

Food Safety Specialists Safeguard Our Food



For Paul A. Hall, the path to a career in food safety began in first grade when he got interested in science by watching "Mr. Wizard," he recalled. His early love of science led to an interest in biology in high school, thanks to a great teacher.

Hall went to work at Ralston Foods Co. while completing his bachelor's degree to become a food microbiologist. Today, Hall, 60, is vice president of food safety and quality at Chicago-based Flying Food Group Inc., which produces prepared meals for airline customers, mainly on international flights. The company produces more than 300,000 ready-to-eat meals every day, 365 days per year.

Hall is responsible for the safety of ready-to-eat food products prepared in 18 FFGI facilities across the U.S. He works with the company's corporate food safety and quality teams at various sites to make sure all products conform to the company's standards, as well meet international and governmental requirements.

"Food safety is essential because it touches every single person each and every day," Hall said. "We have a global food supply, so literally, we can be eating raspberries from Chile, fish from Vietnam, edamame from China, mangoes from Mexico. A global food supply assures variety and richness in the types of food we consume, but it also presents food safety challenges, since many of these countries have rudimentary food safety systems in place, at best," he noted.

Those considering a career as a food safety specialist should have, at minimum, a bachelor's degree in microbiology, food microbiology or a related field, Hall said. Most people in the field also need training in Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HAACP), an internationally recognized protocol for food production and handling. Those handling seafood need specialized HAACP training.

Job seekers should also be versed in the Global Food Safety Initiative, which promotes continuous improvement in food safety management worldwide, and be certified in food microbiology by the National Registry of Certified Microbiologists, a strong credential that demonstrates competency in the field, Hall said.

While there are many good schools in the Chicago area, Hall said he recommends the Institute for Food Safety and Health at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

The Institute is a research consortium run by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, IIT and the food industry. Under a cooperative agreement, the Institute brings together the food safety and technology expertise of academia, industry and government with "the common goal of enhancing and improving the safety of food for U.S. consumers," according to the IFSH site.

"In my mind, this is one of the leading food safety programs in the world," Hall said. "(Students) get to interact with world-class food safety professionals and make lasting contacts that will help them for years in their career."

Maria Santa Lucia, owner and trainer at Santa Lucia Food Safety Consulting in Chicago, said a background in the sciences is helpful. Food safety specialists must also pass state and city exams.

"The most important skill is to understand the requirements on keeping an environment safe from biological, chemical, physical and allergenic contaminants, and integrate that into the client's environment," Santa Lucia said. "The best part of this job is helping people maintain a safe and healthy environment for their customers."

With proper training, said Brian J. Hill, CEO of Hill Foodservice Consulting, also in Chicago, those with certification can work in restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, factories, retail stores that sell food, food manufacturing plants, daycare centers, public stadiums and more -- basically, anywhere food is produced or sold.

Hall, whose resume includes jobs with Anheuser Busch and Kraft Foods, said food safety specialists can also pursue food microbiology research at a number of academic institutions nationwide, or they can work for the government (the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the FDA, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state and local governments), or independent food safety testing labs.

"Food safety professionals are in high demand and there are many options for individuals pursuing this career," he said.

In addition to relying heavily on science, Hall said food safety careers also mean making a difference in the lives of others.

"I view food safety as a sacred responsibility that transcends the individual company," he said. "We're protecting the health and well-being of families all over the world."

Job assignments range from management to research.

Food safety and quality managers perform many duties. They typically see to it that regulatory guidelines and requirements for food safety are obeyed. They may also work as managers in a variety of different settings, from food manufacturing facilities to food corporations and food warehouses.

On the job, food safety and quality managers make sure that workers handle, process and package food in compliance with government food standards. They may also perform safety audits, teach employees or clients about food safety, solve problems and respond to food safety emergencies.

At the local level, food safety specialists may inspect restaurants and other establishments that serve food, or work for private companies. At the national level, the U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service is responsible for inspecting meat, poultry and egg processors to ensure safety, including examining animals before and after slaughter.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the median salary for jobs in food safety was \$42,680 in 2013.

Rather than spending all day in an office, safety and quality managers often visit food processing venues, including loud, chilly factory-style environments. They may also come in close contact with animal byproducts. Depending on the job, some travel may be involved.

According to education-portal.com, educational requirements for food safety and quality managers can range from a high school diploma to a master's degree.

However, many employers prefer prospective managers to have a bachelor's degree in food science or a similar field. Food science programs explore food technology and packaging and the correlation between food, health and the environment.

Those earning master's degrees in food science take specialized courses in food chemistry, food microbiology and food processing.

Education Portal also notes that many employers expect applicants to have 2-5 years of experience in food safety or manufacturing, which can start with internships during college.

A big aspect of the job is making sure employees follow specific national regulations and guidelines issued by agencies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The FDA also oversees HACCP, an internationally recognized preventative protocol for analysis and control of hazards in food production from raw material production through procurement and handling "to manufacturing, distribution and consumption of the finished product," according to the FDA website.

Various organizations and university extension programs offer HACCP certification. Students must pass an exam post-training.