food safety permit but did not need to show any proof of my experience in food handling”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’ group)*

Conflicting time-pressures

In some cases, staff had a reasonable understanding of what they *should* be doing, but felt that they were not given enough time to do it properly. Correct food handling procedures were often described as repetitive, boring and time consuming. The pressures to complete orders quickly meant that juniors were often tempted to ‘cut corners’, especially at peak times.

*“When we’re flat that we can’t do all of it”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’ group)*

Juniors in poor practice food businesses often claimed there was no tangible reward for practicing food safety. However, if they took too long to serve customers they would end up out of a job.

Structure of workforce

The high rate of young, inexperienced staff employed on a casual basis in the food industry was raised as a significant barrier to food safety. FSSs in fast food chains complained that many of the casual staff they employed ‘did not understand or care about food safety’, and needed constant supervision to ensure that they adhered to the company’s guidelines.

*“Its hard to train them and make them care...half the time they don’t do it”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ group)*

*“They’re not paid enough to care”
(FSS, Fast Food Business, ‘poor practice’ group)*

*“You can tell someone a hundred times, something really simple,
and they’ll still go back and do it that same way”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’ group)*

“The part time people are not career minded. They don’t care”

A high staff turnover, across all types of food businesses, also meant that that management was often reluctant to invest heavily in staff training.

*“Very few of these young ones want to make a career of it. The boss doesn’t want to spend a lot of money on training, as they’re only going to leave”
(FSS, restaurant)*

FSSs also complained about a lack of training materials for people from non-english speaking backgrounds.

“I speak English and that thing (Food Safety Template) was hard enough for me to understand the requirements so I can’t imagine what it is like for people from non-english speaking backgrounds”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’ group)

Multi-tasking

Many felt that standards in food safety are compromised in businesses (usually take-away food stores, coffee shops and sandwich shops) where staff are required to do multiple tasks such as take orders, prepare food, handle money, and clean. Multi-tasking, combined with pressures to do things quickly, can lead to poor food safety.

“You’re making sandwiches, taking money, wiping bench tops. There’s no time to be washing your hands in between.”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)

“I’ve worked in places where the chef used to put the garbage out, and walk straight back into the kitchen”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)

“You’re the jack of all trades, and master of none”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)

Lack of control over suppliers

FSS often complained about lack of control over suppliers and distributors, and its potential impact on food safety. Their key grievances were:

- Use by dates printed only on external cartons, and not on individual food packs
- Inadequate refrigeration in delivery vans
- Deliveries made outside working hours, or when the FSS is not there.

“You’re never sure if the supplier is doing the right thing”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ group).

*“You’re supposed to take temperature of food when delivered
but you can’t if it’s not your shift”
(FSS, ‘poor practice’ group).*

In some businesses, usually those defined as poor practice, responsibility for overseeing the delivery of food and ensuring food safety was allocated to the FSS, who was not always available. Businesses defined as ‘best practice’ were more likely to spread the responsibility more widely, and train the whole team in the basics relating to correct handling of food.

Substandard equipment

Some junior staff members (mainly working in small businesses) complained that it was difficult to maintain high standards in food safety because they were not given access to certain materials or equipment. The most common complaints related to a shortage of clean aprons, tea towels, wash cloths, hand towels, cleaning products, brushes, and hot water.

*“There was never enough hot water. Management were too stingy”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ restaurant)*

*“I had to take the tea towels home with me to wash,
because there were never any clean ones in the shop”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ sandwich shop)*

4.4 A segmentation

Attitudes towards food safety and the challenges in knowledge transfer varied between different types of food businesses.

Up market restaurants

In this study, up market restaurants and hotels were more likely to fit within models of best practice. High standards in food quality and customer service were considered vitally important to the business, and staff generally took a great deal of pride in delivering to the best of their ability. Responsibilities were often divided into key sections: front of house, bar, and kitchen. At least some of the staff were likely to have formal training in their speciality area, whilst all would have received on-the-job coaching on systems and procedures unique to the business.

“It’s part of overall quality control” (FSS, ‘best practice’ restaurant)

“The chefs have years of training” (FSS, ‘best practice’ restaurant)

Key challenges: These food businesses were less likely to see food safety as a nuisance, and more as a fundamental part of running a successful business. Their key challenge was finding highly motivated and conscientious staff, who genuinely understand and care about food safety. Keeping detailed records of food safety procedures was also considered highly demanding.

Small businesses (take-away stores, sandwich shops, and coffee shops)

The owner/proprietor is likely to have ‘hands-on’ involvement in the day to day management of the business, but may not have any training or prior experience in food handling. Staff are expected to be ‘jack of all trades’... preparing food, serving customers, cleaning, and handling money. Training is on the job, and limited resources are available for formal training. Informal systems and procedures for handling food safely may be in place, and these are not always clearly communicated to all staff members. Moreover, staff may not always have a full understanding of the ‘science’ behind these rules and procedure.

*“In smaller businesses, the mama and papa shops, you don’t get any training. They don’t have the resources. You just get thrown into it”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)*

Key challenges: learning the rules, establishing systems, and training staff within the limited resources available. Record keeping is a low priority.

Fast food and restaurant chains

The ‘culture’ of fast food and restaurant chains is often hierarchical and highly disciplined. There is a large number of casual and inexperienced staff, and staff turnover is high. Staff are allocated set tasks, and given clear procedural guidelines for their work area, but may feel ‘out of their depth’ in other areas. Training may be a combination of on the job, and off-site training, using tools and systems provided by head office. The key role of the FSS is usually to monitor staff and procedures.

“There are training modules for each part of the business. You have to complete each module, before you’re allowed to work in each section.”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ fast food chain)

Key challenges: training and motivating inexperienced staff to follow rules and procedures.

	Up market restaurants	Small businesses (take-away & sandwich stores, coffee shops etc)	Fast food chains
‘Culture’	High standards in food quality and customer service... part of corporate ‘ethos’	Informal and unstructured	Hierarchical, and highly disciplined
Staff	Staff often work in teams ... ie. front of house, bar, or kitchen Responsibility for FSS in the kitchen lies with the head chef	Staff are ‘jack of all trades’... preparing food, serving customers and handling money. No formal training	Employs large number of casual and inexperienced staff. Staff are allocated set tasks, and are given clear procedural guidelines.
Training	Some staff likely to have some formal training in hospitality.	Training is on the job... limited resources for external or formal training.	Training may be combination of on the job, and off-site training. Training tools provided by head office, and tailored towards the organisations. Focus of FSS is correct implementation
Systems and procedures	May not be explicit, but generally firmly entrenched ‘everybody knows them, even though they’re not written down’	Informal, or non-existent	Guidelines and systems developed at head office level.
Challenges	Recruiting highly motivated staff, who genuinely understand and care about food safety.	Learning the rules, developing systems, and training staff within the limited resources available. Record keeping (low priority).	Motivating and supervising an inexperienced workforce

4.5 Priorities for training

FSS believed that the top issues that need to be discussed with each new staff member (and often the most difficult to train them in) were:

- **Personal hygiene.** In particular, the importance of washing hands before touching food, after smoking, after going to the toilet, and after touching hair or face. Whilst this should be common sense for anyone working with food, FSS in all types of food businesses complained that staff continually need to be reminded to wash their hands. Posters and stickers near washbasins and toilet areas help to reinforce the expectation that hands must be washed regularly.
- **Cross-contamination.** There was widespread confusion about cross-contamination, including what it means, and how it can be avoided. Practical guidelines (such as the use of different coloured cutting boards for meat, fish and vegetables) were felt to be useful, along with simple explanations of why cross-contamination is an important issue in food handling.

*“It’s good to have systems in place, like different coloured boards, but you’ve also got to give staff a bit of an explanation of why it’s important”
(FSS, best practice)*

*“What is it with the different coloured boards? I’ve never heard of that?”
(Junior, poor practice)*

- **Temperature regulations and food storage.** Both FSS and juniors struggled to remember storage rules for different types of food. Simple visual summaries of appropriate temperature ranges, and how long certain foods could be kept at certain temperatures were much needed, could help as reminders.
- **Stock rotation.** Careful stock rotation helped avoid food wastage, as well as encourage food safety. But while some businesses had tightly regulated systems in place to ensure stock was rotated correctly, others found it difficult to train staff in stock rotation procedures, and to discourage staff from taking stock within easiest reach, whatever it’s use by date. Practical tips on how to set up and train staff in effective systems of stock rotation would be welcomed by many food businesses.

4.6 Common types of training

On the job training was considered crucial in initiating new staff in the systems and procedures unique to every food business. The most common type of on the job training was ‘shadowing’, where newcomers observed a more experienced member of staff at work in all relevant aspects of the business. Whilst it was agreed that this was the most practical way to show staff ‘how things need to be done’, the standard of training in food safety issues is clearly dependent on the trainers’:

- level of knowledge and experience
- personal attitude and commitment to food safety, and
- their ability and willingness to pass on their knowledge.

According to junior staff, this was highly variable:

*“I haven’t been given specific training with regards to food safety requirements, I kind of just go off what I know and making a few observations along the way”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group).*

*“I haven’t been given any real instructions. A lot of the rules are common sense”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)*

Despite statutory requirements that FSS should have a certificate in food handling, not all FSS had any formal training. By their own admission, this was a limitation in their ability to train and motivate junior staff.

Whilst staff who were interested in making a career in the food industry felt it was worth doing a certificate course in food safety, others lacked interest or argued that they couldn’t afford it.

*“It’s expensive. I can’t afford the time or the money”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)*

*“Some places value it (the food handler’s certificate), but others want you to do it their way. They don’t care if you’ve got formal training or not”
(Junior, ‘poor practice’ group)*

Interestingly, several FSSs felt that some form of formal training should be compulsory. Some also felt there should be more focus on education than on monitoring.

“Anyone working with food should have to do a short course in hygiene.” (FSS)

“Bar staff have to get their RSA (Responsible Serving of Alcohol). You’d think that food handlers should have to get some kind of certificate as well”(FSS)

4.7 'Best practice' in knowledge transfer

What can be learned from best practice organisations?

A clear finding of this study was that best practice in food safety is not just a matter of effective knowledge transfer and 'good training'. It is also influenced by the 'corporate culture', accountabilities, and systems and procedures in place.

Indeed, the key differences between organisations defined in this study as 'best practice' and those defined as 'poor practice' were:

- **Corporate 'culture' and attitude of management towards food safety**

Best practice organisations shared a strong commitment to food safety, starting at a managerial level, and filtering down to junior staff. High standards were expected, and staff took pride in doing their jobs well, including taking care with food safety.

*"If management starts to slack off, then it goes haywire"
(FSS, 'best practice' group)*

*"You've got to have pride in your job, from the top down"
(Junior, 'best practice' group)*

- **Allocation of responsibilities**

Best practice organisations were likely to share the responsibility for food safety amongst all members of staff, not just managers or FSSs. Often, junior staff were involved in conducting temperature checks and monitoring safety procedures, and were held responsible if irregularities in procedure were overlooked and not corrected. Not only does help reduce the burden on FSSs, it encourages junior staff members to embrace correct food safety procedures as part of their day to day job.

"If they don't have responsibility, they don't care" (FSS, 'best practice' group)

"We get the young ones doing the temperature checks, so that they learn." (FSS, 'best practice' group)

“We were having huge problems with stock. Staff would cut corners all the time, and just take the first thing they could get their hands on. So we ended up employing one person, who loaded and unloaded the fridges, and was responsible for rotating the stock. It worked.”

“It’s a big job, so we divvy it up between the teams. Each team is responsible for ensuring that things in their area are done properly, and are accountable if they are not” (FSS, best practice restaurant)

*“Everyone needs to be accountable”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ group)*

■ **Systems and procedures**

Another palpable difference between ‘best practice’ and ‘poor practice’ food businesses, was the extent to which they had formal systems and procedures for handling food. Having ‘fool proof’ systems in place was considered the easiest way to ensure that staff consistently practiced food safety, without even having to think about it.

“You’ve got to have the right systems” (FSS, best practice)

*“Everything needs to be planned. Having systems in place makes a difference”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ group)*

*“Good food safety all comes down to the procedures in place”
(FSS, ‘best practice’ group)*

Examples included:

- Using different coloured chopping boards for cutting fish, chicken, meat and vegetables
- Labelling all incoming food with use by dates
- Simple and clearly communicated rules and guidelines
- Checklists
- Internal auditing systems
- Stock rotation procedures.

“If an item doesn’t have a use by date, we put it one”(FSS ‘best practice’ group)

“At XXX, if it’s been out of the fridge for too long, you have to chuck it. It’s a rule, and everybody knows that” (Junior, ‘best practice group)

- **Deeper understanding of the science of food safety**

In some organisations, it was argued that best practice was also dependent upon staff having a deeper understanding of the reasons *why* certain procedures were in place. They believed, for example, that staff were more likely to use one board and one knife for chopping raw chicken and another for chopping vegetables, if they understood just how easily bacteria from the chicken could contaminate other foods. Thus whilst it was vital to have good systems in place, it also helped if staff understood why they were important.

“It’s really important that the juniors are taught why they have to wash their hands all the time...show them how bacteria is spread. Then they might change their attitudes”

(FSS, poor practice group)

4.8 Training materials

Food safety program

Roughly half of the FSSs taking part in this study were involved in the development of their organisation's Food Safety Program. Whilst lamenting the huge amount of work that was required to put the document together, most felt that it had been a worthwhile experience, and some had used sections of it to assist in the training of staff.

Those working in franchises and chain stores were unfamiliar with the Program – presumably it was prepared and submitted by head office. Others had 'inherited' the program from predecessors. Interestingly, these FSSs tended to view the Program as cumbersome, and were cynical about its value as a training tool.

*“The focus is all on regulations and paper work”
(FSS, 'poor practice' group)*

*“Never looked at it”
(FSS, 'poor practice' group)*

DHS food safety posters

Posters, on the other hand, were widely perceived as a useful tool for educating staff on the basic tenets of food safety. The display of such posters in kitchens and backrooms served as a reminder to staff, and helped convey the message that 'management is serious about food safety'.

While some businesses had been given posters for use by their local council, others had not seen them before. In an ideal world, these would be sent to all registered food businesses, and updated every few years. Smaller sized posters (ie.A4 or A5) might also be of interest in businesses that have limited wall space.

*“They need to be bright, simple, to help reinforce the culture”
(FSS)*

Brochures

The general view was that brochures and handouts were less useful as a training tool, as the majority of staff would not take the time to read them. However, they were valued as resource materials for FSS seeking background information and practical advice on establishing food safe systems in their place of business.

“They’re not really impactful. They need to be more visual” (Junior)

“They’re good, but there’s too much writing. Not everyone would read them” (FSS)

There was some interest in written materials (postcards, stickers, or fridge magnets) that summarise, in simple terms, key facts about food safety, such as the correct temperatures for food storage, or reminders to wash hands, keep fridge doors closed, use older stock first, and store raw foods away from cooked foods. These could be strategically placed on fridge doors, above benchtops, and near washbasins, to remind staff of correct procedures.

Other suggestions

There was a high level of interest in web based training materials, or interactive cds that guide staff through the basic facts in food safety. Ideally, information should be tailored specifically for key business types (ie. Take-away, vs dine-in, vs delivery). To be effective, they should also be accompanied by short quizzes to test staff on facts, as part of their training.

“They should have a cd-rom as an option for self-training. You could incorporate a test at the end of it, as a way of checking that staff actually read it”

Finally, it was pointed out that materials need to be available in languages other than English, to cater for the large number of people in the industry from non-English speaking backgrounds.