

Appointing a Food Safety Consultant

Most food businesses are required, by law, to put in place, implement and maintain procedures based on HACCP principles (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point). HACCP is the central part of a food safety management system (FSMS). In essence this is a document that details how you ensure the food your business produces is safe.

The level of detail depends on the nature and complexity of the food you offer. Many businesses can use the Food Standards Agency's Safer Food Better Business Pack, including retailers, most caterers, residential care homes and childminders. However, it is not suitable for all businesses.

The process of devising a system based upon the HACCP principles can be complex and time consuming. Even with the best intentions and effort businesses do not always achieve what is required, over complicating the system or missing out critical elements. This costs time and money.

In those businesses where a comprehensive food safety management system is required, the most efficient and effective means of achieving this can be through the appointment of a food safety consultant. As with any appointment in your business it is important to ensure you are appointing the right person for the job. This leaflet gives advice to help you do it.

Business needs

To appoint the right person you need to decide what it is your business needs. Food Safety Consultants usually offer a suite of interventions for your business including:

- Introductory HACCP training if you intend to develop your own HACCP plan
- Technical support to help you devise, document and implement a HACCP plan
- Assistance in the full development of your HACCP plan and creation of your FSMS
- Validation, verification and audit of an existing HACCP and FSMS to identify gaps

The Food Safety Consultant

The consultant should:

- Be able to demonstrate suitable qualifications and a track record in the development of HACCP plans and FSMS's similar to your requirements
- Have the technical knowledge and ability to help you identify the hazards in your food operation and be able to demonstrate this through experience, previous work or testimonials
- Have a clear understanding of the principles of implementing a HACCP/FSMS
- Be willing to conduct a follow up review of the working HACCP and FSMS at a future date
- Provide you and your staff with an appropriate level of training
- Importantly, be willing to work with you to create a system bespoke to your business



Questions to Ask

As with any appointment it is beneficial to contact at least three different consultants to discuss what they can offer and to help you decide who best fulfils the needs of your business. You could undertake preliminary discussions over the telephone, but it is always best to meet in person.

Points for discussion include:

- **Do they have an appropriate qualification?**

The person delivering the service should be competent in the task they are undertaking. They should have an appropriate level of technical knowledge. In addition, relevant experience in the food industry may be of benefit when addressing issues in your food business.

- **Is the consultant interested in identifying your specific business needs?**

Are they willing to spend time with you, listen to you and explain the best method of meeting your requirements?

- **How does the consultant assess your business needs?**

Will they visit your business – are you happy they will visit for the right reasons i.e. to assess current practices? Will they meet with your key representatives and staff members? What do they hope to achieve by doing this?

- **Are they willing to show you some of their previous work?**

This will give you an indication of the quality of work you can expect to receive. It also allows you to assess whether the service provided is generic or customer specific.

- **What do their previous clients say about them?**

Talking to some of the consultants' previous clients will inform you of the quality of the service you may receive. It must however be kept in mind that the success of the project is dependent on both the input of the consultant and you as the food business operator (FBO).

- **What type of follow-up support will they provide?**

The success of the project is dependent on how it is implemented in the workplace. Follow up visits may prove beneficial as they assist in the implementation of knowledge obtained. These visits can also help clarify any issues that have arisen since the service was provided.

- **Do they encourage management participation?**

Food business operators should be familiar with and have ownership of their HACCP/FSMS. Therefore it is important that the consultant and FBO work together to address all food safety aspects relating to the business.



- **Do they provide appropriate HACCP Training?**

A consultant who is involved in developing a HACCP system should provide appropriate HACCP training as part of the service. This should include introductory training in HACCP for staff members who have a role in your HACCP system and advanced HACCP training for at least one member of staff who will be responsible for the implementation, verification, validation and revision of your HACCP system. Advanced training should include full practical details on conducting the steps covered by the seven principles of HACCP. While there is no specific timescale for completing a HACCP course, to ensure all the requirements are addressed effectively will typically take two days (14 hours).

Things to Avoid

Do not buy a HACCP/FSMS off the shelf no matter how tempting it seems. It is very unlikely to meet legal requirements.

Do not hire a consultant to devise and document a HACCP plan for your business without working with you to do it.

Remember

You will have to run your HACCP system, revise it and defend it when asked by your customers or when an officer of the Local Authority visits to undertake a food hygiene inspection. An inadequate or inappropriate HACCP system can have a significant impact on your food hygiene rating.

Selection

The responses you receive to the suggested questions will assist you in making your final decision.

- Draw up a short list of at least three consultants.
- Ask them to tender for the work. A tender should consist of a breakdown of the work they will undertake, a costing and a timescale.
- Select your consultant based on your discussions with them and their tender document.

Remember

The quality of the service they provide is as equally important as the cost. If you get it wrong and you harm a customer the financial cost and damage to your reputation will be much higher.

The success of the service provided by a consultant depends on your commitment to being involved in the process, implementing

the system and taking on board the advice you receive. A consultant can only provide you with the tools; it is the individual food business operator that ensures the success of the project.

Thank you to Food Safety Authority of Ireland which provided much of the information in this guidance.

