THE VALUE OF FOOD SAFETY AUDITS

Global Research Core Report

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World of Auditing®

AKNOWLEDGEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food safety auditing plays a central role in protecting consumers and maintaining trust, yet the research underpinning this field remains limited. Unlike financial or social auditing, food safety auditing has not benefited from broad, systematic study. Insights have historically been scattered across practice, standards, and experience, leaving industry and thought leaders without a holistic, evidence-based view of how food safety audits create value, where they fall short, and how they must evolve.

This need for clarity became increasingly apparent over the past years. The 2023 Food Safety Magazine article Why a Paradigm Shift is Needed in Food Safety Auditing sparked unprecedented interest and dialogue, followed by months of discussion through a global Think Tank, a White Paper, and multiple conference presentations. Across every platform, the same themes resurfaced: concerns about compliance-driven approaches, auditor shortages, governance gaps, audit fatigue, digital readiness, and the untapped potential of internal audits. The repetition of these issues across regions, companies, and roles highlighted one thing clearly: the industry needed a more comprehensive, data-driven understanding.

This research report intends to address that gap. It brings together global quantitative insights from 162 professionals and qualitative interviews with auditors and QFS leaders, offering one of the most comprehensive perspectives currently available. The study's mixed-methods design provides a more transparent lens on the strengths, challenges, and future expectations of food safety auditing across different geographies and stakeholder groups.

The findings reveal a sector at a turning point: audits are valued, but constrained by compliance mindsets, limited transparency, governance variability, workload pressures, and slow digital transformation. At the same time, the profession holds strong potential—particularly through more empowered internal audits, enhanced auditor capabilitiesy, and more harmonized and risk-based approaches, embracing digitalization.

To meet the needs of different audiences, two versions of this report are provided:

- a core version including intro and background, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion, and
- an extended version with survey questions and detailed analysis for those seeking deeper insight.

The study and the report give leaders a collective basis to advance food safety auditing toward greater clarity, impact, and long-term relevance, and call for action to:

- Reaffirm the purpose of audits by positioning them as tools for foresight, learning, and continuous improvement, especially through stronger use of internal audits.
- Embed audit insights into strategic decision-making so audits become a driver of performance, not just a compliance requirement.
- Strengthen trust and integrity through transparent governance, empowered auditors, and psychologically safe audit environments.
- Accelerate transformation by aligning digital innovation and cross-industry collaboration with a clear, future-ready vision for auditing.

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INTRODUCTION

Food safety auditing has emerged as an essential mechanism for ensuring compliance, maintaining consumer trust, and facilitating continuous improvement within the global food and beverage industry. Yet, in contrast to fields such as financial auditing or social compliance auditing, the academic literature on food safety auditing remains limited in both depth and breadth. Much of the available knowledge is dispersed across industry reports, trade journals, and professional practice papers, rather than consolidated within peer-reviewed research. This scarcity of systematic academic inquiry underscores the importance of conducting broader, evidence-based studies to quantify and qualify the challenges facing food safety auditing (Kotsanopoulos & Arvanitoyannis, 2017).

1.1 LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL AUDITS

Scholarly critiques highlight that conventional food safety audits often fall short of delivering their intended outcomes. Powell et al. (2013) argue that "audits and inspections are never enough," as checklist-driven approaches tend to be reactive, retrospective, and incapable of fostering systemic change. The academic literature further stresses that audits are less effective when they are primarily used as backward-looking compliance tools rather than as mechanisms for identifying emerging risks (Kotsanopoulos & Arvanitoyannis, 2017).

1.2 INTERNAL AUDITS AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Recent research highlights the potential of internal audits to support organizational resilience. Tóth et al. (2024) demonstrate that self-checking systems in the food industry effectively identify risks when embedded within a culture of continuous improvement. Likewise, Psomatakis (2024) shows that retail food safety management system (FSMS) audits frequently identify compliance gaps but are underutilized as tools for broader organizational learning and performance enhancement. These findings suggest that internal audits, if designed strategically, could deliver value beyond compliance.

1.3 EXTERNAL AUDITS, CERTIFICATION, AND AUDIT FATIGUE

External, third-party audits remain the most prominent form of food safety assurance, particularly through certification programs benchmarked by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI). Certification has become a "license to operate" in global supply chains, helping harmonize standards and restore consumer trust. However, overlapping schemes and multiple customer requirements contribute to inefficiencies and so-called "audit fatigue" (Powell et al., 2013).

1.4 FOOD SAFETY CULTURE AND THE HUMAN DIMENSION

A growing strand of literature underscores that audit effectiveness depends not only on technical rigor but also on organizational culture. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA, 2022) highlights leadership commitment and employee engagement as decisive factors shaping how audits are translated into practice. A systematic review by Pai et al. (2024) similarly emphasizes that the maturity of food safety culture directly influences the extent to which audits drive continuous improvement. This has also shifted expectations for auditors, who are increasingly expected to act as facilitators and advisors rather than solely inspectors.

1.5 DIGITALIZATION AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

The transformative potential of digital technologies for food safety auditing is increasingly recognized, yet remains only partially explored in the academic literature. Work on blockchain- and IoT-enabled traceability systems in agri-food supply chains shows that digitally integrated architectures can strengthen data integrity, end-to-end visibility, and the auditability of process controls, thereby supporting more risk-based approaches to oversight (Tian, 2017; Gálvez et al., 2018). Recent reviews of artificial intelligence and machine-learning applications in the food industry further demonstrate how automated inspection, anomaly detection and predictive analytics can enhance process control and early warning capabilities relevant to food safety audits (Wang, 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that digitally harmonized monitoring systems can streamline documentation, reduce redundancies and provide a richer evidence base for audit judgements. However, diffusion in the food sector is uneven: small and medium-sized

enterprises in particular continue to face financial, skills, and data-governance constraints, and they report concerns about cybersecurity and interoperability that slow adoption despite the perceived benefits (OECD, 2021).

1.6 GOVERNANCE AND INTEGRITY CONCERNS

Governance of audit programs is another recurring theme in the literature. Studies highlight fragmentation across schemes, inconsistent integrity programs, and conflicts of interest between certification bodies and auditees, all of which undermine trust (Lytton & McAllister, 2014; Zezza et al., 2020). Additional analyses emphasize the need for harmonized oversight systems and stronger public–private governance structures to build confidence in audit outcomes (Kowalska, 2022). These perspectives underscore the importance of strengthening the governance and integrity of food safety auditing systems.

1.7 SYNTHESIS AND RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

Taken together, the existing literature paints a picture of both progress and persistent challenges. While auditing has become institutionalized as a cornerstone of food safety assurance, its credibility, efficiency, and effectiveness are under scrutiny. Compared with financial or social compliance auditing, the research base is relatively underdeveloped: problems are insufficiently quantified, outcomes are rarely evaluated systematically, and empirical evidence is often fragmented across case-specific contexts.

This gap provides the rationale for the present research. While not conducted as a traditional academic study, the project was designed in line with academic guidelines and methodological rigor. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, it sought to generate structured insights into the current and future state of food safety auditing. The objective was not only to highlight gaps identified in practice but also to provide actionable perspectives for industry, certification bodies, and regulators. The following "Background" section outlines the evolution of this initiative, beginning with the seminal 2023 article and subsequent Think Tank and White Paper, which together laid the foundation for this global research effort.

Although the need to reconsider how audits are conducted in the food industry had been raised for several years (Powell et al., 2013), *World of Auditing* added to this ongoing discussion in 2023 with the article *"Why a Paradigm Shift is needed in Food Safety Auditing"* published in *Food Safety Magazine*. Written in a deliberately thought-provocative style, the article—later becoming the magazine's most-read publication of the year —argued that the prevailing audit model was no longer aligned with evolving expectations, global risks, and technological developments. Echoing earlier critiques of checklist-driven approaches, it called for a transition toward proactive, risk-based, and trust-centered audits, drawing inspiration from more mature industries such as aviation.

The widespread readership of the article reflected an industry eager for dialogue and innovation. A subsequent webinar on the future of food safety audits, organized later in 2023, attracted significant participation across the sector and confirmed that stakeholders—including industry practitioners, certification bodies, and regulators—shared a common concern: the traditional audit model was no longer sufficient to meet emerging challenges such as globalization, climate change, digital transformation, and evolving consumer expectations.

To advance this discussion, *World of Auditing* convened a Think Tank on the Future of Food Safety Auditing in August 2023. Over the course of nine months, more than thirty professionals from eighteen countries engaged in structured dialogue, beginning with a SWOT analysis of the existing audit landscape, followed by collaborative problem-solving and the formulation of strategic recommendations. The process culminated in the publication of a White Paper in April 2024, which synthesized findings and set forth proposals for reform.

The White Paper identified systemic challenges, including the overemphasis on compliance, the lack of harmonization across schemes, auditor shortages, and limited adoption of digital tools. At the same time, it highlighted opportunities to strengthen governance, redefine audit

objectives, and enhance the profession through improved training and capacity building. Recommendations were structured around five thematic areas: governance, requirements and reporting, profession, digital transformation, and mindset. Central to these proposals was the call to shift audits from being perceived as a costly obligation toward becoming a strategic enabler of food safety and organizational learning.

The outcomes of the Think Tank attracted international attention. *World of Auditing* was invited to present its findings at two major global conferences: the Food Safety Summit in Chicago (May 2024) and the Dubai International Food Safety Conference (October 2024). These presentations demonstrated the relevance of the initiative and positioned its recommendations as a key reference point for policy and practice alike. Nevertheless, the discussions also revealed the need for empirical evidence to substantiate conceptual arguments and provide a more comprehensive understanding of practices across geographies and organizational contexts.

In response, *World of Auditing* initiated a Global Research Project to systematically capture industry perspectives. The study employed a mixed-methods design consisting of a quantitative survey (distributed globally via Google Forms) and a qualitative study (conducted through structured interviews on Microsoft Teams). This dual approach was intended to provide both breadth and depth of insight, enabling the project to generate actionable knowledge to guide the future of food safety auditing.

Together, the progression from article to webinar, Think Tank, White Paper, and global conference presentations laid the groundwork for the present research. What began as an effort to raise awareness evolved into a structured, international initiative aimed to support the literature gap by generating systematic, data-driven insights to support both scholarly understanding and industry practice.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was designed to provide a comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of the current practices, effectiveness, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in food safety auditing. The research employed an explanatory research design underpinned by a mixed-methods approach.

The study adopted an explanatory sequential design, in which the research process began with the collection and analysis of quantitative data to identify prevailing patterns and trends. This was followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data aimed at uncovering the underlying reasons, contextual dynamics, and experiential perspectives associated with the quantitative results. This design allowed for the integration of both measurement-based evidence and narrative-based insights, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings through data triangulation.

3.2 RESEARCH POPULATION AND SAMPLING

3.2.1 QUANTITATIVE PHASE: The research population consisted of professionals actively engaged in food safety auditing and quality and food safety management. Purposive sampling was employed to target individuals who met two main inclusion criteria:

1. A minimum of three years of professional experience in the field.
2. Direct involvement in food safety management and/or audit processes.

The sample represented a range of sectors, including food manufacturing plants, retail food chains, and independent auditing bodies. This diversity ensured that the data captured reflected the perspectives of stakeholders from different segments of the industry.

3.2.2 QUALITATIVE PHASE: To generate richer and more contextually nuanced insights, a subset of 11 participants was selected from the quantitative sample using maximum variation sampling. This ensured diversity in terms of job role, years of experience, and sector representation. Participants included auditors working as freelancers or employed by a certification body or a food company, and quality and food safety leaders from the industry.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

3.3.1 QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

Quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire developed by the researcher and refined based on expert review. The instrument was informed by an extensive literature review (Smith et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2022) and industry best practices. It consisted of multiple-choice questions and five-point Likert-scale items, organized into the following thematic domains:

- The perceived impact of audits on compliance and risk mitigation
- The role of governance structures in ensuring audit reliability
- The integration of digitalization into audit processes
- Auditor competencies and their influence on audit outcomes
- The anticipated role of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation in future auditing

The questionnaire was validated through a pilot study with 30 individuals, followed by a group of five professionals to assess its clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine question wording and eliminate redundancies before full deployment. The questions and the Likert scale used are provided in the Annex.

3.3.2 QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to explore participants' professional motivations, operational and cultural barriers to effective auditing, perceptions of stakeholder engagement, governance processes, technological transformation,

auditor skill requirements, and expectations for the future of the profession. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were conducted via video conferencing platforms, with participants' informed consent, and were both video- and audio-recorded. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The questions used during the interviews are provided in Annex.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

3.4.1 QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed using SPSS software. Initially, descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were calculated to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and their responses to questionnaire items.

Subsequently, the Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence was employed to examine whether perceptions of value that audits created differed significantly according to categorical demographic or professional variables, such as job position, years of experience, and sector of employment. This non-parametric test was selected for its suitability in identifying relationships between categorical variables.

The results from the quantitative phase provided the foundation for targeted exploration in the qualitative phase, ensuring that the subsequent interviews addressed key areas of variance or statistical association revealed by the chi-square analyses.

3.4.2 QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes to capture meaningful features of the data.
3. Identifying themes by grouping related codes.
4. Reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and consistency.
5. Defining and naming themes to clarify their conceptual boundaries.
6. Producing the final report by selecting representative quotations and integrating them into the narrative.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). Participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity was ensured by assigning codes to each participant, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts. Data were stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team, and were used exclusively for research purposes.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS FOR THE RESEARCH

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This research was designed in line with academic guidelines, applying a structured methodology that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Several strengths distinguish it from other industry initiatives. Most notably, it achieved regional representation across 162 participants, ensuring that perspectives from different geographies were included. The mixed-methods design, combining a global survey with in-depth interviews, enabled both breadth and depth of insight. Finally, the research addressed an area with limited prior academic attention, making it one of the few global initiatives dedicated exclusively to understanding the value and future of food safety auditing.

At the same time, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively modest (162 responses), limiting the generalizability of findings. While the regional distribution was balanced, some regions remain underrepresented in absolute terms. Second, the voluntary nature of participation may have introduced self-selection bias, as respondents may reflect those with stronger interest or specific experiences in auditing. Third, reliance on online tools (Google Forms and Microsoft Teams) ensured accessibility but also brought constraints of depth, nuance, and language, particularly compared to longitudinal or in-person academic studies.

Finally, although the study followed principles of academic rigor, it was not a peer-reviewed academic project, which may affect its perception within scholarly circles.
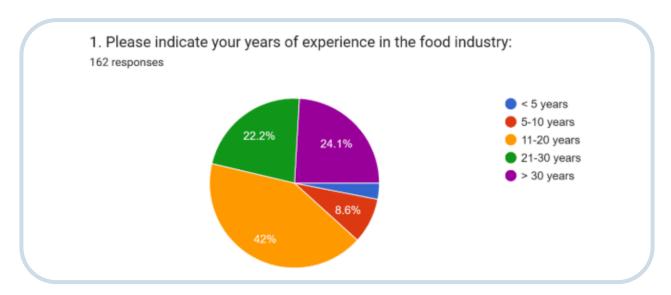
1.1 QUANTITATIVE RESULTS:

This section of the report presents the quantitative results for each question, together with the demographic breakdown. The survey consisted of 18 sections in total: the first provided a brief overview of the survey purpose, the second addressed ethical consent, and the final section confirmed participants' voluntary involvement in the interview. Accordingly, the results are reported across 15 sections.
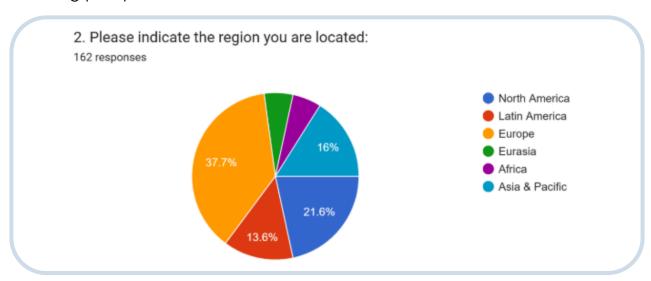
1.1.1 SECTION 3 OF 18: GENERAL QUESTIONS – ALL AUDIENCE

A total of 162 professionals from across the food industry participated in the global survey, providing a diverse and experienced cross-section of insights into food safety auditing practices and perceptions. This section summarizes their professional backgrounds, geographical representation, roles, and organizational affiliations.

Survey respondents reflect a highly experienced community. A significant portion (42%) reported having between 11 to 20 years of experience in the food industry. Additionally, 24.1% have more than 30 years of experience, and 22.2% fall within the 21–30 year range. This suggests that nearly 90% of participants have more than a decade of industry experience, indicating a strong foundation of knowledge and expertise among contributors. Only a small fraction (3.1%) reported having less than 5 years of experience.

1. Please indicate your years of experience in the food industry:
162 responses

- < 5 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 21-30 years
- > 30 years

Participants represented a broad global footprint, with the majority located in Europe (37.7%), followed by Asia & Pacific (21.6%), and North America (16%). Contributions were also received from Latin America (13.6%), Eurasia (7.4%), and Africa (3.7%), illustrating a geographically diverse dataset and enabling a more global understanding of food safety auditing perspectives.

2. Please indicate the region you are located:
162 responses

- North America
- Latin America
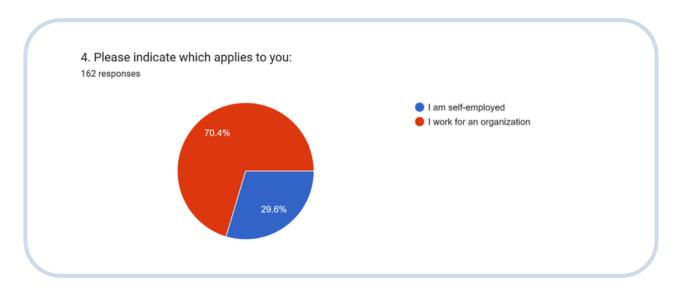- Europe
- Eurasia
- Africa
- Asia & Pacific

Respondents were asked to indicate the geographical scope of their roles. Notably, 64.2% reported having responsibilities at a global level, while 42% indicated involvement at the regional level, and an equal percentage (42%) at the local/national level. Multiple selections were possible, suggesting that many participants operate across several levels of responsibility. This highlights a strong representation of professionals engaged in strategic, cross-border food safety management.

3. Please indicate which applies to you (multiple selection is possible):
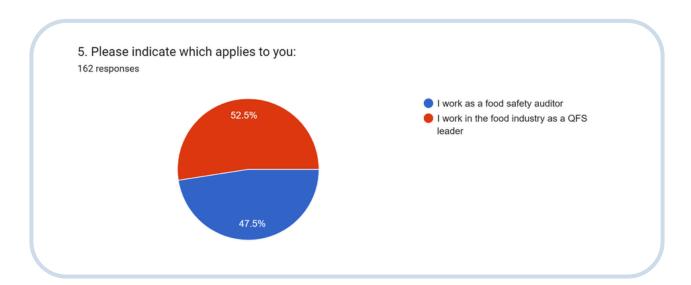162 responses

The majority of respondents (70.4%) are employed within an organization, while 29.6% identified as self-employed. This balance suggests the survey reached both internal company experts and external consultants,

auditors, or independent professionals, offering a broad range of operational perspectives.

4. Please indicate which applies to you:
162 responses

- I am self-employed
- I work for an organization

70.4%

29.6%

Respondents were nearly evenly split between food safety auditors (47.5%) and QFS (Quality and Food Safety) leaders working within the industry (52.5%). This blend provides valuable dual perspectives—both from those conducting audits and those being audited or leading internal food safety programs—enriching the analysis with viewpoints from both sides of the audit process.

5. Please indicate which applies to you:
162 responses

- I work as a food safety auditor
- I work in the food industry as a QFS leader

52.5%

47.5%

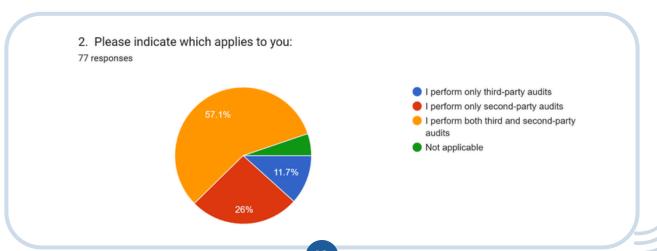This section provides an overview of the 77 food safety auditors who participated in the survey, shedding light on their employment structure and the nature of audits they perform. The responses offer important context for understanding how different auditor roles and responsibilities may influence perceptions of audit value.

Nearly half of the auditors (49.4%) identified as freelance food safety auditors working with one or more certification bodies. This suggests a strong presence of independent professionals within the auditing landscape. In contrast, 19.5% reported working as full-time auditors for a certification body, while 23.4% are employed as full-time auditors within food companies. Only 7.8% indicated they work as part-time auditors in a food company.

1. Please indicate which applies to you:
77 responses

- I work as a freelance food safety auditor for one or more certification bodies
- I work as a full-time food safety auditor for a certification body
- I work as a full-time food safety auditor at a food company
- I work as a part-time food safety auditor for a food company

When asked about the type of audits they conduct, the majority (57.1%) reported performing both second-party and third-party audits, indicating a hybrid role that spans supplier oversight and certification. Meanwhile, 26% conduct only second-party audits, and 11.7% are involved exclusively in third-party audits. A small proportion (5.2%) indicated that the question was not applicable to their work.
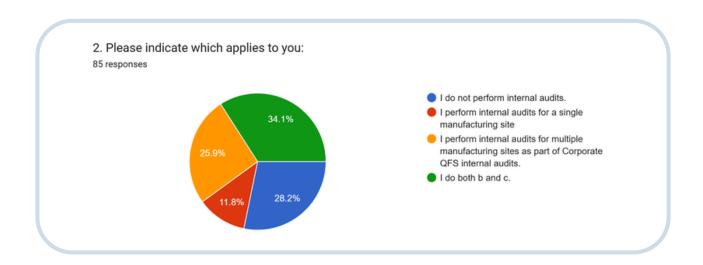

2. Please indicate which applies to you:
77 responses

- I perform only third-party audits
- I perform only second-party audits
- I perform both third and second-party audits
- Not applicable

1.1.3 SECTION 7 OF 18: GENERAL QUESTIONS – QFS LEADERS

This section highlights the characteristics of the 85 Quality and Food Safety (QFS) leaders who responded to the survey. Their organizational roles and involvement in internal audits offer context for understanding how audit value is perceived from the auditee's perspective.

Nearly half of the QFS leaders (49.4%) report working for a B2C (business-to-consumer) manufacturing company, while 31.8% work in B2B (business-to-business) manufacturing environments. The rest of the participants are spread across retail (4.7%), food service (1.2%), and other roles that don't fit into the listed categories (12.9%).

QFS leaders showed varied levels of involvement in internal audits. Over one-third (34.1%) indicated that they are responsible for conducting internal audits both at a single site and across multiple sites as part of a corporate audit function. Another 25.9% focus specifically on audits across multiple manufacturing sites, while 11.8% conduct audits solely for a single site.
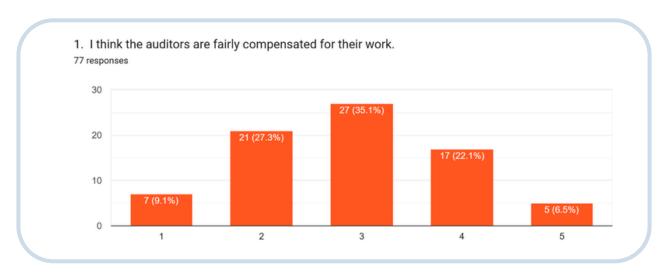
Notably, 28.2% of respondents reported that they do not perform internal audits, which may reflect more strategic or oversight-oriented roles within their organizations.

2. Please indicate which applies to you:
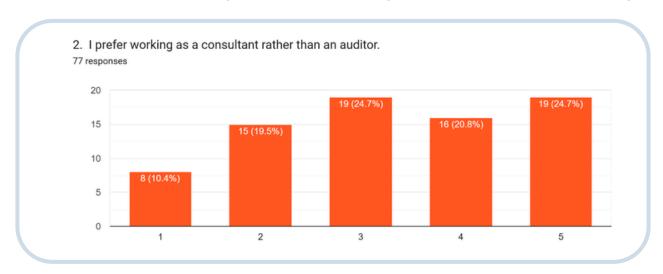85 responses

- I do not perform internal audits.
- I perform internal audits for a single manufacturing site
- I perform internal audits for multiple manufacturing sites as part of Corporate QFS internal audits.
- I do both b and c.

This section explores the current sentiment among food safety auditors related to compensation, professional development, job satisfaction, and career direction. The insights gathered help to illuminate challenges and motivations within the auditor community.
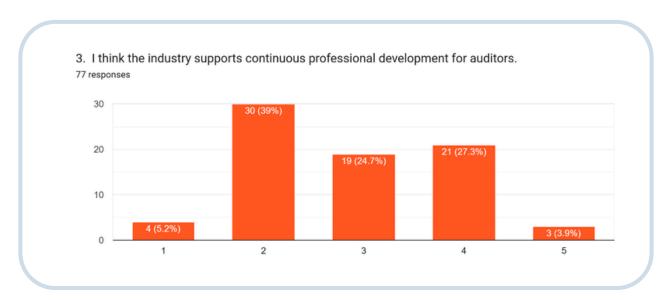
When asked whether they feel auditors are fairly compensated for their work, responses were mixed—generally leaning neutral to negative. The most common rating was a 3 out of 5 (35.1%), indicating moderate satisfaction, while 27.3% rated it 2 and 9.1% gave the lowest score of 1. Only 6.5% rated compensation at the highest level (5). These results show a significant level of dissatisfaction or ambivalence about compensation, with fewer than one-third expressing positive views.

1. I think the auditors are fairly compensated for their work.
77 responses

Auditors were also asked whether they prefer working as consultants rather than auditors. Responses were distributed fairly evenly, though 24.7% rated 5, indicating strong agreement, and an additional 20.8% rated 4. In total, nearly half (45.5%) of respondents expressed a clear or strong preference for consulting. This may reflect a desire for greater flexibility, perceived value, or recognition in consulting roles compared to auditing.

2. I prefer working as a consultant rather than an auditor.
77 responses

When it comes to continuous professional development, responses suggest a perceived gap in industry support. The most frequent response was 2 out of 5 (39%), and only 3 respondents (3.9%) rated it a full 5. Although 27.3% rated it 4, the overall trend suggests that many auditors feel underserved in terms of structured growth and training opportunities.

3. I think the industry supports continuous professional development for auditors.
77 responses

Finally, when asked about interest in transitioning to a less compliance-focused role, responses were spread across the scale. 26% selected 3, indicating uncertainty or neutrality, while 22.1% chose both 1 and 4. Only 9.1% expressed a strong desire to move away from auditing (rating 5). This suggests that while some auditors are open to new directions, many remain committed to their roles or are ambivalent due to current conditions rather than career dissatisfaction.

4. I would transition from auditing to a less compliance-focused role if given the chance.
77 responses

This section presents the views of food safety auditors on the value created by different types of audits (third-, second-, and first-party) and whether certification audits would continue in the absence of external requirements. The results offer insight into how auditors perceive the relevance and sustainability of current auditing practices.

Auditors generally see third-party audits as valuable, with a combined 66.3% rating them positively (scores 4 and 5). 36.4% of respondents gave the highest rating (5), and another 29.9% chose 4. However, 22.1% provided a neutral score (3), and 11.7% expressed doubt about their value (scores 1 or 2). While the overall sentiment is positive, this distribution indicates there is room to better demonstrate and communicate the benefits of certification audits.

1. I think third-party audits create great value for organizations.
77 responses

Second-party audits received higher ratings. A total of 67.6% of auditors gave them a score of 4 or 5, with 37.7% choosing 4 and 29.9% choosing 5. These results show that second-party audits are seen as impactful and meaningful. This may be because these audits are perceived as more customized, actionable, and directly related to operational improvement.

2. I think second-party audits create great value for organizations.

77 responses

First-party audits, conducted internally within an organization, also received high value ratings. Like second-party audits, 66.3% of respondents rated them 4 or 5, with 36.4% selecting the highest rating. Only a small proportion (13%) rated them negatively (scores 1 or 2). This consistency across all three audit types suggests that auditors see value across the full audit spectrum, particularly when audits are well-integrated into the operational context.

3. I think first-party audits create great value for organizations.

77 responses

When asked whether organizations would continue to pursue certification audits in the absence of external requirements (from customers or parent companies), opinions were more divided. While 40.3% of respondents leaned toward agreement (scores 4 or 5), a significant share (36.4%) rated this 2 or 3, and 13% gave the lowest score. These results imply that external drivers remain the primary motivator for certification audits and that the intrinsic business value alone may not be strong enough to sustain them voluntarily in all organizations.
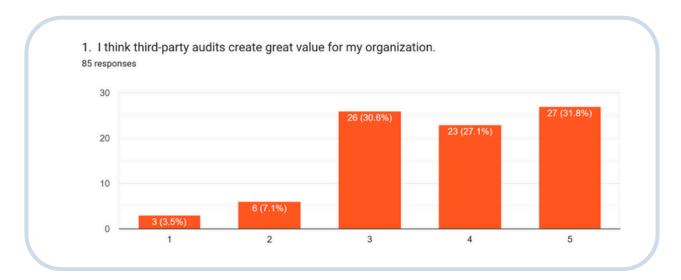
4. I think organizations would still ask for certification audits even if customers or mother companies didn't require them.

77 responses

This section reflects the perspectives of 85 QFS leaders regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of food safety audits from within the industry. The data offers insight into how value is attributed to first-, second-, and third-party audits, and touches on the motivations for certification and the complexity of managing multiple standards.
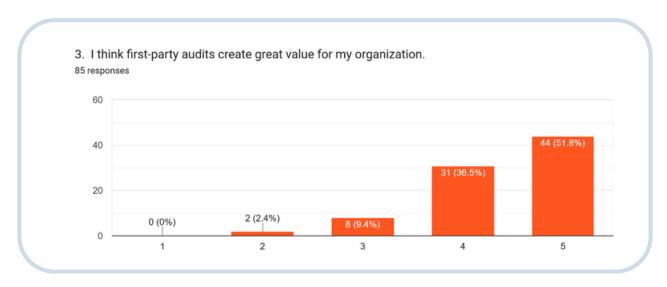
QFS leaders expressed generally positive views on the value of third-party audits. 31.8% rated them as highly valuable (5 out of 5), and 27.1% rated them 4. However, 30.6% gave a moderate score of 3, and 10.6% scored 1 or 2. While the majority agree that third-party audits deliver value, the high percentage of neutral responses suggests that the perceived benefit may vary depending on the audit approach, auditor capability, or business context.

1. I think third-party audits create great value for my organization.
85 responses

Second-party audits were slightly more favorably rated, with 31.8% assigning a score of 4, and 30.6% giving the highest rating (5). Together, over 62% see strong value in these audits.This indicates that direct, business-integrated audits are often perceived as more aligned with operational goals and outcomes.

2. I think second-party audits create great value for my organization.
85 responses

Among the three audit types, first-party audits received the highest endorsement from QFS leaders. An impressive 51.8% gave them the highest rating (5), and another 36.5% rated them 4, a combined 88.3% expressing strong agreement that internal audits provide great value. This result clearly highlights how internally driven audit processes are viewed as highly effective when embedded into the company's quality and food safety systems.

3. I think first-party audits create great value for my organization.
85 responses

When asked whether organizations would keep pursuing certification without external pressure from customers or parent companies, 36.5% of QFS leaders strongly agreed (rating 5) and 27.1% rated it 4. However, 36.5% of participants gave ratings from 1 to 3, indicating that although many value certification, its continuation might not be seen as self-sustaining without market or corporate mandates. This reflects a strategic dependence on certification for compliance or customer trust rather than intrinsic operational need.

4. I would still ask for certification audits even if customers or mother companies didn't require them.
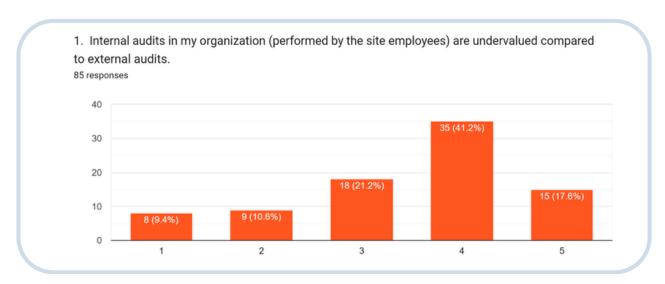
85 responses

On the question of whether the cost of managing multiple certifications is well understood, opinions were notably mixed. 27.1% chose a neutral response (3), while roughly equal proportions rated both ends of the spectrum: 16.5% selected 1 (strong disagreement) and 21.2% selected 5 (strong agreement). These results point to inconsistent visibility or tracking of certification-related costs, potentially complicating value assessments and internal decision-making around audit strategies.
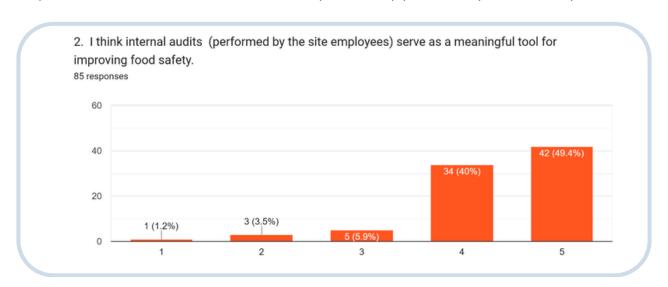
5. I think the cost of handling multiple certifications is unknown.

85 responses

Internal audits conducted by site employees form a critical foundation of food safety management systems. This section explores QFS leaders' perspectives on how these audits are valued, utilized, and supported within their organizations.
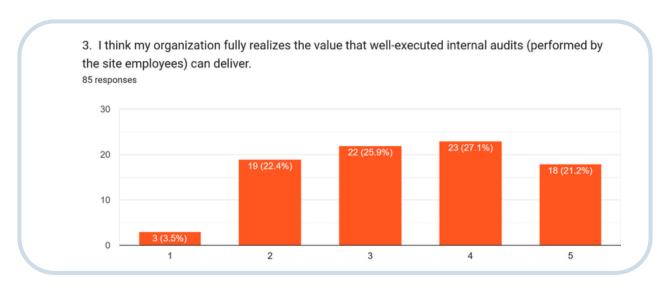
A majority of respondents (58.8%) believe that internal audits are undervalued with 41.2% selecting a rating of 4 and 17.6% selecting 5. Only a small portion (20%) disagreed with this view. These results indicate a perceived imbalance in recognition, despite the essential role internal audits play in proactive risk management.

1. Internal audits in my organization (performed by the site employees) are undervalued compared to external audits.
85 responses

QFS leaders overwhelmingly agreed that internal audits are a meaningful tool for improving food safety. A combined 89.4% rated this statement as 4 or 5, with 49.4% giving it the highest score. This strong consensus reinforces the belief that well-implemented internal audits are highly impactful when executed effectively and supported by leadership.

2. I think internal audits (performed by the site employees) serve as a meaningful tool for improving food safety.
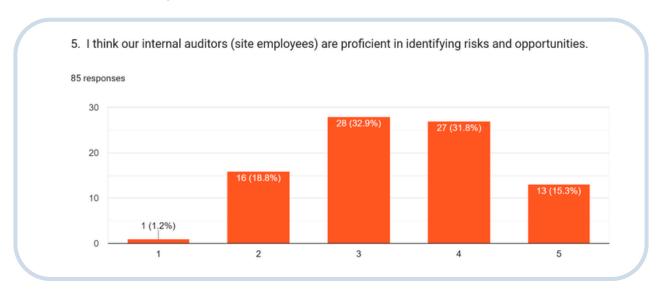85 responses

While internal audits are seen as valuable, there appears to be a gap in how fully their value is recognized within organizations. Only 21.2% gave the highest rating (5), and 25.9% gave a neutral rating (3). Meanwhile, nearly half (47.1%) expressed some level of disagreement or limited confidence in their organization's recognition of internal audits. This suggests that while QFS leaders believe in their potential, this value is not consistently understood or acknowledged at all levels.

3. I think my organization fully realizes the value that well-executed internal audits (performed by the site employees) can deliver.
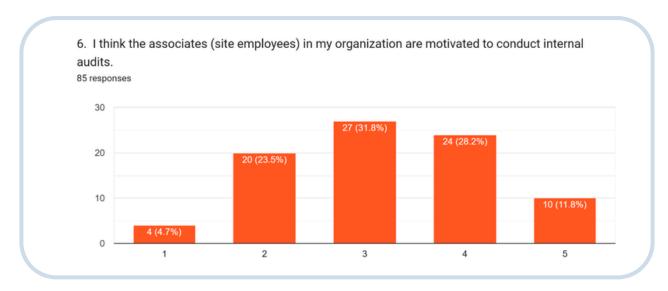85 responses

When asked whether internal auditors come from diverse departments, just over half of the respondents (51.8%) agreed (ratings 4 and 5), indicating moderate support for cross-functional audit teams. However, a significant minority (28.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, implying that audit team diversity is not yet an established practice in many organizations, potentially limiting insight.

4. The internal auditors in my organization (site employees) come from multiple departments, fostering a balanced, multidisciplinary team with diverse areas of expertise.
85 responses

Just under half of respondents (47.1%) believe their internal auditors are proficient in identifying risks and opportunities, with the highest responses falling in the middle of the scale. Notably, 18.8% rated this only a 2, suggesting there may be skill or training gaps that limit audit effectiveness. This result points to a need for more structured auditor development programs at the site level.

5. I think our internal auditors (site employees) are proficient in identifying risks and opportunities.
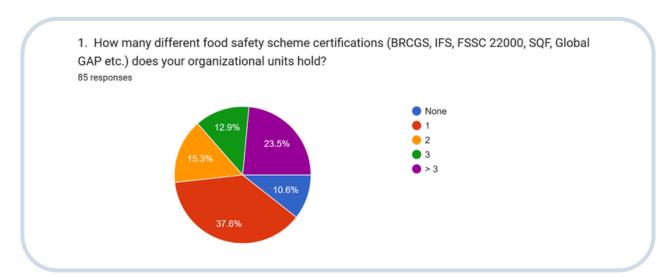
85 responses

Finally, QFS leaders were asked about site employees' motivation to participate in internal audits. Only 11.8% gave the highest rating, while 47% rated motivation at 2 or 3, indicating that engagement and ownership remain challenges. Lack of recognition, training, or perceived value may all contribute to this issue.
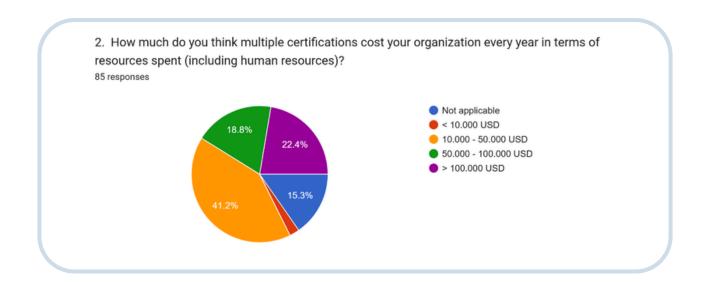
6. I think the associates (site employees) in my organization are motivated to conduct internal audits.

85 responses

To complement the value-based perspective, QFS leaders were also asked about the breadth and cost implications of managing multiple food safety scheme certifications. These responses provide insights into the operational burden and resource impact of certification compliance in complex food supply chains.

A significant portion of respondents (37.6%) reported that their organizational units hold only one food safety certification, such as BRCGS, IFS, FSSC 22000, SQF, or Global GAP. However, 23.5% indicated their units hold more than three different certifications, suggesting high complexity and regulatory overlap in many operations. The remainder is split across those holding 2 (15.3%) or 3 (12.9%) certifications. Only 10.6% reported holding none. This spread highlights that multi-certification is common in the industry, particularly in large or global organizations, which face multiple regulatory, customer, or market-driven compliance expectations.

1. How many different food safety scheme certifications (BRCGS, IFS, FSSC 22000, SQF, Global GAP etc.) does your organizational units hold?

85 responses

When asked to estimate the annual cost of managing these certifications, including human resource efforts, most QFS leaders (41.2%) reported it to be between $10,000 and $50,000 USD. An additional 18.8% estimated costs between $50,000 and $100,000, while 22.4% believe the costs exceed $100,000 USD annually. Only 2.4% estimated the total to be under $10,000, and 15.3% chose "not applicable."

2. How much do you think multiple certifications cost your organization every year in terms of resources spent (including human resources)?

85 responses

Legend:
- Not applicable
- < 10.000 USD
- 10.000 - 50.000 USD
- 50.000 - 100.000 USD
- > 100.000 USD

18.8% · 22.4% · 15.3% · 41.2%

These figures reveal that certification management represents a substantial investment for many organizations, both in direct and indirect resource allocation. The perceived cost reinforces the need for companies to periodically evaluate the added value of each certification in relation to the business outcomes it supports.
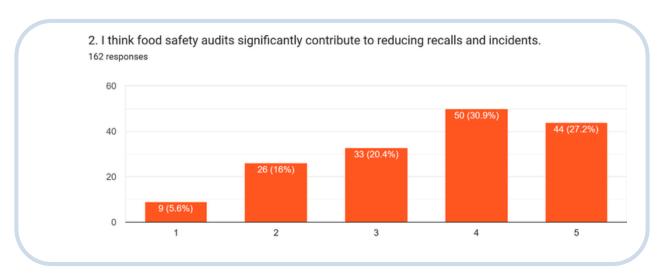
This section captures how a broad group of professionals across roles and regions assesses the current food safety auditing practices, their effectiveness, and the opportunities for improvement. Responses from 162 participants reflect collective insights into how audits are perceived in terms of public health, operational effectiveness, and cultural impact.
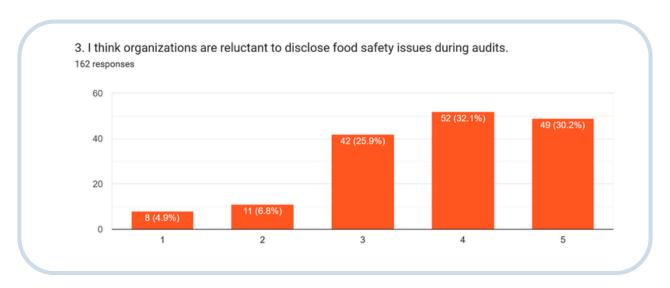
Overall, 58% of respondents believe current food safety auditing practices are effective in ensuring public health safety (ratings 4 and 5), though 21.6% selected a neutral rating (3), and nearly 20% expressed skepticism (ratings 1–2). When asked whether audits contribute to reducing recalls and incidents, the support was stronger; 58.1% gave positive ratings, and only 21.6% rated the impact as low.
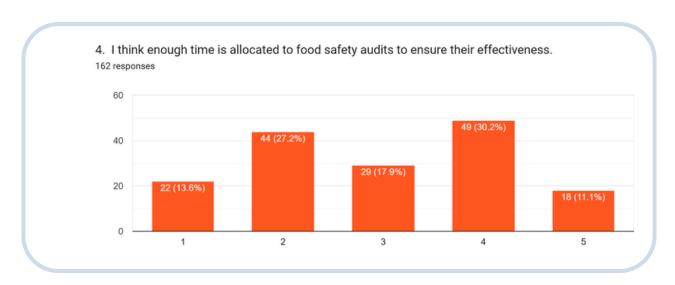

A majority of respondents (58.1%) believe that food safety audits significantly contribute to reducing recalls and incidents, with 30.9% rating the impact as 4 and 27.2% as 5. 36.4% provided neutral or low ratings (1–3).
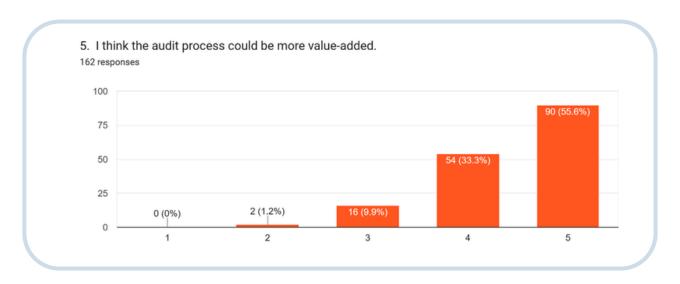
A strong majority (62.3%) agreed that organizations are reluctant to disclose food safety issues during audits, suggesting a persistent lack of transparency or psychological safety in audit environments. This perception raises concerns about the trust dynamic between auditors and auditees, and the true depth of insight audits can deliver if key risks remain hidden.

3. I think organizations are reluctant to disclose food safety issues during audits.
162 responses

Only 41.3% of respondents believe sufficient time is allocated to food safety audits (ratings 4 and 5), while a combined 40.8% rated the time allocation as poor (ratings 1 and 2). This indicates that resource pressure and time constraints are widely recognized as limiting the effectiveness of audit practices.

4. I think enough time is allocated to food safety audits to ensure their effectiveness.
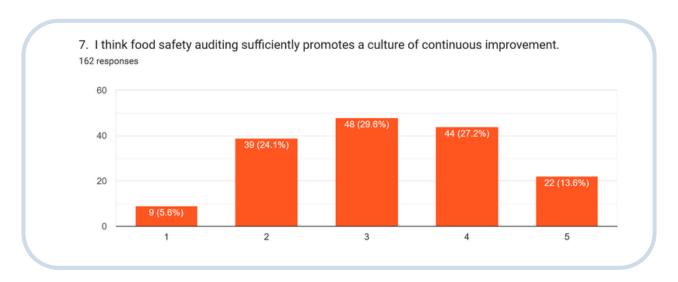162 responses

The clearest consensus emerged in response to the statement about audit value: 88.9% agreed the audit process could be more value-adding, including a remarkable 55.6% selecting the highest score. This overwhelming response sends a clear message that stakeholders expect more strategic benefit and insight from audits beyond compliance verification.

5. I think the audit process could be more value-added.
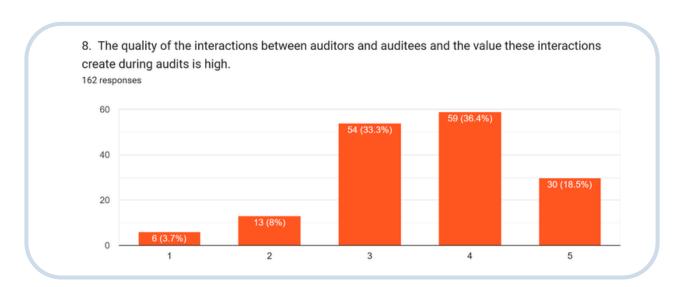162 responses

Nearly 77.1% of participants believe that current audits prioritize compliance over continuous improvement (ratings 4 and 5), suggesting a desire to evolve audits into a more forward-looking, development-oriented tool.

6. I think the food safety audits prioritize compliance over continuous improvement.
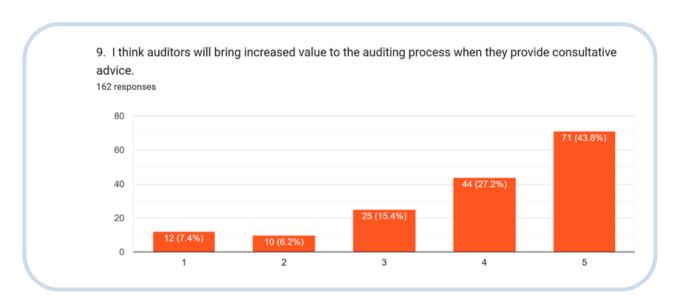162 responses

When asked whether audits currently promote a culture of continuous improvement, only 40.8% responded positively (ratings 4 and 5), and 53.7% rated this statement as neutral or low (ratings 1–3).

7. I think food safety auditing sufficiently promotes a culture of continuous improvement.
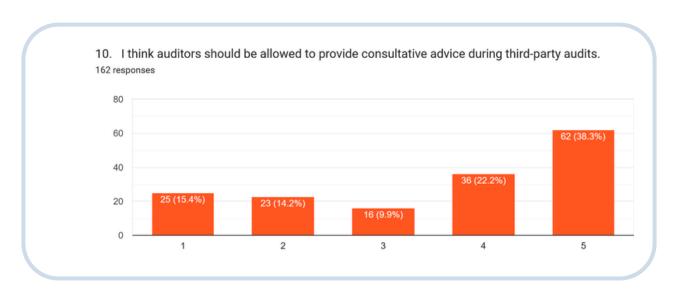162 responses

Over half of respondents (54.9%) view the quality of interactions and the value they create as high (ratings 4 and 5), while 33.3% gave a neutral rating.

8. The quality of the interactions between auditors and auditees and the value these interactions create during audits is high.
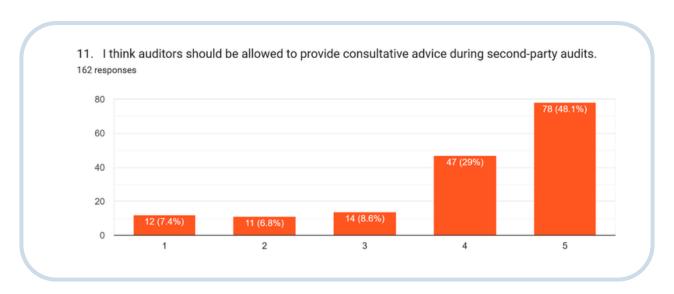162 responses

A combined 71% of respondents believe that auditors bring greater value when they provide consultative advice, with 43.8% strongly agreeing. This reflects a clear appetite for audits to become more insightful and development-oriented.

9. I think auditors will bring increased value to the auditing process when they provide consultative advice.

162 responses

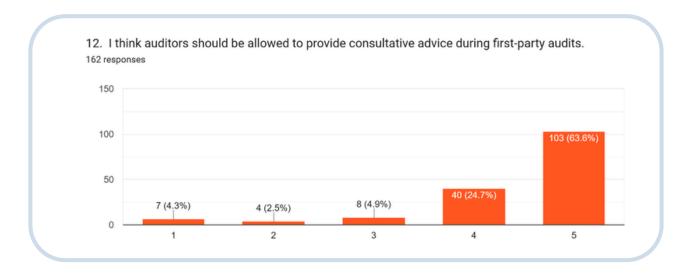A majority of respondents (60.5%) support the idea that auditors should be allowed to provide consultative advice during third-party audits, with 38.3% strongly agreeing. However, 29.6% disagreed (ratings 1–2), reflecting a divided view on balancing impartiality with advisory value.

10. I think auditors should be allowed to provide consultative advice during third-party audits.

162 responses

Support is even stronger for consultative roles in second-party audits, with 77.1% of respondents agreeing (ratings 4 and 5), including 48.1% who strongly support it. Only 14.2% expressed disagreement, suggesting a broad consensus that advisory input is appropriate and welcomed in this audit context.
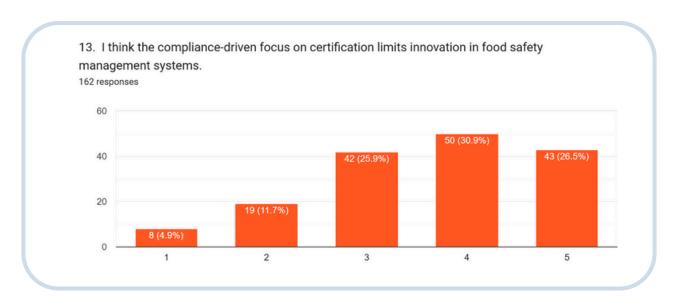
11. I think auditors should be allowed to provide consultative advice during second-party audits.
162 responses

Rating	Count
1	12 (7.4%)
2	11 (6.8%)
3	14 (8.6%)
4	47 (29%)
5	78 (48.1%)

An overwhelming majority (88.3%) of respondents support consultative advice during first-party audits, with 63.6% strongly agreeing.

12. I think auditors should be allowed to provide consultative advice during first-party audits.
162 responses

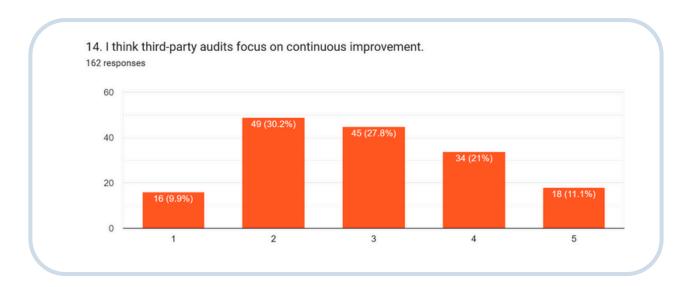| Rating	Count
1	7 (4.3%)
2	4 (2.5%)
3	8 (4.9%)
4	40 (24.7%)
5	103 (63.6%)

The trend shows that the closer the auditor is to the organization, the greater the acceptance for a consultative role, reflecting a clear preference for collaboration and shared learning in corporate and supplier audit contexts, while maintaining more caution in certification settings.

A significant portion (57.4%) of respondents agree (ratings 4 and 5) that a compliance-driven focus on certification limits innovation in food safety management systems. Only 16.6% disagreed (ratings 1 and 2), suggesting that most see compliance focus in certification as a potential barrier to innovation.

13. I think the compliance-driven focus on certification limits innovation in food safety management systems.
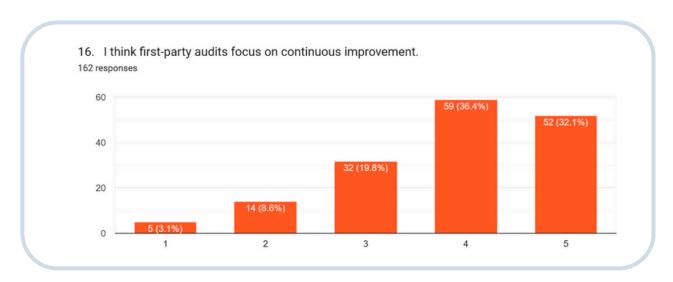
162 responses

Only 32.1% of respondents (ratings 4 and 5) believe that third-party audits support continuous improvement, while 40.1% disagreed (ratings 1 and 2). This indicates skepticism about the improvement value of third-party audits.

14. I think third-party audits focus on continuous improvement.
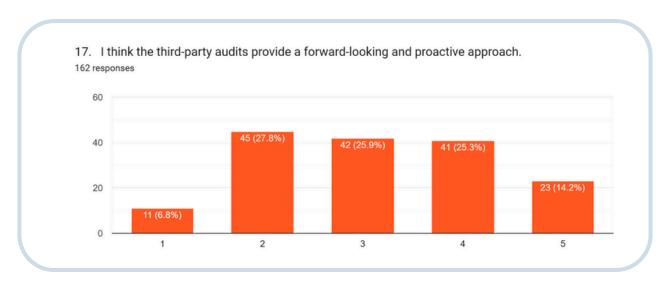
162 responses

More balanced responses, but still leaning positive: 47.5% agree (ratings 4 and 5), and 25.3% disagree. This shows that second-party audits are viewed more favorably than third-party ones in driving improvement.

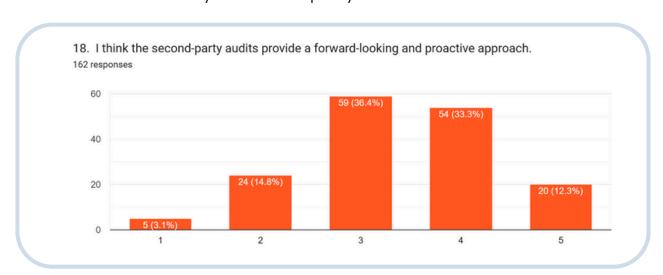**15. I think second-party audits focus on continuous improvement.**
162 responses

The most positive perception: 68.5% of respondents (ratings 4 and 5) think first-party audits focus on continuous improvement, with only 11.7% disagreeing. This suggests a strong belief in internal audits as a lever for progress.

16. I think first-party audits focus on continuous improvement.
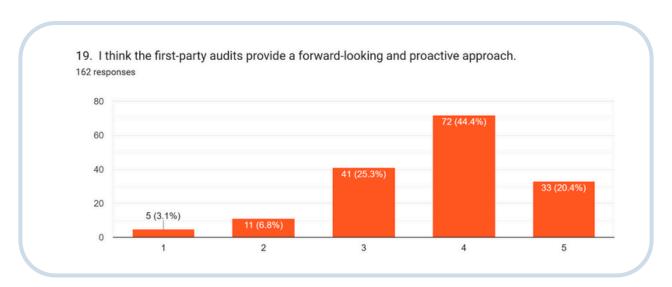162 responses

Overall, the data indicate that third-party audits are not widely perceived as forward-looking. While 39.5% of respondents agreed (rating 4 or 5), a similar proportion either disagreed (34.6% rated 1 or 2) or remained neutral (25.9% rated 3). The largest group, 27.8%, rated the statement a 2, suggesting a noticeable lack of confidence in the proactive value of third-party audits.

17. I think the third-party audits provide a forward-looking and proactive approach.
162 responses

Rating	Count
1	11 (6.8%)
2	45 (27.8%)
3	42 (25.9%)
4	41 (25.3%)
5	23 (14.2%)

Responses show a more balanced perception, with 45.6% of participants rating 4 or 5, indicating agreement that second-party audits are forward-looking and proactive. However, the largest group, 36.4%, chose a neutral rating of 3, suggesting some uncertainty or mixed experiences. A smaller share (17.9%) disagreed (ratings 1 or 2). Overall, second-party audits are viewed more favorably than third-party ones.

18. I think the second-party audits provide a forward-looking and proactive approach.
162 responses

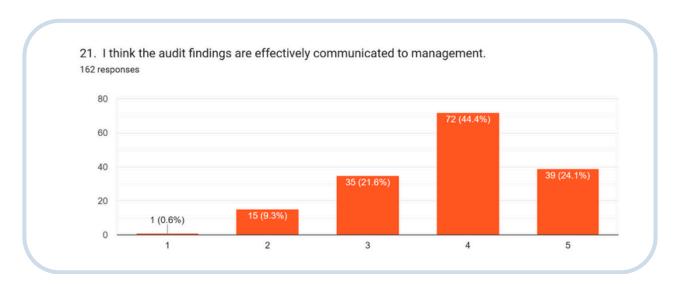| Rating	Count
1	5 (3.1%)
2	24 (14.8%)
3	59 (36.4%)
4	54 (33.3%)
5	20 (12.3%)

Perceptions are strongly positive, with 64.8% of respondents selecting 4 or 5, indicating broad agreement that first-party audits are forward-looking and proactive. Only 9.9% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), and 25.3% remained neutral. These results highlight that first-party audits are perceived as the most reliable among the three types when it comes to driving proactive and future-oriented action.

19. I think the first-party audits provide a forward-looking and proactive approach.
162 responses

The results are highly positive, with 80.2% of respondents rating 4 or 5, indicating strong agreement that audit findings are actionable. Only 5.6% expressed disagreement, and 14.2% remained neutral. The absence of any responses at rating 1 reinforces the perception that audits generally produce meaningful, practical outcomes, which remains contradictory to some of the earlier results indicating that the audits should drive more value.

20. Overall, I think the audit findings are actionable.
162 responses

The majority of respondents (68.5%) rated 4 or 5, indicating strong agreement that audit findings are effectively communicated to management. While 21.6% chose a neutral stance, only 9.9% expressed disagreement (ratings 1 or 2).

21. I think the audit findings are effectively communicated to management.
162 responses

A clear majority of respondents (68.6%) agreed with the statement, rating it 4 or 5, indicating that certification is often viewed as a checkbox exercise rather than a meaningful value-add. Only 13.6% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), while 17.9% remained neutral. These results suggest a prevailing perception that the certification process may prioritize compliance over true improvement or business benefit.
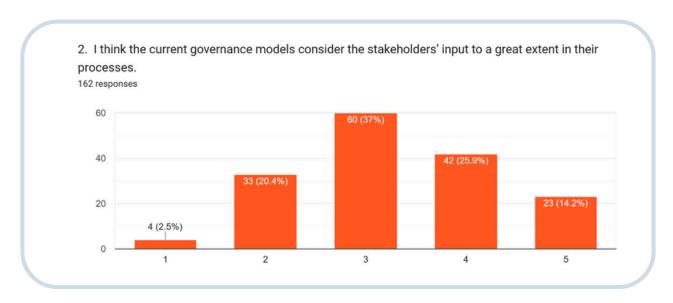
22. I think achieving certification is seen as a checkbox exercise rather than a value-add.
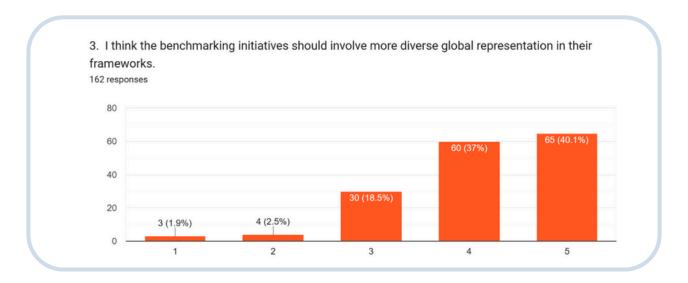162 responses

The majority of respondents (49.4%) rated 4 or 5, indicating general agreement that governance frameworks in food safety auditing are transparent. However, 28.4% remained neutral, and 22.2% expressed disagreement (ratings 1 or 2). While the overall perception leans positive, the significant share of neutral and negative responses points to opportunities for improving clarity and openness in governance structures.
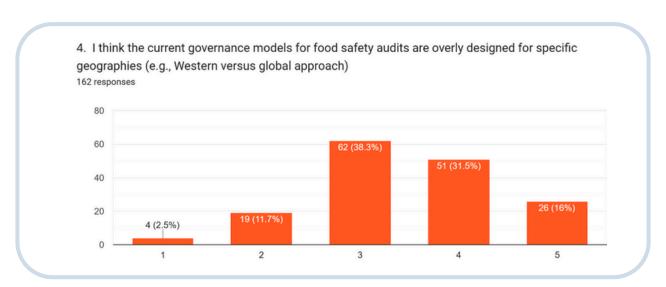

Responses are mixed, with the largest portion, 37%, selecting the neutral rating of 3 when it comes to the inclusiveness of governance models. While 40.1% agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that stakeholder input is well considered in governance models, 22.9% disagreed. The data suggests moderate confidence, but also signals a need for greater stakeholder engagement and transparency in decision-making processes.
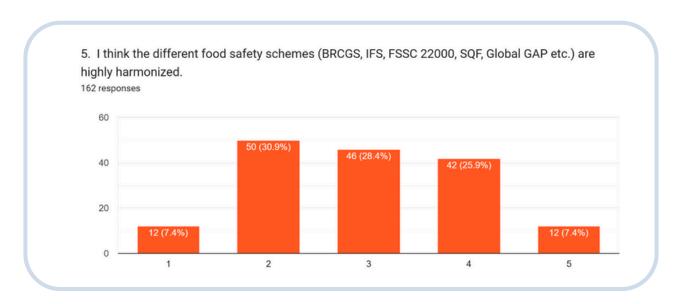
The vast majority of respondents (77.1%) strongly agree (ratings 4 or 5) that benchmarking initiatives should include more diverse global representation. Only 4.4% expressed disagreement, and 18.5% remained neutral. This overwhelming consensus highlights a clear demand for broader inclusivity and representation in global food safety auditing frameworks.

3. I think the benchmarking initiatives should involve more diverse global representation in their frameworks.
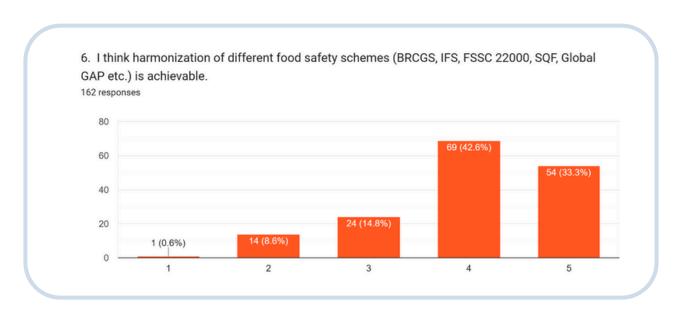162 responses

A combined 47.5% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that current governance models are overly designed for specific geographies, while 38.3% remained neutral. Only 14.2% disagreed. The data points to a prevalent concern about geographic bias in audit models and a call for more globally inclusive frameworks.

4. I think the current governance models for food safety audits are overly designed for specific geographies (e.g., Western versus global approach)
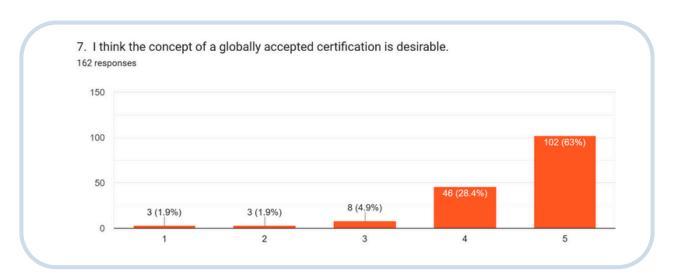162 responses

Only 33.3% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that food safety schemes are highly harmonized, while a larger share, 38.3%, disagreed (ratings 1 or 2). Additionally, 28.4% selected a neutral rating. These results suggest that many stakeholders perceive inconsistencies or fragmentation among existing food safety standards.

5. I think the different food safety schemes (BRCGS, IFS, FSSC 22000, SQF, Global GAP etc.) are highly harmonized.
162 responses

The responses reflect strong optimism, with 75.9% of participants agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that harmonization of food safety schemes is achievable. Only 9.2% disagreed, and 14.8% remained neutral. This suggests broad confidence in the feasibility of aligning various standards, despite current fragmentation.

6. I think harmonization of different food safety schemes (BRCGS, IFS, FSSC 22000, SQF, Global GAP etc.) is achievable.
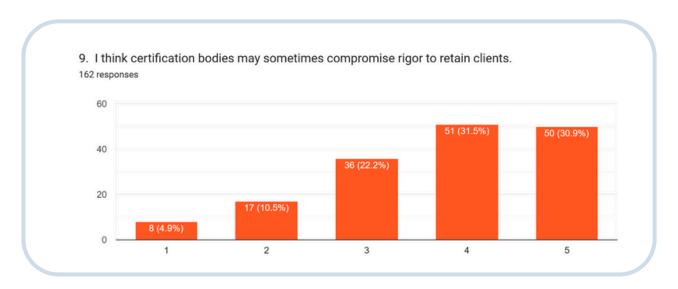162 responses

There is overwhelming support for the idea of a globally accepted certification, with 91.4% of respondents selecting ratings 4 or 5. Only 3.8% disagreed, and 4.9% remained neutral.

7. I think the concept of a globally accepted certification is desirable.
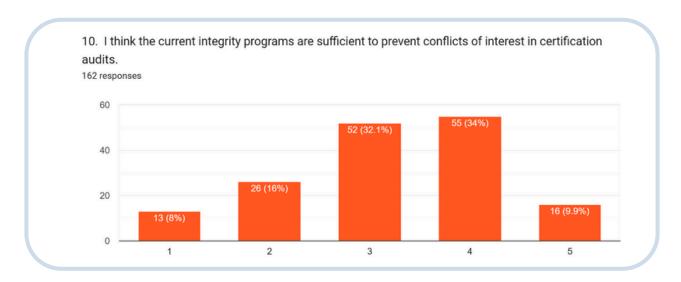162 responses

A strong majority, 68.5% of respondents, believe that a globally accepted certification is feasible, selecting ratings 4 or 5. While 16% were neutral, a smaller portion (15.4%) expressed doubt. The results suggest solid confidence in the practicality of global certification, though slightly less assured than the enthusiasm seen for its desirability.

8. I think the concept of a globally accepted certification is feasible.
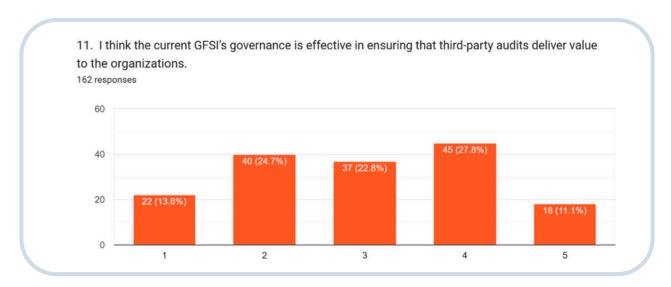162 responses

A majority of respondents (62.4%) agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that certification bodies may sometimes compromise rigor to retain clients. Another 22.2% remained neutral, while only 15.4% disagreed. These results suggest a notable level of concern within the community about potential conflicts of interest in third-party certification practices.

9. I think certification bodies may sometimes compromise rigor to retain clients.
162 responses

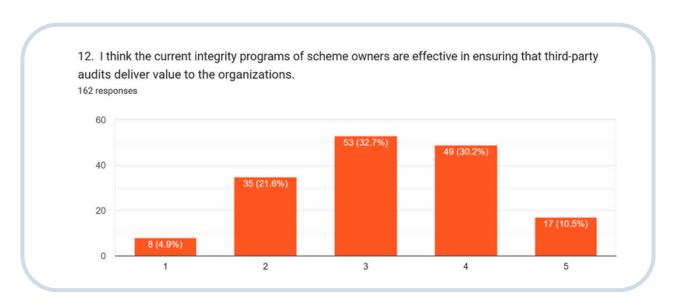| Rating	Count
1	8 (4.9%)
2	17 (10.5%)
3	36 (22.2%)
4	51 (31.5%)
5	50 (30.9%)

Responses reflect moderate confidence in current integrity programs, with 43.9% agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that they are sufficient to prevent conflicts of interest. However, 32.1% remained neutral, and 24% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2). These results suggest that while many believe integrity measures are in place, concerns about their adequacy still persist.

10. I think the current integrity programs are sufficient to prevent conflicts of interest in certification audits.
162 responses

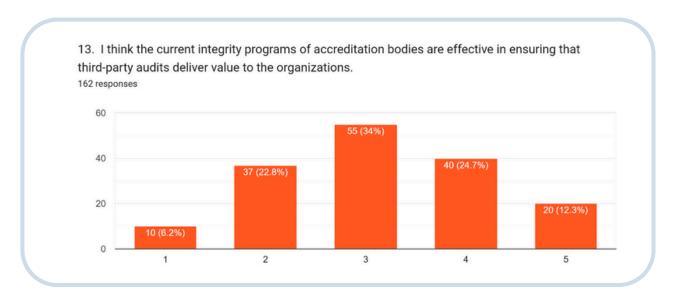| Rating	Count
1	13 (8%)
2	26 (16%)
3	52 (32.1%)
4	55 (34%)
5	16 (9.9%)

Perceptions of GFSI governance are mixed. While 38.9% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that it ensures value from third-party audits, 38.3% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), and 22.8% remained neutral. This split suggests a lack of broad confidence in GFSI's effectiveness in ensuring the potential of third-party audits, with nearly equal support and skepticism among stakeholders.

11. I think the current GFSI's governance is effective in ensuring that third-party audits deliver value to the organizations.
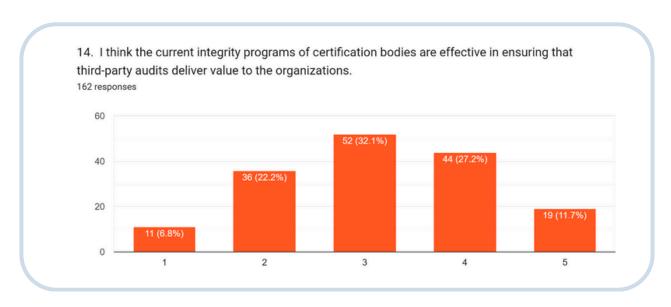
162 responses

Views on the effectiveness of scheme owners' integrity programs are mixed but slightly more favorable. While 40.7% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5), 26.5% disagreed, and 32.7% remained neutral. The high neutral response indicates some uncertainty or inconsistency in experiences, suggesting room for improvement in ensuring audit value through these programs.

12. I think the current integrity programs of scheme owners are effective in ensuring that third-party audits deliver value to the organizations.
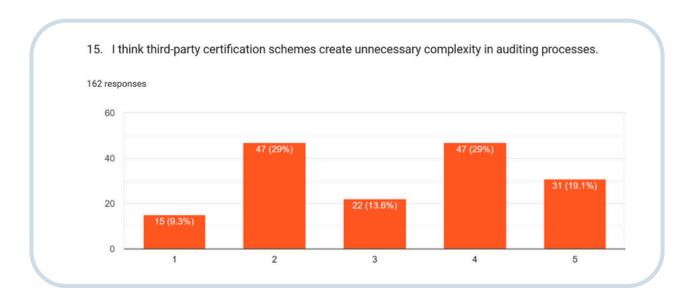
162 responses

Responses indicate moderate confidence in the integrity programs of accreditation bodies. While 37% of participants agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that these programs ensure audit value, a notable 29% disagreed, and the largest group, 34%, remained neutral. This suggests that trust in accreditation oversight is present but not firmly established, with many unsure of its effectiveness.

13. I think the current integrity programs of accreditation bodies are effective in ensuring that third-party audits deliver value to the organizations.

162 responses

Perceptions of certification bodies' integrity programs are mixed, with 38.9% of respondents agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that they ensure audit value. However, 29% disagreed, and 32.1% remained neutral. The distribution suggests that while there is some trust, many stakeholders are either unconvinced or uncertain about the effectiveness of these programs.

14. I think the current integrity programs of certification bodies are effective in ensuring that third-party audits deliver value to the organizations.
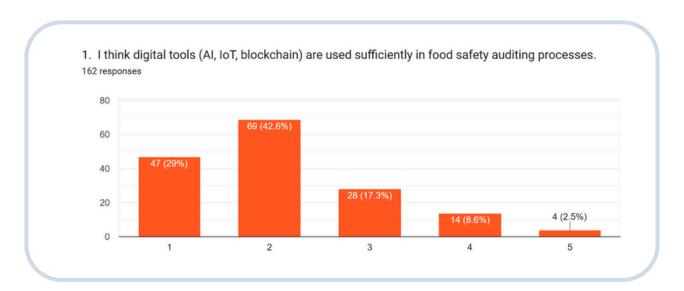
162 responses

Views on complexity introduced by third-party certification schemes are evenly split. While 48.1% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that these schemes create unnecessary complexity, 38.3% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2). A smaller group (13.6%) remained neutral. The results reflect a polarized perspective, with nearly equal support and opposition on this issue.
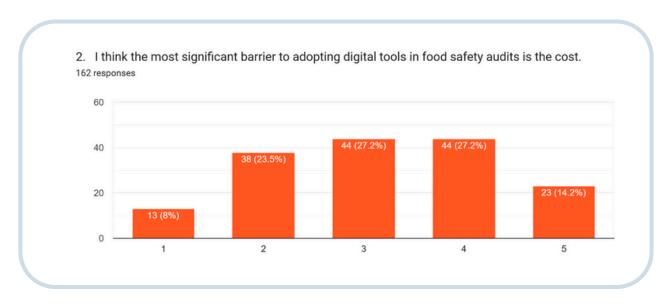
15. I think third-party certification schemes create unnecessary complexity in auditing processes.
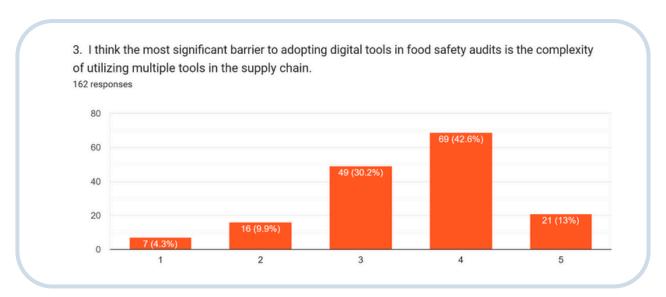
162 responses

The vast majority of respondents (71.6%) disagreed (ratings 1 or 2) that digital tools like AI, IoT, and blockchain are used sufficiently in food safety auditing. Only 11.1% agreed (ratings 4 or 5), while 17.3% remained neutral. These results indicate a strong perception that current auditing processes are falling short in leveraging digital technologies.
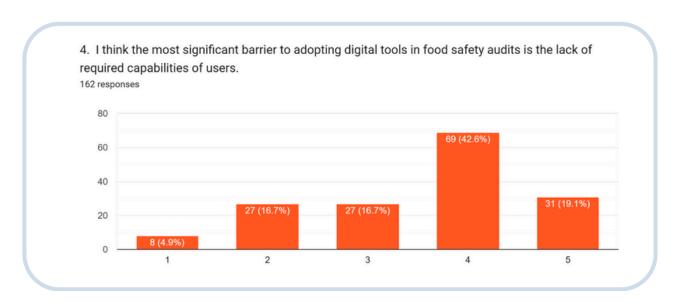

Responses are fairly evenly distributed, with 41.4% of participants agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that cost is the main barrier to adopting digital tools in food safety audits. Meanwhile, 31.5% disagreed and 27.2% remained neutral. These results suggest that while cost is seen as a barrier by many, it is not universally regarded as the most significant one.
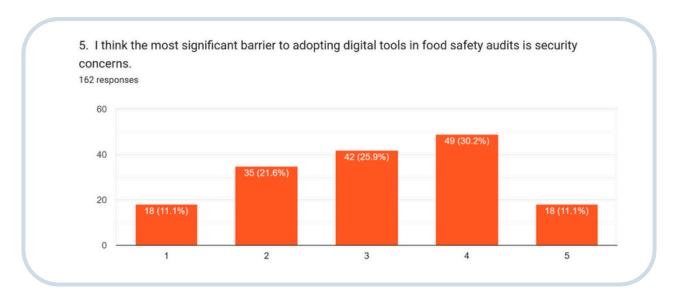
The majority of respondents (55.6%) agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that complexity in using multiple digital tools across the supply chain is a major barrier to adoption. A smaller portion (14.2%) disagreed, and 30.2% remained neutral. These results suggest that interoperability and integration challenges are widely recognized as significant obstacles in digitalizing food safety audits.

3. I think the most significant barrier to adopting digital tools in food safety audits is the complexity of utilizing multiple tools in the supply chain.

162 responses

A strong majority (61.7%) of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that a lack of user capabilities is a key barrier to adopting digital tools in food safety audits. Only 21.6% disagreed and 16.7% remained neutral. These results highlight a clear concern about skill gaps as a critical obstacle to digital adoption.

4. I think the most significant barrier to adopting digital tools in food safety audits is the lack of required capabilities of users.

162 responses

Responses show a moderate level of concern regarding security as a barrier to digital adoption. While 41.3% agreed (ratings 4 or 5), 32.7% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), and 25.9% remained neutral. These results suggest that although security is recognized as a challenge, it is not considered the most critical obstacle compared to other barriers like complexity or user capability.

5. I think the most significant barrier to adopting digital tools in food safety audits is security concerns.
162 responses

A strong majority (67.3%) of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that automating audit reporting would significantly enhance audit value. Only 15.4% disagreed, and 17.3% remained neutral. The results clearly indicate broad support for report automation as a means to increase efficiency and impact in audit processes.

6. I think automating audit reporting will significantly improve audit value.
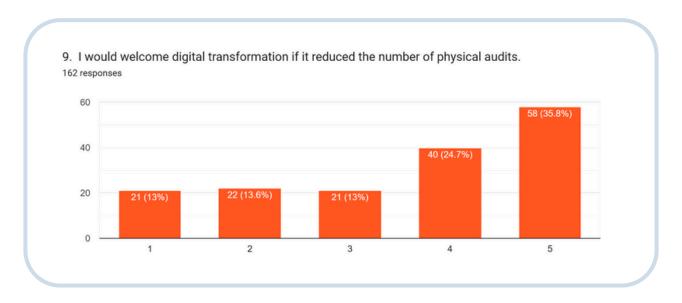162 responses

Responses are fairly balanced, with 41.4% of participants agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that their organization is ready for full audit digitalization, while 33.9% disagreed and 24.7% remained neutral. These results indicate growing readiness, but also highlight significant variation in digital maturity across organizations.

7. I think my organization is ready to embrace a fully digitalized audit process.
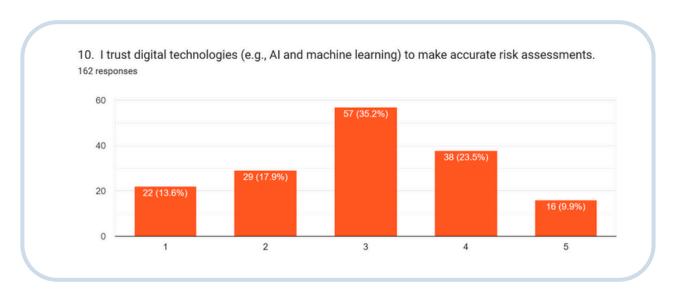162 responses

A majority of respondents (51.3%) disagreed (ratings 1 or 2) that auditing organizations and auditors are adequately trained to use digital tools. Only 18.5% agreed, while 30.2% remained neutral. These results highlight a significant skills gap and suggest that digital literacy for auditors remains a key area for development.

8. I think the auditing organizations and auditors are adequately trained to use digital tools.
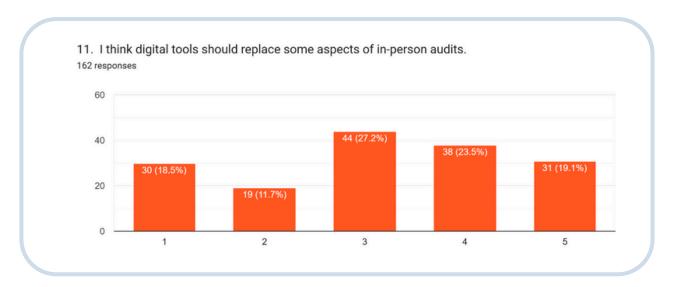162 responses

A majority of respondents (60.5%) indicated support (ratings 4 or 5) for digital transformation if it led to fewer physical audits. Meanwhile, 26.6% opposed the idea (ratings 1 or 2), and 13% remained neutral. These results suggest strong openness to digital alternatives, provided they can effectively reduce on-site audit burdens.

9. I would welcome digital transformation if it reduced the number of physical audits.
162 responses

Trust in digital technologies for accurate risk assessment appears cautious. Only 33.4% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5), while 31.5% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), and the largest group, 35.2%, remained neutral. These results suggest that while there is emerging confidence in tools like AI and machine learning, many stakeholders remain unsure or unconvinced of their reliability in critical audit decisions.

10. I trust digital technologies (e.g., AI and machine learning) to make accurate risk assessments.
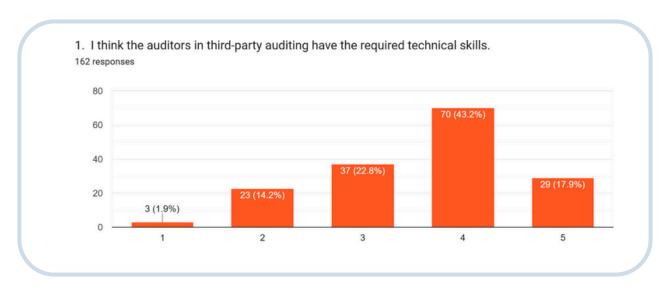162 responses

Opinions are mixed on replacing parts of in-person audits with digital tools. While 42.6% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5), 30.2% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), and 27.2% remained neutral. This suggests cautious openness to digital substitution, with a significant portion still valuing physical audit components.
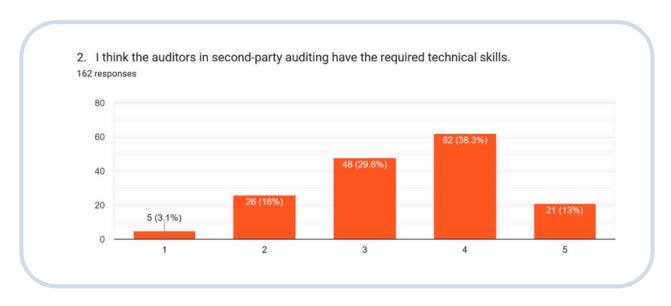
11. I think digital tools should replace some aspects of in-person audits.
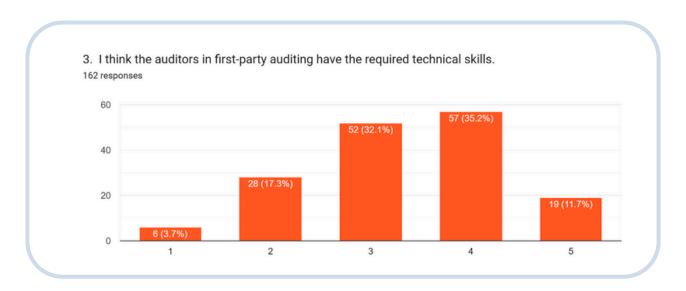162 responses

A majority of respondents (61.1%) agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that auditors in third-party auditing possess the necessary technical skills. Only 16.1% disagreed, while 22.8% remained neutral. These results indicate a generally positive perception of auditors' technical competence within third-party audit frameworks.

1. I think the auditors in third-party auditing have the required technical skills.
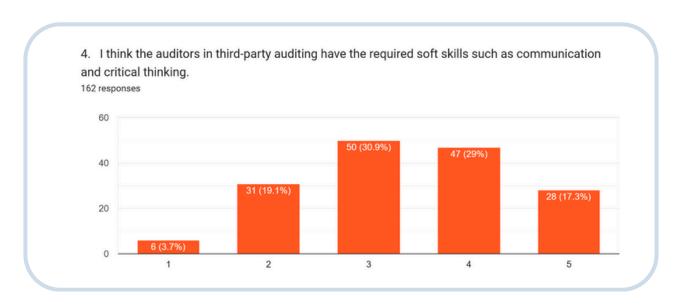162 responses

Perceptions of technical skill among second-party auditors are generally positive, with 51.3% of respondents agreeing (ratings 4 or 5). However, 19.1% disagreed, and 29.6% remained neutral. While overall confidence is evident, the relatively high neutral response suggests some uncertainty or variability in skill levels across organizations.

2. I think the auditors in second-party auditing have the required technical skills.
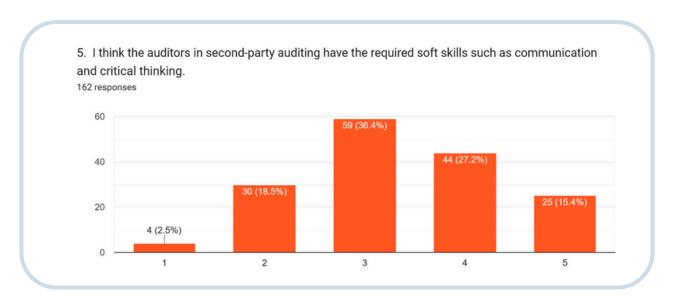162 responses

Responses show moderate confidence in the technical skills of first-party auditors. While 46.9% of participants agreed (ratings 4 or 5), 21% disagreed, and 32.1% remained neutral.

3. I think the auditors in first-party auditing have the required technical skills.
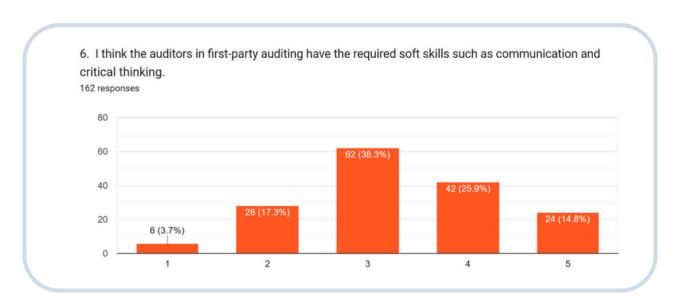
162 responses

Perceptions of soft skills among third-party auditors are mixed. While 46.3% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that these auditors possess strong communication and critical thinking skills, 22.8% disagreed, and 30.9% remained neutral. These results suggest that soft skills are recognized in many auditors but not consistently across the board.

4. I think the auditors in third-party auditing have the required soft skills such as communication and critical thinking.
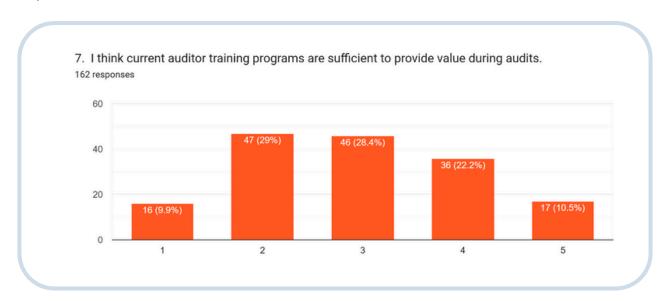
162 responses

Responses suggest a more neutral stance on soft skills among second-party auditors. While 42.6% agreed (ratings 4 or 5), a significant 36.4% remained neutral, and 21% disagreed. The data indicate that although there is some confidence in their communication and critical thinking abilities, perceptions are less clear-cut compared to technical skills.

5. I think the auditors in second-party auditing have the required soft skills such as communication and critical thinking.
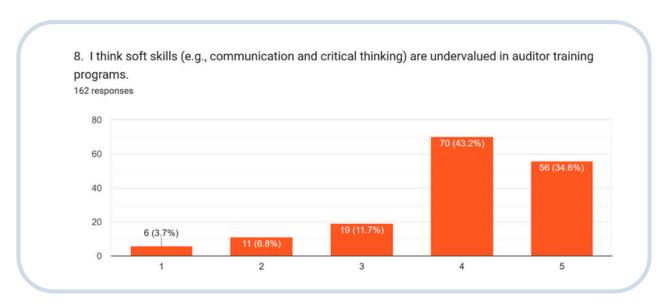
162 responses

Responses reflect a cautious view of soft skills among first-party auditors. While 40.7% agreed (ratings 4 or 5), a sizable portion, 38.3%, remained neutral, and 21% disagreed. This suggests that confidence in internal auditors' communication and critical thinking skills is moderate, with many respondents unsure about their strength in these areas.

6. I think the auditors in first-party auditing have the required soft skills such as communication and critical thinking.
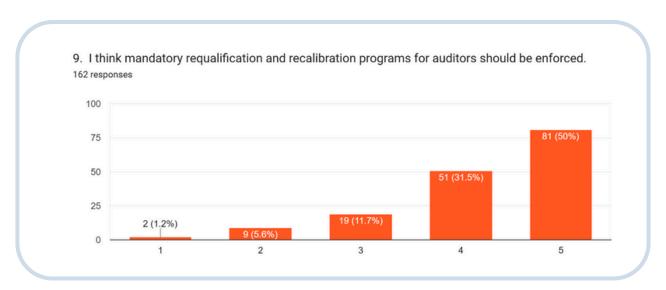
162 responses

Perceptions of current auditor training programs are mixed, with only 32.7% of respondents agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that they are sufficient to deliver value during audits. In contrast, 38.9% disagreed (ratings 1 or 2), and 28.4% remained neutral. These results indicate a need to reassess and possibly enhance training programs to meet stakeholder expectations better.

7. I think current auditor training programs are sufficient to provide value during audits.
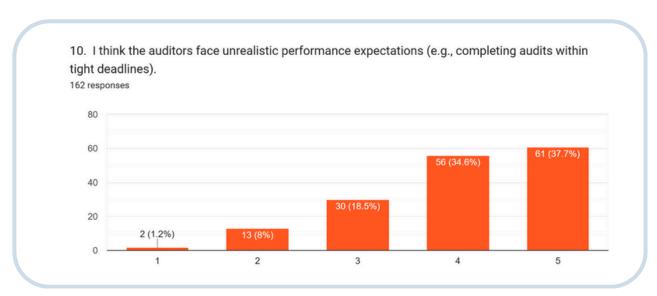162 responses

A strong majority of respondents (77.8%) agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that soft skills are undervalued in current auditor training programs. Only 10.5% disagreed, while 11.7% remained neutral. These results highlight a clear call for greater emphasis on communication, critical thinking, and other soft skills in auditor development.

8. I think soft skills (e.g., communication and critical thinking) are undervalued in auditor training programs.
162 responses

There is overwhelming support for enforcing mandatory requalification and recalibration programs for auditors, with 81.5% of respondents agreeing (ratings 4 or 5). Only 6.8% disagreed, and 11.7% remained neutral. The results indicate broad agreement on the importance of maintaining auditor competency through regular requalification and recalibration programs.

9. I think mandatory requalification and recalibration programs for auditors should be enforced.
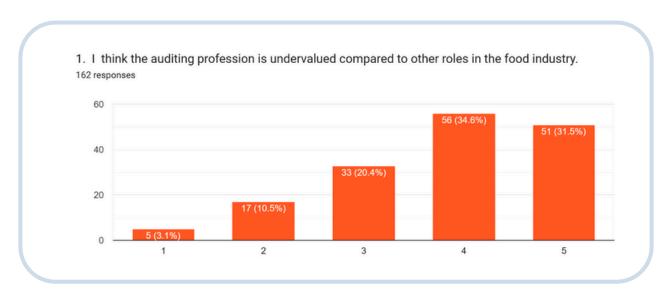162 responses

A large majority of respondents (72.3%) agree that auditors face unrealistic performance expectations, such as completing audits under tight deadlines. Only 9.2% disagree, while 18.5% remain neutral. The results indicate a widespread recognition of workload and time pressure as common challenges in audit performance.
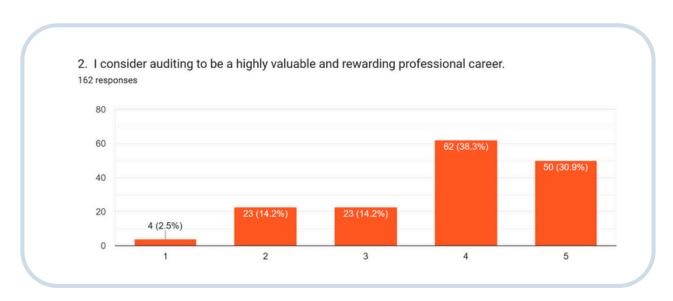
10. I think the auditors face unrealistic performance expectations (e.g., completing audits within tight deadlines).
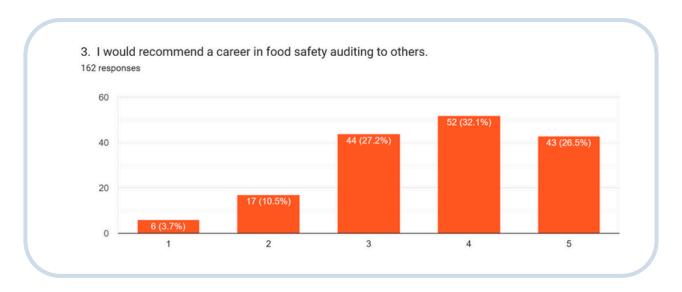162 responses

A significant majority of respondents (66.1%) agreed (ratings 4 or 5) that the auditing profession is undervalued compared to other roles in the food industry. Only 13.6% disagreed, while 20.4% remained neutral. These results indicate a strong perception that auditors do not receive adequate recognition for their contributions.
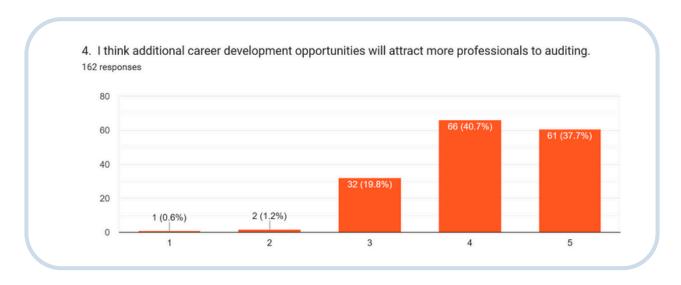

A strong majority of respondents (69.2%) view auditing as a highly valuable and rewarding profession, selecting ratings 4 or 5. Only 16.7% disagreed, and 14.2% remained neutral. These results reflect broad recognition of auditing as a meaningful and fulfilling career path, despite perceptions of undervaluation.

Most respondents (58.6%) indicated they would recommend a career in food safety auditing, selecting ratings 4 or 5. A smaller portion (14.2%) disagreed, while 27.2% remained neutral. These results suggest that, despite some reservations, the profession is generally seen as worthwhile and recommendable.

3. I would recommend a career in food safety auditing to others.
162 responses

There is overwhelming agreement that more career development opportunities would attract professionals to auditing, with 78.4% of respondents selecting ratings 4 or 5. Only 1.8% disagreed, and 19.8% remained neutral. These results emphasize the importance of growth pathways in strengthening the appeal of the auditing profession.

4. I think additional career development opportunities will attract more professionals to auditing.
162 responses

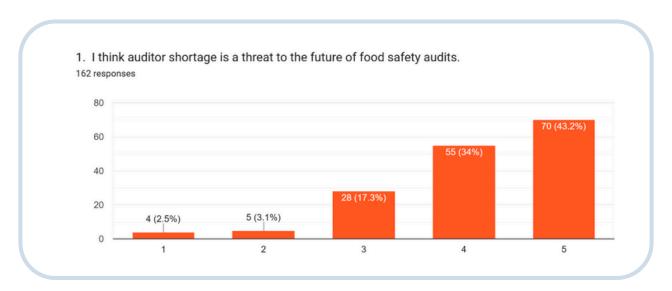Responses suggest moderate confidence in auditors' influence over food safety practices. While 51.8% of respondents agreed (ratings 4 or 5), 18.5% disagreed, and 29.6% remained neutral. This indicates that although many see auditors as change agents, a substantial portion feels their impact could be stronger.
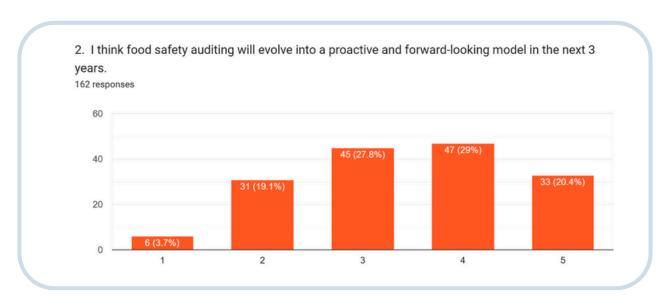
5. I think auditors have enough influence to drive change in food safety practices.
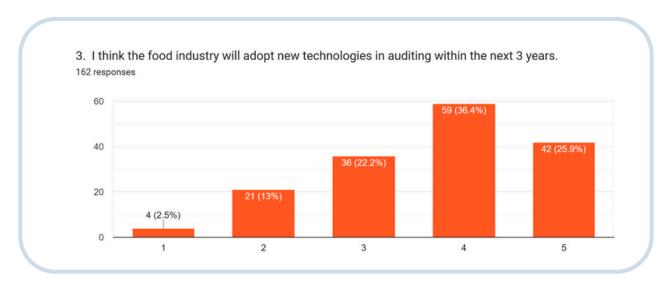162 responses

There is strong agreement that auditor shortage poses a threat to the future of food safety audits, with 77.2% of respondents selecting ratings 4 or 5. Only 5.6% disagreed, and 17.3% remained neutral. These results highlight widespread concern over workforce sustainability in the auditing profession.

1. I think auditor shortage is a threat to the future of food safety audits.
162 responses

Respondents are cautiously optimistic about the future of food safety auditing, with 49.4% agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that it will become more proactive and forward-looking within three years. However, 22.8% expressed skepticism (ratings 1 or 2), and 27.8% remained neutral. These results reflect a hopeful outlook for evolution.

2. I think food safety auditing will evolve into a proactive and forward-looking model in the next 3 years.
162 responses

There is strong optimism about technological adoption in auditing, with 62.3% of respondents agreeing (ratings 4 or 5) that the food industry will adopt new tools within the next three years. Only 15.5% disagreed, and 22.2% remained neutral. These results signal broad confidence in near-term digital transformation.

3. I think the food industry will adopt new technologies in auditing within the next 3 years.
162 responses

Rating	Responses
1	4 (2.5%)
2	21 (13%)
3	36 (22.2%)
4	59 (36.4%)
5	42 (25.9%)

A strong majority (67.9%) of respondents believe that food safety audits will shift toward a high-risk focus rather than exhaustive checklists within the next three years. Only 18.5% disagreed, and 13.6% remained neutral. These results indicate a clear expectation for audits to become more risk-based and targeted.

4. I think food safety audits will focus more on high-risk areas than exhaustive checklists within the next 3 years.
162 responses

Rating	Responses
1	7 (4.3%)
2	23 (14.2%)
3	22 (13.6%)
4	67 (41.4%)
5	43 (26.5%)

5.2 QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The interview process consisted of nine questions posed to food safety auditors and QFS leaders, with seven questions common to both groups. A total of four food safety auditors and seven QFS leaders participated. The qualitative evaluation of the two groups was conducted separately.

5.2.1 FOOD SAFETY AUDITORS

5.2.1.1 CAREER DECISIONS

Interview Question:

Can you describe what factors most influence your decision to stay in auditing or consider a shift toward consulting or another role, and how compensation, recognition, and professional development opportunities shape that decision?

The following themes emerged from the interviews conducted with food safety auditors.

a. Sense of Purpose
A strong sense of purpose emerged as a central factor shaping auditors' career trajectories. Participants highlighted the significance of *contributing to public health,* with auditing perceived not merely as a professional activity but as a personal mission. One interviewee emphasized "the intrinsic motivation that comes from knowing she plays a vital role in protecting public health". Another described auditing as "a calling" and a meaningful career choice rather than just a job . Such reflections underscore the extent to which auditors derive motivation and long-term commitment from their alignment with societal well-being.

b. Learning and Professional Growth
Closely tied to purpose was the theme of *continuous development.* Auditing was seen as a career characterized by ongoing learning, diverse exposure, and constant skill advancement. One auditor stated, "You never stop learning as an auditor. Every site teaches you something new". Similarly, another noted that "each audit presents a new environment and a fresh learning opportunity". These accounts reveal that intellectual stimulation and skill development function as critical motivators for sustaining engagement in the profession.

c. Financial Concerns

Despite these intrinsic drivers, *financial concerns* were consistently reported as demotivating factors. Interviewees pointed out that compensation often did not match the level of responsibility, complexity, and intensity required by the role. As one participant observed, "The compensation auditors receive is not aligned with the complexity and responsibility of their work". Another reinforced this concern by stating, "Compensation does not consistently reflect the intensity or importance of the work". These perceptions indicate a misalignment between professional expectations and financial recognition.

d. Recognition and Appreciation

The lack of recognition further shaped auditors' perceptions of their career viability. Many described limited appreciation for their role, noting they were often perceived more as more as compliance checkers rather than business partners. One participant commented that "auditors are often seen more as enforcers than as partners in improvement", while another reflected on the perception of auditors as "police" enforcing rules. Such accounts suggest that insufficient professional respect undermines both motivation and identity within the role.

e. Career Viability

Sustainability of the auditing career was also questioned under the subtheme of *workload and mental load.* Participants referred to the growing burden of reporting, constant responsibility, and limited opportunity to disconnect. As one auditor remarked, "Reports are becoming longer and more focused on documentation than on technical substance". Another emphasized the pressures associated with "significant time pressure, extensive travel, and limited personal time". These challenges illustrate the cumulative toll of auditing responsibilities on well-being and long-term career commitment.

f. Motivation for Retention or Exit

Finally, participants reflected on potential *shift conditions* that might affect their retention. While many remained motivated by intrinsic factors, there was recognition that burnout, stagnation, or lack of autonomy could prompt career changes. One interviewee cautioned that "if these intrinsic motivators were to diminish… she would begin to consider alternatives like consulting or training". Another observed that "consulting roles or strategic advisory work may offer more autonomy and potentially higher earnings". These perspectives reveal that auditors weigh the balance

between purpose and strain and may transition into adjacent career paths when the latter outweighs the former.

5.2.1.2 KEY CHALLENGES DURING AUDITS

Interview Question:

From your experience, what are the biggest challenges you face during audits, especially when it comes to time pressure, transparency from the auditees, and balancing compliance with continuous improvement goals?

Interviews with food safety auditors brought forward the following themes:

a. Time Constraints
One of the most frequently cited challenges is the tension between audit scope and time. Participants reported that the time allocated for audits often fails to correspond with the size or complexity of the sites being assessed. As one auditor observed, "The window of time allocated for an audit often does not reflect the scale or intricacy of the site". Others emphasized that "audit schedule is often very tight, leaving limited room to explore issues in depth" and that auditors are frequently "asked to do a lot within a limited window, often leading to surface-level analysis". Collectively, these accounts illustrate how structural time limitations undermine the depth and comprehensiveness of audits.

b. Transparency of Auditees
A second major challenge concerned the *defensive behavior of auditees*. Interviewees noted that companies sometimes withheld information due to fear of negative consequences or pressure to maintain certification. For example, one auditor described how "some companies hesitate to be fully open… worried that disclosures might affect certification". Another added that "while most sites are honest, the pressure to retain certification can create defensiveness". The problem was further compounded by reports that "facilities are guided by management to present a polished version of reality". These insights reveal how certification pressures and fear of sanctions compromise the transparency essential for effective audits.

c. Compliance–Improvement Tension

Participants also pointed to a recurring *narrow perception of audits*, which limited their effectiveness as tools for organizational learning. Several emphasized that companies often reduce audits to a pass/fail exercise. One participant noted, "Many companies see audits primarily as a pass/fail exercise rather than a learning opportunity". Another argued that "audits no longer serve their role as tools for organizational improvement", while a third highlighted that "this binary view reduces the audit's potential as a diagnostic tool". These reflections suggest that the compliance orientation of audits hinders their capacity to drive systemic improvement.

d. Auditor Role Limitations

Interviewees further described the constraints imposed by the *restricted role scope of auditors.* Many expressed frustration that offering advice or engaging beyond rigid audit structures risked being perceived as a conflict of interest. As one participant explained, "Offering advice would be seen as a conflict of interest… we're boxed in". Others observed that "audits are often checklist-driven, leaving little room for deeper engagement", and that "our role is strictly defined—we cannot cross into consultancy". These comments illustrate how role boundaries, while designed to preserve objectivity, also restrict opportunities for meaningful dialogue and improvement.

e. Cultural and Organizational Dynamics

Finally, mindset and framing emerged as important cultural and organizational factors shaping audit experiences. Several participants noted that the way audits are introduced and communicated within organizations profoundly affects attitudes and openness. As one auditor put it, "Cultural issue where audits are viewed as threats rather than opportunities". Another highlighted that "the way leaders frame the audit significantly shapes staff behavior and openness". These accounts demonstrate that leadership framing and organizational culture play a pivotal role in determining whether audits are received defensively or constructively.

5.2.1.3 STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF AUDIT VALUE

Interview Question:

In your view, what factors most influence how different stakeholders perceive the value of various audit types, and what would help align these perceptions to make audits more impactful across the board?

The interview findings highlight the following thematic areas:

a. Role-Dependent Expectations
The perceived value of audits was found to be highly contingent on stakeholder roles and their relationship to operational risks. Participants highlighted *perception variability,* noting that regulatory bodies frequently view audits primarily as instruments for compliance, while others emphasize their role in learning or benchmarking. One interviewee explained that "regulatory bodies may view audits as necessary for compliance". Another observed that "perceptions differ depending on proximity to operational risk", while a third emphasized that "expectations vary based on stakeholder roles and audit purposes". These findings underscore the diversity of stakeholder expectations, which can shape both the perceived legitimacy and practical impact of audits.

b. Audit Format and Structure
Participants also discussed the ways in which *rigid protocols versus flexibility* affect audit outcomes. Several expressed concern that third-party audits often prioritize checklist-driven approaches, which restrict the possibility of deeper inquiry. As one auditor remarked, "third-party audits are often checklist-driven and inflexible". Another noted that "the format prevents real dialogue or system-level exploration". Such reflections reveal how structural constraints within audit formats may limit their capacity to uncover systemic issues or stimulate broader organizational learning.

c. Communication Effectiveness
Another key factor shaping perceptions was the *clarity of purpose and outcomes communicated.* Participants stressed that audits framed solely as compliance exercises diminished their potential value, while misaligned communication between technical and business language often hindered impact. One participant cautioned that "framing audits solely as pass/fail limits their value". Another argued that "audit results must be communicated in a way that drives engagement".

These perspectives highlight the importance of tailored, actionable communication in ensuring audit results resonate across stakeholder groups.

d. Auditor Conduct and Style

The *engagement tone* adopted by auditors was also described as a determinant of audit value. Several participants emphasized that the depth of inquiry, listening culture, and interpersonal approach of the auditor shaped how audits were received. One participant explained that "the auditor's tone and openness shape the experience of the site". Another elaborated that "auditors must listen deeply and balance technical and interpersonal approaches". These accounts suggest that auditor conduct goes beyond technical accuracy to influence trust, dialogue, and organizational receptivity.

e. Inclusivity in the Audit Process

Finally, the theme of *shared ownership* underscored the importance of involving a diverse range of voices in the audit process. Several participants emphasized that cross-functional involvement enhanced both buy-in and relevance. One noted that "engaging diverse voices builds buy-in and relevance", while another stressed that "audits gain strength when they include more stakeholders". These reflections reinforce the view that inclusivity fosters collective accountability and maximizes the potential impact of audit findings.

5.2.1.4 COMPLIANCE VERSUS CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Interview Question:

From your experience, what would help shift food safety audits from being primarily compliance-driven to becoming more value-adding and improvement-oriented?

The interviews surfaced the following recurring observations.

a. Mindset Shift

Participants emphasized the need for a fundamental *shift in mindset* from a compliance orientation to one focused on growth and organizational learning. Many noted that audits are still widely viewed as events to be endured rather than opportunities for reflection. As one auditor observed, "Audits are seen as events to survive, rather than tools for reflection". Another stressed the importance of "reframing the audit

as a joint opportunity to evaluate risk and improvement potential". These perspectives suggest that cultivating an improvement culture requires repositioning audits beyond their traditional compliance function.

b. Auditor Role Expansion

A second theme concerned the *expansion of the auditor's role* from that of a strict assessor to that of a strategic partner. Several participants highlighted the potential of auditors to contribute to risk-based approaches and provide contextually relevant insights. One interviewee remarked that "auditors need space to connect findings to broader risks", while another explained that "freedom to explore contextually relevant areas would increase audit value". These accounts reflect the view that auditors can play a more transformative role when enabled to move beyond checklist-driven assessments.

c. Communication and Dialogue

The importance of *collaborative interaction* was another recurring theme. Participants described how open-ended questioning, active listening, and constructive tone could shift the audit dynamic toward shared learning. For instance, one auditor reflected that "open-ended questioning and active listening change the audit dynamic". Another emphasized that "more two-way dialogue leads to shared learning and trust". These insights highlight that communication style is central to positioning audits as collaborative rather than adversarial processes.

d. Organizational Leadership

The role of *support from top management* was also identified as critical in enabling improvement-oriented audits. Participants observed that leadership framing strongly shaped both staff responses and overall outcomes. As one auditor explained, "How leadership frames the audit purpose strongly affects outcomes". Another noted that "when audits are positioned as improvement tools, teams respond with openness". These reflections point to the centrality of organizational culture and leadership endorsement in embedding learning-oriented practices.

e. Audit System Design

Participants further stressed the need for redesigning audit systems to go *beyond nonconformity reporting.* Several argued that audits should highlight good practices, provide actionable insights, and assess system maturity. One participant stated, "Reports should include observations on strengths and system maturity". Another criticized that "currently, reports emphasize flaws rather than providing balanced insight".

Such accounts underscore the necessity of moving toward audit outputs that reinforce improvement alongside compliance.

f. Training and Skills Development

Finally, participants underscored the importance of *empowering auditors through training and skills development.* They emphasized that technical expertise must be complemented with business acumen and interpersonal competencies. As one auditor cautioned, audits are "only effective if auditors are well-trained in communication and analysis". Another highlighted that "soft skills matter as much as technical ones in enabling audit impact". These perspectives confirm that auditor capability building is essential to sustaining improvement-oriented practices.

5.2.1.5 FOOD SAFETY AUDITING GOVERNANCE

Interview Question:

What improvements do you think are needed in the governance of food safety audits to enhance global consistency, transparency, and inclusiveness?

Based on the interviews, several key patterns emerged:

a. Harmonization of Schemes

Participants highlighted the pressing need for *greater global consistency in schemes.* Divergent interpretations and variations across schemes were identified as key drivers of audit inconsistency, which in turn undermined fairness and comparability. One auditor emphasized that "application of standards varies significantly, which undermines fairness". Another explained that "auditors often apply the same standard differently, creating confusion". These observations suggest that without harmonization, the credibility and equity of audits remain vulnerable to inconsistency.

b. Auditor Qualification and Oversight

The issue of *training and integrity monitoring* was also raised as central to governance improvements. Participants stressed that transparent qualification processes, competency checks, and continuous performance evaluation are essential for maintaining auditor credibility. As one participant noted, "we need transparency in how auditors are qualified and evaluated". Another elaborated that "auditor development

should include onboarding, feedback, and requalification". These reflections highlight the importance of robust oversight structures to ensure both competence and accountability within the auditing profession.

c. Transparency and Accountability

Several participants underscored the value of *open governance structures* that emphasize clear communication and stakeholder engagement. Interviewees pointed out that auditees must have visibility of appeals processes and understand how to respond effectively to findings. For example, one auditor stated that "sites must understand how to respond to findings and appeal if needed". Another stressed that "audit results should clearly convey risks, not just list observations". These perspectives reflect a demand for governance that prioritizes clarity, fairness, and stakeholder trust.

d. Inclusiveness in Implementation

Concerns were also raised around *regional and cultural sensitivity* in governance models. Participants warned against one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to account for contextual realities. One participant observed that "one-size-fits-all governance models ignore contextual realities", while another insisted that "small or lower-resource sites must be represented in scheme governance". These accounts underline the need for inclusivity in the design and implementation of auditing systems, ensuring equity across diverse operational contexts.

e. Independent Oversight

The importance of *impartiality and conflict of interest management* was frequently emphasized. Participants argued that both certification bodies and scheme owners require independent oversight to protect credibility and prevent bias. As one auditor noted, "we need oversight of auditing bodies themselves to protect audit credibility". Another added that "scheme owners must be neutral, not involved in day-to-day certification". Such reflections point to independence as a foundational principle of legitimate governance in food safety auditing.

f. Effectiveness of Witness Audits

Finally, participants discussed the *quality assurance function of witness audits,* expressing concern that these are often reduced to logistical exercises rather than developmental opportunities. One participant remarked that "witness audits often focus only on logistics and miss depth". Another argued that "performance reviews should include

developmental feedback, not just compliance checks". These insights highlight the potential of witness audits to strengthen auditor practice through peer learning, provided they are designed and implemented with sufficient rigor.

5.2.1.6 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN FOOD SAFETY AUDITING

Interview Question:

What do you see as the biggest barriers to digital transformation in food safety auditing, and what would be needed to accelerate adoption in a meaningful and practical way?

Insights gathered from the interviews were summarized under the following themes:

a. Infrastructure
A recurring challenge concerned *technology gaps* linked to unequal infrastructure. Participants emphasized that limited connectivity, outdated systems, and regional disparities hinder the consistent adoption of digital tools. As one auditor noted, "limited technological infrastructure in certain regions hinders full adoption". Such disparities create uneven opportunities for digitalization, leaving some sites unable to benefit fully from technological advancements.

b. Resistance to Change
Several interviewees also described *cultural and personal* barriers that slow down digital adoption. Traditional work habits and discomfort with new tools created reluctance among some auditors. One admitted, "I'm a bit old-fashioned and tend to rely on what I know". Others described how "some auditors feel uncomfortable moving away from their checklists and paper notes", while another stressed the need for reassurance that "using digital tools won't compromise their performance". These reflections highlight how digital transformation requires not only technological infrastructure but also confidence and cultural adaptation.

c. Fragmentation of Tools
Another barrier identified was the *lack of standardization* across platforms and systems. Participants pointed to the challenges of managing multiple client-specific tools that often lacked interoperability. One participant explained, "different clients require different digital systems—it's hard to streamline". Another added that "each client has its

own tech, and they rarely talk to each other". Such fragmentation generates inefficiencies and complicates consistent digital integration across audits.

d. Policy and Security
Confidentiality and security restrictions were also reported as limiting factors. Policies often prohibit the use of mobile devices and cameras, while organizations remain hesitant to share sensitive information electronically. One participant observed that "phones and cameras are often restricted due to confidentiality and hygiene reasons". Another noted that "sites are reluctant to share sensitive digital records electronically". These findings reveal how legitimate security concerns can inadvertently act as barriers to digital innovation.

e. Training
Participants repeatedly emphasized the *digital skills gap* as a significant obstacle. Insufficient orientation and lack of hands-on support left auditors feeling unprepared to use new technologies effectively. One auditor stressed that "digital literacy training must be scenario-based and hands-on". Another noted that "auditors feel overwhelmed when asked to use multiple unfamiliar tools". These perspectives confirm that effective digital transformation depends on tailored training that integrates real-life auditing scenarios.

f. Strategy and Vision
At the same time, interviewees highlighted enablers of digital transformation, particularly the importance of clear *strategy and phased implementation.* Pilot projects were described as useful mechanisms for demonstrating value and fostering acceptance. One participant explained that "pilot projects can help demonstrate how digital tools enhance, not replace judgment". Another emphasized that "the why behind the technology must be clear to everyone". These reflections indicate that strategic clarity, communication, and gradual rollout are critical enablers for sustainable digital adoption in auditing.

Interview Question:

What skills—technical or interpersonal—do you believe are most critical for today's auditors, and how could training programs better support their development and continuous improvement?

Discussions with food safety auditors brought to light the following themes:

a. Technical Competence
Participants consistently emphasized the importance of *food safety foundations* as the bedrock of effective auditing. Core knowledge of HACCP, GMPs, regulatory requirements, and risk assessment was seen as indispensable. One interviewee explained, "You need a strong foundation in HACCP and risk assessment to evaluate systems properly". Another highlighted that "auditors must understand the standards they are auditing against". These reflections underscore that technical mastery remains the essential baseline for credible auditing practice.

b. Interpersonal Skills
Beyond technical knowledge, participants highlighted *soft skills for engagement* as critical to eliciting openness and building trust during audits. Communication, empathy, diplomacy, and listening were all identified as central to effective auditor–auditee interactions. As one participant stated, "You need to build rapport quickly and read people well". Another observed, "When we listen and connect, we get better insights and more openness". These findings suggest that interpersonal effectiveness significantly enhances the depth and quality of audit outcomes.

c. Critical Thinking and Judgment
A further theme concerned the role of *analytical capability* in differentiating effective auditors. Participants stressed the importance of root cause analysis, contextual interpretation, and risk prioritization. One auditor remarked that "a checklist alone can't replace risk-based thinking". Another explained that "critical thinking lets you prioritize issues rather than treat all findings equally". Such accounts indicate that analytical judgment allows auditors to move beyond surface-level findings toward meaningful system evaluation.

d. Training Structure and Approach

Interviewees also discussed the need for *experiential learning approaches* in training. Case studies, role-plays, and real-time coaching were viewed as more effective than theory-based instruction. As one participant suggested, "training should include simulations and peer learning". Another emphasized, "we need real-world case studies and scenarios—not just theory". These perspectives reveal a preference for practice-based learning that reflects the realities of auditing environments.

e. Onboarding and Mentorship

The theme of *guided early-stage development* highlighted significant gaps in onboarding processes. Several participants reported a lack of structured support when entering the profession. One reflected, "I had no formal onboarding—it was sink or swim". Another argued that "structured observation and mentoring improve early-stage confidence". These accounts stress the value of systematic mentoring and observation-based learning to ensure smooth entry into auditing roles.

f. Learning Experience

Participants further stressed the importance of *lifelong learning support*. Opportunities for peer exchange, digital upskilling, and structured reflection were described as necessary to maintain auditor competence in a rapidly evolving field. One participant stated, "training must evolve with the industry". Another suggested, "we should have forums where auditors share experiences and lessons". These reflections indicate that continuous improvement must be embedded within professional development frameworks.

e. Integrity and Independence

Finally, participants underlined the significance of an *ethical mindset* as an enduring skill for auditors. Upholding objectivity, resisting external pressures, and maintaining clarity of role were seen as critical to professional integrity. As one auditor explained, "there is pressure, but we must uphold our objectivity". These insights highlight that ethical commitment is not only a skill but also a defining characteristic of the auditing profession.

5.2.1.8 AUDITOR RETENTION AND CAREER MOTIVATION

Interview Question:

What do you think needs to change to raise the visibility, recognition, and long-term appeal of a career in food safety auditing?

Interviews revealed themes, as outlined below:

a. Visibility

Participants highlighted the limited *public and industry understanding* of auditors' contributions as a barrier to attracting new talent. The role was described as undervalued and largely hidden, only gaining attention during crises. As one auditor observed, "auditors are critical but rarely seen people don't know what we do". Another reflected, "We're often invisible until something goes wrong". These accounts suggest that raising visibility is essential to enhance both recognition and recruitment into the field.

b. Strategic Communication

The theme of *storytelling and impact demonstration* emphasized the importance of communicating auditors' contributions more proactively. Participants argued that highlighting success stories and demonstrating the preventive value of audits could make the profession more appealing. One participant explained, "We should show how our work prevents foodborne outbreaks". Another added, "Tell stories about real impact— how audits improve lives." Such narratives are critical for reframing auditing as a profession that protects public health and generates societal value.

c. Professional Recognition

A lack of *internal acknowledgment* emerged as a recurring concern. Several interviewees described how management often perceived auditors as primarily enforcers or cost centers, rather than as contributors to organizational improvement. One participant noted, "Managers often see us as cost centers or police." Another stressed that "auditors rarely get praised for identifying systemic improvements". These reflections reveal that greater recognition within organizations could improve both job satisfaction and retention.

d. Career Pathway Development

The importance of *structured progression opportunities* was also emphasized. Participants argued that clearer advancement pathways and professional mobility would enhance the attractiveness of auditing careers. One auditor suggested, "there should be formal levels and titles for growth", while another pointed to the need for "advancement paths—senior auditor, lead auditor, etc.". These perspectives indicate that professionalization of career structures could foster long-term commitment.

e. Early Engagement and Outreach

Several participants stressed the role of *educational pipeline initiatives* in building future interest. Collaborations with universities and structured internship programs were proposed as effective mechanisms. One interviewee recommended "working with food science departments to promote auditing careers." Another added that "we need outreach programs for students". Such efforts could embed awareness of auditing as a viable career choice earlier in professional trajectories.

f. Working Conditions and Support

Finally, participants pointed to *sustainability and retention factors* as central to career appeal. Heavy workloads, extensive travel, and insufficient work–life balance were identified as deterrents to career longevity. As one auditor noted, "the job is intense—traveling constantly and reporting nonstop". Another warned, "You can't keep people without better balance and mental health support". These accounts underscore the importance of addressing structural working conditions to ensure both retention and well-being.

5.2.1.9 FUTURE OF FOOD SAFETY AUDITING

Interview Question:

What do you believe are the most important steps needed to ensure the future of food safety auditing is both sustainable and forward-looking, especially in light of auditor shortages and digital transformation?

The following topics emerged across the interviews:

a. Talent Pipeline Development

Participants emphasized the urgency of attracting and retaining auditors by creating clearer and more accessible entry pathways.

Simplified qualification processes and early mentorship were repeatedly identified as critical enablers. One participant recommended "making entry easier and providing coaching early on". Another cautioned that "we lose talent because onboarding is unclear and overwhelming". These reflections underscore that the sustainability of the profession depends on structured support from the earliest stages of an auditor's career.

b. Career Sustainability

The theme of *workload and mental health support* further highlighted the importance of designing careers that are viable in the long term. Burnout and fatigue were described as common experiences, exacerbated by extensive travel and persistent time pressures. As one participant explained, "the stress is real—burnout is common". Another suggested that "we need models that reduce travel and spread workload better". These accounts demonstrate the need for innovative job design and organizational support systems that protect well-being.

c. Digital Integration

Participants also reflected on the role of *strategic use of technology* in creating sustainable auditing practices. They emphasized that digital tools should be designed to complement, rather than replace, human judgment, and that their rollout must be carefully managed. One auditor stressed that "digital tools should support, not replace, human judgment". Another added that organizations should "design systems with auditors, not for them". These perspectives reveal that technology will be a key enabler of sustainability only if it is aligned with auditor needs and realities.

d. Systemic Reform

The need for *structural and cultural change* was also raised, particularly in relation to empowering the auditor role within organizations and schemes. Several participants criticized the reduction of audits to procedural exercises, arguing for a broader recognition of their strategic value. As one explained, "the system must value audits beyond box-checking". Another reinforced that "auditors need stronger status and clearer roles". These insights suggest that systemic reform is essential to reposition audits as meaningful instruments of assurance and improvement.

e. Continuous Learning Ecosystem

Another recurring theme was the importance of building a *development infrastructure* to support continuous learning. Participants stressed that

training should be practical, scenario-based, and sustained across the career lifespan. One interviewee recommended to "mix theory with practice: case study, mentoring, real sites". Another observed that "lifelong learning needs structure, not just one-time courses". These accounts reinforce the view that sustainability requires embedding a culture of continuous professional development.

f. Governance for the Future
Finally, participants pointed to the necessity of establishing a *professional resilience framework* through inclusive standards and long-term governance strategies. Succession planning and performance-based models were seen as central to this effort. One participant argued that organizations should "use performance-based models and support continuous growth". Another concluded that "sustainability means long-term strategy—not short-term fixes". These reflections highlight that governance must evolve toward proactive, future-oriented frameworks to secure the resilience of food safety auditing.

5.2.2 QUALITY AND FOOD SAFETY LEADERS

5.2.2.1 CHALLENGES IN MANAGING MULTIPLE CERTIFICATIONS

Interview Question:

What challenges do you face in managing multiple certifications? What drives the need for them in your organization, and what solutions do you see to reduce or eliminate unnecessary overlap?

The interviews revealed themes, as outlined below.

a. Customer-Driven Complexity
QFS leaders emphasized that managing multiple certifications is largely driven by *customer-specific demands.* Different market actors, particularly private label clients, frequently insist on adherence to specific schemes such as IFS, BRC, or FSSC. One participant explained, "private label customers demand specific certifications such as IFS or BRC". Another highlighted that "some customers demand IFS, while others expect BRC or FSSC". Similarly, others described that "many large clients require adherence to specific standards". These accounts suggest that external customer expectations, rather than internal business needs, are the primary drivers of certification complexity.

b. Operational Burden

The operational strain of maintaining multiple certifications was another recurring theme. Leaders described the significant duplication of effort and resource drain associated with overlapping audits and preparation processes. As one participant noted, "maintaining both schemes was deemed too burdensome". Another emphasized that "preparing for, hosting, and following up on multiple audits demands extensive planning and manpower". Similarly, "creates a burden on operational resources, including preparation time, documentation, and manpower". These reflections highlight how multiple certification requirements lead to audit fatigue and place substantial stress on organizational resources.

c. Scheme Harmonization

Participants further identified the *minimal recognition of equivalence* across certification schemes as a major challenge. Despite GFSI benchmarking, customers frequently insist on their preferred standards, undermining the potential for mutual recognition. One leader commented that "scheme owners and customers often do not recognize the equivalence or strength of other systems". Another added that "even though these schemes are GFSI-benchmarked… customers still insist on their preferred standards". Others confirmed that "GFSI benchmarking exists but is not always respected in practice", while some argued for "stronger recognition and trust between certification schemes—especially those under GFSI". These accounts demonstrate how limited harmonization perpetuates redundancy and inefficiency.

d. Proposed Solutions

Finally, participants articulated several potential solutions, emphasizing *consolidation and risk-based approaches* to certification. Suggested measures included integrating systems, standardizing internal processes, and educating customers on scheme equivalency. As one leader proposed, "developing more risk-based approaches to certification" could reduce duplication. Another emphasized the need to "standardize internal systems… ready for any audit". A third highlighted the importance of "broader customer education on scheme equivalency to avoid redundant audits". Together, these proposals reflect a desire for systemic reform to reduce certification complexity and operational strain.

Interview Question:

In your experience, what are the main reasons internal audits may be undervalued or underutilized within organizations, and what would help increase their impact and recognition across functions

Discussions with QFS Leaders brought to light the following themes:

a. Training and Competency

Participants highlighted auditor *skill and preparedness* as a central limitation in internal audit programs. Many described that internal auditors were often appointed without sufficient consideration of their training needs, leading to audits lacking depth and contextual understanding. As one leader observed, "most internal auditors are not well trained—often selected without much thought". Another added that "internal audits sometimes lack depth due to limited experience". Others emphasized the importance of connecting findings to broader implications, with one stating, "auditors should understand not just what's wrong but why it matters". These reflections point to the need for more structured preparation to ensure internal audits provide meaningful insights.

b. Perception

The *formalism versus learning* dynamic emerged as another major theme. Participants noted that internal audits frequently devolved into box-ticking exercises rather than opportunities for organizational learning and improvement. One leader remarked that "internal audits feel like a checkbox exercise". Another argued that "audits should lead to learning—not just compliance scores", while others pointed to the importance of asking "deeper questions". These perspectives suggest that internal audits risk being undervalued when their potential for system-level improvement is not fully realized.

c. Objectivity and Bias

Concerns were also raised around insider blind spots. Participants described how internal auditors may default to familiar areas, avoid uncomfortable issues, or struggle with impartiality when auditing colleagues. One interviewee explained that "they audit areas they are comfortable in, avoiding uncomfortable topics". Another reflected that "you're auditing your colleagues, so it can be hard to be fully objective".

These insights indicate that internal audits may be compromised by proximity, reducing their ability to provide independent evaluations.

d. Recommendations

Finally, leaders offered recommendations that centered on *training and culture shifts.* Participants emphasized the need for hands-on training, risk-based approaches, and fostering a mindset of learning rather than compliance. One participant suggested, "need hands-on training and emphasis on audit purpose". Another reinforced that "auditors must be empowered to think systemically and communicate purpose". These accounts highlight the importance of reframing internal audits as developmental processes supported by strong training and cultural alignment.

5.2.2.3 STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF AUDIT VALUE

Interview Question:

In your view, what factors most influence how different stakeholders perceive the value of various audit types, and what would help align these perceptions to make audits more impactful across the board?

The interview findings highlight the following thematic areas:

a. Audit Approach

Participants frequently raised concerns regarding the *checklist-driven nature of external audits.* Leaders reported that auditors often adhered rigidly to standardized forms, which limited contextual relevance and adaptability. One participant stated, "Audits are too checklist-focused and miss contextual risks". Another recalled that "the auditor stuck to the form, even when there were bigger issues not covered". These accounts suggest that over-standardization reduces the ability of audits to identify meaningful risks or system-level weaknesses.

b. Value Perception

The *tension between certification and improvement* emerged as another prominent theme. QFS leaders described external audits as heavily oriented toward pass/fail outcomes, with limited focus on organizational learning. As one explained, "you do what's needed for the certificate—not necessarily to improve". Another observed that "some findings felt arbitrary—not tied to actual risk". Similarly, others reflected that

"we fix what they write up, not always what's truly risky". These perspectives indicate that the certification function often overshadows opportunities for deeper system improvement.

c. Auditor Capability

Despite these concerns, several participants emphasized the importance of *communication and expertise* in shaping positive experiences with external audits. When auditors demonstrated rigor, clarity, and constructive engagement, the process was viewed more favorably. One participant noted, "good auditors made it feel like a collaborative process". Another remarked, "the auditor was well-prepared and communicated expectations clearly". These accounts highlight how auditor conduct and competence can mitigate the limitations of standardized approaches.

d. Audit Preparation

Finally, leaders reflected on the *resource investment* required for external audits. Preparing for, hosting, and responding to audits was described as highly resource-intensive, involving months of planning and significant stress. One participant explained, "audit weeks are extremely resource-draining". Another added, "we start preparing months in advance—especially for high-stakes audits". These reflections underscore the substantial operational costs associated with external audits, which further reinforce their perception as burdensome rather than developmental exercises.

5.2.2.4 COMPLIANCE VERSUS CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Interview Question:

From your experience, what would help shift food safety audits from being primarily compliance-driven to becoming more value-adding and improvement-oriented?

The interviews surfaced the following recurring observations.

a. Finding Quality

Participants expressed concerns about the relevance and actionability of audit findings. Many described findings as overly generic, insufficiently prioritized, or disconnected from systemic issues. One leader reflected that "some findings are too vague to act on". Another observed that

"auditors sometimes flag minor issues and miss bigger patterns". These comments indicate that the effectiveness of audit outcomes depends heavily on the clarity, prioritization, and systemic relevance of findings.

b. Use of Results

The theme of *short-term fixes versus long-term learning* highlighted how organizations often approach audit findings. While corrective actions are typically addressed promptly, participants noted a tendency to avoid deeper root cause analysis or strategic reflection. One interviewee explained, "we fix findings fast, but don't always go deeper". Another added that "corrective actions are done to close the audit—not to build better systems". These perspectives suggest that audits often reinforce compliance behaviors rather than fostering sustained organizational learning.

c. Organization Response

Participants also reflected on variability in *engagement and follow-up.* While findings are routinely tracked, the level of leadership involvement and integration into broader systems was said to vary considerably. One participant noted, "we track all actions, but leadership engagement varies". Another highlighted that "we use findings in management reviews and training—when they're useful". These accounts demonstrate that organizational culture and leadership engagement are decisive in determining whether audit findings drive improvement beyond corrective action closure.

d. Improvement Enablers

Finally, participants identified *auditor insight and dialogue* as key enablers for using findings constructively. Leaders valued auditors who provided contextually relevant insights, asked reflective questions, and adopted a constructive tone. One commented that "auditors who explain and explore issues help us learn more". Another reinforced that "the best findings come from auditors who understand our system—not just the checklist". These reflections highlight the relational dimension of auditing, suggesting that findings achieve their greatest impact when embedded within a dialogue that promotes reflection and systemic learning.

Interview Question:

What improvements do you think are needed in the governance of food safety audits to enhance global consistency, transparency, and inclusiveness?

Based on the interviews, several key patterns emerged:

a. Consistency and Alignment

Participants raised concerns regarding *cross-auditor interpretation issues,* describing how outcomes could vary widely depending on the individual auditor or the certification scheme applied. Subjective judgments and a lack of calibration were seen as significant barriers to fairness and reliability. One leader explained, "audit outcomes can vary significantly depending on the auditor". Another noted that "there are differences in interpretation even within the same scheme". These reflections highlight the need for stronger alignment and calibration mechanisms to ensure consistent and credible audit results.

b. Transparency and Accountability

The theme of *transparent processes and traceability* emphasized the importance of clarity in audit reporting and communication. Participants criticized vague findings, unclear scoring systems, and limited feedback mechanisms, which hindered accountability. One participant commented that "reports are vague, overly procedural", while another stressed that "better communication guidelines are needed". These accounts suggest that without clear and transparent governance, audits risk being perceived as bureaucratic rather than constructive.

c. Inclusiveness

Finally, leaders underscored the importance of *frontline and regional representation* in governance structures. They described current models as overly top-down, with insufficient engagement from those operating at site level. One participant reflected that "protocols are often made without frontline input". Another argued for greater inclusivity, recommending to "broaden participation beyond technical teams". These perspectives suggest that governance reform must incorporate diverse voices to ensure policies are both practical and contextually relevant.

Interview Question:

What do you see as the biggest barriers to digital transformation in food safety auditing, and what would be needed to accelerate adoption in a meaningful and practical way?

Insights gathered from the interviews were summarized under the following themes:

a. Fragmentation of Tools

Participants identified *platform silos and lack of interoperability* as major barriers to digital transformation. Non-standard tools, client-specific software systems, and limited data integration were said to create inefficiencies and prevent seamless digital adoption. One leader explained, "systems used by different actors don't align". Another added, "digital platforms don't communicate with each other". These accounts suggest that fragmentation across tools undermines the potential for efficiency and consistency in digital auditing practices.

b. Digital Literacy

The theme of *confidence, competency, and perceptions* emphasized cultural and individual barriers to digital adoption. Leaders highlighted gaps in digital literacy, skepticism toward tool reliability, and fears that digitalization might undermine the professional role of auditors. One participant observed, "many see tools as unreliable or distracting". Another noted that "auditors fear digital tools may devalue their role". These reflections point to the importance of building both technical skills and cultural readiness for digital transformation to succeed.

c. Strategy and Vision

Finally, participants described how purpose-oriented and participatory design could enable successful adoption. They stressed the importance of pilot programs, feedback loops, and clear demonstrations of value to build trust in digital tools. One interviewee suggested, "focus on tools that solve real audit problems". Another emphasized that "demonstrating value helps with acceptance". These insights indicate that digital transformation in auditing requires both strategic framing and participatory implementation to overcome resistance and ensure sustainability.

5.2.2.7 KEY AUDITOR SKILLS AND TRAINING NEEDS

Interview Question:

What skills—technical or interpersonal—do you believe are most critical for today's auditors, and how could training programs better support their development and continuous improvement?

Discussions revealed the following themes:

a. Knowledge Set
Participants emphasized that *food safety science and systemic understanding* remain the non-negotiable foundation of effective auditing. Knowledge of HACCP, Food Safety Standards, audit trail analysis, and process control was viewed as indispensable for ensuring credibility. As one leader put it, "understanding risk and systems is still foundational". Another reinforced that "standards knowledge is non-negotiable". These reflections confirm that technical and regulatory expertise continues to form the backbone of auditor competence.

b. Interpersonal Skills
Beyond technical knowledge, leaders highlighted the importance of *empathy, communication, and conflict navigation.* Effective auditors were described as those who engage respectfully, provide constructive feedback, and adapt to cultural contexts. One participant noted that "auditors must engage respectfully and ask why". Another stressed that "building trust is essential for good audits". These accounts suggest that relational competencies are central to fostering openness and creating the conditions for meaningful dialogue during audits.

c. Critical Thinking
Finally, participants underscored the role of *insight generation and judgment skills.* Leaders argued that auditors must be capable of contextualizing findings, prioritizing systemic over superficial issues, and conducting root cause exploration. One explained that "going beyond checklists is key". Another elaborated that "auditors must synthesize and interpret complex info". These perspectives indicate that analytical acumen is what transforms audits from procedural exercises into opportunities for organizational learning and improvement.

5.2.2.8 AUDITOR RETENTION AND CAREER MOTIVATION

Interview Question:

What do you think needs to change to raise the visibility, recognition, and long-term appeal of a career in food safety auditing?

Interviews revealed themes, as outlined below:

a. Workload Pressures
Participants identified *high expectations and burnout* as central challenges affecting auditor retention. Heavy travel schedules, limited opportunities for rest, and the continuous mental demand of maintaining objectivity were frequently cited. One leader noted, "Auditors are on the road constantly—it wears you out". Another emphasized that "the pressure to always be objective and alert takes a toll". These reflections suggest that the intensity of the role, without adequate recovery, threatens long-term sustainability in the profession.

b. Compensation and Recognition
The theme of *pay versus responsibility* highlighted the imbalance between the critical nature of auditors' work and the level of compensation or recognition they receive. Several participants pointed to undervaluation both within organizations and externally. As one explained, "given the responsibility we hold, compensation is not competitive". Another added, "people don't really understand how important the job is". These insights reveal a mismatch between auditors' responsibilities and the recognition they receive, which undermines motivation and retention.

c. Career Path
Participants also stressed the lack of *development and opportunities* within auditing careers. Advancement was described as limited, with few options for strategic roles or long-term progression. One participant reflected, "after a few years, there's no real path to grow unless you leave". Another emphasized the need for structure, suggesting, "we need a defined ladder—junior to senior, to trainer or specialist". These accounts underscore that the absence of clear progression pathways contributes to stagnation and turnover.

D. Retention
Despite these challenges, leaders also pointed to factors that support retention, particularly *job meaning and autonomy.* The intrinsic value of contributing to food safety and the independence associated with the

auditor role were seen as important motivators. One participant stated, "you feel proud when you know your work prevents food incidents". Another shared, "I like the autonomy—I'm trusted to make professional calls". These reflections suggest that purpose-driven work and professional autonomy serve as critical counterbalances to the pressures of the role.

5.2.2.9 FUTURE OF FOOD SAFETY AUDITING

Interview Question:

What do you believe are the most important steps needed to ensure the future of food safety auditing is both sustainable and forward-looking, especially in light of auditor shortages and digital transformation?

The following topics emerged across the interviews:

a. Talent Attraction
Participants underscored the need to strengthen awareness and entry pathways in order to attract new talent into the auditing profession. They pointed to limited visibility of auditing careers, particularly among students and young professionals, and stressed the importance of proactive outreach. One leader observed, "Students don't even know this job exists—we need outreach". Another suggested that "we could partner with food science departments to create internships". These accounts reflect the necessity of structured initiatives that frame auditing as a viable and meaningful career choice.

b. Professional Identity
The theme of *recognition and role framing* emphasized the importance of reshaping how auditors are perceived, both within organizations and in the broader public sphere. Several participants noted that auditors are often mischaracterized as compliance enforcers, rather than professionals contributing to risk prevention and public safety. One interviewee argued, "auditors need to be seen as risk professionals—not compliance cops". Another added, "we prevent harm—but that's invisible unless something goes wrong". These reflections highlight the role of professional branding and public education in strengthening the identity of the profession.

c. Supportive Infrastructure

Participants also emphasized the significance of resources and tools in enabling auditors to perform effectively. Access to IT support, learning platforms, and practical field resources was described as critical. As one leader explained, "auditors should have tools that reduce admin and support analysis". Another noted, "support systems make or break your effectiveness in the field". These perspectives indicate that investment in supportive infrastructure is key to sustaining auditor effectiveness and efficiency.

d. Sustainability

Finally, the theme of *long-term role design* highlighted the need to make auditing careers sustainable through strategic involvement, mental health considerations, and career longevity. Participants called for redesigning jobs to reduce burnout and ensure auditors' inclusion in broader organizational discussions. One participant cautioned, "design jobs for long-term viability—not burnout". Another emphasized, "we must be included in strategic discussions—not just be report writers". These insights point to the importance of embedding sustainability principles in workforce planning and role design to secure the future of the profession.

DISCUSSION

The evolution from the <u>2023 Food Safety Magazine Article</u> to the <u>Think Tank White Paper</u> and the 2025 Global Research on the Value of Food Safety Auditing illustrates a clear intellectual and practical journey in rethinking food safety auditing.

What began as a provocation to question the traditional audit paradigm has evolved into an evidence-based framework for transforming audits into instruments of learning, insight, and shared accountability. Taken together, these initiatives depict an industry that is aware of its limitations yet increasingly united in the desire to move beyond compliance toward meaningful, value-creating assurance.

The first axis concerns the **purpose and evolution of audits.** Historically, food safety audits were designed as control mechanisms to verify compliance with standards and protect consumers through formal certification. The 2023 article challenged this premise, arguing that audits had drifted from their true purpose of ensuring food safety toward an exercise in administrative conformity. This view resonated widely, catalyzing the formation of the Think Tank, which examined why audits had become trapped in reactive and repetitive cycles. Participants traced the problem to fragmented governance, excessive focus on certification, and limited opportunities for reflection and improvement during audits. The Think Tank's recommendations reframed auditing as a proactive, knowledge-oriented process, integral to business resilience and continuous improvement.

The research results provided empirical confirmation of this need for redefinition. While 58% of respondents agreed that audits currently contribute to protecting public health, an overwhelming 89% believed the process could generate more value if reoriented toward improvement rather than only compliance. This collective voice signals a paradigmatic change: audits should not end when the checklist is complete; they should begin when insight is gained. Yet, the data also highlight a structural tension. Current governance frameworks often prioritize procedural completion over critical discussion, leaving limited time and

and space for auditors to exchange perspectives or focus on value-adding topics. As a result, much of the effort goes into demonstrating that the audit has been executed according to protocol, rather than reflecting on its insights or implications for improvement. This operational constraint narrows the potential of audits to serve as genuine learning exercises.

The second axis, **value and impact perception,** reveals how deeply intertwined the technical and cultural dimensions of auditing have become. The 2023 article questioned whether the growing number of audits actually correlated with improved food safety outcomes. The Think Tank expanded this discussion by exposing inefficiencies in the audit ecosystem: overcomplicated schemes, costly duplications, and excessive documentation. Its analysis showed that value creation is not proportional to audit frequency; rather, it depends on the clarity of objectives and the quality of engagement.

The global research data made this visible in numbers. While third-party audits remain the most widely implemented, their perceived value lags behind both second- and first-party audits. QFS leaders rated first-party audits as the most valuable, with 88% assigning top scores, emphasizing their strategic reach, cross-functional visibility, and ability to integrate global standards into company systems. These audits are often more holistic, identifying systemic trends and improvement opportunities across sites.

Moreover, over 57% of respondents described certification audits as "checklist-driven," while nearly two-thirds agreed that the prevailing emphasis on obtaining or maintaining certification restricts innovation and learning. The current culture of "auditing for the certificate" rather than "auditing for improvement" reinforces defensiveness and discourages openness. True value, as both data and commentary revealed, lies not in proving compliance but in uncovering insights that drive capability and risk reduction.

Interestingly, perceptions of value also varied depending on the respondents' professional positions. While QFS leaders favored first-party audits for their strategic alignment, external auditors tended to emphasize second- and third-party audits for their independence and comparability. This divergence likely reflects differences in mandate and perspective: external auditors seek consistency and credibility,

while internal stakeholders prioritize practicality and business impact. Such variation underscores the need for a shared understanding of what constitutes value in auditing, one that balances assurance with learning and acknowledges the distinct yet complementary contributions of each audit type.

At the same time, the research distinguished internal audits conducted at manufacturing sites from these first-party corporate audits. They were recognized as a powerful but underutilized lever for learning and improvement. Respondents noted that when properly designed and supported, such site-level internal audits turn daily quality and food safety checks into ongoing learning experiences. They allow teams closest to production to identify root causes early, strengthen ownership, and integrate food safety thinking into routine decision-making. Yet, these audits often receive limited recognition in corporate frameworks. The findings suggest that empowering sites to use their internal audits as structured learning tools could significantly enhance both local accountability and systemic resilience.

The third interpretive axis addresses **trust, integrity, and the human dimension.** From the beginning, this was the most persistent and sensitive topic across all three works. The original article emphasized that the very purpose of auditing is rooted in trust, noting that *"the purpose of auditing and the driving force behind its development are both linked to trust. It all boils down to trust."* This framing underscored that even the most technically precise audit loses its real value when credibility and openness are absent. The Think Tank explored this in greater depth, identifying root causes that included governance structures, conflicts of interest, and integrity programs. Participants warned that certification cannot be more trustworthy than the system that governs it.

The research findings echoed this sentiment: 62% of respondents believed that sites hesitate to disclose issues during audits, reflecting a culture of fear rather than openness. This lack of psychological safety prevents learning and perpetuates risk. At the same time, over 70% of participants supported a consultative approach in auditing, recognizing that impartiality and support are not mutually exclusive when grounded in ethics. Moreover, 76% agreed that audits bring the greatest value when auditors help organizations understand root causes rather than simply document nonconformities. These findings confirm that the

auditing profession should transform from a compliance-oriented activity toward a trust-based partnership. Real progress will depend on governance systems that strengthen integrity programs, promote greater transparency, and foster mutual learning, rather than focusing on procedural perfection.

Finally, the fourth axis, **future direction and systemic transformation,** captures how the field is preparing to operationalize these insights. The Think Tank laid the conceptual foundation for reform, identifying five enabling levers: governance, requirements and reporting, profession, digitalization, and mindset. The research confirmed that these levers remain relevant and urgent. Digitalization stands out as both an opportunity and a challenge. While enthusiasm for digital tools, such as AI, analytics, and connected platforms, is strong, adoption remains limited, with only 37% of organizations reporting active use of digital tools in their audit processes. Research implies that digitalization should not be a patchwork of isolated tools, but part of a coherent strategy aligned with the organization's broader vision and objectives.

A well-defined digital audit strategy ensures consistency, data integrity, and accessibility, enabling real-time visibility and predictive insights. This integration allows auditing teams to perform risk-based, higher-value audits and to detect emerging issues before they escalate. In contrast, ad hoc digital initiatives often fragment data and reduce comparability, diminishing the reliability of findings. When strategically aligned, digitalization transforms audits from episodic assessments into continuous learning cycles, where data quality and transparency drive foresight, not just oversight.

Equally transformative is the evolving mindset. Across continents and roles, respondents expressed readiness for a culture that views audits not as punitive but as developmental. This cultural shift is the true frontier of food safety auditing. Governance models, technology, and methodology will matter only to the extent that they support this deeper evolution in purpose and perspective.

Viewed together, these four interpretive dimensions, **purpose, value, trust, and future direction,** illustrate a sector in transition. The conversation that began as a critique has matured into a structured, global dialogue about reform. The data show that the appetite for

change is no longer limited to a few thought leaders; it is shared across auditors, QFS professionals, and business leaders. Food safety auditing now stands at a defining crossroads: either it remains confined to the logic of compliance, or it embraces its emerging identity as a collaborative, intelligence-driven, and future-oriented discipline. The evidence from this multi-stage initiative suggests that the latter path is both possible and already unfolding.

CONCLUSION

Across several years and multiple platforms, our collective journey from reflection to research has produced more than an agenda for improvement; it has articulated a new vision for what auditing can and should achieve. The findings converge on one essential idea: audits derive their true value not from the act of verification but from the insight and trust they generate. When purpose, transparency, and human competence align, audits evolve from being an obligation to becoming an organizational asset.

The future of food safety auditing will depend on sustaining this alignment through four interdependent commitments.

First, to reaffirm purpose: recognizing audits as mechanisms for foresight and learning rather than retrospective control. This includes elevating the role of site-level internal audits carried out by plant teams, which are often the closest to daily operations and therefore uniquely positioned to convert findings into practical learning. Their potential to foster ownership and continuous improvement remains underutilized and deserves greater recognition within corporate governance structures.

Second, to enhance value by embedding audits into strategic decision-making and by demonstrating measurable impact on food safety performance. Aligning corporate audit findings with enterprise risk management will help bridge assurance with strategy, transforming auditing from a cost center into a strategic capability.

Third, to strengthen trust and integrity by ensuring that governance frameworks are transparent, auditors are empowered yet accountable, and auditees feel safe to disclose issues without fear of punishment. Governance models should create the time and space for meaningful dialogue rather than limiting auditors to demonstrating procedural compliance. This human dimension, psychological safety, ethical consistency, and constructive engagement, define whether an audit becomes a catalyst for learning or a ritual of control.

Fourth, to accelerate systemic transformation through digital innovation, cross-industry collaboration, and professional renewal. The right digitalization strategy, one aligned with organizational vision and built on data integrity, accessibility, and analytical insight, turns auditing into a dynamic, risk-based learning system. Fragmented, ad hoc solutions rarely deliver this impact; strategic alignment ensures that digital tools strengthen both efficiency and the quality of insight, enabling more frequent, focused, and value-driven audits.

At the same time, this research opens pathways for deeper inquiry and continued dialogue. Several areas merit further exploration to advance the field both conceptually and practically:

- How does psychological safety during audits influence the depth and honesty of auditee disclosure, and what approaches best cultivate such safety across diverse cultural settings?
- How can digital tools and artificial intelligence enhance audit efficiency without compromising human judgment or ethical integrity, and what governance models most effectively ensure data transparency and privacy?
- In what ways can auditor competence frameworks evolve to balance technical mastery with behavioral and communication skills, enabling auditors to act as credible facilitators of learning rather than mere inspectors?
- How can the value and learning impact of audits be measured systematically over time, and how might harmonized governance structures reduce redundancy while strengthening global trust in certification systems?
- How do workload, motivation, and opportunities for continuous learning affect auditor well-being and career sustainability, and what mechanisms can secure the long-term quality and resilience of the auditing profession?

The transformation envisioned here is not about replacing one model with another but about restoring balance between control and learning, evidence and empathy, structure and culture. The food industry's journey from compliance to competence mirrors the maturation of its audit systems, from static inspection to dynamic partnership.

If fully embraced, this shift will enable audits to become what they were always intended to be: a bridge between assurance and improvement, serving not only certification but also the continuous safeguarding of public health and trust in the global food supply.

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ABOUT US

World of Auditing is a specialized consultancy firm dedicated to elevating the standards of auditing, strategy optimization, and governance in the Food & Beverage industry.

Founded by industry professionals Tülay Kahraman and Marc Cwikowski, our company brings together decades of global experience to offer bespoke solutions that drive excellence and innovation in food safety and quality assurance.

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