How Technology Strengthens the Weakest Link in Food Safety:
Labor

Technology can answer almost any vulnerability an employee potentially introduces.

The restaurant industry employs *a lot* of people: well more than 10 million workers, according to statistics service Statista.[i]

From chefs to servers, from managers to maintenance, the foodservice industry's workforce is its lifeblood. It is also one of its greatest weaknesses, particularly when it comes to food safety. Across environments as diverse as restaurants, grocers, C-stores, schools, food manufacturing, healthcare facilities, and many more, high turnover forces many operations to struggle with recruiting high-quality staff and then having to work harder to get them up to speed on policies, practices, and procedures. Even then, errors run rampant – as can fraud and theft. Altogether, the workforce costs foodservice operations more than just their paychecks, and the cost of labor relative to revenue can be a major contributor to unnecessarily thin profit margins.

Here's the good news: technology can answer almost any vulnerability an employee potentially introduces. From finding high quality employees—and then keeping them—to driving down error and fraud even as productivity improves, restaurant and food safety technology can rescue any foodservice operation from its weakest link.

Technology makes it easier to attract, hire, and retain great workers.

Sometimes, the most fundamental labor-related weakness is just trying—and failing—to find and keep good workers in the first place.

Recruiting is one of the top problems facing foodservice operators. Monthly labor turnover in hospitality and foodservice is nearly double the national average at 5.4%.[ii] Plus, unfilled job openings remain high. In a recent survey, nearly two-thirds

(60%) of foodservice operations say they are understaffed.[iii]

Deploying technology can have a huge impact on recruitment and, especially, retention. To start, it can help to attract younger generations in the first place. Millennials and Gen Zers—together, by far the largest segment of the modern workforce by generation—are "digital natives" who grew up in a world of omnipresent technology. The lifelong acculturation of younger generations to technology has predisposed them to favor it in the workplace. Nearly all Millennials, for example, cite "modern and up-to-date technology as one of the most important aspects of a workplace."[iv]

That's because well-implemented technology helps them to succeed and makes the work experience more rewarding. A survey by Salesforce of 773 automation users in the United States found that 89% are more satisfied with their job and 76% say they are more satisfied with their stress levels at work as result of using technology like automation.[v]

In foodservice, technology can especially help employees with skills or language gaps. Many workers do not speak English as their primary language, for example, which makes language-intensive tasks (like checklists, logging, and reporting) take longer and be more difficult to complete. Technology can streamline these tasks and easily incorporate visual cues.

A digital checklist, for example, can be completed with a minimum of taps and swipes, and wireless probes can automatically fill in temperature data in just three or four seconds.

The apps are highly directive with visual cues that lead the user through the process, step by step. It makes an otherwise tedious and time-consuming task simpler than sending a text message. This reduces errors, speeds up service, and makes the dining experience easier for everyone.

Tech-driven automation, alerts, and reports reduce error and fraud.

Sometimes, workers *themselves* are the weak link. Their inexperience, skill gaps, mistakes, and/or malfeasance can cause serious problems for foodservice operations. Here too technology can often overcome serious vulnerabilities.

Consider errors and failure to adhere to food safety programs. A study by the Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHS-Net) with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control found that over half of foodservice workers failed to follow food safety protocols like using a thermometer to verify if food was done or changing gloves when appropriate.[vi] Whether unintentional or not, errors and other failures to follow food safety practices can create serious risks for the operation and its customers.

Perhaps worse is the risk of fraudulent activity by employees. One restaurant franchise owner, for example, made an unexpected visit to his store one Friday evening and found that logs had already been filled out for the whole weekend. Falsifying logs can expose the operation to potential safety lapses and serious legal liabilities.

Technology solves this problem by creating enforceable accountability.

When it comes to checklists, for example, the system will alert users of what needs to be done within a specific time frame set by the restaurant. The technology itself identifies which employees complete each list and guards against:

1. Failure to complete the list.
2. Failure to complete the list within the proper window (like trying to complete all checklists for the weekend at once).
3. Just going through and mindlessly marking check, check, check.

4. Entering inaccurate information that cannot be verified or validated.

That last point is particularly important. Technology makes it possible to *verify* the employee's entries. Photos incorporated into the digital list can provide evidence that brand guidelines are being met, for example, or that a particular area has been properly cleaned. Wireless temperature sensors can communicate directly with the app and automatically log temperatures independent of employee intervention.

In fact, that kind of automation can remove the human element from the equation altogether. It erases all risk of human error or malfeasance. Better yet, it lets human workers focus on higher-priority tasks rather than tedious, if necessary, logging and checks.

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Source: The Environmental Health Specialists Network & the CDC

Meanwhile, all this information then gets securely uploaded to the cloud in real-time, so that any problems can be detected immediately. Temperature sensors placed in cold-holding units can simply alert staff, managers, and/or executives any time temperatures go out of spec, without having to wait for an employee to update the temperature log. Similarly, automated alerts can inform everyone when a delivery arrives if the unit's door was left open or was pushed open by fallen boxes.

Even better, owners and executives can do a deep dive into the accumulated data without having to dig through mountains of paperwork. For instance, they can pull up individual stores or employees to get more information: how long does it take to get checklists done or to do that line check? It offers the ability to see which employees are having issues or who might be doing it too fast. It provides owner-operators the opportunity to provide training and re-training as needed.

Technology makes workers more efficient and productive, which reduces labor costs.

The cost of labor relative to revenue is often unusually high in foodservice. The high cost of labor means getting more for your money from your workforce is – or *should* be – a major priority for most commercial kitchens.

If you're paying someone a healthy salary to help run the store, her time shouldn't be spent inefficiently on non-core, non-revenue generating activities. If digital checklists let her complete those tasks 30 or 40 percent faster than a manual, pen-and-paper process, that could return an hour a day to return to higher value tasks. For example, would you rather your operation isolate management completing administrative tasks like checklists; or have them walking among the tables and asking, "Is everything ok? Do you need anything?" to boost customer satisfaction and loyalty?

Even better, technology simplifies these tasks enough that less skilled employees can complete them (and protections against fraud make the trustworthiness of the employee completing the checks much less of an issue, as we discussed in the previous section). The store manager might just hand the task off entirely to a lower-paid employee, so that she can focus entirely on higher priority activities, while the owner can still get the data they need to get.

Technology can also reduce overwhelm that hurts productivity.

One of our clients had realized that they were drowning their management staff in more paper checklists than they could reliably complete and still finish their own job duties. In making the transition to a digital process, they were able to see how they had placed undue expectations on the store manager.

Another customer, a nationwide chain, fully *doubled* the scope of its checklists and *still* reduced the amount of time required to complete them by 25% when they digitized.

That's the power of technology in supporting employee productivity.

Ultimately, technology can help brands stay on top of their labor.

In short, food safety and quality assurance technology can help eliminate or mitigate operational, safety, and quality weaknesses associated with labor. These systems have the potential to ease labor management and efficiency by (1) better aligning employee behavior with organizational guidelines, (2) improving labor productivity and efficiency, and (3) helping owners and executives to spot and address labor-related problems before they spiral into crises.

When foodservice operations have the tools needed for success, they can work as efficiently as possible, minimizing the time they need to spend on critical but labor-intensive tasks. Brands can then identify issues before they turn into problems or, worse, crises – and spot who's responsible with pinpoint precision.

The result is a safer and more efficient operation whose labor is empowered to perform at peak.

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ComplianceMate™ provides the world's leading patented monitoring software system for food safety compliance and operational effectiveness. Their principal product offering has streamlined HACCP compliance checklists and cooler monitoring for thousands of foodservice and restaurant locations across multiple continents. With wireless temperature sensors, mobile technologies, and easy-to-use tools, ComplianceMate™ gives users total control over food safety and compliance. Award-winning sensors monitor and record temperatures inside any temperature-controlled equipment, generating real-time alerts if temperatures go out of specification. Users can also complete fully customizable digital checklists for literally any HACCP or brand-specific compliance benchmarks. Managers, executives, and owners can then use any web-enabled device to view real-time and historical compliance data across all stores.

ComplianceMate™ is the first eHACCP company to utilize LoRa long- range, low-power sensors for transmission of temperature data. LoRa signals can readily penetrate the stainless steel, heavy insulation, and concrete construction of a commercial kitchen while using much less power, offering greater security, with off-the-shelf batteries that can last up to years before needing to be replaced.

The award-winning ComplianceMate™ system has been selected as a Kitchen Innovations® (KI) Award recipient from the National Restaurant Association, an IoT Innovator of the Year at the IoT/WT Innovation World Cup®, and a German Innovation Awards recipient from the German Design Council. ComplianceMate™ has also been repeatedly included in the *Food Logistics* FL100+ Top Software and Technology Providers list.

References

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