IN-DEPTH RESEARCH REPORT

FOOD SAFETY IN TODAY'S WORKPLACES:

WHAT COMPANIES TOLD US AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

J. J. Keller®
COMPLIANCE NETWORK

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose of the Research

This research was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the real-world challenges that people across the food industry face in their daily food-safety work. While many companies have strong policies and well-written procedures, we wanted to look beyond the paperwork and understand how these expectations actually play out on the floor. The purpose of this study was to learn what's working, what's not, and where employees and supervisors feel they need more support to keep food safe every day.

Statement of Questions Posed

To understand these experiences fully, we asked people a wide range of questions about:

- Training and how confident people feel applying it on the job
- Staffing levels and how turnover affects consistency
- Communication between shifts, departments, and leadership
- Food-safety culture and whether people feel comfortable speaking up
- Equipment, tools, and workspace conditions
- Documentation expectations and how manageable they feel
- Supplier quality and incoming-material variability
- Production pressure and how time constraints affect accuracy

By asking these questions, we aimed to understand not just the technical steps of food safety, but the human experience behind them—how people think, feel, react, and adapt while trying to follow safety processes in fast-paced, high-pressure environments.

Context for Why the Study Was Done and Why Readers Should Care

Food safety is not held together by one big system—people hold it together. People who are tired, busy, learning on the job, solving problems in real time, and doing their best with the space, tools, and time they have. Even the strongest policies rely on communication, leadership support, practical instructions, reliable equipment, and training that matches real-world conditions.

When any of these pieces fall short, food-safety routines become much harder to maintain and risks increase. Understanding these everyday realities matters because it helps companies make informed decisions about where to invest their energy and resources. Real experiences—not assumptions—show the most straightforward path to improvement.

This study provides an honest look at what daily food-safety work really feels like for those who do it. These insights highlight the most significant challenges, where employees are seeking support, and which improvements will have the greatest impact on safety, consistency, and confidence across the industry.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FINDINGS

Staffing shortages and turnover disrupt daily food-safety work

- Many locations reported ongoing staffing gaps and high turnover that make it hard to keep routines consistent.
- People feel rushed, stretched thin, and often overwhelmed—especially newer employees who are still learning.
- These pressures directly affect the accuracy of daily food-safety tasks and confidence on the floor.

Communication breakdowns create preventable mistakes

- People shared that updates don't always reach every shift or department.
- Reliance on word-of-mouth messages leads to inconsistent practices.
- Several people noted confusion between human-safety updates and food-safety updates, which causes errors and missed expectations.
- Aging equipment, tight spaces, and supplier inconsistencies add extra strain, forcing teams to adapt on the fly.
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WHO DID WE ASK?

This study reflects insights from people across many roles in the food industry, including:

- Production workers
- Warehouse and distribution teams
- Quality and food-safety staff
- Supervisors and shift leads
- Sanitation employees
- Maintenance and equipment operators

Across the sample:

- People represented small, mid-sized, and large operations.
- Experience ranged from brand-new hires to seasoned leaders.
- Responses reflect real, everyday conditions inside food production, warehousing, and processing environments.

THE REALITIES BEHIND DAILY FOOD-SAFETY WORK

PAIN POINT 1:

STAFFING SHORTAGES AND TURNOVER AFFECT CONSISTENCY

High turnover and short-staffed shifts make it challenging to maintain food safety routines. New employees arrive without experience, and supervisors spend more time teaching basics than reinforcing advanced skills.

Some shifts have experienced workers, while others are almost entirely comprised of new staff, leading to inconsistent results. Employees often feel overwhelmed and rushed, especially when they're still learning.

EXPERT TIP

Use visual job aids and short training touchpoints to help new employees learn faster. Keep instructions simple and place reminders near workstations so employees can easily reference them without interrupting their work.

PAIN POINT 2:

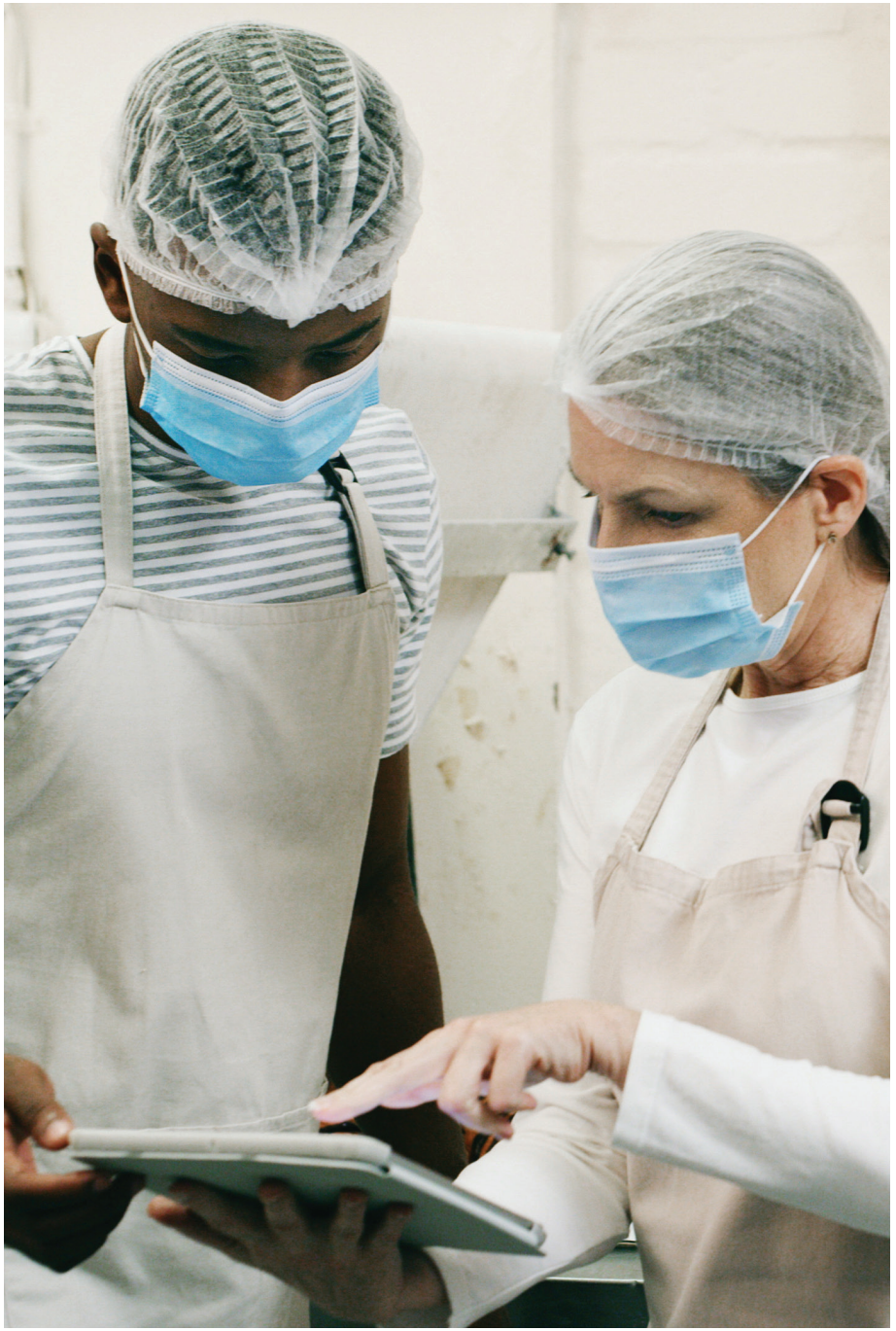
TRAINING DOESN'T MATCH REAL-WORLD CONDITIONS

Many training programs fail to accurately reflect the pace, noise, and stress of the production floor. Classroom sessions and videos help explain concepts, but employees say the real work environment feels different.

New hires often become overwhelmed when too much information is presented at once. Employees retain information better when training is hands-on, repeated, and tied directly to the task they're doing. Respondents also stated that although many employees receive basic food-safety certifications, they often seek additional role-specific training that translates theory into real-world decision-making.

EXPERT TIP

Use short, targeted micro-trainings that match real conditions. Quick demos, brief refreshers, and on-the-spot guidance help employees remember steps and understand the importance of each one.



PAIN POINT 3:

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS ACROSS SHIFTS AND TEAMS

Important updates don't always reach every employee or every shift. Some employees receive instructions only by word of mouth, which can lead to mixed messages.

Departments may not communicate changes, leading to confusion when processes shift. One change on paper doesn't always translate into action when information flows are inconsistent.

EXPERT TIP

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PAIN POINT 4:

DOCUMENTATION OVERLOAD AND CHECKBOX BEHAVIOR

Employees feel overwhelmed by the amount of documentation they're expected to complete each day.

Some logs are complicated or unclear, and when employees feel rushed, they may check boxes without fully verifying the step. Paper logs can get lost or become messy, and digital systems may be scattered across multiple folders.

EXPERT TIP

Simplify forms, remove unnecessary fields, and keep documentation organized in one central place. Clearer logs improve accuracy and reduce stress.

PAIN POINT 5:

PRODUCTION PRESSURE CAUSES SHORTCUTS

Employees often feel pressure to meet production goals, and when time is tight, safety tasks may be rushed or overlooked.

Employees want to do things right, but they also want to keep up with workflow demands. Supervisors often feel torn between productivity and safety. In high-pressure environments, employees may conceal mistakes rather than report them.

EXPERT TIP

Build in buffer time for critical safety steps. Reinforce that accuracy is more valuable than speed. Recognize employees who follow steps correctly, not just those who do them quickly.

PAIN POINT 6:

SUPPLIERS AND INCOMING MATERIALS AREN'T ALWAYS RELIABLE

Even when teams perform well internally, supplier inconsistencies create problems.

Incoming materials may arrive at incorrect temperatures, have inconsistent quality, or be accompanied by incomplete documentation. Some suppliers make formula changes without promptly notifying their customers. These issues create risk and disrupt daily routines.

EXPERT TIP

Use incoming inspection checklists, require complete documentation before shipment, and communicate regularly with key suppliers. Having backup suppliers reduces vulnerability.

PAIN POINT 7:

AGING EQUIPMENT AND FACILITY LIMITATIONS

Older equipment can be hard to clean, unreliable, or difficult to maintain. Some facilities weren't designed with modern safety expectations in mind, leading to issues such as condensation, poor airflow, or awkward layouts. Employees do their best, but the environment itself adds barriers.

EXPERT TIP

Create a long-term equipment plan and prioritize upgrades for high-risk areas. Small improvements—such as sealing gaps, replacing gaskets, or rearranging stations—can reduce risk until major upgrades are feasible.

PAIN POINT 8:

LACK OF CROSS-TRAINING CREATES GAPS

When only one or two employees know how to complete critical tasks, the team becomes vulnerable. Absences, turnover, and shift changes create uncertainty. New hires often get stuck in one role without learning others, leaving gaps that affect consistency.

EXPERT TIP

Use a cross-training matrix to identify where knowledge gaps exist. Train multiple employees in essential tasks to reduce dependency on a few individuals.

PAIN POINT 9:

TECHNOLOGY GAPS SLOW DOWN WORK

Paper logs are easy to use, but they create organizational problems. Hybrid systems—part paper, part digital—cause duplicate work. Teams want digital solutions, but they often feel overwhelmed by the choices, costs, and learning curves. Many of the newer technologies being explored are designed for human safety compliance rather than improving food-safety tracking or verification accuracy.

EXPERT TIP

Start small with technology. Replace paper temperature checks with digital probes or use simple digital forms. Small steps make big differences.

PAIN POINT 10:

FOOD-SAFETY CULTURE ISN'T CONSISTENT

Employees in some facilities feel comfortable reporting issues. In others, they fear criticism or consequences. When the culture doesn't support speaking up, risks go unreported. Feedback showed that approximately half of the participants felt that employees are not fully comfortable raising safety concerns—highlighting the need to clearly distinguish between reporting food-safety risks and general safety observations.

EXPERT TIP

Leaders should encourage questions, thank employees who report concerns, and model calm, supportive behavior.

PAIN POINT 11:

COMMUNICATION GAPS BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND FRONTLINE STAFF

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EXPERT TIP

Leaders should conduct regular floor walks and talk directly with employees to understand what they need.

PAIN POINT 12:

REAL-WORLD STRESS AFFECTS SAFETY

Fatigue, repetition, long shifts, and mental strain all impact attention to detail. When employees are tired, mistakes increase.

EXPERT TIP

Use job rotation, short breaks, and reasonable schedules to reduce fatigue.

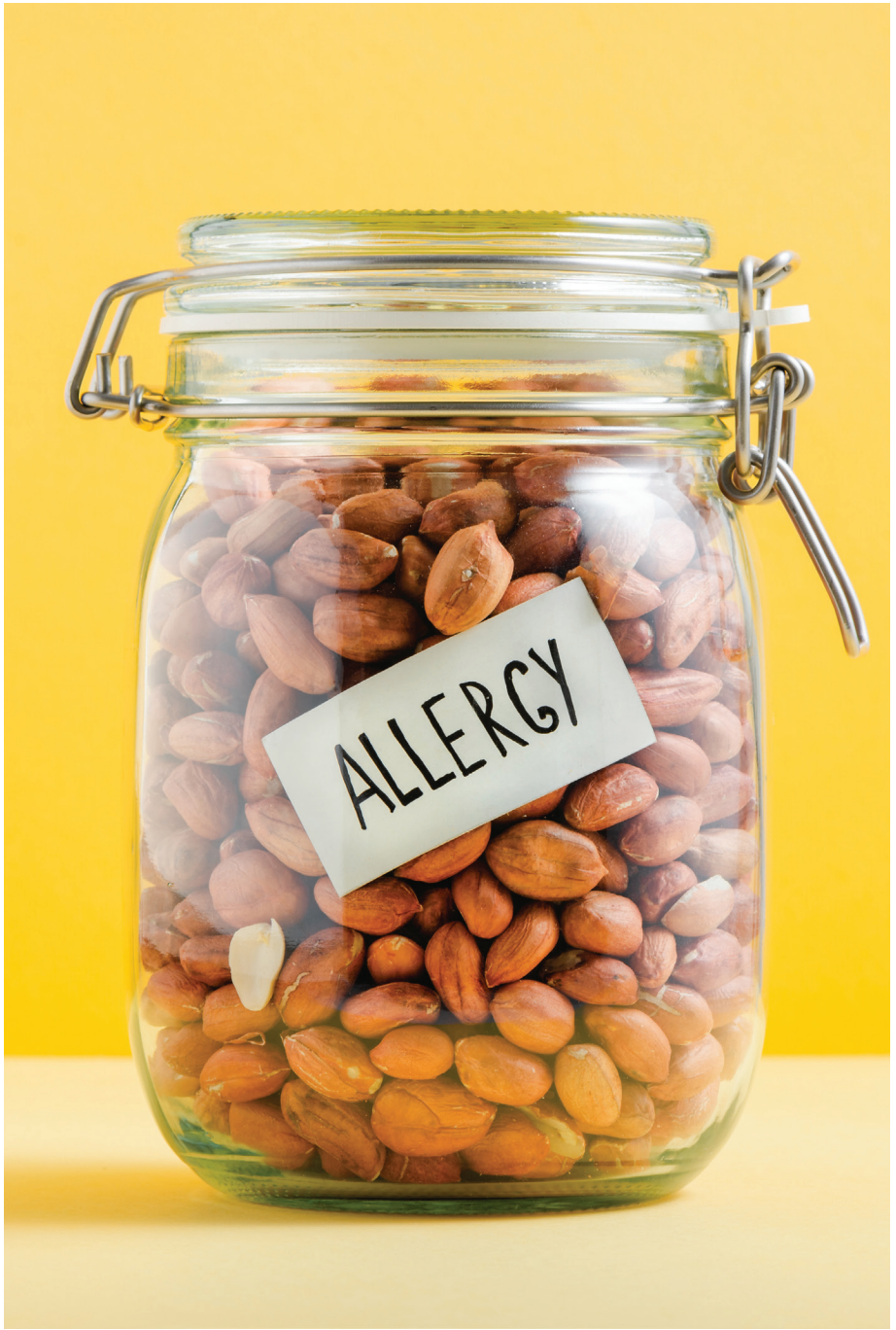
PAIN POINT 13:

ALLERGEN CONTROLS ARE NOT FULLY UNDERSTOOD

Employees often fail to understand the severity of allergen cross-contact. Mixing tools or equipment by accident creates risk.

EXPERT TIP

Use visual reminders, color-coded tools, and simple allergen refreshers. Show real-world examples of cross-contact to reinforce understanding.



PAIN POINT 14:

CLEANING ISN'T ALWAYS THOROUGH OR CONSISTENT

Sanitation tasks require precision, but employees feel rushed after long shifts. Some steps are skipped when time is tight.

EXPERT TIP

Provide clear cleaning videos or photo guides. Conduct quick spot checks and provide immediate feedback.

PAIN POINT 15:

TEMPERATURE CONTROLS ARE MISUNDERSTOOD

Some employees check temperatures quickly or estimate readings. Others may not understand why temperature accuracy is important.

EXPERT TIP

Explain the why behind temperature standards. Use simple charts that show how bacteria grow at different temperatures.

CASE EXAMPLES: HOW CULTURE IMPACTS REAL OUTCOMES

While the study did not collect individual case reports, the following real-world examples reflect common situations observed in the food industry. These examples are shared to help illustrate how culture, leadership response, and workplace dynamics can directly impact food safety outcomes.

In one facility, an employee noticed condensation forming above a storage area where packaged goods were kept. Instead of ignoring it, she reported the issue right away because her supervisors encouraged open communication. Leadership responded within the hour. Maintenance fixed the airflow problem, production adjusted the layout to protect the goods, and the sanitation team verified that the area was safe. That quick response prevented a larger issue and sent a clear message: When employees speak up, the company takes action. As a result, employees in that facility now report concerns more promptly, and supervisors report seeing potential issues earlier than before.

In another facility, the culture looked very different. Several employees noticed inconsistencies on product labels during a busy shift. Some labels were smudged, others had incorrect allergen statements, and one batch was missing a date code entirely. Employees were nervous about delaying production and worried they would be blamed for slowing down the line.

Past experiences had taught them that raising concerns often led to frustration from supervisors, rather than solutions. Because of this fear, the team kept the line running and didn't report the issue until much later. By the time leadership became aware, a significant amount of product had already shipped. The company had to issue a recall, notify customers, pull the product from shelves, and manage the fallout. What could have been a simple correction turned into a costly, time-consuming event because employees didn't feel safe speaking up.

We also observed a facility where strong teamwork helped prevent a near-miss incident. A sanitation employee noticed that a cleaning step on a piece of equipment had been skipped during a shift change. Instead of assuming someone else would handle it later, he reached out to the incoming team and explained why it mattered. Because their culture encouraged learning rather than blame, the teams worked together to fix the issue. In places where communication is open and supportive, employees feel comfortable asking questions and double-checking each other's work. These small interactions prevent problems from growing into bigger risks.

Contrast that with another facility experiencing high turnover. New employees were unsure about the right chemical concentrations for sanitation, and the training materials were outdated. Employees felt embarrassed to ask questions because the environment was fast-paced and tense. As a result, cleaning was inconsistent, and supervisors later found equipment that had not been sanitized thoroughly. The issue wasn't carelessness—it was a culture that didn't support asking for help. These kinds of gaps reveal how fear, confusion, or pressure can quietly erode food-safety systems, even when policies are technically in place.

These stories make one thing clear: culture drives behavior more than any written procedure. When teams feel supported, heard, and respected, they are more likely to report problems, correct issues promptly, and follow food safety steps consistently. However, when employees feel afraid, rushed, or ignored, small concerns often go unreported and can quickly escalate into major risks. Culture isn't just a nice-to-have—it directly shapes real-world outcomes every single day.

QUESTIONS POSED/DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

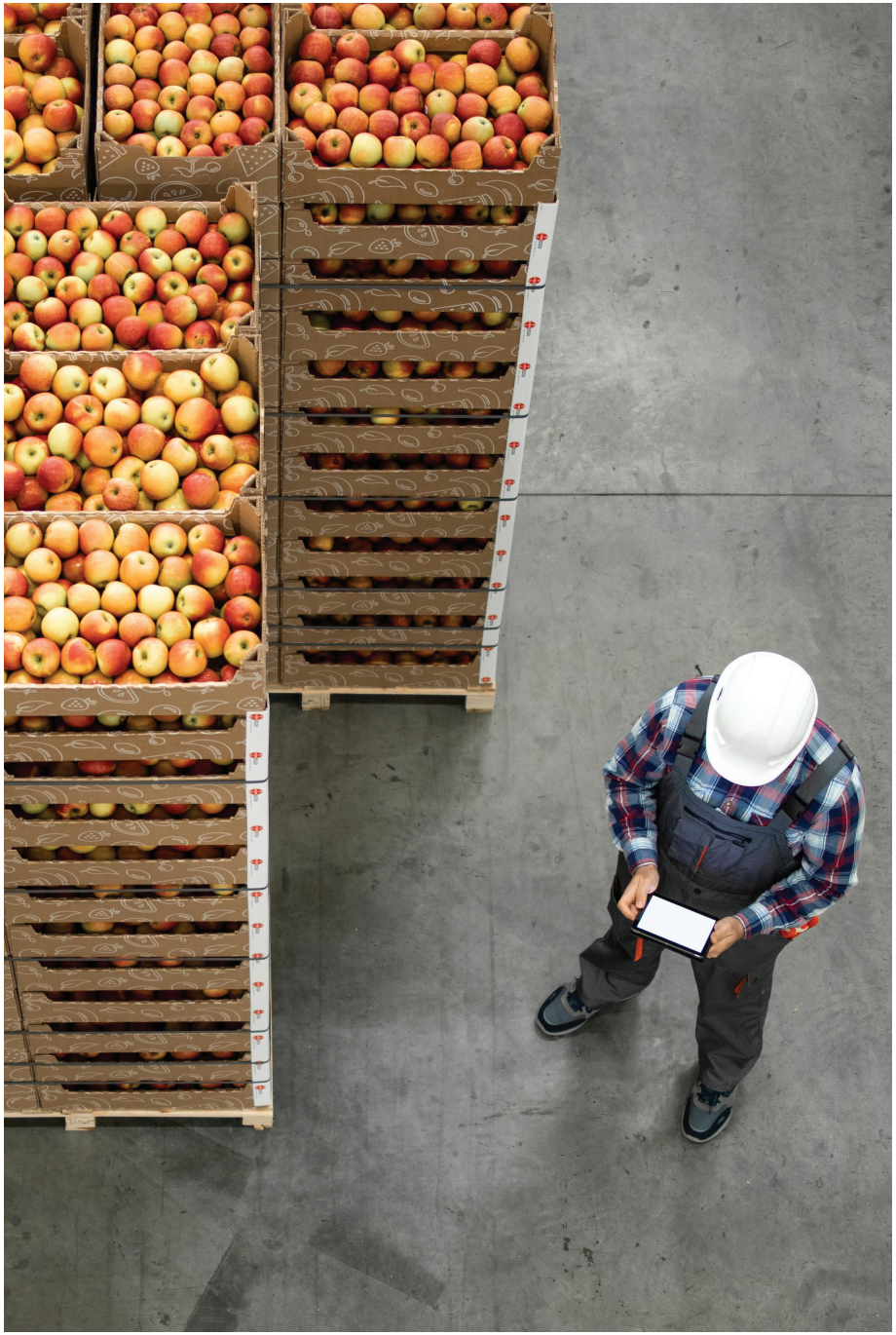
INDUSTRY TRENDS

Across the food industry, companies are being pushed to tighten their food-safety practices faster than ever before. Customers expect cleaner operations, stronger tracking, and fewer mistakes. Retailers and buyers are raising their standards, and even small suppliers are feeling the pressure to keep up. Many companies have told us that they now face increased customer audits, more documentation requests, and a greater demand for proof that their processes are reliable. At the same time, consumers have become far less forgiving of errors.

A single incident—such as an allergen mix-up or mislabeled product—can quickly become public, spreading across social media within minutes. This environment makes food safety not just a compliance issue, but a business-reputation issue. Even companies that have never experienced a major event are being pushed to adopt stronger routines to protect their brand and keep customer trust.

Another major trend is the shift toward digital tools—everything from temperature-monitoring devices and digital checklists to automated labeling systems and real-time documentation platforms. Many companies view these tools as a means to reduce human error and simplify daily tasks. But respondents also told us the transition can feel overwhelming, especially for teams already stretched thin. Costs, training time, and the learning curve are slowing digital adoption.

Still, over the next few years, digital systems are likely to become the norm. Customers and buyers increasingly expect traceability, and digital records offer faster answers than paper files ever could. Companies that start small—by digitalizing just one or two key processes—often see immediate benefits, such as fewer mistakes, easier audits, and clearer communication between shifts. This early momentum helps teams build confidence and move toward more advanced tools at a manageable pace.



WORKFORCE REALITIES

Workplaces across the food industry are facing genuine challenges that extend far beyond rules and checklists. Employees are doing their best while juggling long shifts, high production expectations, and constant interruptions. Many employees are still learning, while others feel overextended from covering short-staffed shifts.

When someone calls in sick or a new hire quits unexpectedly, the workload doesn't go away—it just shifts to the employees who are still there. This adds pressure, increases stress, and makes it harder to stay focused on food-safety details. Even experienced employees said they sometimes rush through tasks because they feel pulled in too many directions at once. These realities mean mistakes are more likely when teams are tired, distracted, or simply trying to keep up.

Another challenge is that employees often work in environments that weren't designed for the pace and complexity of today's food-safety expectations. Older facilities have tight spaces, awkward layouts, and equipment that requires extra attention just to function properly. Employees may also receive mixed messages—one supervisor focuses on production speed, while another emphasizes safety.

This inconsistency creates confusion and frustration for workers who are trying to figure out what matters most. Add in language barriers, cultural differences, and changing audit expectations, and employees may feel uncertain about whether they're doing things correctly. These workplace realities underscore the importance of simplifying tasks, communicating clearly, and supporting employees with training and tools that align with the pace of real-life production floor operations.

PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS FOR LEADERS

Leaders play a major role in shaping how smoothly food safety work happens every day. One of the most effective steps leaders can take is to simplify communication. Short shift huddles, clear written updates, and consistent reminders help employees understand what's changing and what to focus on. When messages are concise, direct, and consistently repeated, employees feel more confident and less overwhelmed.

Another key step is reducing unnecessary complexity. Leaders can review forms, checklists, and procedures to identify which steps are truly essential and which can be removed or streamlined. Simplifying expectations does not lower standards—it makes safety easier to achieve. Leaders can also help by showing up on the production floor, talking to employees, and asking what gets in their way. These conversations often reveal problems that don't appear on reports, such as poor equipment placement or unclear instructions.

Another critical step is building a stronger sense of support and recognition. When employees feel appreciated, they take more ownership of food safety. Leaders can set the tone by celebrating small wins, thanking employees for speaking up, and recognizing employees who follow the right steps even when under pressure. Regular, short coaching conversations help employees understand where they're doing well and where they can improve without feeling criticized.

Leaders can also introduce mock inspections or quick spot-checks—not to catch employees doing something wrong, but to help everyone stay prepared and confident. Finally, leaders should ensure that teams have sufficient training, time, and resources to perform their tasks effectively. Adjusting workloads, adding cross-training, and planning for backups prevent burnout and reduce mistakes. Small improvements from leadership create big differences in how safe and consistent daily operations feel.

Leaders should also recognize that rules like FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) 204 apply only to certain high-risk foods listed under the Food Traceability List (such as fresh-cut produce, ready-to-eat deli salads, soft cheeses, and some seafood). This limited scope often contributes to confusion, so awareness efforts should be targeted to affected product lines rather than applying broad compliance training to all teams.

CONCLUSION

Food safety improves most when companies focus on simple, steady actions that support employees in their daily work. Teams don't need complicated programs or long lists of rules—they need clear expectations, practical tools, and enough time to do things correctly. Companies should also consider identifying and tracking a small set of meaningful food-safety KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)—such as recall avoidance or HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) deviation rates—to better measure real outcomes rather than relying solely on general safety or compliance data. When employees understand the why behind each step and feel comfortable speaking up about concerns, maintaining food safety becomes easier.

Companies that simplify documentation, reinforce communication, and invest in consistent training see fewer errors, stronger teamwork, and more reliable outcomes. These small changes add up quickly, making food-safety work feel more manageable in fast-paced environments where every minute counts.

Moving forward, leaders should aim to build workplaces where employees feel supported rather than rushed. This means creating a culture that values accuracy over speed, encourages questions, and recognizes employees for doing things the right way.

Food safety isn't just about passing audits—it's about taking care of the employees who prepare, handle, and protect the food every day. When teams feel respected, informed, and equipped, they naturally take greater pride in their work. The strongest food-safety programs are built on this foundation of trust and consistency.

By focusing on employees first, companies can strengthen their food-safety systems and ensure better outcomes for customers, employees, and the business as a whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ray Chishti is a dedicated EHS Editor at J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. Prior to joining our team in 2017, Ray held prominent roles in EH&S, executing audits, steering management strategies, and spearheading executive leadership endeavors, all while overseeing multimillion-dollar projects. Ray's extensive expertise spans over 20 years and three diverse sectors, including fossil fuel power plants, utilities, retail establishments, warehousing, and college campus construction.

ABOUT J. J. KELLER CENTER FOR MARKET INSIGHTS

The J. J. Keller Center for Market Insights is the collaborative research arm of J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. The center originated in 2019 with a focus on sharing, with the public, trends and insights from an abundance of safety and compliance data gathered by J. J. Keller over decades serving more than 700,000 customers across the United States. Through historical data, new proprietary studies and partnerships with reputable, research-focused third-party organizations, the center publishes ongoing reports to spur discussion and advancements in safe, respectful workplaces, job sites and highways. To contact the J. J. Keller Center for Market Insights, contact sbaranczyk@jjkeller.com.

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