

# A VOLUNTARY APPROACH TO FOOD SAFETY



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**The Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST) is a membership organisation and professional body whose main aims are focused around the advancement of food science and technology.**

As with many membership organisations, our activities are focused on sharing and disseminating knowledge, in our case based broadly around food science and technology and related issues – both within the scientific and industrial communities and to the wider community. Another important activity for IFST is concerned with setting and upholding standards of competence and integrity within the profession.

Our remit of food science and technology is based on applied sciences and is something we see as one of our great benefits and strengths. Supporting all aspects of food science and technology means engaging professionals who cross-cut many other pure sciences and disciplines. This brings with it two distinct advantages:

Firstly, our qualifications, awards and levels of membership recognise the mix of sciences that make up the many different applications within the food sector – from bio-engineering and crop science, through to food safety and sensory sciences. This eclectic mix helps to attract members from a broad range of scientific backgrounds.

Secondly and most importantly, as our qualifications and professional registers have been developed very specifically for the application of food science, they have direct

applicability to organisations and individuals working in the food sector. We believe our membership accreditation levels and registers can therefore be used to directly support and encourage best-practice in the food sector.

It is around the assessment and maintenance of individuals' professional skills, knowledge and experience that IFST is currently focusing its attentions. As an independent charity our objects clearly require us to focus on providing public benefit. One of the most effective ways in which we believe we can achieve this is by encouraging those working in the sector to strive to achieve the highest levels of professionalism – whether they are researching and developing novel foods; auditing food processing standards within a food processing plant; processing and packaging own-grown produce on a farm or displaying food on market shelves. Notwithstanding a minority of operators intent on breaking the law, higher levels of professionalism in the sector will generally lead to better food safety for the general public.

## **ACADEMIC VS. NON-ACADEMIC**

We recognise that professionalism does not need to be purely about academic qualifications. As with many science degree courses, numbers of students interested in pursuing food science, food

technology or related subjects through further or higher education are falling well short of the numbers needed by the sector. There are many reasons for this – some understandable but many based on misunderstandings over the career paths available. There are, however, many other avenues by which people find their way into food science and technology-based roles other than through academic paths.

With a shortfall in the numbers of food science and technology graduates entering the sector, food businesses need to focus on other ways to attract, develop and promote individuals who don't have food science-based degree qualifications. One avenue has been the recruitment of more general science graduates and then to cross-train them with the necessary food science background. Another option is to develop employees with lower academic qualifications, providing them with workplace training and development, sending them on technical courses and programmes and encouraging them to learn through experience. The last two options of providing the specific skills and knowledge in-house is only really a viable option for larger businesses with the resources to do so.

There are some other potential disadvantages in this type of career development

path. From an employer's point of view it can be more difficult to determine whether individuals have the appropriate level of skills and knowledge relating to the roles they are required to fulfil. When recruiting, individuals who have built up their C.V. based on a variety of roles and experiences can also prove difficult to assess. From the food professional's viewpoint, they may find it difficult to demonstrate they meet the required standards for a role in food science and technology and may also lack the confidence that they are capable.

## PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Providing sector-recognised registers, encouraging appropriate levels of membership within IFST or encouraging food professionals to apply for Chartered Scientist can be an effective way of setting and encouraging high standards in food safety. By signing up to a specialist register, food professionals are encouraged to develop their careers based on three important drivers:

Firstly, to apply to for a qualification or to join a relevant register, candidates need to prove an appropriate level of skills, knowledge and experience. Just the application process alone helps to raise an individual's awareness of the standards required of them. Once registered, following a rigorous assessment process, candidates will have confirmation and therefore the confidence that they meet a set of professionally recognised and accredited standards.

Secondly, to maintain their position on a professional register, registrants are obliged to maintain a log of their continuing professional development (CPD) thereby encouraging individuals

to at least maintain their professional standards and currency of knowledge. Registrants are also required to sign up to a code of professional conduct which carries with it the power to discipline individuals who fail to comply with the code.

Furthermore, where a register defines different levels of professional attainment and experience, individuals may choose to use the different levels of the register as a benchmark for their professional development and career – they may even target themselves to strive towards higher levels within the register as an acknowledgement of their standing and achievements.

Within the food and drink sector, where high levels of (often scientific) knowledge and skills are required by key roles within most organisations relating to food safety, these drivers can prove valuable ways of raising overall professionalism.

## TRACK RECORD

IFST already has experience in operating professional registers within the food sector. One particularly successful register is linked to the Safe and Local Supplier Approval (SALSA) scheme, a scheme supported by the Food Standards Agency and DEFRA.

IFST's role is to accredit and maintain the register of the food auditors and mentors to ensure they have the required professional skills and experience to operate as auditors of SALSA suppliers. Through this voluntary scheme, consumers can be assured that micro and small-sized local food and drink producers, registered through SALSA, meet minimum levels of food safety and hygiene.

After just over three years of operating, most of the UK's leading retailers and food service providers recognise and support SALSA thereby demonstrating that voluntary codes can deliver the necessary standards needed to ensure the supply of safe food to the consumer.

## BIG SOCIETY

Building on the success of the SALSA register IFST is now developing a more far-reaching 'Food Safety Professional Register' aimed at all food and drink producers and outlets. We would like to think of this as an example of the Government's Big Society in action whereby IFST, a registered charity is encouraging industry to sign up to a voluntary code of conduct with the aim of delivering safe and nutritious food for public benefit. For this to be successful, though, the scheme will need to gain support and momentum from all stakeholders, such that employers actively register their key food safety professionals. Ideally, then, employers will actively seek out and recruit those who are registered at an appropriate level and employees will see registration as a necessary career development and promotional tool. Government support will clearly be critical to its success as well.

We recognise there will always be the need for tight control and enforcement within certain high risk situations and businesses. However, given the ever increasing pressures on both the FSA and Environmental Health Officers working through local authorities, trying to deliver within ever tighter budgetary constraints, some form of voluntary code seems a very viable and cost-effective second option.

## CHANGING EMPHASIS

For IFST and many other similar bodies membership is and always will be a fundamental part of our activities. It is, after all, through the generosity of our volunteer members that we are able to operate at all. Volunteers deliver our governance, participate on our advisory and technical committee structures but, most importantly, they also form the basis of our valuable independent knowledge base. However, the traditional membership model operated by many institutes is changing and will need to continue to change to cater for very different environments in which we find ourselves operating.

In the past, the main activity for institutes and other bodies similar to ours has been focused around the sharing of knowledge in the form of seminars, lectures and events. Whilst these still have an important part to play there are now other, sometimes more immediate and cost effective, ways in which individuals can share knowledge. Web-based knowledge hubs and forums can provide specialist information literally at people's fingertips. Much of this information is still being provided by professional membership bodies but in much less resource-intensive ways.

This change in emphasis enables bodies like the IFST to look at new and more direct ways in which we can deliver our objects and so deliver valuable public benefit. Many of our volunteer members continue to be actively involved on behalf of the Institute, freely giving of their time and experience in new ways, helping us to promote and operate our registers and CPD schemes.

