



Benefits of Third Party Certification

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Introduction

Accreditation and certification are proven concepts in many industries, including food, and they provide a framework for assessing the pertinence and compliance of food safety management systems. They are widely practiced and accepted in many parts of the world due to the benefits of the checks and balances applied at each stage in the process. They have strong verification and results based procedures. Moreover, they are steeped in an atmosphere of continuous improvement. In addition, many entities in many countries, particularly those in Europe, have made use of accredited, third party certification for the prioritisation of risks.

Governments and Regulators

Governments and regulators benefit from third party certification in as much as oversight is achieved without the use of additional publicly-funded financial and human resources, because it is funded by private industry. Certification results may thus be used by regulatory agencies as a tool to optimise the use of budgeted resources and to determine not only the frequency of their own audits, but also the areas to concentrate on during these audits. GFSI allows for consultation and access for representatives from the academic, institutional and governmental world, all actively participating and providing input into GFSI activities in their role as advisors to the GFSI Board. For each one of the GFSI recognised schemes there are, upon request, provisions for access by regulatory bodies to audit information and the certification results. Access by regulatory bodies may also provide additional private-sector benefits as described in selected government guidelines for improved access or speed of “May Proceed” rates for imported food shipments, particularly in the US.

Third party certification provides compliance with the requirements for a certification process including in the areas of facility application, certification, the recertification process and the withdrawal of certification. It also allows for compliance with generic government requirements for the attributes of a certification process.

Third party certification also has the benefit of transparency and, as driven by GFSI, aims at continuous improvement and flexibility in response to rapidly evolving market demands with the added advantage of audits being carried out on an annual basis and with the ability to modify contracts as a function of changes to the scope of production in a given facility. All GFSI recognised schemes also require corrective action plans as a follow up on non-compliances, and require a systems-based approach built on the HACCP principles, thus relying on prevention rather than reaction. Accreditation under ISO 17065 or ISO 17021/ISO22003 exists as a further safeguard for regulatory bodies.

Manufacturers

One major benefit to industry of third party certification under GFSI recognised schemes is the avoidance of duplication driven by the GFSI goal of ‘Once certified, accepted everywhere’. Certification to GFSI

benchmarked standards provides substantial economic benefits through the avoidance of duplicate audit requirements by multiple domestic and international buyers with some manufacturers indicating that they had more than 15 to 20 audits per annum for multiple buyers under the former system of multiple audits and audit checklists. This was a waste of time and resources and caused a huge burden on suppliers.

Companies that have been certified to one of the GFSI recognised schemes have been independently assessed against a set of scientifically based food safety principles. The scope of the assessment covers food safety management systems, addressing product non-conformities, incident management, traceability, sanitation, hygiene, water quality, pest control, control of hazards and control of allergens among others. Verification that HACCP, GMP and GAP (if applicable) based food safety management systems are in use reduces the level of risk for both suppliers and importers.

Improved traceability and properly tested recall programmes increase a company's ability and capacity to manage these activities when necessary. Compliance with certification requirements can also lead to greater efficiency in the allocation of resources by private industry and financial savings due to reduced numbers of product recalls.

Reducing the audit burden and improving food safety management systems implemented in food production operations allows for greater cost efficiencies throughout the supply chain. Manufacturers are able to devote more resources and time to implementing benchmarked food safety and food quality principles and controls rather than spending it on preparations for repetitive and duplicative audits.

Companies that obtain third party certification have greater opportunities with the buying community thus providing greater market access for their products. In addition, GFSI managed pilot schemes for the education of individuals working at smaller suppliers in order to create a pathway to full certification for those supplier companies that currently lack adequate resources to attain full compliance with GFSI recognised schemes. This is an initiative being driven by the Global Markets Technical Working Group (TWG) for companies, and therein, also resides the Food Safety Knowledge Network (FSKN) aimed at the development and education of individuals working for those smaller suppliers. In turn, these programmes will help to provide enhanced market access at all levels.

Retailers, Food Service Operators and Consumers

The benefits of global convergence between GFSI recognised schemes and mutual recognition of food safety certification to retailers and food service operators conducting business and purchasing on an international scale are many with the growing harmonisation of certification for food safety based on food categories and processes. This is also leading to the efficient assurance of regulatory compliance for certification schemes in markets as diverse as the European Union, the Americas, Asia Pacific and the Middle East and Africa.

The optimisation of resource and time allocation for regulatory inspections and the verification of controls and management systems through a risk based approach means that all certified facilities have a risk based food safety system with its foundation in Codex principles or equivalent, science based principles,

such as those of HACCP and the various ISO standards. These facilities are certified by accredited, third party certification bodies with further room for complementary recognition by governments of third party certification.

Unaccredited assessments or audits typically last between 1 and 4 days and focus on programmes, procedures and records. Their requirements are normally GMP and / or HACCP based and they are not globally benchmarked. However, they do provide a starting point for small enterprises. In comparison, third party certification audits against GFSI recognised schemes represent the advantage of being subject to benchmarking every two years as a result of revisions to the GFSI Guidance Document. They last on average between 2 and 5 days, including onsite assessment and report writing. They focus on policies, programmes, procedures, records, implementation, continuous improvement, verification and validation. Corrective action plans for non-conformities are agreed with the certification body for the resolution of issues prior to the issuing of the certificate, which is the confirmation that all food safety related issues have been resolved. Verification is also present in the form of pictures and follow up audits and closure of outstanding issues is required within stipulated deadlines for certification or recertification to be granted.

The correlation between third party certification and recalls and withdrawals can be measured and other metrics, such as improvements to the food safety environment in local communities, worker protection and changes of attitude, behaviours or culture within a company that is certified, are also possible. Improvements to the food safety culture results in a top down and bottom up commitment to food safety and to continuous improvement. This can be communicated to external stakeholders and the pride associated with certification then often leads to a virtuous circle of reinforced training. This has also been demonstrated following the successful pilots of the Food Safety Knowledge Network (the programme referred to above and designed to assist in the training and development of individuals working for smaller suppliers in emerging markets).

Accreditation

Additional credibility for third party certification to GFSI recognised schemes is provided by accreditation bodies and the fact that GFSI is a signatory to an MLA with the IAF [these abbreviations should be spelled out], thereby allowing for peer assessment and cross frontier certification. Accreditation is also the validation that a certification body has the infrastructure, competencies and controls necessary to properly assess conformity and there is verification that a certification body does indeed comply with its own processes.

Certification

Third party certification identifies the risks within a company, validates its food safety management system and the processes in place to control these risks and has verification systems to ensure adequate controls. It focuses on policies, programmes, procedures, records, implementation, continuous improvement and verification and validation. Furthermore, certification bodies verify execution and compliance during the assessment or audit with the aim of assurance that the facility maintains its control measures in between annual audits for the purposes of recertification. Auditors working for certification bodies only audit to designated food sectors in which they have demonstrable experience and competence. Third party certification allows for corrective action to resolve non-compliances or non-



conformities and provides a defined classification for these. Correction actions are planned and implemented prior to the facility receiving its certification or recertification.

Conclusion

For governments, third party certification, funded and managed by the food industry, provides a welcome framework allowing the risk-based reallocation of resources to areas perhaps requiring more focus. For manufacturers it helps to address the issue of reallocation of resources through avoidance of duplicative audits, and with the support of GFSI tools for suppliers and training, it can lead to enhanced market access even for the smallest of suppliers and, over time, to a virtuous circle of training and continuous improvement. For retailers and the ultimate consumer, there is the reassurance of a thorough verification having taken place against internationally recognised standards and the robustness is guaranteed by stringent and international accreditation procedures for the certification bodies carrying out those controls.