

FOOD AT WORK

WORKPLACE SOLUTIONS FOR MALNUTRITION, OBESITY
AND CHRONIC DISEASES

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OBESITY AND CHRONIC DISEASES

Christopher Wanjek

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FOREWORD

The rights to safe drinking water and to freedom from hunger are basic human rights and yet all too often ignored in the context of rights at work. Equally, they are an essential foundation of a productive workforce, and yet also all too often ignored in the context of productivity improvement and enhanced enterprise competitiveness. Measures to ensure a properly fed and healthy workforce are an indispensable element of social protection of workers, and yet frequently absent from programmes to improve working conditions and occupational safety and health. And despite the fact that these concerns are indeed fundamental ones for both employers and workers, they all too rarely feature as topics for social dialogue.

Food at work is therefore inextricably linked to the pillars of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda. It touches not only on questions of nutrition, food safety and food security, although these in themselves are important enough. But it also calls into question other basic issues of working and employment conditions: wages and incomes, since workers – and their families – cannot eat decently if they do not receive an adequate income; working time, since workers cannot eat decently if their meal break is too short, or if their shift requires them to work at times when food is not available; and work-related facilities, since workers' health will be affected both by the quality of what they eat and drink at work and the conditions in which they consume it (such as protection from workplace chemicals and other hazards).

The importance of food at work is reflected in the Millennium Development Goals which set targets of halving, by 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and those without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. These targets are not only to be met at the workplace, but the workplace is an essential place to make a start. This recognition is not new: food at work was recognized as a building block of social justice in the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia concerning the aims and

purposes of the ILO, which recognized the ILO's obligation "to further among the nations of the world programmes which will achieve: ... the provision of adequate nutrition, housing and facilities for recreation and culture".

This book was conceived as a response to the lack of attention to the issue of food at work. It aims to show not simply why this issue is important – that is rather easily done – but also, and more importantly, what employers, workers and governments can do and what they have done to improve food at work. It is intended as a practical rather than a theoretical contribution. We hope that amongst the many examples of good practice from around the world that are presented here, some will seem useful, relevant and replicable to the readers. These examples, taken from a wide range of countries and enterprises – from multinationals operating in highly industrialized countries to small-scale enterprises in developing countries and countries in transition – show that every business can benefit from improved attention to food at work. They also provide evidence that improvements – whether through improved cafeterias or mess halls, the introduction of meal voucher programmes, working with local vendors and others to improve street foods, or the provision of safe drinking water – are within the reach of any business, even the smallest. Furthermore, they demonstrate the active role that can, and indeed must, be played in this process by workers and their organizations, as well as the role for governments.

François Eyraud, Director

William Salter, Senior Adviser

Conditions of Work and Employment Programme

Social Protection Sector

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INTRODUCTION

Why workers' nutrition is important

- Nearly a billion people are undernourished and one billion are overweight or obese; a stark contrast of the haves and have-nots (WHO, 2004a).
- Workplace meal programmes can prevent micronutrient deficiencies and chronic diseases, including obesity. Investments in nutrition are repaid in a reduction of sick days and accidents and an increase in productivity and morale.
- Access to healthy food (and protection from unsafe and unhealthy food and eating arrangements) is as essential as protection from workplace chemicals or noise.
- Adequate nourishment can raise national productivity levels by 20 per cent (WHO, 2003a).
- A 1 per cent kilocalorie (kcal) increase results in a 2.27 per cent increase in general labour productivity (Galenson and Pyatt, 1964).
- Increasing the average daily energy supply to 2,770 kcal per person per day with adequate nutrients in a sample of countries could have increased the average annual GDP growth rate by nearly 1 per cent each year between 1960 and 1990 (Arcand, 2001).
- Iron deficiency affects up to half the world's population, predominantly in the developing world (Stoltzfus, 2001). Low iron levels are associated with weakness, sluggishness and lack of coordination.
- As much as a 30 per cent impairment in physical work capacity and performance is reported in iron-deficient men and women (WHO, 2001, p. 30).
- Micronutrient deficiencies account for a 2–3 per cent loss in GDP in low-income countries; and in South Asia, iron deficiency alone accounts for a loss of US\$5 billion in productivity (Ross and Horton, 1998, p. 38).

- Hypoglycaemia, or low blood sugar, which can occur when one skips a meal, can shorten attention span and slow the speed at which humans process information (McAulay et al., 2001).
- Obesity accounts for 2–7 per cent of total health costs in industrialized countries (Kumanyika et al., 2002).
- In the United States, the total cost attributable to obesity calculated for 1995 amounted to US\$99.2 billion (Wolf and Colditz, 1998).
- Studies have shown that obese workers are twice as likely as fit workers to miss work (Wolf and Colditz, 1998).
- In 2001, non-communicable diseases contributed to about 46 per cent of the global disease burden and 60 per cent of all deaths worldwide, with cardiovascular disease alone amounting to 30 per cent of deaths (WHO, 2002a, p. 188). The global disease burden from non-communicable diseases is expected to climb to 57 per cent by 2020 (WHO, 2003b, p. 4).
- The diabetes epidemic is particularly acute in the South Pacific, where the percentage of total health-care resources allocated to this disease is 6 per cent in Fiji, 10 per cent in the Federated States of Micronesia, 14 per cent in the Marshall Islands and 14 per cent in the Cook Islands (WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2003).

Workers' meal programmes are good for workers, good for business and good for the nations.

This book addresses a simple question – how do workers eat while at work? This question, we have found, is not always given much thought. This is strange, as food is the fuel that powers production. One would think that employers, wanting to maximize productivity, would provide their workforce with nourishing food or, at the very least, convenient access to healthy food.

What we have found in researching material for this book is that workplace meal programmes are largely a missed opportunity. It is a salient fact that worldwide nearly a billion people are undernourished while over one billion are overweight. How do we address this catastrophic misappropriation of food resources? The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), among other international bodies, have taken great steps in remedying malnutrition through projects focused on better food supply chains, storage, land management, food fortification, bulk food distribution and education. Our view, in assisting this global aim, is that the workplace should be a locale for meal provision and nutrition education initiatives.

Too often the workplace meal programme is either an afterthought or not even considered by employers. Work, instead of being accommodating, is frequently a hindrance to proper nutrition. Canteens, if they exist, routinely offer an unhealthy and unvaried selection. Vending machines are regularly stocked with unhealthy snacks. Local restaurants can be expensive or in short supply. Street foods can be bacteria laden. Workers sometimes have no time to eat, no place to eat or no money to purchase food. Some workers are unable to consume enough calories to perform the strenuous work expected of them. Agricultural and construction workers often eat in dangerous and insanitary conditions. Mobile workers and day labourers are expected to fend for themselves. Migrant workers, far from home, often find themselves with no access to local markets and no means to store or cook food. Night shift-workers find they have few meal options after hours. Hundreds of millions of workers face an undesirable eating arrangement every day. Many go hungry; many get sick, sooner or later. The result is a staggering blow to productivity and health. Poorer nations, in particular, remain in a cycle of poor nutrition, poor health, low productivity, low wages and no development.

Presented in this book are mostly positive examples of how governments, employers and trade unions are trying to improve the nutritional status of workers. In wealthier nations, where obesity and related non-communicable diseases – cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and kidney problems – are epidemic, we find some employers offering healthier menus or better access to healthier foods, such as on-site farmers' markets. In developing and emerging economies, where hunger and micronutrient deficiencies such as anaemia are epidemic, we find some employers offering free, well-balanced meals or access to safer street foods.

Chapter 1 provides governments, employers and workers with a rationale for embracing a proper workplace meal programme. Governments gain from a well-nourished population through reductions in health costs, through tax revenue from increased work productivity, and – in feeding its children – through the security of future generations of healthy workers. The savings are significant. In Southeast Asia, iron deficiency accounts for a US\$5 billion loss in productivity. In wealthier nations, obesity accounts for 2 to 7 per cent of total health costs. In addition to these costs, employers must understand that poor nutrition is tied to absenteeism, sickness, low morale and higher rates of accidents. Obesity, inadequate calories and iron deficiency result in fatigue and lack of dexterity. Employees must understand that their health and thus job security is dependent upon proper nutrition. The workplace can be an instrument for eating well.

Chapter 2 is an overview of nutrition, complemented by Appendices A and B. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the workplace is the logical setting for

nutrition intervention. First, nutrition is an occupational health and safety concern. Spoiled food can be as deadly to the workforce as a chemical leak; poor nutrition can be as deadly as a weak ladder rung. Second, workers usually come to the workplace regularly for an extended period, making intervention convenient. Larger enterprises regularly have the means to make some improvement at little cost, such as negotiating with food suppliers for safer, healthier food or providing better shelter to make the meal more restful and enjoyable. Even the smallest enterprises have low-cost options, such as working with local vendors to supply clean water or discount vouchers. Issues raised in this chapter include cost, place, time, comfort, accessibility and gender.

Chapter 4 begins a series of case studies – the heart of this publication. The Chapter 4 case studies concern canteens, a facility where freshly prepared, hot food is served. A proper canteen is a reflection of a well-run enterprise. Canteens require the greatest investment of resources among the meal solutions presented in this book, but examples of inexpensive canteen improvement are also listed here. Canteens are well suited for remote sites, such as mines and factories, where there are no local food options. Some remote sites offer lavish canteens as a means to attract employees, while other sites (particularly in the agricultural sector) offer very basic meals of grain with little meat or vegetables. Notable canteens presented in Chapter 4 include those who: have removed unhealthy foods completely; offer subsidized meals designed to combat specific nutritional deficiencies; made radical improvements at the request of unions or employees; and improved hygiene.

Chapter 5 contains case studies of countries with food and meal vouchers. Vouchers are tickets provided by the employer to the employee, or sometimes their families, for food and meals at selected shops and restaurants. The voucher programme, sanctioned by the government, is common in Europe and South America and is spreading to other regions. The programme offers many benefits: saves employers the cost of maintaining a canteen; helps governments in tax collection, keeping transactions on the books; and revitalizes urban centres with restaurants and shops. The Brazil voucher system has sharply reduced malnutrition and increased productivity. Vouchers work best in densely populated areas with a variety of shops to choose from.

The case studies in Chapter 6 are about mess rooms and kitchenettes – spaces at an office or facility set aside for eating. Mess rooms and kitchenettes usually require less investment than canteens and vouchers. At a minimum, a decent mess room could be a simple room with chairs, tables, protection from the weather and a place to wash before eating. Mess rooms entail little or no cooking and food storage. Employers, for example, can invite a local caterer daily to sell food. Kitchenettes are small rooms with some means to cook or heat food (stove, microwave oven, hotplate, rice cooker), to store food

(refrigerator or cupboard) and to wash up. Although simplistic, properly maintained mess rooms and kitchenettes can increase an employee's meal options and provide a high level of comfort and convenience.

In Chapter 7 the case studies describe local vendors: nearby shops, street food vendors, vending machines and office foods for meetings and events. Employers who work with local vendors can improve their employees' meal options. For example, employers can provide street vendors with fresh water, ice chests, stainless steel utensils or any other item that improves food safety, as well as assisting them to receive training on food safety and nutrition. Construction workers usually rely on local vendors. Often this is low-quality food eaten in undesirable conditions, such as on the roadside or on a dirty construction site. Novel programmes presented in this chapter include workplace farmers' markets, the workplace free fruit programme and street food improvement activities.

Chapter 8 extends workplace nutrition to the family. Feeding an adult at work will leave more food at home for the family. Yet some employers can reach out directly to the workers' families. In wealthier nations, the take-home dinner option from the company canteen is growing in popularity among working parents. Some companies distribute food staples in bulk, such as rice, which can curb hunger at home. Other companies run low-cost shops or bakeries with discounted foods for the worker to bring home.

Chapter 9 concerns water. Access to clean drinking water is particularly important for workers in warm climates or performing arduous work. Some workers are drinking more water for health or dietary reasons. Employers have many options in providing clean water. If the municipal water is unsafe or inaccessible, employers can install water coolers or water filtration systems.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 will help employers make proper nutrition a reality. Chapter 10 lists the many factors that employers need to consider when developing meal options for their employees, such as budget, space, number of employees, nutritional needs and food safety. This is followed by a checklist of specific items and concerns for each food solution presented in this book. Chapter 11 provides a description of useful documents on international standards, policies and programmes. Chapter 12, the conclusion, ties it all together.

In short, this publication demonstrates how good nutrition is good business and a sound investment. Proper nutrition leads to gains in productivity and worker morale, prevention of accidents and premature deaths, and reductions in health-care costs. For the government, employers and workers, proper nutrition at the workplace is a win-win-win proposition.