Executive Summary

FOOD AT WORK
WORKPLACE SOLUTIONS FOR MALNUTRITION,
OBESITY AND CHRONIC DISEASES

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FOOD AT WORK:
A SUMMARY

Why is workers’ nutrition important?

Nearly a billion people are undernourished while over one billion are overweight or obese, a stark contrast of the haves and have-nots. Iron deficiency affects up to half the world’s population, predominantly in the developing world. 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. Hypoglycaemia, or low blood sugar, which can occur when one skips a meal, shortens attention span and slows the speed at which humans process information. Studies have shown that obese workers are twice as likely as fit workers to miss work.

This book addresses a simple question — how do workers eat while at work? This question 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. 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. Indeed, access to healthy food (and protection from unsafe and unhealthy food and eating arrangements) is as essential as protection from workplace chemicals or noise.

In fact, workplace meal programmes are largely a missed opportunity. 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 unsanitary 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.

The rights to safe drinking water and to freedom from hunger are basic human rights, an essential foundation of a productive workforce, an indispensable element of social protection of workers, and fundamental topics for social dialogue between employers and workers. 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 recognised as a building block of social justice in the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia concerning the aims and purposes of the ILO, which recognised 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”.

Presented in this book are mostly positive examples of how governments, employers and unions are trying to improve the nutritional status of workers. In wealthier nations, where obesity and related chronic 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. The history and economics of workplace nutrition

The price of poor nutrition provides governments, employers and employees 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 2001, non-communicable
diet-related 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. The global burden from non-communicable diseases is expected to climb to 57 per cent by 2020. In Southeast Asia, iron deficiency accounts for US$10–28 billion, or 3–9 per cent of gross domestic product. In wealthier nations, obesity accounts for 2–7% of total health costs: in the United States the annual economic costs of obesity to business for insurance, paid sick leave and other payments is US$12.7 billion.

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. For their part, employees need to understand that their health and thus job security is dependent upon proper nutrition. The workplace, where many adults spend a third of their day, or half their waking hours, is a logical place for health intervention and can be an instrument for eating well. It also pays off: in Canada, the cost-effectiveness of workplace health promotion programmes is estimated to be CAN$1.75–6.85 (US$1.50–5.75) for every corporate dollar invested.

**Chapter 2. A nutrition overview**

Nutritionists have established the energy expenditure for men and women for a variety of activities. Sedentary office work requires 1.8 kcal per minute; sitting requires 1.39 kcal per minute; farming, mining, forestry and construction can require 5 to 10 kcal per minute worked. Poorer nations are more likely to rely on manual labour; and workers in poorer nations are more likely to consume inadequate calories for these labour-intensive tasks, leading to weight loss, fatigue, low productivity and accidents.

Protein deficiencies may lead to mental retardation or stunted growth among children or a loss of muscle mass among adults. Deficiencies are rare in developed countries but still of great concern in developing countries. Micronutrients — vitamins and minerals that are essential for proper growth and metabolism — are also of concern. More than one billion people are ill or disabled as a result of a micronutrient deficiency and billions more are at risk. Iron deficiency anaemia alone affects hundreds of millions of workers. Anaemia, and more mild levels of iron deficiency, decrease physical work capacity and work productivity in repetitive tasks, yet can be inexpensively remedied.

**Chapter 3. The workplace as a setting for good nutrition**

The workplace is a 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, the workplace is the ultimate community-based setting for health intervention. Many workers are present at least eight hours a day, five days a week. They are often of the same educational background and face similar health concerns. An opportunity exists to provide employees with what may be their only wholesome meal of the day. The comparison with school lunch programmes is apt.

Too often, the opportunities are lost. How many workers have no access to a canteen or proper restaurant, or no place to safely store food? How many are surrounded by only fast-food options or street foods of questionable safety? How many workers in the vast informal economies in developing nations have no allotted meal break? How many skip lunch or get by on bread and water? How many workers have no place to wash before eating or are subjected to food-borne contaminants?

The reality is that there are few laws that stipulate when, where and how workers gain access to food. In many cases, workers have low expectations about feeding programmes and unions have what they consider to be more pressing concerns. In developing countries, only half the populations consume enough calories for normal activity, while in richer countries an increasing proportion of workers is obese or overweight. A cycle emerges: poor nutrition leads to poor health which in turn leads to lower learning potential, leading to a poorly qualified job pool, leading to lower productivity, leading to a loss of competitiveness, high business costs and lower economic growth, leading to lower wages and greater wealth disparity, leading to poor nutrition and poor health ...

![Figure 3.1 The cycle of poor nutrition and low national productivity](image)

Ideally the meal break should be a time to rest, refuel, bond with co-workers, release stress and to physically remove oneself from the cubical or workstation. The meal setting should be clean and free from the noise, vibrations, chemicals and other hazards of the work area — a place to unwind. The workplace or its environs can be a haven for good nutrition where workers can find all those foods that their doctors recommend for losing...
weight or lowering cholesterol: foods such as whole-grain breads, lean meats, fruits and vegetables. As necessary, the workplace meal can be fortified with iron, iodine or other key nutrients that might be lacking in the local diet. Even the smallest enterprises have low-cost options, such as working with local vendors to supply clean water or discounted meal vouchers.

Important issues to be considered in deciding on the most effective workplace solution include:

- Cost (meals must be affordable),
- Place (including safety),
- Time (time is needed for the walk to and from the eating area, for purchasing food and for finding a seat),
- Comfort,
- Accessibility (eating areas must be accessible), and
- Gender.

PART II CASE STUDIES: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Chapter 4. Canteens and cafeterias

A proper canteen (a facility where freshly prepared, hot food is served) is a reflection of a well-run enterprise, a place where workers can eat a decent meal in pleasant surroundings with friends and colleagues. The canteen can offer physical and psychological benefits, enabling employees to rest, nourish themselves, relieve stress, and escape the monotony or industrial hazards of their workstations, even if it is for only 30 minutes. Canteens require the greatest investment of resources among the meal solutions presented in the book, but examples of inexpensive canteen improvement are given. 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 include those which:

- 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. Some good examples are:
  - Dole Food Company (United States) and Husky Injection Molding Systems (Canada) have essentially stripped their canteens of unhealthy foods. The costs of the healthiest foods are heavily subsidized.
  - San Pedro Diseños (Guatemala) assessed the nutritional needs of its workforce and designed a menu to combat micronutrient deficiencies. Investment is made in food quality, safety and subsidy; the kitchen and dining area are simple.
  - Glaxo Wellcome Manufacturing (Singapore) remodeled its canteen at the workers’ request. Workers chose the new look, new menu and new pricing scheme. This has resulted in high morale and better health.
  - Akteks Acrylic Yarn (Turkey) revamped its kitchen and dining area with a focus on hygiene. Better storage capacity allows for greater food variety. Meals are tasty, varied, healthy and free.
  - Tae Kwang Vina (Viet Nam) adopted Nike’s code of conduct after being cited for environmental and labour violations. Among the many improvements is a varied, well-balanced free lunch for workers.
  - Voestalpine Stahl (Austria) runs a canteen based on a union initiative that calls for healthy foods either grown locally or purchased from vendors with established “fair” pro-worker values.
  - Canada and Singapore have strong government and union initiatives to improve nutrition in the workplace, as well as in the community at large.

Chapter 5. 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. Vouchers are a social benefit regulated by national law, first adopted formally in the 1950s in the United Kingdom with the stated goal of feeding workers. Employers usually contribute 50–100 per cent of the face value of the voucher. Laws specify maximum tax exemption and employee contribution, as well as the types of shops and restaurants that can participate, the types of items that can be purchased (no alcohol or tobacco, for example) and the daily use (number of vouchers accepted, no change given, etc.). The voucher programme, sanctioned by the government, is common in Europe and South America and is spreading to other regions. Hungary has the greatest percentage of workers enrolled in a voucher plan compared with other countries; over 80 per cent of its approximately 2.75 million workers. Hungary initiated a voucher system to better regulate tax collection, to improve the health of its workforce and to “catch up” to Western Europe.

The meal voucher programme offers many benefits:

- It saves employers the cost of maintaining a canteen;
- It helps governments in tax collection, keeping transactions on the books. Tax revenue generated from increased activity in the food sector can exceed taxes lost from voucher tax exemptions;

- It revitalizes urban centres with restaurants and shops.

- Unlike cash hand-outs, vouchers can only be used for certain items, such as meals. The voucher system can, as it has in Brazil where the voucher programme reaches about 30 per cent of Brazil’s 30 million workers in the formal sector, reduce malnutrition and increase productivity.

Meal vouchers are ideal for urban companies, where rental space is expensive and eateries are plentiful, and for companies with mobile or telecommuting workers. A meal voucher scheme can be a great equalizer, allowing small companies that cannot afford a canteen the ability to grant meal benefits to their employees. Savings include the cost of canteen construction, equipment, cooking staff and insurance for legal responsibility in case of accident or food poisoning. On the other hand, employers cannot control the quality of food, as they can with a canteen. They must also grant employees enough time to leave the workplace for a meal. A 30-minute break is not usually enough time. A successful system requires tax exemptions and a harmonious relationship between employers, employees, restaurants/shops, governments and voucher issuers.

Chapter 6. Mess rooms

Mess rooms and kitchenettes – spaces at an office or facility set aside for eating – 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 simple and cheap, properly maintained mess rooms and kitchenettes can increase an employee’s meal options and provide a high level of comfort and convenience, while sending a message to employees of small-scale enterprises that the employer cares enough to offer at least something in the way of a food solution. They can be greatly improved with small investments in appliances and recreational elements, such as television, radio or games. They require less space than a canteen and are easy to clean and maintain. This solution can work well in the informal sector.

Some novel mess room/kitchenette examples are:

- Workers at MexMode in Mexico went on strike in part because of bad food in the mess room. The company improved service by offering a greater variety of food with a full subsidy. Morale and productivity are up; sick days and accidents are down.

- K. Mohan and Co. in India worked with the NGO Global Alliance to improve food safety and nutrition for what amounted to a few cents per worker per day.

- American Apparel in California improves its mess room year by year with new additions. The company works with a local university to offer subsidized, nutritious and ethically appropriate meals.

- Simbi Roses in Kenya began serving free meals when the managers realized workers were skipping lunch. The company hired a local cook to prepare a simple but relatively nutritious meal to be served every day, cooked in a semi-enclosed shed and eaten usually outdoors. The company saw a rise in productivity and is now constructing a permanent, enclosed structure for cooking and dining.

Chapter 7. Refreshment facilities and mobile food vans; local vendors

Many workers, including most construction workers, usually rely on local vendors for their meals during the workday. Often this is low-quality food eaten in undesirable conditions, such as on the roadside or on a dirty construction site. However, street foods, if properly handled, can be nutritious and inexpensive. Street vending makes significant contributions to the local economy. Recent efforts organized by WHO and FAO have improved street market food safety markedly. Employers who work with nearby shops and local street food vendors can improve their employees’ meal options at little or no cost to the business, persuading food van operators or shop owners to serve healthier food through financial incentives or the promise of regular customers. Supporting local vendors is the most inexpensive food solution presented in this book. Merely providing a street vendor with access to clean water and a washroom will greatly improve food safety. For only a little more, employers can provide street vendors with 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. They can also ensure that their workers have a place to eat their meal comfortably, so that the meal break provides relaxation as well as nourishment.

Refreshments, particularly during meetings, are often sweet and fatty foods, yet healthy alternatives abound. One healthy trend is free workplace fruit; another is healthy vending machines, which have the added advantage that they can serve shift workers who work after the canteen or local stores have closed. Farmers’ markets cost a company next to nothing to arrange. They require little space. Employees benefit from inexpensive, fresh, local fruits and vegetables.
Novel programmes presented include workplace farmers’ markets, the workplace free fruit programme and street food improvement activities:

- Hundreds of companies in Denmark participate in a free fruit programme that has been very popular with workers.

- Kaiser Permanente of Northern California has established weekly farmers’ markets at several of its sites. These cost nothing to arrange and require little space. They are very popular with workers and the community, helping people reach the recommended five-a-day fruit and vegetable goal.

- South Africa significantly improved street foods safety through a carefully planned educational outreach programme, coupled with urban planning to ease crowding and improve waste collection and access to clean water.

Chapter 8. Solutions for families: low-cost shops, food vouchers, provision of food rations

Every meal provided to the worker at work benefits the family, for that is one less mouth to feed. This is especially true in the developing world. 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 large sacks of rice, oats or other grain products several times a year, which can curb hunger at home. Grains are fairly easy to store. Whole grains or fortified grains can help reduce the nutritional deficiencies so common in poorer nations. Other companies run low-cost shops or bakeries with discounted foods for the worker to bring home. These can be a blessing to poor families, provided that they do not evolve into high-cost shops or a means to ensure continued indebtedness of workers, once workers come to depend on them – a common practice in company towns in years past. Properly run dormitories for young migrant workers, particularly women, can provide a haven from physical and sexual abuse, as well as a place to store food purchased in bulk and to cook and eat food in sanitary conditions.

Some novel family examples presented are:

- Pfizer Canada is one of many companies with canteens offering take-home meals. The plan entails few costs above canteen maintenance. Meals are available for pick-up at the end of the working day, distributed from a vending booth.

- Unilab in the Philippines distributes 11 sacks of rice per year (and a special food package for the 12th month, Christmas). Each sack provides a family of four with enough rice for the month.

- Mashuda Shefali of Bangladesh has established dormitories for young women from the countryside working in Dhaka, predominantly in the garment industry. These save the women from the dangers of shantytowns. The women have access to clean water; can cook, eat and socialize in decency; and save money for their families back home.

Chapter 9. Clean drinking water

Access to a regular supply of safe water is a basic human right, and yet at least 2.4 billion people lack access to basic sanitation, of which 1.1 billion have no source of clean drinking water such as protected springs and wells. An estimated 2.2 million people die every year from diarrhoeal diseases (including cholera) associated with inadequate water supply, sanitation and hygiene. In Bangladesh alone, 35 to 77 million out of a total of 125 million people are at risk of drinking arsenic-contaminated 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 diet reasons.

There are no specific guidelines for water at the workplace, other than the fact that employers in many countries must provide some form of potable water. Most industrialized countries have safe water supplies. Tap water is generally healthy. bottled water at the workplace, although common and often preferred by workers, is largely a benefit and not a necessity, except at certain remote sites. In other countries, 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.

Several examples are given of water provision:

- Tai Yang in Cambodia installed an advanced water filtration system. Initial costs were high, but the solution was far cheaper and safer than relying on water delivery by truck. (The local water supply is contaminated.) Tai Yang saved costs by relying on expertise from its parent company in Taiwan.

- Confections et Emballage in Haiti installed numerous water coolers that quickly paid for themselves as worker productivity rose.

- The Russian-British Consulting Centre in Rostov-on-Don (Chapter 6) installed an inexpensive filter on the spigot in its kitchenette, reducing bottled water cost by nearly 90 per cent.

- Water coolers at Glaxo Wellcome Manufacturing (Chapter 4) and water promotion led to a sharp decline in the consumption of sugary drinks.
PART III RESOURCES FOR UNIONS, EMPLOYERS AND GOVERNMENTS

Chapter 10 A checklist for enterprise decision-making

Food at Work identifies several factors that employers need to consider when developing meal options for their employees.

**Number of workers**: The larger the workforce, the greater the economic justification and reward in offering a formal meal plan.

**Budget for meal plan**: As the figures depict, a variety of food solutions exists depending on an employer’s budget.

**Space available for facility**: Businesses in crowded urban settings might have difficulty allocating space for a dining area. When space is limited or too costly, meal vouchers can be a viable alternative to a canteen or mess room.

**Length of break**: Unlike the 8-hour day and 40-hour week, time allocation for meal breaks often is not regulated. Short meals breaks, 30 minutes or less, make it difficult to obtain meals beyond the company grounds. Long queues and limited seating at the canteen cut into meal breaks. Workers in warm climates need extra time to rest to avoid heat exhaustion.

**Proximity/accessibility of meal plan**: Related to break length, the locations of facilities must be chosen to ease accessibility. One canteen at the edge of the company grounds doesn’t help employees on the other side unless they have convenient access to the canteen. Similarly, workers in industrial settings wearing protective materials need time and space to change and wash.

**Food safety**: Employers must remain diligent about proper food handling and hygiene, or run the risk of sickening hundreds of workers with one meal. Food must be free from workplace chemical residue and served in a clean area.

**Food security**: Malnutrition often occurs when people have limited access to healthy foods, a result of economics (food unaffordable), distribution (food variety unavailable in markets), natural calamity (drought, infestation), education (poor understanding of nutrition or food preparation) or war. Employers have the opportunity to offer the types of healthy foods that employees might not have access to, such as fresh fruits and vegetables.

**Workforce dietary/health concerns**: Workers around the world have different dietary concerns. In industrialized countries, obesity and chronic diseases are more of a nutritional concern than macro- and micronutrient deficiencies. In many developing nations, the reverse is true. Meal plans should address these dietary concerns.

**Education**: Employees who are educated about proper nutrition and then offered access to healthy foods will be more likely to eat them, compared with workers who receive no education.

**Workforce gender**: In many developing countries, a case can be made that women have different dietary needs to men and that these needs often aren’t met. Iron deficiency and anaemia are more common among women, for example. Women of child-bearing age need micronutrients such as folate (folic acid), before pregnancy, to ensure the health of their children.

**Special needs**: Companies, particularly multinationals, must remain aware of cultural norms, such as food restrictions on religious grounds.

Based on these factors, practical checklists are presented for enterprise decision-making concerning canteens, meal vouchers and the other food solutions presented in this publication.

Chapter 11 International standards, policies and programmes

Nutrition, food security, and food and water safety have long been a concern for the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank and related United Nation agencies. Workers’ wellbeing, in turn, has long been the domain of the International Labour Organization. While there are
no international standards regarding workers’ nutrition, a multitude of programmes and documents are described that have been developed in recent years to help guide governments and employers on this important topic.

**Chapter 12 Conclusions**

Nutrition programmes to combat chronic diseases, obesity or malnutrition around the world are largely aimed at elementary schools and the community at large, not the workplace. In fact, however, good nutrition is the foundation of workplace productivity, safety, wages and job security – concerns shared by governments, employers, workers and unions. In the developing world, nutritious workplace meals can help in reversing the cycle of poverty and malnutrition. In industrialized countries, one of the highest business costs is health care. Sick days, long-term absences and the general drain on productivity due to circulatory disease or obesity, to name just a few problems, cut into a company’s bottom line. A canteen with unhealthy meal options or, in general, poor access to healthy food during the working day fuels the epidemic of chronic disease.

Decent meals with adequate rest are fundamental to a healthy workplace. Moreover, the workplace is the locale for easy intervention. This is illustrated in a case study on K. Mohan and Co. in Bangalore, India. Health experts identified malnutrition among garment workers at K. Mohan and worked with the company to provide daily, free midday meals with iron supplementation. For K. Mohan, this was a small investment that may yield large returns.

Workers’ nutrition need not be a costly investment. Governments and employers can implement a multitude of measures to improve workers’ access to food and rest during working hours.

**Governments** can provide the infrastructure and legal framework for workers’ nutrition efforts to be implemented. Government rules and financial incentives can ensure access to healthy food (and, conversely, protection from unsafe and unhealthy food and eating arrangements), and level the playing field for companies. Government initiatives can take the form of:

- **Tax incentives.** Enterprises need financial incentives to offer decent meal plans to their employees. Governments can help here with tax breaks. Tax reductions are common for canteens. The meal voucher system also needs tax burden relief in order to flourish. Vouchers have been shown to build a strong restaurant and food sector, ultimately increasing tax revenue. Since no government wants to subsidize poor nutrition, incentives can give preferential treatment to healthy meal plans.

- **Health promotion.** Many countries promote health, exercise and diet but few health-promotion programmes in the area of nutrition target the workplace. The ubiquitous five-a-day fruit and vegetable programmes are a pertinent example. Only Denmark brings such a programme to the workplace with its firmafrugt (fruit at work) programme. Singapore and Canada deserve mention with their programmes to promote workplace health and nutrition and most recently the state of California in the United States has also designed programmes targeting the workplace canteen so that workers have access to the foods they know they’re supposed to eat.

- **Laws on break times.** Few countries regulate times of meal breaks, in the way that the eight-hour working day is a standard. By mandating a minimum meal break time, governments can send a positive message to employers and workers that midday meals and rest are productive. Laws put all businesses on an equal footing, so managers and employees will feel less pressure to skip lunch or to eat a quick lunch at a workstation to remain competitive.

- **Laws on meal provision.** Employers must be encouraged, if not required, to provide some food solution, which is a workers’ right as basic as rest, water or occupational safety. Clearly company finances, size and location must be taken into account. When a canteen or voucher plan is not economically feasible, employers must consider rudimentary mess rooms, cupboards or refrigeration to store packed lunches, or storage or water facilities for street vendors. That is, employers should not have the freedom to offer no meal arrangement.

- **Street foods.** In many countries in Asia, Africa and South America, street foods are a predominant source of nutrition for workers. Governments must take a leading role in ensuring the safety of street foods. The two factors that determine the level of food safety are infrastructure and vendor knowledge of hygiene and food handling. The two factors cannot be divorced. Vendors need access to clean water, lavatories and washrooms; and they must be educated about proper food handling. Understanding that one must wash one’s hands means little if there is no means to wash them. A first step for governments in this regard is to provide some form of legal recognition of street foods. With legal recognition established, vendors will be more willing to make investments in street vending – that is, investments in better equipment and education. Understanding the number and location of vendors (by virtue of licensing them) enables a government to move forward with education and other improvements. The next step is to provide structure to the chaotic world of vending. This is done primarily through zoning. These decisions should be reached through dialogue with organizations of street vendors and others affected. Once legal vending locations are established, governments can move forward with infrastructure improvements. Street food vendors need access to public lavatories with soap and water. Vendors also need a clean water supply to cook and wash. To reduce the number of rodents and insects, governments must also provide regular rubbish collection.

**Employers** should start with understanding that proper nutrition equates to higher productivity.
Nutrition is a wise company investment. In industrialized nations employers are increasingly aware that merely providing a meal programme or access to food can be counterproductive if that food is not healthy. In developing nations employers must understand that good nutrition will make for a stronger, better-equipped workforce that, in the long run, will make their company and country more competitive and more attractive to investors. Areas for employer action are:

- **Access to meals and rest.** Access to proper food and rest in a major concern. The length of the meal break is important; it must fit the employer’s chosen food solution(s). For example, if the company has no canteen or dining area, the employee will need to venture outside the company for a meal; and 30 minutes is not enough time to travel to a neighbouring shop, order food, eat, pay and return. Once the proper time is allocated, employers must provide healthy food options at a reasonable price. Through canteens and mess rooms, employers can control the cost and quality of food. Workers in poorer nations might have micronutrient deficiencies. These can be remedied through well considered food provision. Workers in wealthier nations might be at risk of excessive weight gain or chronic disease. These concerns can also be addressed through food provision. If a company does not have a formal meal plan, then it should provide workers with a means of buying a nutritious meal or storing a homemade meal safely. When budgets or space limitations do not allow for the creation of a canteen or mess room, small businesses might consider simple kitchenettes with a place to store food and a clean and pleasant place to eat away from workstations and protected from the weather.

- **Local vendors.** If workers have no food choice other than local restaurant or street foods, employers can still take action to ensure high-quality and safe meals. Employers can work with restaurants in suggesting low-cost daily specials or adding healthy items to the menu. An employer’s bargaining chip with the restaurant owner is the promise of a steady flow of customers or the incentive of financial assistance, such as by issuing meal vouchers. Or, if workers visit street food vendors, employers can make small infrastructure investments (potable water, soap) to ensure the quality of this food. Employers can invite local vendors into the company grounds and even help the vendors with proper food transport and storage, further minimizing the risk of food-borne diseases. Companies in industrial areas can pool their resources with other employers to create a central area of food vending. Employees will benefit from the convenience; vendors benefit from customers, leading to more profit and more investment in safety; and employers benefit from a better-nourished workforce able to eat and rest comfortably during the meal break.

- **Health education.** Employers who want their employees to stay healthy must educate them about proper diet and hygiene. Several case studies showed how education was key in motivating employees to eat the healthy foods offered to them at the canteen, or how a lack of education led to employees rejecting healthy canteen changes to the extent that the contracted caterer wouldn’t offer healthier selections because they didn’t sell.

- **Monetary incentives.** When education fails, money can help. Case studies have shown how subsidy on only healthy foods made eating unhealthy foods an unpopular option. Employers operating canteens or mess rooms usually subsidize meals, but employers can be selective and offer greater discounts on the healthiest menu options. Meals or meal vouchers are better than cash, because cash can be lost, stolen, gambled or used for tobacco or alcohol.

- **Families.** In some cultures, the male wage earner eats first, leaving less food for the children and mother. Feeding the worker will leave more food for the family. And healthy children grow up to be healthy and more productive workers. Employers can help combat hunger at home through the distribution of fortified grains or rice or other staples. The employer can save money by buying such supplies in bulk, often with established business connections and shipping and storage capability.

- **Water.** Access to a regular supply of safe water is a basic human right. There are no specific guidelines for water at the workplace, other than the fact that employers in many countries must provide some form of potable water.

**Workers and unions** must remain diligent in protecting their right to safe food, water and rest at work. Similarly, they must appreciate the value of a proper meal and rest during working hours to reduce stress, stay sharp on the job and to remain healthy. Local, national and international workers’ organizations can secure break lengths and meal programmes in collective bargaining agreements. In Austria, the union-initiated “fair eating” movement takes eating healthily to the next level: where the canteen food is produced through fair and sustainable business practices around the world, with a preference given to local products. Global trade unions can pursue these concerns in a wider social and environmental context, such as the need for fortified foods, clean water and proper sanitation. They can also seek to establish standards for industries particularly plagued by poor access to proper meals, such as construction and food harvesting. At the enterprise level, workers can take a lead in the search for solutions, in cooperation with employers.

**Concluding comments**

The twentieth century saw remarkable progress in workers’ rights and, subsequently, business productivity. The battle is far from over, particularly in developing and emerging economies; but in much of the industrialized world, the workplace has become safer. Dangers once omnipresent for years during and after the Industrial Revolution are slowly fading from the workplace landscape. Many company owners have resisted changes,
citing concerns over the expense of safety regulations. Yet as workers and their organisations press for safer workplaces, and as national and international laws equal the playing field and force all to play by the same rules, safety improvements will translate into economic gains.

Workers’ nutrition has progressed along with improvements in health and safety and similarly translates into economic gains. The solutions presented in this publication have:

• boosted employee morale and productivity;
• reduced the number of accidents and sick days;
• saved on long-term costs of health care;
• promoted the good name of the employer; and/or
• increased national GDP or tax revenue.

For a business owner with one bundle of money to spend, what would be the relative gain or merit of spending it on health care, meal solutions, education, retirement funds, vacation plans or another social benefit? It seems that there is no direct answer to this question – no scientific review or cost-benefit analysis looking at the actual and perceived value of such benefits. But it is clear that without a foundation of good workplace nutrition, many other hard-fought benefits become meaningless. A good medical plan will be pushed to the limit if workers are sick from poor nutrition. Retirement benefits are not useful if the worker dies of a stroke or heart attack by the age of 64. Job security is impossible to guarantee when sick workers and malnourished children crush national productivity and investment. Governments, employers, workers and their organizations together must capitalize on the opportunity to use the workplace as a platform to promote nutrition in order to reap the rewards this so clearly yields: health, safety, productivity, economic growth and a civil society. Having access to a decent meal during working hours with adequate rest is an obvious choice.
ABOUT THE ILO

Established in 1919, and since 1945 a specialized agency of the United Nations Organization, the International Labour Organization has focused on workplace issues actively seeking to create decent work for all — work which is freely chosen and performed in an environment of equality and human dignity, while promoting individual and collective rights at work.

The ILO encourages social dialogue and supports an open and constructive industrial relations policy between governments, employers and workers.

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