

Our Path to Lab Accreditation

How we overcame barriers to arrive at quality

A first-hand account by Deborah Lankin,
Senior Microbiologist at Sun Valley Foods

The reality today, especially in the food production business, is that conformance to international standards is increasingly being seen as a requirement for companies to remain competitive. Unfortunately, there is a perception among some smaller organizations that accreditation or certification to these standards is unattainable.

I know first hand that this is not necessarily true.

As the senior microbiologist for a small in-house laboratory within a medium-sized production facility, I have experienced the growing pains and challenges associated with implementing a quality management standard.

Did accreditation to ISO 17025, the international standard for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories, take hard work, time and dedication for a small laboratory? Absolutely!

But in the end, the rewards far outweighed the challenges.

My employer, Sun Valley Foods, is a division of Cargill Ltd., a global company that reaches markets both within and outside of Canada. At our production facility in London, Ont., we produce processed chicken for the food service industry. Comprising only three full-time members of the 750 employees at the plant, our microbiology lab is a small part of the overall operation, but our role is vital in ensuring the success of our business, which is dependant on meeting strict regulations for food safety.

Having an accredited lab in-house eliminates the added expense and the time of sending samples off-site (often to another city) to be tested by an independent accredited laboratory. Our in-house laboratory can also perform regulatory testing and generate data on which major decisions affecting production are made.

Our motto in the lab is “Results that are correct first time, every time and on time!” and it was this vision that led us to seek out laboratory accreditation as a means of demonstrating that we met the stringent requirements for testing set out in ISO 17025. Accreditation was also seen as a means of demonstrating our competence to our clients – both those within our facility and the end user of our products.

Getting our management team on board was the first step on our way to attaining accreditation. With ISO 17025, management participation is not only desirable; it is required by the standard itself. Our job was to convince senior management that an in-house accredited laboratory made good business sense. This was achieved by demonstrating that accreditation would eliminate the need to send samples off-site for testing or to have the products re-tested in order to meet the requirements of foreign markets. Another selling point was the fact the results from an accredited lab would be legally defensible in court. Finally, we stressed the role of accreditation as a competitive edge and marketing tool for attracting potential new customers.

The biggest challenge we faced once we had support from management was determining if we had the resources

Standards Council of Canada
Conseil canadien des normes

Having confidence in your laboratory means your customers will have confidence in you.

No business can afford mistakes when it comes to the testing of their product. Limit your risk by choosing a laboratory accredited by the Standards Council of Canada.

www.scc.ca

Canada

necessary to make the changes and to meet the ongoing requirements of accreditation by the Standards Council of Canada. Physical resources such as supplies and equipment were never a concern; rather it was our modest human resources that posed the biggest problem.

With such a small team, everyone in the lab had a full workload. The addition of another position with the sole responsibility of monitoring our quality management practices was not feasible. So how were we going to make this work?

The answer was in the delegation of duties and responsibilities. For example, our manager of technical affairs for plant operations also acts as the laboratory quality manager and technical manager, but essentially everyone shares in the responsibility of maintaining the quality system. At times the delegation of duties is not enough, so some overtime is required.

Another dilemma faced by our laboratory was internal audits. Since we were so small and we were doing the daily testing, performing internal audits would have resulted in auditing ourselves. How can you be impartial and audit your own work? The answer was to look outside the laboratory and contract an external, qualified auditor. Although there was a cost associated, we approached the audits as a valuable learning experience. We valued the

different points of view and ideas that were revealed through internal audits. This helped in the continuous improvement of the laboratory.

Our involvement in the quality process at Sun Valley Foods has not only resulted in better performance, it has also instilled us with a sense of pride in our work. I personally feel a level of accomplishment and satisfaction when I see how our microbiology lab is contributing to our company's vision: "To be the global leader in nourishing people" by ensuring the food is safe.

Our small laboratory has encountered some challenges on our way to accreditation, but these challenges have been overcome and every minute of our journey has been very satisfying. It has been said that quality means "fit for purpose" or "fitness for use". Quality is achieved when the customer's expectations and needs are brought into harmony. Quality provides a sound foundation for business relationships. Our laboratory is successful because we have a conspicuous role in achieving quality for the customer. Ultimately at Sun Valley Foods, everyone is a winner: the laboratory, the company, and most importantly the customer. ■

