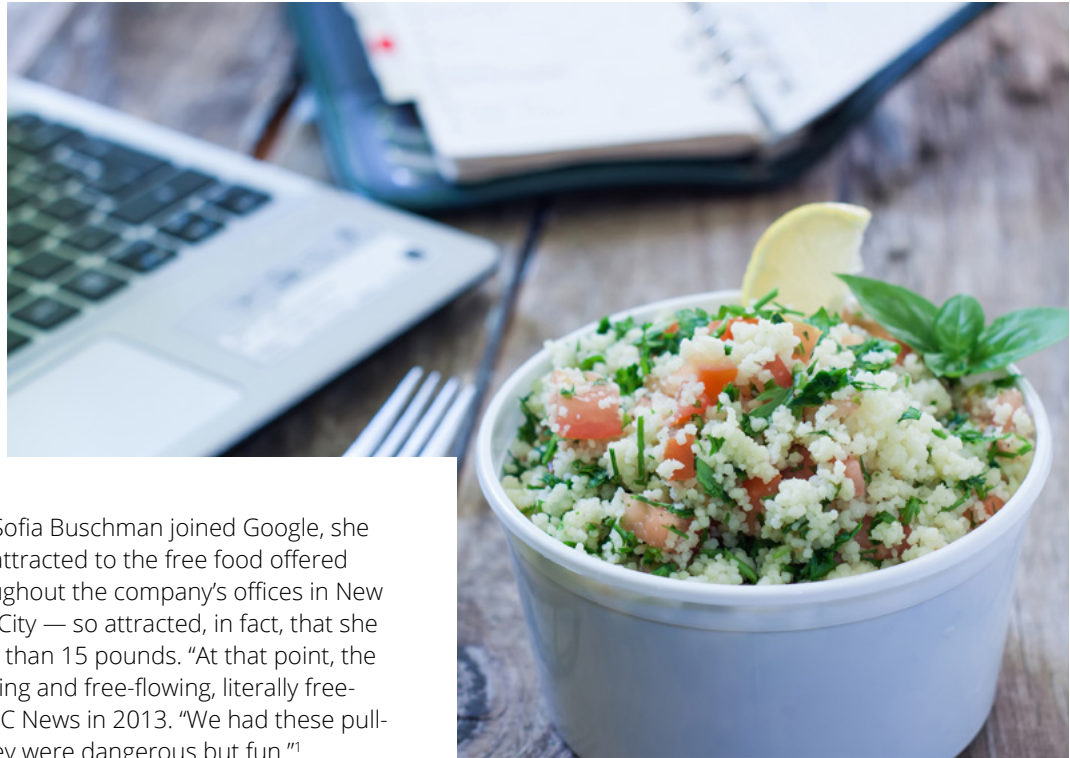


# Fit For Duty



Food for thought:  
11 healthy eating workplace strategies  
for well-being savvy organisations





When Sofia Buschman joined Google, she was attracted to the free food offered throughout the company's offices in New York City — so attracted, in fact, that she quickly gained more than 15 pounds. “At that point, the candy was very alluring and free-flowing, literally free-flowing,” she told ABC News in 2013. “We had these pull-down machines. They were dangerous but fun.”<sup>1</sup>

Buschman wasn't alone in her weight gain. Tech workers joke about the Google 15 — the 15 pounds (circa 6.8 kg) many new Googlers put on thanks to the ready availability of free food. (The phenomenon parallels the Freshman 15 new college students are said to acquire.)<sup>2</sup>

To help its workers avoid the Google 15, the tech giant made a number of changes to its food offerings a few years ago. It didn't take away the free food; instead, it used subtle techniques to nudge workers toward healthier choices. Among them was replacing those “dangerous but fun” candy dispensers with opaque jars. The result? “In seven weeks, New York Googlers consumed 3.1 million fewer calories from M&Ms,” Jennifer Kurkoski, People Analytics Research Manager, Google, told ABC News. Similarly, picking up on the idea that colourful and enticing packaging has a powerful influence on what we buy and consume, a think tank has recently argued that in order to help reduce the amount of sugar and fat children consume, the packaging on sweets and chocolates should be wrapped in plain packaging.<sup>3,4</sup>

For those reading a printed version of this PDF, head to [aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty-corporate-wellness](https://aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/fit-for-duty-corporate-wellness) to access the sleep and mental health-related articles.

1: <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/google-diet-search-giant-overhauled-eating-options-nudge/story?id=18241908>

2: <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/07/12/doubleclick-employees-worry-about-gaining-the-google-15/>

3: <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/google-diet-search-giant-overhauled-eating-options-nudge/story?id=18241908>

4: <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-48499195>



## The human impact

Of course, the rationale for encouraging healthy choices isn't just one of obesity. One report found that employees with unhealthy diets were 66 percent more likely to report a productivity loss than healthy eaters. Balanced nutrition is also linked to good cognitive function, improved mental health and energy levels. And neither is the problem of overeating limited to Google. According to the World Health Organization, more than 1.9 billion adults — 39 percent of the global population — are either overweight or obese, nearly triple the rate in 1975. And obesity is a major risk factor for a host of preventable diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders and even some cancers.<sup>5,6,7</sup> (For more information, read our white paper – [Globesity: Tackling the world's obesity pandemic](#))

People become overweight or obese when they consume more calories than they expend, something that's easy to do in workplaces where the most strenuous activity might be walking to the vending machine for a snack. A study published recently in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* found

that nearly a quarter of U.S. workers obtain food at work each week, obtaining an average of 1,292 calories per person per week. (To put that number into context, if you drank one 20-oz (circa 590 ml) bottle of Coca-Cola each day during a five-day workweek, you would consume 1,200 calories that week.) What's more, the authors wrote, "The leading food types obtained included foods typically high in solid fat, added sugars or sodium, such as pizza, regular soft drinks, cookies or brownies, cakes and pies and candy. [Healthy Eating Index] scores suggest that work foods are high in empty calories, sodium and refined grains and low in whole grains and fruit."<sup>8,9</sup>

## The cost to individuals and businesses

While obesity might seem to primarily affect individuals, there are follow-on impacts on employers in the form of increased health care costs and reduced productivity. A meta-analysis of 36 studies found that for every \$1 spent on corporate wellness programs health care costs drop \$3.27 while absenteeism costs drop \$2.73, yielding

5: <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>  
 6: <https://p5performance.org/healthy-eating-increases-employee-performance/>  
 7: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626>  
 8: [https://jandonline.org/article/S2212-2672\(18\)30369-1/abstract](https://jandonline.org/article/S2212-2672(18)30369-1/abstract)  
 9: <https://www.coca-colaproductfacts.com/en/products/coca-cola/original/20-oz/>

six times return on investment. Moreover, the authors noted, “wellness program costs are likely to be front-loaded — that is, more costly at the start — while health benefits are likely to accumulate gradually. Therefore, to the extent that program costs decrease over time, we may be understating the true return on investment.”<sup>10</sup>

“Obesity affects both individuals’ waistlines and organisations’ bottom lines,” says Dr Mitesh Patel, Medical Director, Aetna International. “Therefore, organisations have a vested interest in helping their workers get healthy and stay healthy.

“According to our recent research, [82 percent of expatriate employees](#) either feel they should make a conscious effort to stay fit and healthy, or make an effort at least some or most of the time. Employers have an interested, willing audience when it comes to introducing wellness initiatives and promoting healthier habits and they should capitalise on this, making it easier for their people to make healthier choices.

“Recently researchers at UCLA and University of Washington quantified that corporate wellness programs, including nutritional education, significantly improved the productivity of participating employees – up to one additional day per month. They put it down to increased gratitude towards their employer’s efforts on their behalf, which they reciprocated, and down to their improved wellness, mood and energy.”<sup>11</sup>

## The role of employers

Diet and physical activity are the two sides of the obesity coin, but research indicates that diet is a far greater contributor to obesity-related deaths than exercise. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, dietary factors caused 678,282 deaths in the U.S. in 2010, nearly three times the 234,022 deaths physical inactivity caused.<sup>12</sup>

Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International, says, “We have found that people are taking more responsibility for their own health. They’re educating themselves – not only about what and how often to eat – but about their own unique biological

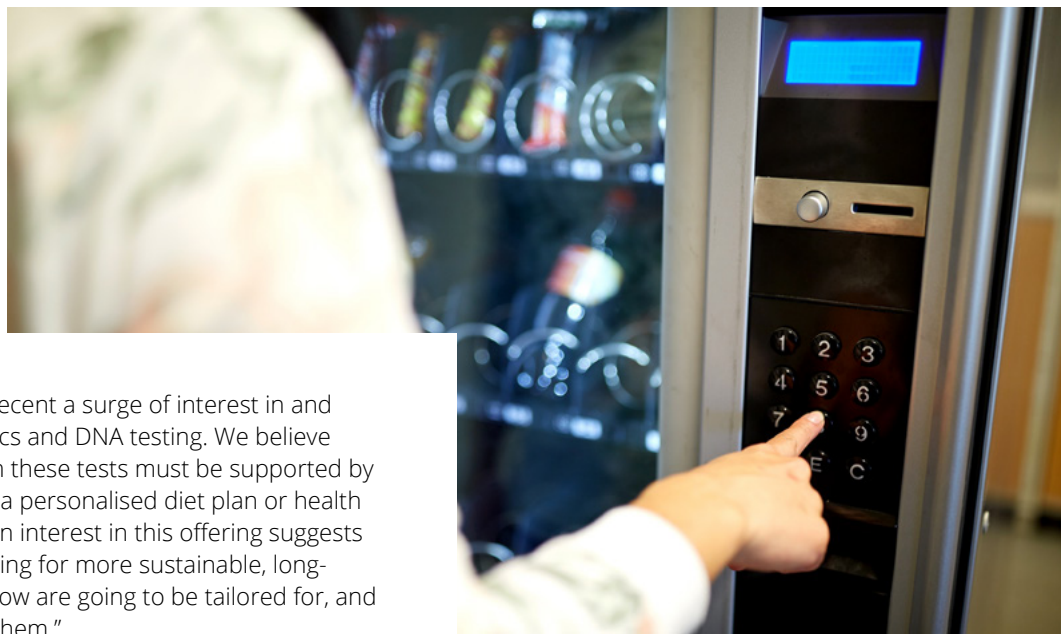


“ Employers have an interested, willing audience when it comes to introducing wellness initiatives and promoting healthier habits and they should capitalise on this, making it easier for their people to make healthier choices ”

10: [https://www.bcidaho.com/\\_assets/Employer/2010-Harvard-Wellness-Program-Meta-Study-Health-Affairs.pdf](https://www.bcidaho.com/_assets/Employer/2010-Harvard-Wellness-Program-Meta-Study-Health-Affairs.pdf)

11: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/08/170802134738.htm>

12 <http://www.healthdata.org/news-release/dietary-risks-are-leading-cause-disease-burden-us-and-contributed-more-health-loss-2010>



needs. We've seen recent a surge of interest in and awareness of genetics and DNA testing. We believe that the results from these tests must be supported by expert guidance for a personalised diet plan or health journey. The uptick in interest in this offering suggests that people are looking for more sustainable, long-term results they know are going to be tailored for, and therefore, work for them."

Moreover, workplace interventions focused on healthy eating may be more effective than those based on physical activity. One study found that just 21 percent of workers participate in fitness options when offered, and those workers are probably already fitter on average than their peers. Virtually no worker goes through the workday without eating, whether that means going out for a bite, visiting the company cafeteria or eating a home-made/brown-bag lunch in the breakroom. The challenge is to make sure workers have both the food knowledge and the food resources they need to make healthy choices.<sup>13</sup>

The employer's role may be even more critical for organisations that hire international workers. Expats, by and large, have a vested interest in ensuring their overseas assignments are a success, but they may have insufficient knowledge about how to eat healthy in their host countries. As Aetna International's Expat Social Determinants Report 2019 noted, "In an expat context food can be one of the hardest areas to tackle. New countries may have completely alien foods (especially in rural areas). Expats will need to spend time learning what foods are nutritious and which should only be had in moderation, where to get them, how they fit into their budget and how to prepare them."<sup>14</sup>

## Managing vending machines and 'cake culture'

One of the UK's top dental surgeons recently warned that "employees are fuelling the obesity crisis by taking cakes and biscuits to celebrate colleagues' birthdays, engagements or for just surviving the working week." While organisations might not want to go as far as banning cake culture, there could be room for encouraging mixing up the doughnuts and cakes with healthy alternatives such as cheese platters, assorted fresh fruit or nuts.<sup>15</sup>

Given that vending machines are typically loaded with tasty but fat- and sugar-laden treats, organisations could consider removing them from the workplace altogether, just as many schools have done. That's the position taken by Deborah A. Cohen, Senior Natural Scientist, RAND Corporation: "Just putting unhealthy foods in the workplace sends a signal that these products are routine and acceptable everyday items for consumption. Their presence in the workplace is not benign."<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, that decision may not have the intended effect if taken in isolation. In fact, one widely reported study found that students' consumption of fast food

13: <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/2014/05/15/the-secret-way-to-save-on-health-and-fitness>

14: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/content/dam/aetna/pdfs/aetna-international/Explorer/Expat-Social-Determinants-Report-2019.pdf>

15: <https://www.healthyperformance.co.uk/is-office-cake-culture-damaging-employee-health/>

16: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/06/junk-food-havens-vending-machines-dont-belong-in-the.html>

and sugar-sweetened beverages actually increased when vending machines were removed but no other measures were taken. "Policy changes really need to be comprehensive and not just focused on one item such as regular soda or one location such as cafeterias," said Jamie Chriqui, Senior Research Scientist, University of Illinois Chicago's Institute for Health Research and Policy, and one of the study's co-authors.<sup>17</sup>

As part of a comprehensive healthy eating plan, it could make sense to change the mix of products in vending machines, which would also feel less paternalistic than removing popular snacks. As a Wells Fargo Insurance white paper on vending options puts it: "Promote the viewpoint of 'providing additional healthy snacks because we care' rather than 'taking away delicious snacks.'" In



fact, workers may welcome the change. A 2018 survey of American workers found that 75 percent want snacks that are guaranteed to be fresh, 58 percent want snacks that contain vitamins and minerals and 57 percent want snacks made with natural ingredients.<sup>18,19</sup>

### Improving the company cafeteria

Providing additional healthy options can also work in the company cafeteria. Tech companies often lead the way here, both because they have the financial resources and because they need to attract younger workers who may be as interested in health and sustainability as they are in retirement plans and other benefits. Consider this description from *Bon Appétit* magazine: "While your friendly neighbourhood sales manager gets by on the same grey hamburgers, nuked leftovers and pallid salads every day, Dropbox employees in San Francisco eat from a new menu every single day in a glowing 4,000-square-foot cafeteria designed by AvroKO, the firm behind countless cool restaurants, hotels and modern food halls. Options abound, divided into stations: vegan, '625' (where everything is 625 calories or fewer), sandwiches, Mediterranean, Indian, Asian, American and so on."<sup>20</sup>

But even companies that offer more traditional fare can guide workers toward eating better. Simple tactics include posting nutritional information like calorie counts, making healthier foods the default option and subsidising the cost of healthier foods. "At lunchtime on a busy workday, people often don't have the time or mindshare to make thoughtful food decisions," says Senior Medical Director Stella George, Aetna International. "Visual clues like traffic-light symbols can quickly guide them to better options."<sup>21</sup>

### Offering education

What people eat at work is ultimately their decision. If they don't like what they find in the cafeteria or vending machine, they'll bring food from home or go out during the lunch hour. Therefore, education is a key element of any workplace wellness program. Helping employees develop their optimal diet type, learn about empty calories and how to practise mindful eating could prove an engaging and rewarding use of time and resources.

17: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140801213343.htm>

18: <https://wfis.usi.com/insights/whitepapers/Documents/WCS-2950582-WFI-Vending-Mach-WhtPaper-FNL.pdf>

19: [https://www.iriworldwide.com/IRI/media/Library/2018-State-of-the-Snack-Food-Industry\\_03\\_27\\_18\\_Webinar\\_F.pdf](https://www.iriworldwide.com/IRI/media/Library/2018-State-of-the-Snack-Food-Industry_03_27_18_Webinar_F.pdf)

20: <https://www.bonappetit.com/entertaining-style/article/tech-company-cafeterias>

21: [https://www.workhealthresearchnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CDC-WHRN-Nutrition-and-Weight-Management-Employer-Guide\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.workhealthresearchnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CDC-WHRN-Nutrition-and-Weight-Management-Employer-Guide_FINAL.pdf)



While education could mean including healthy-eating tips in the employee newsletter, it's more effective to offer guidance at the point that people are making decisions. And that guidance can go far beyond posting calorie counts. For example, Google tried an experiment in one of its cafés to promote unpopular vegetables like beets, parsnips and Brussels sprouts. The café featured dishes built around those vegetables and promoted them with colourful photos and trivia facts. The result, according to a *Harvard Business Review* report: "By placing the campaign posters at the Moment of Truth, right next to the dish — rather than, say, emailing an article about the health benefits of vegetables — we increased the number of employees trying the featured dish by 74 percent and increased the average amount each person served themselves by 64 percent."<sup>22</sup>

Dr Stella George, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International, says "Globally mobile employees can often

struggle to maintain healthy habits on the go. Tiredness, a busy schedule, hotel food and midnight hunger pangs can often leave people reaching for caffeine, salty or sweet snacks or fast food options. Employers could consider providing their employees with advice on keeping satisfied and sharp while coping with a rigorous travel and meeting schedule.

And when it comes to sending employees abroad to live and work, one of the many challenges they face on settling in is working out how they're going to create healthy habits, including meals, in their new home. The good news is that in our recent survey, 24 percent of expats said that food quality was positively impacted by their move. But 46 percent said it took between two and six months to try a local dish. So, employers could arrange to send newly relocated employees on local cookery courses – it would also be a great way for them to meet new people, counteracting the social isolation that can sometimes accompany an international relocation."<sup>23</sup>

22: <https://hbr.org/2016/03/how-google-uses-behavioral-economics-to-make-its-employees-healthier>

23: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/content/dam/aetna/pdfs/aetna-international/Explorer/Expatriate-Social-Determinants-Report-2019.pdf>

## 11 healthy eating strategies to consider

You don't have to hire a top chef to feed your workers (as nice as that would be). In fact, you can take relatively easy and inexpensive steps to help your workers eat better and stay healthy. Here are some suggestions.

**1 Assess your organisation's healthy eating practices:** It can be difficult to tackle a problem if you don't know what it entails. Alberta Health Services' Healthy Eating Resources for Workplaces includes a 37-question assessment that covers everything from portion sizes at the company cafeteria to the availability of healthy food and drink choices at meetings and functions. By completing an assessment like that, you can identify priority areas of concern.<sup>24</sup>



## 2 Relocate your vending machines or renegotiate your vending machine contracts:

In its research, Google discovered that employees were 50 percent more likely to grab both a snack and a drink when the beverage station and snack bar were two metres apart, compared with a little over five metres apart. Imagine the impact on consumption if your vending machines were down three flights of stairs instead of just down the hall. Vendors are increasingly willing and able to improve the mix of items in vending machines, and customers are increasingly happy to find healthier options alongside the more common candy bars and sugar-sweetened beverages. When the Chicago Park District mandated that its vending machines only include relatively healthy snacks, nearly 90 percent of parkgoers said they were satisfied with their options. Moreover, sales per machine went from USD\$84 to \$371 per week in barely a year. "The whole shift to healthy makes sense," vending company owner Daniel Stein told the *Chicago Tribune*. "This study has proven what I've believed for a long time — that people are paying a lot more attention to what they eat if you put the better choices in front of them."<sup>25,26</sup>

## 3 Help globally mobile employees eat well on the move:

Sticking to healthy eating routines can be tough enough at the best of times, but for frequent flyers, it can be even more challenging. Restricted access to healthy options, jet-lag and a gruelling schedule could leave employees reaching for the ready-made and nutrient deficient. Providing guidance around healthy habits could help your people stay sharp and keep well on their travels. Read "[Eating healthy while travelling for business](#)" for more information.

“Restricted access to healthy options, jet-lag and a gruelling schedule could leave employees reaching for the ready-made and nutrient deficient”

24: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/nutrition/if-nfs-hee-he-resources-for-workplaces.pdf>

25: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/chi-chicagoans-choose-healthy-food-over-junk-in-vending-machine-study-20140807-story.html>

26: <https://hbr.org/2016/03/how-google-uses-behavioral-economics-to-make-its-employees-healthier>



**4 Use principles of behavioural economics to modify behaviour:** As Zoë Chance, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Marketing at Yale University, has noted, “One of the most important discoveries of behavioural economics is how little our behaviour is influenced by our intentions and how much it is influenced by context.” In addition to putting its free M&Ms in opaque jars, Google took many other steps to help workers make better decisions. These included putting healthier items in the privileged position on buffet lines, providing smaller plates and takeout containers and labelling foods green, yellow or red to indicate their relative nutritional value.<sup>27,28,29</sup>

**5 Subsidise cookery classes:** Helping employees develop the skills to plan and prepare balanced meals and healthy snacks could boost employee morale through a fun, social learning experience. Not only will you be helping your teams learn how to make manageable changes towards healthier food choices, but despite leading busy lives, they could discover how to boost their immune systems, break the weight gain cycle and eat well to sharpen their minds and focus.

**6 Subsidise DNA tests:** From optimal diet types to understanding carbohydrate and saturated fat sensitivity, salt, alcohol and caffeine sensitivity, individual vitamin and mineral needs and more, today's DNA tests offer personalised, secure lab results. Offering employees confidential health and wellness services that combine the results with professional results interpretation, clinician advice and personalised diet plans could help support employees' sustainable, long-term results.<sup>30</sup>

**7 Discourage workers from eating at their desks:** There's ample evidence that working long hours without a break is counterproductive; for example, one British study demonstrated a link between long working hours and decreased performance on vocabulary and reasoning tests. Moreover, according to dietician Susan Moores of the American Diabetic Association, “Eating at your desk encourages mindless eating and overeating. You're most likely multitasking and not paying attention to the amount of food you're eating.” You're also more likely to be eating a candy bar than a salad.<sup>31,32</sup>



27: [http://faculty.som.yale.edu/zoechance/documents/Yale\\_OptumHealth\\_whitepaper\\_final\\_005.pdf](http://faculty.som.yale.edu/zoechance/documents/Yale_OptumHealth_whitepaper_final_005.pdf)

28: <https://hbr.org/2016/03/how-google-uses-behavioral-economics-to-make-its-employees-healthier>

29: <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/google-diet-search-giant-overhauled-eating-options-nudge/story?id=18241908>

30: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/press-releases/2018/launch-of-health-and-lifestyle-DNA-testing.html>

31: <https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/169/5/596/143020>

32: <https://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/features/7-tips-eating-while-you-work#1>



**8 Upgrade your breakroom:** “It’s hard to blame people for eating at their desks when the breakroom offers little more than uncomfortable seating, artificial lighting and workplace-safety posters,” says Dr Mitesh Patel. “When your workroom is an inviting space that offers essentials like a refrigerator, microwave oven and ample storage space, workers will be more likely to bring lunch from home and share time with their colleagues.”<sup>33</sup>

**9 Control the type and availability of free food:** In its Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit, the American Heart Association recommends replacing candy bowls with fresh fruit and only making food available in common areas for short periods of time, such as 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. for lunch and snacks. “If you have desserts left over from a meeting, let people know they’ll be going away at the end of the day,” says Dr Lori Stetz, Senior Medical Director, Aetna International.<sup>34</sup>

**10 Create a workplace farmers market:**

One of the hottest company perks today is the on-site farmers market, according to digital business publication FitSmallBusiness.com. That’s something managed-care organisation Kaiser Permanente has been offering to great effect since 2003. When it polled shoppers (most of whom were physicians and staff members) in 2010, it found that 74 percent were consuming more fruits and vegetables as a result, while 71 percent were eating a greater variety of produce. “The markets are making a difference, and that’s good news,” said Loel Solomon, Ph.D., Vice President of Community Health, Kaiser Permanente. “This study shows the power of farmers markets in helping people eat healthier and expanding their palates — and sense of culinary adventure.” Small to medium size organisations might not want to go to such lengths, but making healthy snacks, such as fruit and vegetable platters, available in the office could be a step in the right direction.<sup>35,36</sup>

**11 Share tips and advice:** Regularly sharing articles and information with employees can prompt them to make small adjustments to their behaviours, gradually helping to improve their well-being over time.

**Want more information?**

Read [“How to eat healthy at work: 7 healthy eating strategies for the office”](#) or share it with your employees to provide clear guidance on how people can eat right when pressed for time.

Find more [Fit for Duty \(workplace health and wellness\)](#) materials.

33: <http://www.youngupstarts.com/2016/11/05/breakroom-basics-and-beyond/>

34: [https://www.heart.org/-/media/data-import/downloadables/fc-healthy-workplace-food-and-beverage-toolkit-ucm\\_465693.pdf](https://www.heart.org/-/media/data-import/downloadables/fc-healthy-workplace-food-and-beverage-toolkit-ucm_465693.pdf)

35: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-in-office-farmers-market-is-the-hottest-workplace-perk-right-now-2018-11-29>

36: <https://about.kaiserpermanente.org/our-story/health-research/news/kaiser-permanente-study-reveals-further-correlation-between-farm>



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