HEALTHY EATING AT WORK: 4 TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

Written for Virgin Pulse by P.K. Newby, ScD, MPH, MS
The Nutrition Doctor
Virgin Pulse Science Advisory Board Member
There are many factors influencing our diets, whether that be the desire to lose weight, manage an illness, or increase energy and overall well-being. Ultimately, what we choose to eat is up to us.

Even so, the places where people live and work can make it easier for them to do the right thing in their diet. Because people spend so much of their time each day in the workplace, as an employer, you have the opportunity to create a food environment and develop nutrition programs that make healthy eating easier. The checklist below will help put your company on the road to creating a nourishing environment that supports your employees in their quest for health.
Healthy behaviors begin with a healthy environment. Cleaning up the workspace and filling it with the right stuff is at the heart of your effort in supporting employees’ nutrition. The “right stuff” reflects the six principles of healthy eating, which means offering foods that reflect a health promoting, disease preventing, and energy boosting plant-based diet. A healthy food environment should strive to increase healthy food options and limit unhealthy food options.

The specifics for creating the ideal food environment in your workplace will depend on where people are eating. The cafeteria is often the major setting, so looking to menu offerings and food preparation techniques (i.e., how food is cooked) will be a central component for most large companies. Yet snack shops, vending machines, and foods provided in other company settings can be just as important. And simply adding more nutritious options isn’t enough. Limiting the variety of energy-dense, sugar-filled snack foods and menu items that tend to populate so many workplaces is also critical.

There are many additional ways to create a healthy food environment, from boosting the prominence and size of your kitchen facilities, to ditching the water cooler in lieu of a more sustainable and less wasteful (and costly) option. Engaging with national campaigns like Meatless Monday or Five-a-Day can also be helpful. Find out what works best for your company and your employees.
Make it attractive: taste, cost, and convenience matter.

Research shows that taste is the major driver of food choices, so paramount to the effort of getting employees to consume healthy food is making it delicious. This may require teaching healthy cooking techniques to food service professionals in your workplace and/or changing vendors to obtain higher-quality products.

It also means expanding healthy options beyond traditional offerings to engage employees in eating healthfully. Tired messages about consuming more fruits and vegetables and simply offering more whole fruit in the cafeteria likely won’t do the job—especially if sweet and salty snacks are at the ready. Food cost and convenience are important, too, so create competitive pricing strategies and placement to help make the nutritious choice the easy choice for employees.
Keep it moderate.

There are many foods that you’ll want to think twice about keeping on hand in the workplace given the epidemics of obesity and chronic disease so many employees struggle with managing. Drinks like sugar-sweetened beverages (soda as well sugary fruit drinks) and energy-dense foods like chips, cookies, and donuts should be greatly limited to reduce temptation.

Yet total denial seldom works, nor is it necessary in an overall healthy, energy-balanced diet. Moderation is an important component of any healthful diet—and enjoying life in general. There is no reason to completely rid the environment of all the foods your employees love. The key in the workplace, as in other spaces of peoples’ lives, is to keep such choices as special, once in-a-while treats. Perhaps one Friday per month the cafeteria acknowledges all who had birthdays and offers in celebration a higher-calorie dish for lunch and a scrumptious cake for dessert. Examples like this one not only serve to demonstrate healthy moderation and occasional indulgence, they also provide other feel-good benefits to employees.
Add the necessary ingredients to make it work.

Focusing on the food available in your workplace is a central component to supporting healthy eating – but that alone usually isn’t enough. There’s much more you can do to ensure employees are aware of what they’re eating and help them make the most nutritious choices in the workplace and beyond. Factors like providing health and nutrition information, creating incentives, considering the social environment, and utilizing technology can help shape and sustain healthy eating habits. You may want to consider bringing in additional expertise and resources to help guide efforts to build a better food environment that your employees will love.

Moreover, creating a healthy food environment should be just one part of an overall program supporting employee nutrition, and that in and of itself requires careful planning and implementation. Research suggests that worksite layout and social climate, overall wellness infrastructure, program champions and leadership involvement, and site innovation and creativity are all needed for program success.
The keys to nourishing your workforce can be simple. Help your employees make more nutritious decisions at work and beyond by creating a delicious food environment filled with nutrient-rich foods that fuel the body and mind while allowing for occasional indulgences. Support healthy eating in the workplace by developing incentives to encourage employees to make the best choices, and consider the food environment as part of a larger effort dedicated to nutrition and well-being.

Sources:


International Food Information Council Foundation. 2012 Food and Health Survey. Available at: http://www.foodinsight.org/
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P.K. Newby has over fifteen years’ experience researching diet, obesity, and chronic diseases, studying how people eat, and educating students and the public about a wide range of issues in food and nutrition. Weaving together traditional nutrition, behavioral, and environmental sciences, she teaches using a nutrition ecology paradigm highlighting key topics in food production and public health “from farm to fork.”

P.K. teaches at Boston University’s program in Gastronomy, Culinary Arts, and Wine Studies and Harvard Extension School’s program in Sustainability and Environmental Management. Her major research expertise focuses on the role of diet in obesity and chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. (Find a comprehensive list of her academic experience at pknewby.com.) She has held faculty appointments at the Schools of Medicine and Public Health at Boston University and the School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. P.K. is also a member of the Virgin Pulse Science Advisory Board.

P.K. has a doctoral degree in nutrition (ScD) from Harvard School of Public Health, and completed postdoctoral training at Tufts University. Additional training includes master’s degrees in public health (MPH) and human nutrition (MS) from Columbia University.

pknewby.com | @pknewby

Virgin Pulse, part of Sir Richard Branson’s famed Virgin Group, replenishes employees with tools that help them build better habits. With its award-winning, online platform, the company cultivates daily habits and sustainable behavior change that help people thrive at work and across all aspects of life. Unlike narrowly-focused employee health and engagement solutions, Virgin Pulse creates more meaningful habits and drives greater utilization across HR investments, delivering a better quality of life for employees and better health, increased productivity, and improved culture for employers. More than 250 industry leaders representing more than 2 million employees have selected Virgin Pulse’s programs to replenish their people and ignite their business.

Learn more at www.virginpulse.com.