‘WORKING’ TOWARD HEALTHY EATING
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Policymakers push for healthy eating choices at lunchtime

By Dave Keating

It can be easy to make the wrong food choices during your lunch break. But policymakers are trying to make lunchtime a more satisfying, healthy experience for employees.

Decades ago, lunchtime at a large European company tended to have a steady rhythm. Many companies had in-house canteens, where food was sometimes provided for free. Employees were encouraged to use the time to socialize, and take a full hour. The food on hand was dictated by the company, which could make choices based on what would best fuel their workforce.

Today’s work environments are quite different. Now, there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Too often, workers grab the quickest, easiest and cheapest thing to eat. This can lead to poor health outcomes. Artur Furtado, deputy head of unit for the European Commission’s Health Determinants and Inequality unit, says that roughly 50% of health effects are related to what we eat. “It is something that sometimes goes a bit off the radar, that there is such a direct relationship between what we eat and the quality of our lives, and how this translates to chronic diseases,” he says. Unhealthy diets translate directly into a huge health and budgetary burden. In fact, more than 23% of all deaths can be attributed to that risk factor alone, according to the Commission. Losses of up to 7% of GDP can be linked to obesity. Changing people’s food consumption could yield significant savings for national budgets.

CHANGING HABITS

The Commission has identified these varying health outcomes as a problem that the EU can solve, as*

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identified in Jean-Claude Juncker’s State of the European Union speech last month.

On 19 October, stakeholders and policymakers will meet for a healthy eating summit at the European Parliament, to discuss what can be done to address these health issues at their source. A particular focus will be on how developing technologies can facilitate this transition.

The event is being organised by the European Fighting Obesity through Offer and Demand (FOOD) program, which is now celebrating its fifth year. It was created as a project in 2009, with co-funding from the Commission and meal voucher distributor Edenred. That company created the Ticket Restaurant system in 1962 in France, and today it is in use in 33 countries including Belgium.

One of the activities of the partnership is to link those meal tickets, given to employees in lieu of higher taxed direct payments, to healthy eating choices. The FOOD program is targeting communications to two groups: employees and restaurants.

“Many communication and education tools have been developed for both employees and restaurateurs,” says Laurence Doughan, coordinator of Belgium’s national food and health plan – part of the country’s public health department. Doughan, who has been working with the FOOD program since 2009, notes that while the meal vouchers don’t restrict food purchases to healthy food, they do come with accompanying information and surveys for gathering data.

“At the moment, restaurant tickets do not restrict food choices, but one could imagine a type of restaurant ticket that can be used only for the purchase of menus that meet FOOD criteria and thus actively direct food choices towards healthy food,” she says. “Nevertheless, this may seem too paternalistic and I am not sure that the measure would necessarily be popular.”

It is the surveys that come with the meal tickets that have proven so useful, she says. “Surveys regularly offered to restaurant ticket users are valuable data to see what actions can be taken to improve the situation of employees in healthy food choices.”

The project is a rare example of a public-private EU partnership that continued after the end of public funding. Today there are 25 partners in nine EU member states. The project is now in the phase of implementing policy based on the research it has carried out over the past five years.

MEASURING DESIRES

Over 28 months, the FOOD program contacted workers and restaurants to ask about what they eat, and what they serve. In total, 4.2 million workers and 352,000 restaurants were reached.

Starting in 2012, the program has launched new barometers every year to measure people’s food choices. In 2017, additional questions related to new technologies supporting the promotion of healthy eating at the workplace were included into the FOOD barometers. The 2017 results will be presented together with a general analysis of past 5 years of the FOOD barometers at the conference in the European Parliament.

On average, 77% of Europeans said it is important to them to consider the nutritional quality of the food served at a restaurant before eating lunch there. That figure has been constantly increasing since 2013.

Since 2013, the nutritional value of a dish has been ranked as the second-most chosen criterion for choosing a lunch, narrowly beating out the price. The most important criteria was what they felt like eating at the given time.
Working class people are being harmed as companies abandon free lunch programs, according to food and health policy expert Dr Martin Caraher.

It is a fact of life when you visit any grocery store: healthier food is more expensive. This has presented a problem for low-income families throughout the Western world.

Obesity rates and other health problems are on the rise among the poor, who are being pushed toward unhealthy diets by pricing.

Food choices are massively influenced by income, though of course there are other factors at play like knowledge and skills.

So if you are poor and can't cook then that is a double burden. But if you can cook, the fact that you are restricted by income means that this is the prime determinant of your food choices. Those on high incomes can buy themselves out of this impasse by eating healthier foods and more fresh fruit and vegetables. We now can use data to predict who will cook and the key issues are income and employment conditions.

So if you are in the ‘gig’ economy, you do not have a fixed income and you may not know when you are working next week. So it becomes hard to plan food purchases and meal preparation. It is also important to remember that those who suffer from food poverty or food insecurity are also likely to be ‘poor’ in other ways such as income poor, land poor, time poor and resource poor.

Living in poverty is demeaning in societies where there is obvious wealth and the constant nature of it grinds you down. You manage this week to

**Food expert:**

**There is a link between poverty and unhealthy diets**

*By Dave Keating*

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Dr Martin Caraher explained that food choices are massively influenced by factors like income, knowledge and skills. [Martin Cathrae/Flickr]

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feed your family, but then you have to worry about next week. In this respect, we know that women (mothers and other female carers) are the ones likely to go without so other members of the family or household can eat.

How much of a difference can workplaces make in someone's food choices? What about restaurants, or grocery stores? Which part of a person's life makes the biggest difference?

A big difference. For example, in the old East Germany, many workplaces provided free lunches – and childcare. These are called ‘health dividends’, the extras we can give to people to offset their other spend on food.

In many European countries, the remnants of this are school feeding systems which provide meals of a minimum nutrition standard, taking pressure off the family.

With economic cutbacks in workplaces, the free provision of food is becoming less common. The irony is that big companies, like Google, are providing in-house catering based on healthy eating as a bonus for their workers, while those who really need this ‘health dividend’ are seeing it withdrawn.

The workplace plays an important part in our eating habits simply because many of spend so much time there. Grocery stores and hospitality catering outside the home are increasingly playing a big part in our lives as demands in our lives become busier and more pressured. So the food on sale here often reflects the nature of people's lives – more ready to eat and pre-prepared meals.

There is a danger here that eating becomes driven by a need to refuel and loses its significance as cultural phenomena, which is an important one that brings people together and helps bonding and social activity.

You serve as a member of the external advisory board for the EU’s FOOD program. How long have you been involved with the program, and what differences have you seen it make so far?

The fact that a company [Edenred] can lead on this and is not driven solely by demands from governments for healthy eating displays a social conscience which is often lacking in the hospitality and catering sectors. This is an initiative that others can learn from and copy.

The FOOD programme encourages engagement with local food restaurants and cafes. For the restaurants, the economics and the demand for healthy food has become more apparent and the FOOD program helps them deal with this.

Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York, was recently in London to open a new suite of offices for his company. He said that the new building will have coffee and cafe facilities but no restaurants as he wanted his staff to engage with the local community and leave their desk at lunchtime, surely a healthy proposition. Meal ticket systems [as outlined by the FOOD program] encourages such moves and integration between workplaces and local communities.

How can meal vouchers make a difference in people’s food choices?

People learn from example and if they see Ticket restaurants offering healthy options they may copy this practice in their own food preparation, and where they eat out in other situations. Healthy catering is no more expensive than current practices, and there are economic advantages to be gained from serving healthier food. This can be achieved by displacements on the plate, so reducing the size of meat portion and increasing vegetables are one example. This practice in their own food preparation, and where they eat out in other situations.

If you could ask EU policymakers for any legislative change to encourage healthy eating, what would it be?

To ask workplaces and national governments to introduce eating at work schemes like the Ticket system, to link the workplace and local eating places. The provision of food at lunchtime (free or subsidised) has clear health benefits and can relieve pressure on family food budgets.
Much ado about fish fingers

By Dave Keating

As European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker delivered his State of the European Union address last month, there were several issues which sparked his passion. But one came as a surprise to the audience: fish fingers.

“Slovaks do not deserve less fish in their fish fingers!” he declared emphatically. “Hungarians get less meat in their meals, Czechs less cacao in their chocolate. EU law outlaws such practices already.”

“In a Union of equals, there can be no second class consumers either. I cannot accept that in some parts of Europe people are sold food of lower quality than in other countries, despite the packaging and branding being identical,” he said. “And we must now equip national authorities with stronger powers to cut out these illegal practices wherever they exist.”

Fish fingers may seem like an odd focus, but the phenomenon of which Juncker speaks is real, and examples can be found with many foods.

A report by Reuters news agency earlier this year found that a major brand of fish fingers was labeled in a shop in Bratislava as being made with 58% fish, while those in similar packaging a few miles away across the Austrian border stated that they contained 65% fish.

Eastern European governments and consumers groups have lodged complaints with the Commission about the practices.

SUGARY DRINKS

There are other examples. The same drink products can have twice as much sugar in Croatia as they have in the United Kingdom. Some of this may be down to taste. But the consumer

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groups suspect other factors are at play.

Croatians may enjoy their drinks a little more sugary, but the difference is so stark it has led many to question why.

Given the Commission’s push to improve health outcomes by improving the nutritional content of peoples’ diets, addressing these ingredient differences has been bumped to high priority – hence it’s placement in the EU’s flagship annual state of the union speech.

The Commission has made one million euros available for member states to tackle the problem, through enforcement of two pieces of EU legislation – a law requiring full listing of ingredients and another barring “marketing of identically branded products in a way that has a potential to mislead consumers”.

The Commission is also launching a project to produce a snapshot of the nutritional quality of common food products sold in supermarkets across the bloc. Under the idea of “what gets measured gets done”, the Commission hopes to use this to result in strengthened reformulation activities, benefitting public health and providing a level playing field for industry.

HEALTHIER INGREDIENTS

Given the link between diets and health, the expectation is that solving food content inequality will go a long way toward addressing health inequalities, which also have a stark East-West division in the EU.

This can also be done through continued work on increasing the nutritional quality of ingredients across the single market, and then making sure those rules are enforced across the bloc.

The Commission’s 2007 Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues still serves as the blueprint for this strategy. The EU has goals to reduce salt content by 16 percent, and saturated fat by five percent, between 2016 and 2020.

Key to implementing these targets will be making sure they are reached across the bloc, not just in Western Europe. That will require constant monitoring by the Commission, which may be resisted by the very governments that are asking it to address the problem.

But given the issue’s prominent placement in the state of the union, it appears the Commission is ready to get tough.
Making Europe digitally fit

By Dave Keating

Time is at a premium and many people simply don’t have enough of it to shop, cook and eat healthily. How can new technologies induce change in the eating habits of workers?

It can be hard to make the right food choices in these hectic times. New technologies seem to make life move so much faster.

But these same technologies that can make meals so rushed could also help people make healthier food choices – if they’re used in the right way. The subject is being explored at a healthy eating summit on 19 October in the European Parliament. How can digital tools encourage healthy eating habits and support restaurants in adapting their food offer?

The European Union has been funding a number of projects that are developing digital tools to help people make healthier food choices. Some are eHealth (on a computer) and mHealth (on a mobile) projects that help people manage their calorie intake or other elements like fat or salt.

Other projects are innovating in the health and care system and the way it works. This includes projects that are related to interoperability – the ability of systems and organisations to work together.

**FOOD SCANNING**

One project that has received funding from the EU’s Horizon2020 programme is Spectral Engines. The Finnish start-up is making a portable device that can detect the ingredients and substances in food. It’s so portable that one can use it in the shop, to see if food matches the ingredients listed. This could be particularly helpful for people with allergies.

Started in 2014, the company won the Commission’s Food Scanner Horizon prize this year, receiving an €800,000 funding boost.

Food manufacturers have been working with these new technologies to make sure that their packaging is compatible. Florence Ranson of industry association FoodDrinkEurope says there are many possibilities in this area.

“With apps and online devices, it is quite easy for consumers to keep...”}

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track of what they are eating and to monitor their daily intakes, as well as track their exercise levels,” she says. “Keeping a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle is therefore easier.”

“There is also more and more information available about products through barcodes which can be scanned and help consumers answer questions they may still have about the product they want to buy, but all the basic nutritional information is on the label anyway.”

**BIG DATA**

Big data is also providing new opportunities to harness information about consumer behaviour and use it to better understand consumption patterns.

Data about peoples’ preferences, and what they are actually buying, is already being used to adjust ingredients.

IBM researchers recently created a computer programme that can generate original recipes based on user preferences. A user can set general parameters about what they want, which may be a particular ingredient, a geographic origin, or a health outcome.

The computer then sorts through a treasure trove of big data to make a recipe. That data includes the molecules and chemical compounds in each ingredient, how those ingredients interact with each other, and what flavours result.

With such technology, we could be coming to a situation where robot chefs at restaurants can make meals based on the health outcome desires of customers.

McDonald's has also been looking into how to harness big data, at this point mostly for efficiency purposes. They are looking for trends in consumer demand and trying to match them.

Now that food voucher programmes in the EU have gone digital, there are new possibilities there as well. The vouchers now come on an electronic card rather than on paper, and that card could track trends in food purchasing behaviour, if customers so desire. Government authorities could then see how adjustments could be made to encourage the healthiest food choices.

Technological advances have opened up a new world of possibilities for healthy eating. The question is whether they can be harnessed for these productive outcomes, or whether new apps will just be used to find the nearest kebab shop.
Experts say all companies can benefit from encouraging healthier food choices, but businesses are still hesitant to make the investments needed.

At first glance, it might seem that what an employee eats at lunch is none of his employer’s business. After all, that precious hour in the middle of the day can be a lifeline for someone craving a little ‘me time’.

But in fact, employers are becoming more interested in getting involved in what people eat for lunch, because healthier choices during that meal can lead to better outcomes for companies. Better lunches can mean less absenteeism from illness and more alert, productive workers.

According to the International Labour Organisation, workers who have access to adequate nutrition can be up to 20% more productive and less prone to accidents than other employees.

For companies with in-house canteens, this can be easily done by adjusting the food on offer. But for those without canteens, changing behaviour can be more difficult. It requires less menu-setting and more education.

Despite these statistics, many companies are still hesitant to get involved with education programmes for healthy food. Sometimes, such campaigns can come off as too paternalistic.

But health experts say the costs an employer bears by not getting involved outweigh the costs of getting involved. And for governments, changing health outcomes by reaching citizens through their employers has become a main area of focus.

“A person spends most of his or her time in the workplace, so the possibilities given in the workplace or nearby, in restaurants or markets or street food trucks, make a very big difference,” said Giuseppe Masanotti, the director of the Experimental Centre for Health Promotion and Education at the University of Perugia.

“With or without automatic machines, what is offered and at what price determines what people will choose, and this will have immediate and long-term consequences on

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physical but also mental health.”

**RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), based in Bilbao, has been collecting data to show the connection between healthy workers and greater productivity.

It runs various projects and initiatives on topics related to occupational safety and health. One of them is the Workplace Health Promotion project to raise awareness and provide information materials for employers and workers.

They have documented numerous positive effects from workplace health promotion, like reduced turnover and absenteeism, enhanced motivation and improved productivity. It can also improve the employer’s image to outside customers and clients. Research by the agency has shown that for every euro invested in workplace health promotion, companies can expect a return on investment ranging from €2.50 to €4.8 – due to reduced absenteeism costs.

Other programmes are working toward the same outcome. The European Union’s Fighting Obesity through Offer and Demand (FOOD) program was launched, among other things, to try to inform employers about the financial benefits of having employees who eat better and are therefore healthier.

The public-private partnership which pairs meal voucher supplier Edenred with the European Commission is celebrating its fifth anniversary – a milestone that will be celebrated at an event in the European Parliament on 19 October.

“We have a very good case for saying there is return on investment for actions that are promoting the availability of better quality food,” said Artur Furtado, deputy head of unit for the European Commission’s Health Determinants and Inequality unit.

**FOOD SUPPLIERS AND RESTAURANTS**

Furtado says it isn’t just workplaces that can see a return on investment from encouraging healthier food choices. Food manufacturers can also benefit. “Most companies, especially big multinationals, they need a customer base, not just today, but also in 20 to 50 years,” he said. “They know how damaging bad food can be to life expectancy and quality of life.”

Food Drink Europe, the industry association representing European food makers, launched an initiative in May to corral industry efforts in this area called ‘Together for More Balanced Diets’. It’s a follow-up to the association’s Eat and Live Well initiative, promoting actions taken by food and drink companies to encourage better lifestyles.

The call to action is bringing together public authorities, retail, catering, farmers, restaurants, consumers, dieticians, healthcare professionals and non-governmental organisations to swap best practices on how to optimise the nutritional composition of food, meals and diets.

The association has set itself a goal to achieve a 10% reduction of the overall calorie intake of European consumers by 2020, which it says will also create new opportunities for business and society.

But for food manufacturers, the proposition is more complicated than for employers. It’s a fact of life that unhealthy food often tastes better, and companies are going to cater to their customers’ tastes.

“Manufacturers have an interest in proposing products their customers will like and will want to buy,” said Florence Ranson of Food Drink Europe.

“This is why they try to offer as much choice as possible, with broader ranges of the same product, but also try to encourage consumers to adopt a healthy diet, with smaller portions available or reformulated products to meet general consumer demand.”

“Innovation is key to our sector,” she said. “A policy and regulatory framework that is conducive to investment in research and innovation is essential to foster further progress in reformulation. But there as well, supporting consumer education and awareness campaigns are also very important to encourage the adoption of more balanced diets and a healthy lifestyle.”

The FOOD programme’s outreach is also targetting restaurants. As part of its work, the programme has surveyed diners and restaurants about their preferences for the past five years. Now the programme is sharing that information with each side and letting restaurants know what customers want.

The results show that there is economic incentive for restaurants to offer healthier food. On average, 77% of Europeans said it is important to them to consider the nutritional quality of the food served at a restaurant before eating lunch there. That figure has been constantly increasing since 2013.

The financial benefits are there. But it may take some more work to convince workplaces, manufacturers and restaurants that healthier food choices will be good for their bottom line.