

## Hooray for the Quality System



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One of the most important changes that the processing industry has undergone in the last twenty-five years has to do with quality. In the old days, the focus was on finished product testing to ensure that the products met established specifications. If a lot was found to be out of spec, it would be retested and retested and, perhaps, even tested again until results came out as desired. Using finished product testing to evaluate quality is not a great idea. Once the product is manufactured, it can't be changed. If it is out of spec, it can be reworked, sold at a lower grade, or reprocessed, but it cannot be made good.

Today, thanks in large part to the adoption of the hazard analysis, critical control point (HACCP) system for ensuring food safety, the industry now builds quality into the process. The use of a combination of critical control points (CCP) to ensure that the food is safe and control points (CP) or quality control points (QCP) to ensure that quality parameters are met has improved efficiencies, reduced waste, and enhanced overall quality throughout the food industry. This is called process control. Operators, usually production people, monitor points in the process where control can be exerted to maintain overall product quality. If the system begins to drift, they make adjustments to bring the operation and, hence, product quality back into established control limits. This is another sea change for the food industry: production personnel monitoring quality. When production buys off on and helps maintain quality, it is a sign that the plant has established a systematic approach to quality. This attitude has helped to eliminate the age old battle between quality and production; the latter interested only in getting their "number" and the quality group being the bad guy who stops the line and puts product on hold. These actions will compromise the production group's ability to meet their numbers. I have experienced this first hand in many operations. In fact, when I worked in industry the production manager actually asked if I received bonuses for putting product on hold. I had to tell the person politely that I did not want to place products on hold, but if production failed to do their job, I had to do mine. That went over like a lead balloon.

With production personnel doing more of the monitoring, the quality staff can focus on enhancing the overall quality system.

This includes all aspects of operations. In fact, if one defines quality control and quality assurance, the importance of the system approach comes to light. When one checks a pH or runs protein on a grain product, that action would be considered a quality control activity. When that information is incorporated into a database and used to make decisions, it becomes part of the quality assurance system. The system incorporates all activities elements aimed at ensuring that a company produces safe and wholesome products. This includes the HACCP plan, on- or at-line quality checks, pest management, end product testing, verification of cleaning and sanitation programs, allergen control, shipping and receiving, and all other activities that have been developed, implemented, and maintained to meet this end.

One of the saddest situations that I see in far too many operations is a failure to take full advantage of the systems that have been established. In an operation that has established a process control approach to quality, there is a large amount of data that is generated. What too few companies actually do is use this data for making decisions. In real time, the information provides the monitors with data to make adjustments to the process, but there is more that can be done. The data can be used to demonstrate process efficiencies or to streamline production or finished product testing. There is no reason not to use data, both new and old, to better understand your products and processes. Old data often languishes in binders, production records, or elsewhere. Pull that data out and get it into a database and put it to good use. You might be surprised at what you will find. Yes, pulling this data out and entering it is painful and time consuming, but it is also a finite project. Bring on a temporary employee or utilize a student over the summer. Get it into a format where it can be viewed, massaged, and utilized.

Quality personnel should not be testing; they should be managing the quality system and looking for ways to operate more efficiently. This is a partnership with production, shipping and receiving, purchasing, engineering, maintenance, and any other operating groups in the facility. They need to work with everyone to ensure that the systems are rugged, consistent, and do their job, i.e., protect the products and the company's good name.

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