

Selecting a Food Safety Consultant

When developing a HACCP system it is important to have someone on your team who is very knowledgeable about HACCP. You may already have staff with the required education or experience; if not, you may need to select a food safety consultant. A qualified consultant will be able to provide the needed technical knowledge to your staff.

Determine Your Needs

What is my current situation?	Your consultant should be able to provide ...
I don't have any written programs. I don't know where to start. I don't know how to respond to customer inquiries about HACCP.	... guidance and assistance in creating and carrying out a detailed plan to implement a HACCP system. This may include employee training on HACCP systems, development and implementation of written programs, maintenance of your HACCP system, and development of a record-keeping system.
I have a clean and sanitary facility. As far as I know there have never been any food safety concerns with our products. My staff are very diligent about food quality and food safety. They have been trained in food hygiene and have received technical training regarding specific details of the operation. I lack written documentation and records to prove that we are producing food in a safe manner and meeting the food safety requirements of my customers.	... guidance and assistance with the development of written HACCP programs and records of your activities. ... consultation to ensure that no food safety concerns have been overlooked.
I have some knowledge about HACCP but I may need assistance on validation of the HACCP plans.	... guidance on how to validate the HACCP Plans.
My facility already has a HACCP coordinator and HACCP system in place, but I may need help to improve my HACCP system, prepare for an audit, or obtain a second opinion regarding my HACCP system.	... an assessment (e.g. mock audit or gap assessment) of your current system to determine areas that may need improvement to meet your audit requirements. The consultant will be able to provide advice and suggest what changes could be made.

Furthermore, a consultant should be able to provide these services:

- Conduct an initial assessment (usually called a gap assessment or a needs assessment) of your facility to determine what is needed in your facility to implement a HACCP system;
- Train at least one person in the business to act as a HACCP Coordinator, and provide pertinent training to operational staff;
- Conduct a follow-up review (i.e. mock audit) of the working HACCP systems at a future date (preferably well in advance of a formal audit).

Consultant Qualifications

The following list is intended to be a guide to the type of technical knowledge a person must have in order to be an effective food safety and HACCP consultant. If you are employing a consulting company, these qualifications should also apply to their staff.

Education

A consultant should possess and provide documented evidence of sufficient technical and/or practical application of HACCP systems and food processing technologies including:

- a diploma or degree in food science, microbiology or other science degree; or a technical diploma in a related field, or
- extensive practical experience in food processing environments and the development, implementation and maintenance of HACCP systems (e.g. minimum of 3 years as HACCP coordinator).

Technical Knowledge

A consultant should be able to demonstrate an understanding of food processing and HACCP systems including:

- a thorough understanding of HACCP principles,
- knowledge of HACCP systems in a particular industry/commodity area(s),
- successful completion of a recognized HACCP training course,
- written and oral communication skills, and
- ability to conduct training, as well as train-the-trainer activities (adult education), if applicable to your operation.

Conflict of Interest

Consultants must be free of any conflict(s) of interest that might prevent them from acting in an impartial or non-discriminatory manner. For example, the consultant must not:

- have direct or indirect ownership or other financial interest in an establishment,
- have any direct or indirect financial interest in the products produced or marketed by the establishment, and
- audit any programs they have had a part in developing.

Questions to Ask

1. What are your qualifications as a HACCP system consultant? (education and practical)
2. What HACCP training can you provide?



3. How do you assess the current state of our food safety system and how do you determine where we need to go?
 - The consultant should perform a gap assessment (or similar service) against the standard you will be implementing, to determine the current state of your food safety system. The consultant should use this assessment to create a work plan for developing and implementing your food safety system.
4. How much time will you spend in our facility working with the staff and learning what we do and how we do it?
 - The consultant should be committed to learning your daily procedures and operations to ensure the food safety system developed is applicable to your facility. The consultant needs to spend a significant amount of time in your facility.
5. Can you provide some examples of previous work?
 - The consultant should provide a resume outlining their experiences and past clients.
6. Can you provide some references of previous clients?
 - Ask the consultant to provide three references. Interview these references!
7. Will we put in place a contract for your services?
 - It is critical to have a written and signed contract with the consultant detailing the services and costs that will be provided to you.
8. What type of follow-up service will you provide?
 - To ensure your food safety system is effective and being properly maintained, follow-up visits should be conducted after the HACCP system is implemented.

Warning Signs

- The consultant offers you a HACCP system in a binder. This system may not be applicable to what you do in the plant. There is no effort put into training you and your staff about the contents of the program. A program is written, but it **MUST** be implemented effectively and carried out by our plant staff.
- The consultant says training is not required. Training is critical to ensure employees are aware of what is required for an effective food safety system.
- The consultant does not take into account regulations when developing your HACCP system. You must ensure you meet regulatory requirements.
- The consultant offers to develop your HACCP system without working with you or your staff. This is called “writing in isolation.” This can result in improperly written programs that do not reflect your employees’ activities in the plant. Your programs should reflect the current activities of the staff. Remember, your employees are the best people to consult with when developing and implementing a written program. They perform the daily activities and know what will work and what will not.