



What's **EATING** Onsite Workers?

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WROUGHT HUGE changes across the world. Some were passing, but some endured—most notably a changed relationship with our places of work.

The role of common space has come under increased scrutiny. Employees and their employers returning to offices after being forced to work on kitchen tables and in spare rooms for months (and in some parts of the world, years) are reexamining the benefits of convening in the workplace as somewhere to collaborate, socialize and inspire creativity.

UK-based Compass Group is the world's largest catering business and, with Business & Industry (in other words, offices and factories) as its biggest division, it has a strong interest in the recovery of offices. Compass operates in nearly 40 countries and during the height of the pandemic, the office-catering part of the business came to a virtual standstill overnight.

Today, all elements of the business are trading above pre-pandemic levels, a remarkable achievement considering that in much of the world, office attendance has been slow to recover.

Food and socializing opportunities in the workplace are increasingly on the minds of employees as they return to the office, a Compass survey finds. By Brunswick's TIM DANAHER.

“What we are seeing is that when hybrid workers go into the office, they want to catch up with colleagues and very often that takes place over food,” says Shelley Roberts, Group Chief Commercial Officer of Compass. “It’s all down to the greater role food is playing when people do go into the workplace. Coming into the office may be a less frequent occasion, but it’s more of a social experience.”

How food fits into the new way of working has huge implications for Compass, which employs over 600,000 people globally. To better understand the role food is playing in today's workplace, Compass commissioned global research agency Mintel. Surveying 35,000 workers across 26 countries, the Global Eating at Work Survey is one of the largest undertakings of its kind. It gives a deep insight not just into the role of food at work, but a wider lens into what the next generation of office workers expects from employers.

As someone with truly global experience, South African-born Roberts, who spent much of her career in Australia before relocating to the UK in 2021, is

well positioned to observe how the relationship with the workplace has changed and what today's employees and employers expect of one another.

"What comes through very clearly is that, when it comes to the workplace, employees' expectations of employers have increased," she says. "That's particularly true of Gen Z and Millennials, and with these groups soon making up the largest proportion of the workforce, they will be more and more influential."

Small changes at the workplace can make a big difference. For instance, the length and nature of the lunch break varies hugely, with the average around the world being 35 minutes. Between the countries surveyed, the lowest was 21 minutes and the highest 53 minutes, with most markets—including the US, UK, Germany and Australia—at around half an hour. Globally, the trend across most markets is that breaks are getting shorter and less frequent.

That is a reason for concern, according to Roberts. "We know a lot of organizations are keen to entice employees back to the office more, and ensuring proper breaks in high-quality breakout space definitely helps. The research really demonstrates that longer, better-quality breaks, in the right surroundings, have an important role to play in unlocking productivity and improving well-being." To that point, digital innovation that minimizes time wasted in queues for food has become even more important.

Even for those businesses without the scale or capability to provide food in-house, simply creating comfortable spaces away from the desk can make a big difference. The report found that four in five workers think it's important for employers to provide proper breakout spaces where they can relax and get away from their screens.

This need for engagement with other colleagues comes through acutely with new employees. The research found that recruits with under six months' experience are more likely to take shorter breaks and to take them alone—an unwelcome trend at a time when retention is such a challenge.

It's not just about employees though. At a time when the battle for talent is more intense than ever, Roberts argues that the research shows there are genuine benefits to employers for actively encouraging proper downtime—both in terms of their employer brand and the productivity of their workforce.

Seventy-nine percent of those surveyed said they have more conversations with colleagues when in the office rather than working from home, an obvious result of being physically together rather than having to pick up the phone or dial into a Teams call. And there is a further remarkable correlation: Among

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TIM DANAHER, Partner and co-lead of Brunswick's global Consumer Industries group, is based in London.

respondents, where employers facilitate break time engagement, a full 10% of employees who socialize at lunch speak more highly of their employer compared to those who don't (71% versus 61%).

"Fundamentally, human beings are social creatures," says Roberts. "While there's definitely a role for hybrid work in today's world, what we are seeing from our clients every day is that more employees are choosing to return to the office if they feel they're getting something from it that they don't get at home."

A clear danger with home-based working is the temptation to frequently dive into the kitchen, while also moving around less. The research found that home-based workers snack on average three times a day—more than double that of those based in an office or workplace—while also indulging in more high-calorie snacks like chocolate. A large majority of workers surveyed say that what they eat and drink has an impact not only on how they feel, but on their productivity too. Where they have a workplace canteen, they're eager that it promotes healthier diets.

A key question for employers is the extent to which they financially support the return to work. Three quarters of employees surveyed said that employers should be doing more to support them with the cost-of-living crisis, for instance: free or subsidized food at work—the third most sought-after benefit after competitive pay and medical insurance. And over two thirds of UK office workers would consider a full-time return to the office if travel costs were covered.

While financial support is important, Gen Z and Millennial workers won't compromise on the sustainability and provenance of their food. Over 70% of the workers surveyed expect their employer to proactively promote sustainability in the workplace, and it's something that the senior management of Compass' corporate clients—and not just the people who work for them—are increasingly demanding.

"Sustainability is driving outsourcing of corporate catering," notes Roberts. "And our emissions are our clients' Scope 3 emissions. Just last week I was having a conversation with a global client about how we can model their carbon footprint from our services and work together to reduce emissions by increasing plant content and reducing dairy in their menus, without compromising on taste."

While business leaders debate the pros and cons of mandated office attendance, the evidence that being together in the workplace benefits both employees and employers is increasingly compelling. At a time when well-being is higher on the agenda than ever, the message from office workers is clear—give us a break! ♦