

Thought for food

Doughnuts and pizza and cake, Oh, my! Tips for bringing grub to the workplace

Joe hears about National Doughnut Day (annually held the first Friday of June) on the radio during the commute in and decides to pick up a dozen for the office. Lisa has appetizers left from her daughter's graduation party and figures co-workers might enjoy them. Ellen and David have birthdays this month, and what's a celebration without cake? And the team always gets pizza after landing a new client, so ... you get the picture.

Everyone means well. Food is fun, and we all grew up hearing that we shouldn't waste it (see sidebar). But what role should it play in the workplace?

Bonding

People both need and like to eat. Thus, food acts as a convenient way to bring people together.

"Office food provides an opportunity for colleagues to proverbially break bread," says Jennifer Kaplan of the Culinary Institute of America. "This ancient ritual is well known to break down barriers and build connections among people."

While sometimes food acknowledges milestones or achievements, at other times it simply offers a reason for workers to gather in a central location and chat. Positive feelings arising in both cases can lead to greater morale and job satisfaction.

Potential risks

However, exposure to a stream of edibles—especially ones that tend to be unhealthy—can lead to fatigue and weight gain as well as contribute to development of serious chronic medical conditions such as diabetes. In a recent survey by OfficeTeam, employees cited food at office celebrations (30%) and snacks brought in by colleagues (22%) as the biggest obstacles to meeting

health and wellness goals. Furthermore, 44% of respondents said they eat healthier when they work from home.

Other undesirable results may include spreading germs, causing allergic reactions, creating unsanitary conditions, and distracting employees from their work.

Strategies

Putting the kibosh on communal food sets a manager up for possible backlash as a kill-joy and forfeits the benefits described earlier. Thus, leaders often-times prefer to implement ways for staff to "have their cake and eat it too." Helpful measures can include:

- **Form a social committee to deal with special occasions.** This group can consolidate efforts (think one cake to mark all the birthdays this month or a schedule for volunteers to bring in goodies only on Fridays during the holiday season), take responsibility for clean up, and develop interesting activities that don't always involve eating.

- **Designate an area for food.** Those who wish to partake can gather in that area. Employees who are trying to work won't get bothered, and those watching their weight won't be as tempted. This action also helps constrain mess and promotes efficient disposal.

- **Be aware of any food allergies among staff members.** Convey this information to others and insist triggers stay completely out of the office.

- **Rotate responsibility for clearing out the kitchen fridge** of all items at the end of the day on Friday.



- **Remind everyone about germ transmission** and request that central chip bowls and other set-ups that lead to multiple hands touching food be avoided; putting out hand sanitizer helps, too.

- **When management provides food, be sure to offer healthy choices** such as fresh fruit and veggies as options. Likewise, stock the vending machine or office snack corner with better-for-you items. Opt for individual packaging over bulk bins for controlling portions and limiting the spread of germs.

- **Encourage workers to share overflow from their gardens** and fruit trees, not just leftover Halloween candy.

Cutting the waste

Can't stand the thought of good food going to waste? Sharing it with colleagues can help your conscience – and the environment.

"Bringing food to work that might otherwise be diverted to compost or the landfill is a terrific way to combat food waste," says Jennifer Kaplan, who teaches Introduction to Food Systems at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa, Calif. "Each year, 52.4 million tons of food is sent to landfill, and 43% of wasted food comes from households. Bringing to the office the half-eaten cake or the apples that will go to waste when you go on vacation is an important source of food waste reduction. In fact, it qualifies as one of the most preferred ways to reduce the volume of surplus food generated, aka source reduction, according to the EPA Food Recovery Hierarchy."