Record keeping and the food safety program in small hospitality businesses in Victoria: Influences of workplace culture and training.

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to investigate the relationship between workplace culture and the VET training provided to food safety supervisors. In particular it investigated the practical application of food safety skills and knowledge in small hospitality businesses in relation to the record keeping associated with the food safety program. A literature review was undertaken which found that record keeping for the food safety program in Victorian small hospitality businesses is contingent on three factors. These three factors are: 1. the national Vocational Education and Training system providing the food safety supervisors with the appropriate skills and knowledge needed for food safety record keeping. 2. the workplace culture in these small hospitality businesses supporting transference of these skills and knowledge and practical application into the workplace. 3. these small hospitality businesses having adequate capacity and motivation to undertake the record keeping for the food safety program. Conclusions: Until these three factors are addressed overall improvements in record keeping for the food safety program in small hospitality businesses is unlikely to take place.

Background of the Victorian Legislation for Food Safety

Victorian food businesses registered with their local council are required to have a current food safety program and a nominated food safety supervisor for their business (Victorian Government, 2002). These two strategies together aim to ensure food safety for the public by providing the framework by which food safety systems and processes should be undertaken and managed in the food business.

The introduction of the Food Safety Program Template for Retail and Food Service Businesses in 2001 was designed to reduce the cost and time on food businesses in developing their own food safety program, and provides a range of record keeping templates (Deery and Roberts, 2003; Department of Human Services (DHS), 2001). This template (or its electronic counterpart, FoodSart) used by a large number of the small businesses in the hospitality industry.

In 2002 the Food Safety Supervisor (FSS) requirement was implemented, requiring one person at the food business to be nominated as the Food Safety Supervisor (DHS, 17 May 2002). This person must meet minimum competency standards for the premises type they work in, and have the ability and the authority to supervise other staff handling food in that business. (Victorian Government, 2002).

There are a number of minimum competency standards for Food Safety Supervisors that have been specified by the DHS, Food Safety Unit. These competencies have been specified after consultation with Standards Body, Industry Training Advisory Boards, and stakeholders. These minimum competency standards are National Training Package Units of Competence and are specified according to food business types (DHS, March, 2005)

In Victoria local councils have the responsibility of registering and inspecting food premises to ensure they comply with the States food regulations. Food businesses must be inspected at least once a year (Auditor General Victoria, 2002). During a routine food businesses inspection an Authorised officer under the Food Act (usually an Environmental Health Officer from the local council) physically inspects the business. During this inspection they look for records (among other things) that provide a range of evidence of the systems and processes the business undertakes to ensure the food is safe to be sold. Local council is also responsible for checking that the nominated FSS has met the FSS requirement (DHS, January 2004).

Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) plays an integral role in providing the hospitality industry with the food safety skills and knowledge to operate their small businesses in the complex environment they face. However, in Victoria, VET has been criticised for not providing all the relevant skills and knowledge needed in a food business to put into practice food safety systems and processes so they can meet the food safety regulations (Eden-Jones, 2005).

In particular, record keeping for the food safety program in Victoria is a concern (Smith, 2005; DHS Autumn 2005). A number of small business groups and individual businesses believe that the amount of record keeping needed to meet the food safety requirements is onerous and the cost of spending time to complete this record keeping is unreasonable (Restaurant & Caterers Association, 2003; van Reyk, 2005). In addition, some small businesses claim that the training that is required to meet the legislation is nothing more than a tick the box exercise, with food handlers and food safety supervisors failing to implement good food safety practices upon returning to the workplace after training (Smith, 2005; DHS Autumn 2005; Coleman, 2002).

Appropriateness of the training and its relevance to the regulatory environment is a significant issue. Questions about the quality of training related to hospitality workers has been raised by a number of studies (Restaurant and Catering, 2003; Coleman, 2002; AZNFA, 2001; Eden-Jones, 2005) with the belief that different training providers offer variable quality training. Often the lack of on–the-job training or a practical component was a concern.

On the other hand studies have shown that skills and knowledge of food handlers have improved since the introduction of the FSS requirement (Smith, 2005; DHS Autumn 2005; DHS Spring 2005, Eden-Jones, 2005). Some suggest that there are barriers to implementation of these skills and knowledge that occur at the business such as business management support, employment demographics, workplace culture and systems and processes in the business to support food safety practices (ANZFA, 1998).

Workplace culture plays a significant role in both creating an environment which supports food safety program record keeping practices, and creating a workplace which values learning by providing opportunities for new and newly trained staff to

apply their food safety knowledge in the workplace (Kemp and Dwyer, 2001; Lashley 2003; Lashley 2005).

The debate about the cost of government regulation to business versus the risk of harm caused by no regulation is an age old one. This paper focuses on the influences of both workplace culture and the training system in meeting the current regulatory requirement.

Literature Review

The objectives of this study was to investigate the relationship between workplace culture and the VET training provided to food safety supervisors. In particular it investigated the practical application of food safety skills and knowledge in small hospitality businesses in relation to the record keeping associated with the food safety program.

A literature review was undertaken. Themes in the literature available and relevant to this paper were identified as:
- food safety research
- workplace culture research
- business management research
- small business research
- hospitality industry research
- training research

Research articles were selected which discussed the culture or workplace conditions faced by personal working in the hospitality sector, including any articles that had a food safety context. Articles that discussed a range of management strategies employed by large hotel chains were over represented in the literature. A search of more relevant literature relating directly to small hospitality businesses was subsequently undertaken.

More general articles were sourced relevant to workplace culture theory including a range which support the notion that there are benefits of a learning culture in the workplace.

Literature specific to vocational education and training and the hospitality industry were sought. This included specifically looking for literature that mentioned skills and knowledge for work in the hospitality industry and studies related to food safety training.

Findings and discussions

Training

A number of studies have found that there exists a good theoretical knowledge of food safety issues by small hospitality business employees, but the translation of this into actual good hygiene practices in the workplace was inadequate (ANZFA, 2001; Smith, 2005; DHS Autumn 2005). There was also a gap between the food safety skills and knowledge of the Food Safety Supervisors and the other food handling staff

at establishments – showing that younger, less educated and casual junior staff had poorer food safety skills and knowledge than the Food Safety Supervisors.

Smith (2005) stated that the Comparison Baseline Studies undertaken by DHS also identified areas where there were poor understanding and implementation of food safety procedures by both FSS's and more junior food handlers.

This was supported by the Baseline Skills and Knowledge survey which showed that:

> 'there is a relatively high level of awareness and knowledge of basic safe food handling practices in food businesses, though the theoretical knowledge did not always match actual practices on site' pi 2000/2001 National Food Safety Benchmark, Australia New Zealand Food Authority

Although the past training for FSS's seems to be providing some theoretical skills and knowledge about food safety, there are some gaps which specifically relate to record keeping and practical application in the workplace (Eden-Jones, 2005; Restaurant and Caterers, 2003; Smith, 2005). Practical application of this knowledge is lacking in both the training and workplace environments and this limits the transfer of learning into the work that needs to be performed.

During the same period there have been a range of changes in the training sector and the development of a number of courses and training options for staff seeking Food Hygiene and Food Safety Supervisor Training. The variety and range of courses cause difficulty for people intending to train as Food Safety Supervisors and for businesses and Environmental Health Officer's to ensure that they have actually met the requirements (Eden-Jones, 2005).

A limitation of the selection of the FSS units of competency (DHS, March 2005) is that although these units cover food safety to varying degrees, they were not written to cover all the aspects of the National Food Standards Code, nor with the Victorian State Food legislation in mind. This has meant that there is a range of limitations with the training to meet the needs of the Victorian legislation (Eden-Jones, 2005; DHS Spring, 2005).

Recordkeeping for the Food safety program was not found to feature prominently in the units of competency specified. Practical application of skills and knowledge were also found to be underemphasized (Eden-Jones, 2005).

This suggests that the FSS's are only partially equipped through the training to undertake the work, and that upon returning to the workplace they require further supports from the business itself to put into practice food safety skills and knowledge.

There is a lack of food business confidence in food safety training (Eden-Jones, 2005). This seems to be directly related to the ability of the learner to apply the learning into their work situation (Restaurant and Catering, 2003) and for food safety, confidence in training is eroded when FSS's cannot implement procedures like record keeping related to the food safety program in the business when they return to work.

Mulraney and Turner (2002) discuss why small business is resistant to training and the failure of training providers to meet its needs.

> 'Amongst the reasons were the fact that training programs were too general and not targeted to small enterprise needs, small enterprise lacked conviction that training was useful, and the usual issues of time, quality of training and cost.' Mulraney and Turner (2002)

The ability of the learner to put into practice the newly acquired skills and knowledge in the workplace is vital (Putra, 2004). Practical learning experience can contribute to sustaining learning outcomes (Evans and Kersh, 2004).

The ability for a newly trained worker to put into practice what has just been learned however may not only be a function of the quality and content of the training but also the policies of the workplace that help the learner to practice and apply the learning into the work environment. (Coleman, 2002).

For small hospitality businesses the access to training related to food safety may also be an issue. As mentioned earlier there are a high percentage of casual and part time workers in the hospitality industry. Curtain (2000) found casual workers were less likely to participate in formal training activities compared to permanent workers, but also mentions that casual workers are more likely to undertake training in their own time. The reasons for this include the cost of training, the time it takes, their access to training (i.e. time of classes etc), lack of recognition of work skills, lack of information about career and training opportunities, and their employer's attitudes towards training.

Training and Workplace Culture Intersect

Transfer of learning involves having learnt the skill in training and being given the opportunity to put this into practice in the workplace (Roberts and Deery, 2004; Gjelsvik, 2002). If there is not a culture that is supportive of learning than investing in training may not be useful (Leach and Kenny, 2000). Poor learning retention has been blamed on cultural resistance (Daniels, 2005).

Putra (2004) suggests that management strategies that include post-training interventions can help training programs to have an impact on the workplace. In particular

> 'having the opportunity to perform is considered essential to allowing the trainees to use new skills' Putra (2004)

A number of elements of successful transfer of learning to the workplace include
- training that motivates people to work better on the job
- a supportive environment in the workplace with the opportunity to apply the new skills and knowledge (a learning culture or at least support of the lifelong learning concept), and
- to discuss problems in the workplace with someone else who can help solve them (Putra, 2004)

Coleman (2002) found that managements support and a positive attitude towards food safety training and on the job application of the training was critical to implementing food safety in the workplace. Managements commitment to putting formal training procedures in place to ensure all staff knew about food safety were a factor of their perception of the risks related to food safety.

> '. . .in one survey '48% of catering managers thought their business represented a low risk to food safety'. In another, one manager stated 'good hygiene standards and functions such as training and food safety are excellent in theory, buy unnecessary in practice'.' (p43, Coleman, 2002)

White and Seow (2002) discuss the importance of induction, ascerting that the

> 'first few weeks on the job is the most important time for an employee, as impressions formed then will ultimately affect his or her job performance and commitment.'

They believe a well-planned induction program can foster better work attitudes. This could be a useful strategy to both orientate the worker to the workplace culture, attitudes and values towards food safety, and an opportunity to practice and implement the new skills related to food safety they have learnt through their training. Lashley and Best (2001) suggest that an induction program is part of good human resource management strategies in the hospitality industry.

Training and workplace culture play integral roles in the way that the hospitality business chooses to undertake the record keeping function of the food safety programs.

Workplace culture

A range of researchers describe culture as a set of important understandings, basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members of a community or organisation and it provides context to their work (Kemp and Dwyer, 2001; Kyriakidou and Bowen, 2002; Deery and Shaw, 1998).

Culture impacts on how and what happens in an organisation and is affected by management support (Deery and Shaw, 1998). Culture is affected by the nature of the work (Kemp & Dwyer, 2001) and may have a positive or negative effect on the staff and the workplace (Schachter, 2005).

Coleman (2002) specifically talks about the role of organisation culture in food businesses including his findings that the role of managers and owners of food establishments is significant. Managements:

> 'role in developing an organisational culture which is conducive to the maintenance of high standards of food preparation and service, and in the development of food safety management systems, is critical. Equally their role in developing and maintaining Good Hygiene Practices (GHPs) is also vital. It is not the hands, mouth, nose or any other external part of the body that is most at blame for causing food poisoning, it is the brain.

Unless people 'think food safety' it won't happen.' (Coleman, 2002)

Employees who have a feeling of competence, together with influence over their work are motivation, have increased willingness to take action, increased job related satisfaction and increased productivity (Hancer & George, 2003; Kemp and Dwyer 2001). Workplace conditions which either encourage and support their work practices and behaviours or punish or conflict with them, impact on their work performance.

Organisational cultures change over time (Hatch, 2004), adapting to the environment. The hospitality industries culture has had to change over recent times to adapt and respond to a range of legislative changes including the introduction of the GST, anti-smoking legislation, changes in the occupational health and safety legislation, industrial relations and changes to food safety requirements. McKay (in ANZFA, 1998) concluded that the Food*Safe* food safety training program helped to bring about a culture change in organisations that used it.

But some organisations will resist change to their cultures (Daniels, 2005). It is difficult for an individual food handler, or Environmental Health Officer to begin to change the attitudes and norms in a food business to improve food safety compliance without there being some organisational readiness for cultural change.

The culture to support food safety compliance, in particular record keeping, is significantly impacted on by many things including:
- the characteristics of the industry (work hours, pressure of service, physical work, staff shortages)
- the diverse and transient nature of the workforce, their diverse experience and knowledge related to food safety and record keeping
- resistance to change
- and the cost constraints in both meeting profit margins and the cost of compliance to regulations.

Capacity and motivation

The nature and composition of small hospitality businesses, and the environment they operate in is difficult. Hospitality businesses are predominately small businesses employing less that 6 people (Hospitality, 2005). There is high competition and poor profit margins (Restaurant and Caterers, 2003). There is increasing costs of wages and rents, and increasing difficulties in employing skilled staff (ABS, 2002; Hospitality, 2005; Office of Small business, 2004). Approximately half the workers are part time or casual, young, unskilled or semi skilled, and who earn 75% of the average Australian wage. (Restaurant and Caterers,2003; ABS, 2002; Lashley and Morrison, 2002). There is a high degree of mobility in the industry and many people leave as they get older. (Only one eighth of cooks are aged over thirty) (Fine, 1996). Retaining staff is difficult though this can depend on management practices (Hospitality, August 2005).

' It is really up to the employers to keep employees. They will be keener to stay if they feel management is genuinely concerned about developing staff (including accredited in-house training) and providing both good working environment that includes job

promotion opportunities and better pay'. P34 (Hospitality, August 2005).

Skills shortages have been reported for Chefs and other skilled workers in food businesses (ABS, 2002). However Lashley (2003) found that perceived skills shortages in Manchester were really a symptom of poor management practices that did not encourage staff retention and did not include planning for training.

Lack of food safety compliance is often blamed on the staff for not understanding what they need to do (for example how to fill in the records), or not being willing to fill in the records (for example being resistant to change). Often little thought is given to the constraints food handlers find themselves in. Even a willing and enthusiastic advocate for food safety has limited ability to influence the workplace culture and the workplace context in a small hospitality business that hamper good food safety practices.

There are many business imperatives to meet, of which food safety compliance is just one.

> 'The issue of compliance is fraught with the problem of understanding the legislation, on one hand, and of enforcing the legislation on the other' (p153, Roberts and Deery, 2003)

Small businesses often do not understand their compliance obligations (Banks, March 2003) and this may go some way to explain why there are low levels of compliance to record keeping for the food safety program. Others may undertake evasive responses to avoid the costs of meeting regulations. Coleman (2002) found that many food businesses tried to apply high standards of food safety whereas Banks (October, 2003) acknowledged that small business often find it hard to bear the high cost of meeting regulatory requirements.

Frequent inspections may offer some motivation for food safety compliance. Completing the food safety program record sheets will assist the inspector to determine the food businesses compliance with food safety regulations. The cost of undertaking this activity is often outweighed by the risk of being prosecuted for not doing this.

The Victorian Auditor-General criticised local government for failing to meet the required annual inspection of every registered food businesses in his report in 2002, and again in the Progress Report in 2005 (Victorian Auditor General, 2005). Councils argued in both these reports that they are under resourced both financially and with Environmental Health Officers to undertake the required inspections. This was also raised as an issue in Roberts and Deerys' paper (2004).

Given the current environment in Victoria, with small numbers of Environmental Health Officers to undertake inspections, and a low emphasis in local councils to prosecute food business proprietors, the consequences for non-compliance are few, inexpensive, and protracted, (Victorian Auditor General, 2005) when compared to the immediate day to day costs of operating a business in a highly competitive environment.

Record keeping to avoid prosecution as a result of a food inspections is one reason for compliance. Another is as a risk management activity, where a business with good record keeping could easily show evidence of their food safety systems and processes to defend a food borne illness aligation.

Coleman (2002) found that collecting records helps businesses to defend due diligence aligations if the need arose but found that smaller establishments were less likely to keep records for this reason or to keep records for Environmental Health Officer inspections.

Placing record keeping related to food safety programs as a business imperative may help to motivate businesses to comply with the legislation. However there is a resistance to record keeping for the food safety program because:

- the perceived risks of food borne illness occurring are small
- the perceived risk of prosecution for poor food safety practices are small
- the costs of training is perceived to be high
- the other costs associated with complying with the record keeping is perceived to be high (when compared to the competing demands for cost reduction activities within the business)
- the value of training is perceived to be minimal given that there is little practical skills and knowledge that are relevant to the job – i.e. recordkeeping.
- Workplace cultures in small hospitality businesses are resistant to change
- Workplace cultures provide little support for staff to practice and implement food safety training
- Small hospitality businesses in general have poor attitudes towards food safety compliance
- There is a poor level of management skill related to how to ensure that staff allocation, systems and processes are put in place to ensure that the record keeping in completed effectively and efficiently

Motivation through inspection and compliance measures or strategies to reduce barriers may prove effective.

Conclusions

This research found that transfer of food safety skills and knowledge obtained in training into the workplace is a critical factor to achieve improved food safety practices including record keeping. Practical examples of food safety systems and processes in the training were lacking and this caused difficulties when the participant returned to the workplace and were faced with how to put their food safety knowledge into practice.

Practical application or transfer of knowledge to the work environment is however, not simply a matter of training program content and design, but requires the organisational support for implementation of new knowledge into the workplace. The management systems and workplace culture at the workplace will greatly effect the individual's ability to be able to put into practice what they have learnt. Small hospitality businesses require encouragement to develop of supportive workplace cultures for both continuous learning principles and compliance to food safety legislation.

Small hospitality businesses do not necessarily view food safety as a risk management activity that is designed to ensures quality controls and protect the business and its employees from the consequences of a food borne illness. They also do not generally

value food safety training because they fail to see the cost benefit of training that is not tailored to meet their businesses needs and provide a worker with skills to implement upon his return to the workplace. This, together with small hospitality businesses general lack of understanding of compliance requirements and their belief that sanctions taken against them for any food safety breach are unlikely or small, contributes to small businesses managers prioritising food safety compliance lower than other business imperatives.

There are major barriers to undertaking the record keeping in small hospitality businesses that are not necessarily about the skills and knowledge obtained during training. These include factors related to the individual and the business within which they work. In particular the motivation of the small hospitality business to follow food safety practices and complete records should be considered and methods employed to improve motivations to comply. Actions most likely to improve the level of record keeping in small hospitality businesses are:

- Increasing the emphasis of record keeping in food safety training, increasing the opportunity for practical application of record keeping skills in the training;
- increasing the human resource management skills of small hospitality businesses to create workplace cultures which support food safety compliance and learning cultures;
- monitoring, enforcement and incentive activities related to record keeping for the food safety program targeted at the business proprietor

Until these three factors are addressed overall improvements in record keeping for the food safety program in small hospitality businesses is unlikely to take place.

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