Food Safety Challenges & the Pandemic Survey Report

Coping with the demand for safe food in a global pandemic

RQA has been monitoring the number of food product recalls around the world throughout the pandemic. We observed significant “pandemic” effects in reduced numbers of recalls in most regions for at least a few months of the pandemic. We wanted to delve deeper into the impact the pandemic has had on those individuals responsible for food safety and how their businesses have been affected. We specifically wanted to learn more about food safety challenges, risks, food safety culture and how COVID-19 has affected food safety management, training, audits and product recalls.

The respondents were from a wide range of food sectors and geographies. Almost all hold managerial or director level technical and quality roles with responsibility for food safety in their business. We encouraged them to have their say and we were very pleased with how keen our respondents were to do just that. As well as the set, multi-choice questions, they provided a great deal of follow up responses, comments and observations.

Summary of key findings from the report

92% of respondents stated that “Protecting consumers” was the prime driver for food safety in their business. “Brand protection” and “Avoiding recalls” were also ranked highly as drivers of food safety.

1 in 4 suffered a product incident or recall during the pandemic.

When asked about their top 3 challenges in delivering safe food, 46% identified “Conflicting priorities”, 42% “Poor food safety culture” and 40% “Lack of resources”. When asked specifically about food safety culture however, 74% felt that their company had a good food safety culture.

“Food fraud” was identified as the biggest risk to food safety in the future. “Allergens”, “Brexit supply issues” and “Lack of investment” were all fairly equal behind “Food fraud” in the risk concerns of our respondents.

When asked if COVID-19 has negatively impacted food safety, there was quite a split. 49% did not think COVID-19 had impacted food safety, but 32% did feel food safety had been affected.

During the pandemic 74% had to cancel audits and 34% cancelled food safety training.
Reassuringly, the prime driver of food safety in businesses is to protect consumers above all else.

Q. What is the prime driver of food safety in your business?

The options were:

- Protecting consumers
- Passing audits
- Avoiding relationship issues with customers
- Avoiding recalls
- Brand protection
- Pressure from senior management
- Other

Key findings:

- 92% of respondents ranked “protecting consumers” first; prime driver
- 40% ranked “brand protection” as the 2nd driver
- 58% ranked “avoiding recalls” either 2nd or 3rd
- 52% ranked “avoiding relationship issues with customers” either 2nd or 3rd

RQA Insight:

It is no surprise that 92% of respondents ranked “protecting consumers” as their prime driver for food safety. What perhaps also reflects real life working in the food industry, is that over half ranked “avoiding relationships with customers” either 2nd or 3rd and 40% put “brand protection” 2nd.

Always put consumer safety as your absolute priority, this will then help to protect your brand and customer relationships.
Food Fraud is the most concerning future risk for those responsible for food safety

Q. What do you see as the biggest risk to food safety in the future? Please select one

The risk options were:

- Insufficient budget
- Lack of senior management support
- Poor food safety culture
- Lack of resources
- Conflicting priorities
- Emerging risks
- Audit standards growing in scope
- Reduction in audits due to the pandemic
- Other

Findings:

- Food fraud was clearly seen as the biggest risk to food safety in the future
- Of almost equal concern were “Allergens”, “Brexit Supply Issues” and “Lack of investment”
- “Other” included climate change, increased customer demand and inability to increase price

RQA Insight:

It is an important part of food safety to look for and be aware of emerging risks. Food fraud was identified as the biggest risk to food safety in the future by our respondents. This is a huge topic that has received much attention in recent years. Preparation of food fraud plans and supply chain vulnerability assessments is an important way of managing this risk. It was also interesting to note that 14% identified lack of investment as the biggest risk for the future. Lack of investment in resources, training and equipment could seriously impact food safety and lead to potentially damaging product recalls.
Most businesses believe they have a good ‘Food Safety Culture’ in place

Q. Would you say your business has a good ‘Food Safety Culture’?

Findings: 74% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their business has a good food safety culture

Respondents were asked to comment on their answers; below is a sample of representative responses colour coded by sentiment:

- Engaged and loyal staff who wish to do right. Measured by interviews and daily life
- Food safety is number one in our business
- Food safety become a permanent focus in all activities
- Everyone is empowered and committed towards this
- Awareness is strong within the business
- Recently polled all production staff via anonymous questionnaire

- Long standing employees do not support change readily so keeping everyone at the same level is the biggest challenge
- My company treats food safety like it’s a joke

RQA Insight:

Food safety culture is now seen as a key component in the production of safe food and is included in the GFSI audit requirements. It is clear from the findings that most believe they have a good food safety culture, and this is reflected in the sentiment of the comments too, but developing and instilling a food safety culture is not a one-off activity. A company needs to assess its current status, seek views from staff at all levels, and develop an ongoing programme including training, information, communication, responsibility and ongoing review.

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The impact of COVID-19 on food safety divides opinion amongst respondents

Q. COVID-19 has negatively impacted food safety in your business

Findings: 49% of respondents don’t think COVID-19 has impacted food safety in their business

Respondents were asked to comment on their answers, below is a sample of representative responses colour coded by sentiment:

- Ongoing and continuous supply will have led to corners being cut no doubt...generally within the food industry
- Higher costs, reduced team size due to home & bubble working
- It has prevented us from physically auditing sites for suppliers

- Increased hygiene of workstation, additional downtime for cleaning and handwashing areas has raised awareness of housekeeping and hygiene having a positive effect
- I have seen improved more frequent and more thorough hand washing in my facility
- It caused us to look at our procedures and the changes made have improved the food safety of the business in some areas
- The team here has certainly pulled together
- The company has done a huge effort to keep everyone safe

RQA Insight:

When asked if COVID-19 has negatively impacted food safety, there was quite a split. Almost half of the respondents didn’t believe that COVID-19 had a negative impact on food safety, however, almost a third have seen some affect on their business.

Many said that improved handwashing and hygiene compliance has helped with food safety controls, although handwashing should be standard in food facilities already. Those that did see a negative impact commented that it was largely around increased demand, reduction in personnel, cost cutting and reduced supplier audits. It is important that food safety plans are kept up to date and are always assessed for suitability for current production levels, and staff are trained regularly. This applies at all times, but perhaps even more so in crisis situations.
Food manufacturers have had to cancel audits and food safety training during the pandemic, increasing the risks of a product incident

Respondents were asked: “Have you had to cancel or postpone audits during the pandemic?” AND “Have you had to cancel or postpone required food safety related training due to the pandemic?”

Findings: 74% of respondents cancelled audits and 34% cancelled food safety training

A sample of representative responses colour coded by sentiment:

- All trainings provided virtual
- We switched to virtual training using Teams
- Initially was postponed but we had adapted to virtual training which also brought flexibility
- Online training is being used but is not as effective
- Will do it at later when CoVid10 regulations will allow
- We were forced to reduce the training and to do essential ones virtually
- Our BRC audit was cancelled on three occasions
- We had to suspend face-to-face training which is key to our FS culture programme
- Training budget was poor now non-existent!

RQA Insight:

Obviously, a reduction in audits and training is not good. Whilst the effects of this may not be seen immediately, there may be food safety issues down the line as a result of this reduction in oversight from audits and education from training.
Most food businesses have experienced a virtual food safety audit during the pandemic

Q. Have you experienced a virtual audit?

- 72% yes
- 28% no

Findings:
72% of respondents have experienced a virtual audit

A sample of representative responses colour coded by sentiment:

- Still as challenging as an in-person audit
- Partial virtual. The paper and document audit was performed remotely
- Our company has leveraged virtual audits with our suppliers for a few years already
- Worked well since auditors knew the site, one followed up with a minimised site visit one was totally remote audit
- It can work well if well-organised
- In general virtual audits are a good experience and be an alternative to use this in future with restrictions (walk around)
- Yes certainly onsite audit is important, however was a good perspective for an audit

- Not as valuable/value creating as a normal audit
- Only document audits as we do not have the ICT capacity to virtually tour the production areas
- One good and one bad experience, however I think not down to the practicality of the audit, just the auditor
- In-person audit is much better
- Something, was slightly better than nothing

- Not the same quality - lacking in-depth personal discussions. Feels very odd.
- Nightmare...send an unannounced auditor anytime!
- NOT POSITIVE

RQA Insight:
With a reduction in the number of physical audits during the pandemic as evidenced by how many of our respondents have had them cancelled, it is interesting to see that 72% have experienced a virtual audit. From the comments, the effectiveness of virtual audits was mixed. In our experience, for a virtual audit to be a useful tool in supplier oversight, it needs to be very well organised. Both the site and the auditor need to put in more than usual preparation time. If done well, it is a good alternative to on-site audits and one that may be continued in some circumstances post-pandemic.

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Virtual food safety or product recall training has not been widely adopted during the pandemic

Q. Have you had virtual food safety or product recall related training during the pandemic?

![Pie chart](image)

- 34%
- 66%

yes no

A sample of representative responses comparing virtual with in-person training, colour coded by sentiment:

- I actually think it was better
- Very little difference
- Was planned online anyway for convenience
- It was compulsory for us as per company requirements
- it is better than nothing
- In person training is more practical, by the method, interaction, clarification...

RQA Insight:

It is surprising that only 34% of our respondents have experienced any virtual training in the areas of food safety or product recall. It is very important that staff continue to receive training in food safety to protect consumers (the prime driver of food safety according to our respondents earlier in the survey) and avoid a recall. Annual recall training is then also key to being prepared should an incident occur. Virtual training done well can be just as engaging and educational as an in-person session.
Over a quarter of respondents have experienced a product incident or recall during the pandemic

Q. Have you experienced a product incident / recall during the pandemic?

- yes  26%
- no  74%

RQA Insight:
26% of respondents had already experienced a product incident or recall during the pandemic (up to end January 2021). This is actually a surprisingly high proportion. Whilst the total number of recalls have generally been lower during some of the months of the pandemic, it is clear that at an individual company level, there have been many food incidents to manage. Preparation and training for a food incident is critical to ensure the right decisions are made and everyone knows their roles and responsibilities. Recall training and scenario-based simulation exercises are fundamental in providing that level of know-how and capability to recall or crisis teams.
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a wide-ranging impact on food businesses and those responsible for food safety

Respondents were asked: “How else has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your role and your business?” The participants provided free text responses. Here is a sample of representative responses colour coded by sentiment:

- **Our business has increased dramatically in 2020 due to Covid-19**
- **Generally we have improved our level of remote collaboration which has minimised the impact of reduced travel and site visits**
- **have changed our ways of working; more flexibility, certainly more work!**

- **All senior managers have had to take on more to deal with the specific challenges caused by the pandemic, which has led to being spread a little thinly at times**
- **Additional work load in managing the staff within the production area to keep everybody safe**
- **food service has suffered significant loss of business but the ingredient arm has done very well.**
- **Increased workload from COVID and Brexit challenges**
- **Mainly learning to adapt and do things remotely**
- **Meeting via Teams became normal - but missing personal interactions have a slowing-down effect**
- **kept us busy!!**

- **Decrease number of orders  Low workers productivity**
- **Authorities want different things at different times and no priority given by them to food sector to keep nation fed**
- **Unable to visit/audit our own sites and suppliers’ sites**
- **Raw material have lately too much foreign material inside , quality has been affected**
- **Less staff and more multi tasking. Budgets stretched or non existent whilst the company tries to survive**
- **When my team was split into alternate days working my general work load increased hugely**
- **Severely affected our business**

**RQA Insight:**
As can be seen from the number and variety of responses, this question prompted quite a lot of consideration and feedback. This varies widely between a very positive impact on their business due to increased demand, through those who are managing it but it is not easy, to those who are struggling with the various challenges.

We have for many years encouraged businesses to consider pandemic planning in crisis plans and proposed it as a potential scenario for simulation exercises and were often told “it will never happen”. In our experience, most scenarios can, and do, happen, but it is very difficult to prepare for all eventualities. However, companies who have a crisis plan, train their teams, and put them to the test regularly, are better positioned to handle and recover quickly from a crisis of any kind, than those who do not.
Those responsible for Food Safety, have many challenges beyond their normal role, both pandemic and non-pandemic related

Respondents were asked "Any other challenges in your role, company or industry, relating to food safety or the pandemic. that you feel have not been covered in this survey?"

A sample of representative responses colour coded by sentiment:

- Extending life of raw materials and finished products. Freezing of products not usually frozen
- No doubt covid 19 badly affected business but gradually recovering from it.
- When someone tests positive or one of our employee household members test positive they do not come to work for 14 days. This has caused a disruption in our work force.
- In India people very careless regarding their health so during pandemic completion of routine work was very difficult with social distancing.
- I’m concerned about my safety as I have to the work in bubble.

Conclusion:

Many food producers were already operating under extreme stress prior to the pandemic. The pandemic has further exposed many of these issues. However, looking at it the other way, food companies were already used to working under pressure with tight budgets and a long list of incidents to respond to. That in itself may have made some of them more resilient to the current situation.

Our research tells us that many managers and senior executives responsible for food safety have had a difficult time. They have faced product incidents and recalls; many have been unable to assess their suppliers and several have had to cancel food safety training. We see a picture of reduced team sizes, conflicting priorities, variability in food safety culture and a significant concern about food fraud in the future.

There have also been positives; companies adapting to virtual meetings and remote collaboration, increased loyalty from staff, improved hygiene and in some cases significant increase in business levels.

The food industry is and always has been under pressure to produce safe food 100% of the time. Some of the issues identified in this survey may eventually manifest themselves as food safety incidents. A product recall is the ultimate challenge for a food company, but one all companies in this industry need to be prepared for. RQA recommend a Plan | Train | Test approach to recall management and can help businesses avoid, prepare for, handle and recover from food safety incidents.

Visit our website or get in touch with us at contact@rqa-group.com to find out how we can help.
Food Safety Challenges & the Pandemic Survey Results

Methodology

- This report is based on findings from RQA Group’s Food Safety Challenges & the Pandemic survey which was open for responses between 1st December 2020 and 31st January 2021. In total there were 50 participants, primarily managers or senior managers from the food industry with 98% of these being responsible for food safety. They provided a total of 500 fixed responses and 180 free text responses.

Demographics of respondents:

Respondents from across Europe, North America, Asia, Australia

Respondents by world region

- Asia: 12%
- Australia: 12%
- Europe: 54%
- N America: 12%
- Not specified: 2%

Primarily senior management or management roles:

Respondents by job title

- Director, Head of, Senior VP: 46%
- Manager: 14%
- Others: 25%

Wide range of food sectors represented:

Respondents by food sector

- Cereals and bakery products: 9%
- Food ingredients and flavourings: 12%
- Herbs, spices, sauces, condiments: 12%
- Infant food: 15%
- Meat, poultry and fish: 12%
- Non-alcoholic beverages: 6%
- Prepared dishes and snacks: 15%
- Others grouped: 6%
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