



Food For Work

Fueling America's Workforce

How feeding the workplace drives business results



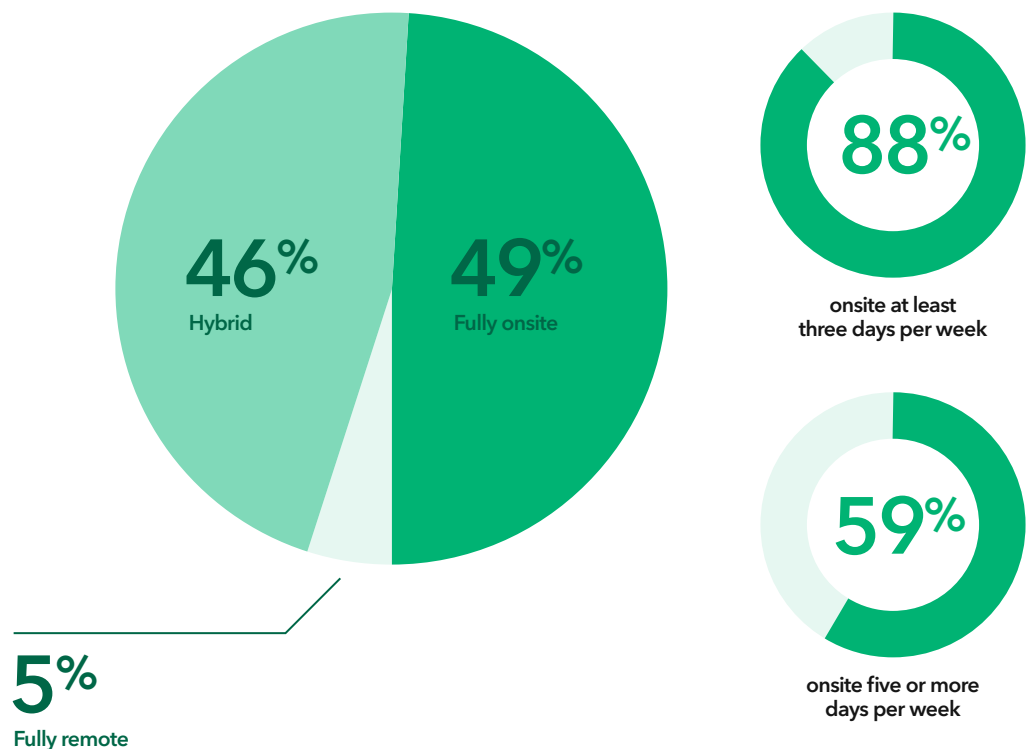
The way America eats at work has changed

Food for work looks a lot different than it did a few years ago. Much of the change stems from pandemic-related shifts, but even with the emergence of hybrid and remote work, 95% of employees work onsite at least some of the time – and when they’re at work, they’ve got to eat.

Whether hybrid or fully onsite, businesses recognize the value of feeding their employees. From boosting productivity and employee satisfaction to improving hiring and employee retention, food for work is good for business.

Most people work at work

According to ezCater survey data, very few people are fully remote.



What is food for work?

“Food for work” refers to the food employers provide to fuel today’s workplaces. It’s food for team meetings and lunch-and-learns, employee appreciation events, and training sessions. It’s cafeteria food and subsidized meals and snacks, it’s celebratory meals for special occasions and holiday events, and it’s food used to open doors and close deals. It’s food for groups of five or 500.

What matters is that food for work is evolving – and it’s having real, positive effects on businesses small and large. This report will explore those changes, dig into the business impact food can have, and provide recommendations that will help companies put food to work for them.

Methodology

To understand the evolution of food for work, we surveyed three key groups during the first quarter of 2023:

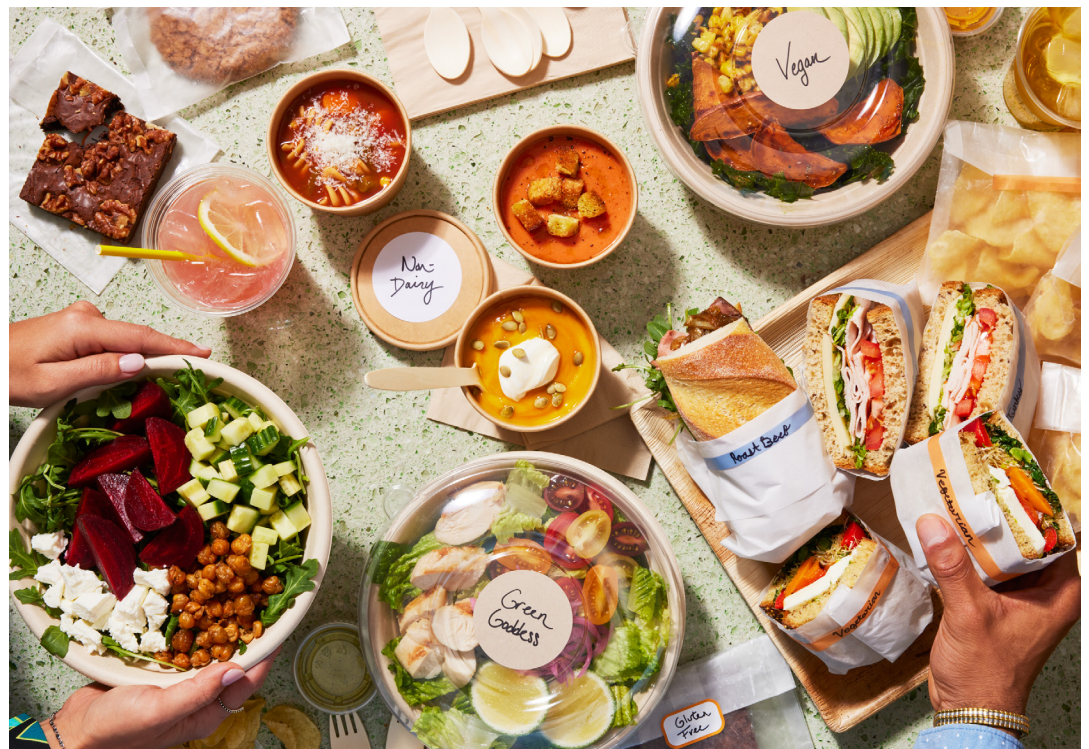
Food orderers: A survey of 621 people who regularly order food for the workplace

Employees: A survey of 1,002 people who work onsite at least one day per week and whose employers provide free or subsidized food

Restaurant operators: A survey of 633 restaurant owners and operators

We also took a look through 15 years of **proprietary ezCater order data:** millions of transactions across tens of thousands of restaurants and caterers.

Combined, these primary source data sets let us take a broad view of current trends and the impact food for work is having.



Food for work: the perk that pays back

Food for work doesn't just feed employees – it fuels business results.

Food ranks as one of the top five perks in terms of return on investment (ROI), according to employers, and HR professionals are almost 20% more likely to say that subsidized food provides the best value for its cost, compared to other perks.

When we asked workers to rank their favorite perks, food for work topped the list – even above flexible work arrangements and education benefits. That number may seem surprising, but at ezCater, we're used to

hearing how powerful food can be to motivate and engage teams at work.

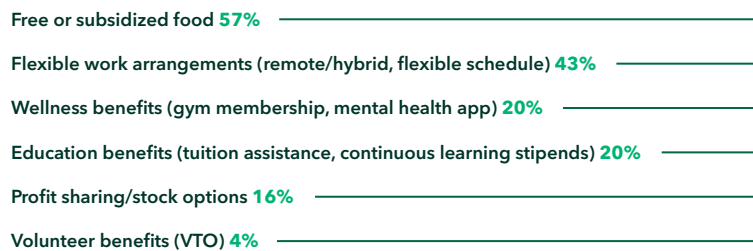
Our research revealed four main reasons that food for work has such an outsized impact on businesses today:

1. Food motivates attendance
2. Food improves performance and productivity
3. Food helps with hiring and retention
4. Food increases engagement

All of these benefits stem from the simple fact that from the employees' point of view, food is the number one perk.

Employees say free food is the #1 work perk

Which of these perks do you appreciate the most?





“Providing free lunch is probably one of our most exciting perks. When we’re hiring, it’s something we promote. Not a lot of companies provide lunch five days a week, so when people hear that, it’s kind of like a jaw-dropper.”

Melissa Allinder, Office Operations Manager, NorthPoint Development

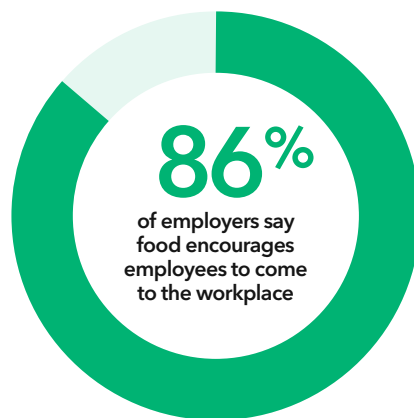
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Feed them and they will come

Given the variety of remote and hybrid options available to workers today, companies looking to create a vibrant in-person culture know they need to “earn the commute” – and food for work can play a huge role.

It turns out that encouraging onsite attendance by making the office more attractive is more effective than enforcing strict policies, and our data shows that offering free, catered meals is an impactful way to do that.

In addition, a recent [Gallup study](#) suggests that workers find virtual meetings less effective than in-person meetings, and companies report increased attendance at just about any meeting where there’s food. ezCater data also reveals they also feel more productive when food is provided. Meeting-centric food can incentivize in-person attendance and boost productivity.



“Food literally has brought people to the office. They love working around the schedules for our set catering days because not only is the food delicious and they love the variety of options, but they also like to be together, creating friendships and memories.”

Samantha Riley, Administrative Assistant, Vor Biopharma



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Food fuels performance and productivity

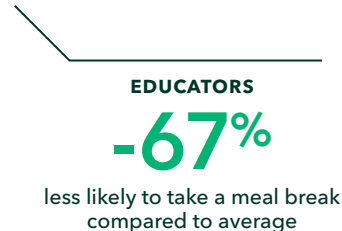
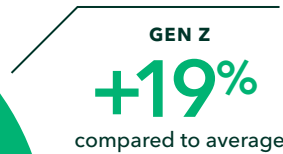
Giving employees the fuel they need to perform at their best pays off: our data shows that more than half of workers feel more productive when provided with food, and younger workers are even more likely to say so. One likely factor for their added productivity? Less time spent traveling to get lunch.

45% of workers say they sometimes spend their meal breaks traveling to get food.

Cutting down or eliminating that travel time lets workers enjoy the mental break that lunch

provides, refuel their bodies, and enjoy a more productive second half of the day.

And it's not just the quantity of work that's impacted – it's the quality, too. Just having a break can help: 30% of workers say they rarely get away from their workstation for a meal, which could lead to burnout or lowered productivity. Food becomes even more essential in industries where a lack of focus or energy could lead to dangerous consequences, like construction or manufacturing.



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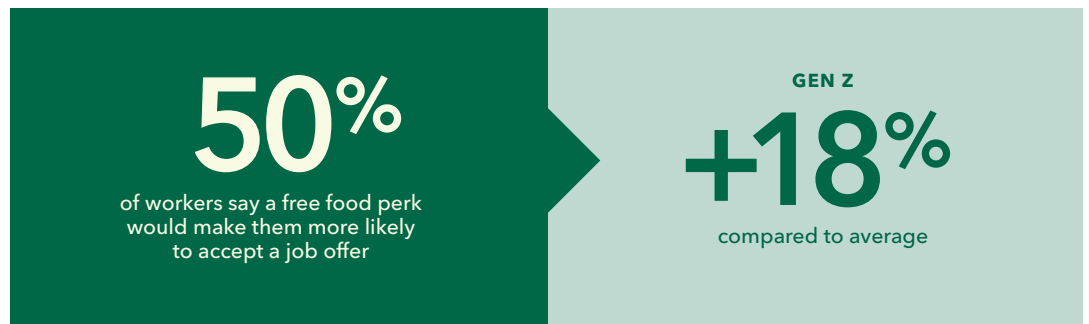
Food helps with hiring

Food doesn't just fill stomachs – it fills open positions. And given the hiring challenges many employers are facing, that's a significant benefit. A recent survey by [Manpower Group](#) shows that 75% of US employers are struggling to hire the workers they need.

The workers in our survey highlighted the availability of free food as a significant contributor to employment decisions.

Don't forget to showcase your free food

Employees say free food is their favorite perk, but only 43% of companies mention free coffee, meals, or snacks during the recruiting process. Since food can help with hiring, make sure it's called out on job listings, careers pages, and in hiring conversations.



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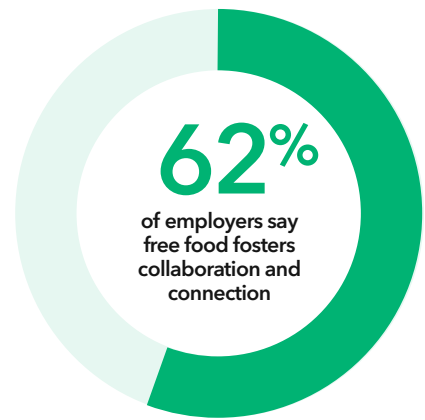
Food increases engagement and retention

Even as businesses rely more on apps and devices to communicate, they're realizing how important in-person interaction is for creating meaningful connections and engagement.

Research from [Gallup](#) shows that companies with a more engaged workforce are 21% more profitable than those with less engaged workers, and that unengaged employees are 18% less productive than engaged workers.

Food for work can provide an opportunity to build connections that lead to engagement.

Boosting engagement can also help with retention. Companies with highly engaged employees have 59% less turnover than those with less engaged workers, also according to [Gallup](#) research.





**"[With catered lunch]
it's like, 'I can get to
know you as we're
sitting across from each
other eating,' and that's
making us more effective
in our meetings."**

Brian Norman, Software Engineer, SeatGeek

Why food for work is the #1 perk

Enhanced productivity, engagement, and retention – it all clearly adds up to great ROI for employers. But why do employees value food for work so highly? They told us it relieves stress, makes them feel valued, and helps relieve some of the financial burden of coming to work.

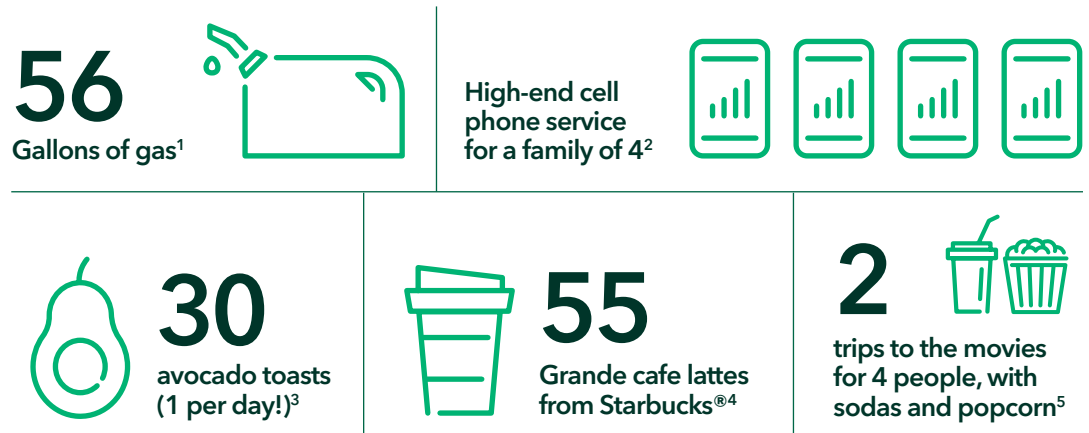
The cost of doing business

A key reason free food is such a popular perk is that the day-to-day expense of lunch adds up. **63% of respondents say they spend at least \$10 per lunch**, meaning that a full-time onsite employee spends at least \$200 per month when they have to provide lunch for themselves.

For individuals, not pulling out their wallet is noticeable and meaningful. For businesses, though, the expense is relatively low, especially when compared to other perks that can be less noticeable to employees.

The most common per person food budget reported by employers in our survey is \$14 – \$16 per meal. If it costs \$3,600 per year to feed a full-time employee every day, that’s a year of appreciation for a relatively small investment. It’s also a perk that’s almost universally used, so every employee is appreciative.

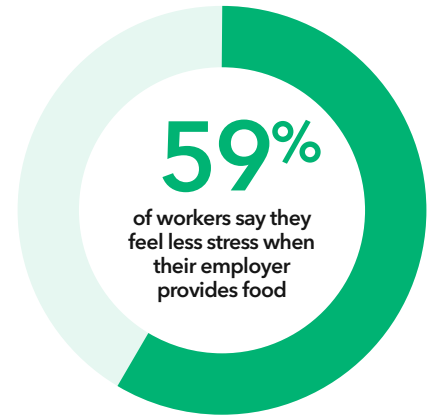
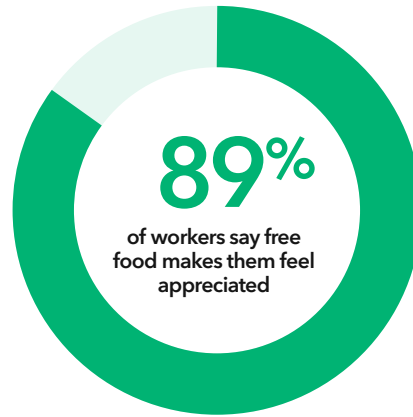
\$200 per month could buy:



¹AAA
²Tom's Guide
³Time
⁴Fast Food Menu Prices
⁵Movie Theater Prices and The Numbers

The feel-good factor of free food

It's not just about saving money and time. Employees simply want to be valued by their employers, and food is a great way to do that.



What's on the menu?

Companies looking to find success by offering this valuable perk should start by understanding the fundamentals. The first question: What do people want to eat at work?

People want to eat healthy

The majority of employees want access to healthier food during their work day, but most aren't finding those options. Only 34% say they eat healthy food at work, and younger people – perhaps pinched by finances or

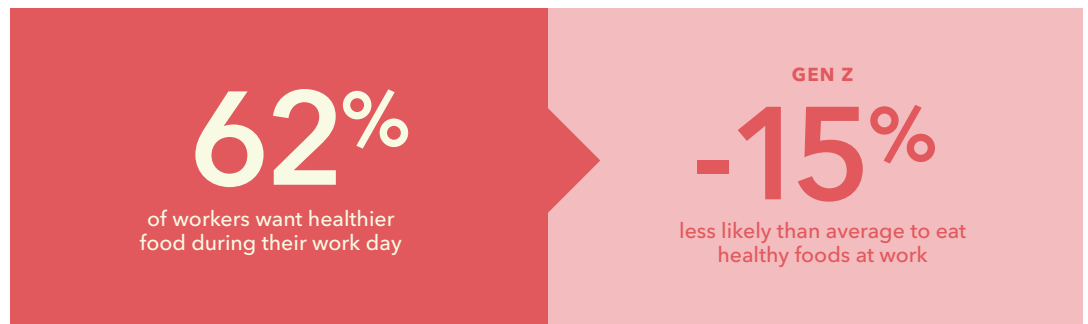
time constraints – are even less likely to. Members of Gen Z were 15% less likely than average to say they eat healthy foods at work.

It's not just younger workers who tend to eat less healthy food. Employees who can't easily access food at work also wind up skipping meals or eating fast food, snacks, or vending machine food. This could be due to a lack of time to travel, a remote location, transportation challenges, or simply working in an industry where breaks are limited, such as education.

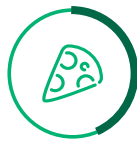


Women are **21% more likely** to replace meals with snacks.

Workers without access to food make less healthy eating choices



61%
eat snacks for meals



43%
eat less healthy foods



40%
sometimes skip meals



17%
often rely on vending machines or convenience stores

Most prefer individually packaged meals

Given the choice, a clear majority of workers say they'd prefer individually packaged meals over shared tray catering.

In a post-COVID environment, most food for work orderers seem to understand this. At ezCater, individually packaged orders peaked during COVID, and usage remains high. Two out of three companies surveyed say they plan to keep ordering individual packaging at the same rate (or higher) than they do today.

Dietary needs matter more than ever

Whether for health, environmental, religious, or other reasons, eaters today have a

wide variety of specific dietary concerns. Workplaces ordering food need to account for a range of common needs, including low-carb, vegetarian, dairy-free, low-fat, gluten-free, and more.

Thinking outside the (lunch)box

Breakfast is now the most searched term on ezCater, showing a rise in catering interest beyond lunch. Whether employers are trying to increase attendance by expanding meal options or just having more breakfast meetings, it's worth noting that breakfast catering usually has a lower per-person cost, so it's a great way to treat the office to a catered meal on a smaller budget.



65%

of workers prefer individually packaged meals



35%

prefer shared tray catering

"We place such an emphasis on being an inclusive campus, and being inclusive is not just about who you are. It's about what you eat. ezCater has so many different options, whether you're looking for a brisket, or if you're a vegetarian, vegan, or gluten-free. We want to make sure that we're catering to all of that."

Sarayu Sundar, Associate Director of Student Experience at Rice University School of Business

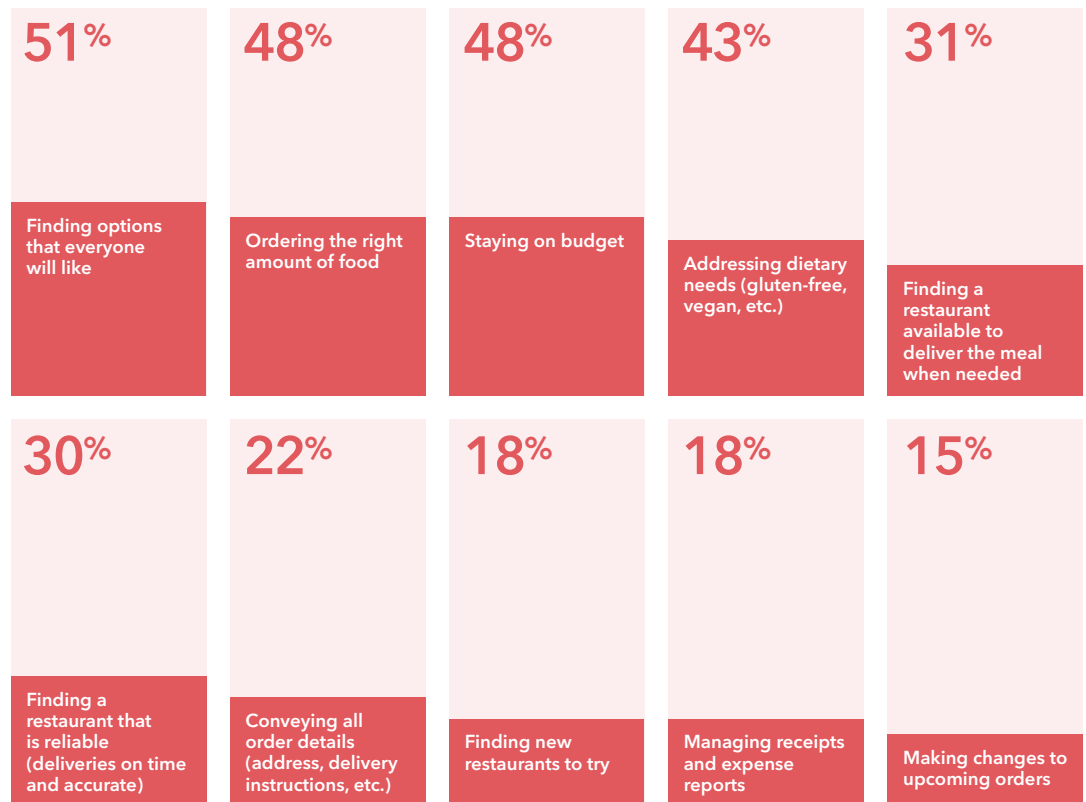


Overcoming food for work challenges

Managing a food for work program at an office or other workplace can be surprisingly complex, thanks to fluctuating headcounts, time-consuming invoicing and billing processes, and a wide variety of dietary preferences.

In addition, ordering food for work is a high-stakes job. It has to arrive on time, as ordered: mistakes or confusion can impact business outcomes and damage professional reputations. Here are the top challenges, according to food orderers.

Top ten challenges when ordering food for work:



It's hard to please all palates

51% of respondents say that finding options everyone will like is the biggest challenge they face, and 43% struggle with being able to handle specific dietary needs.

Getting portion size right takes practice (or guidance)

Almost half of orderers (48%) struggle with ordering the right amount of food to feed their crowd. Estimating portion sizes for different restaurants and cuisines isn't easy, and orderers need to avoid both running out of food and wasting money and food by over-ordering.

Budgets and paperwork waste valuable time

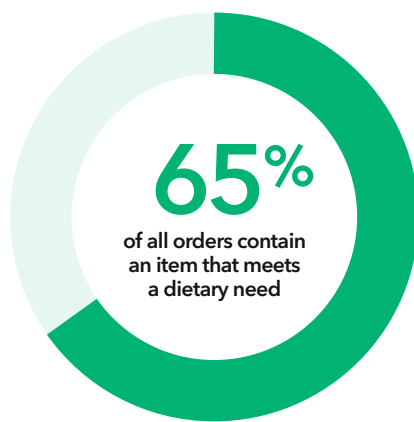
While budgets are increasing overall, people ordering food for work still need to make

sure they're meeting their employees' needs without breaking the bank: 59% say the cost for food, delivery, and fees is one of the most important factors in decision-making. And then, there's the paperwork. 70% of food orderers are responsible for expense reports or processing payments for food or meals provided.

Food needs to arrive on time and as ordered

56% of orderers are focused on reliability, with 31% saying it's hard to find restaurants that can deliver what they need when they need it. Unhappy eaters can translate into lost business deals, unsatisfied employees, and ultimately, damaged reputations.

Meeting dietary needs is a top concern for orderers



ezCater order data

Most common dietary preferences in business orders

49%
Vegetarian

39%
Gluten-free

35%
Vegan

20%
Dairy-free

14%
Nut-free

9%
Kosher

The help businesses need is here

Given all these challenges, getting started with food for work can seem overwhelming. Fortunately, ezCater, the most trusted provider of corporate food solutions, is helping companies get business-grade catering right. ezCater makes the whole process as easy as possible for any size group, with access to over 100,000 restaurants nationwide and award-winning customer service.

On ezCater, you can:

- Estimate order and portion sizes
- Ensure deliveries arrive on time, as ordered
- Filter food options by employees' dietary needs
- Simplify expense reporting and billing
- Create menus that fit your budget

[LEARN HOW EZCATER CAN HELP YOUR BUSINESS >](#)



"ezCater takes the work out of calling restaurants and finding the ones that can handle a large order and coordinate the process. It's so helpful. Sometimes that's the biggest headache."

Courtney Gallagher, MS, RD, CSSD, LD, Assistant Director of Performance, Nutrition, Athletics Department, Texas A&M University

The continued evolution of food for work

While some food for work shifts started during COVID, the impact has reverberated far beyond. Here's a look at some other trends and developments enhancing the role of food in the workplace.

Moving beyond the traditional office

Traditional offices have long put an emphasis on food for work, from onsite cafeterias to catered lunch programs. But as the value that food provides becomes clearer, employer-provided meals and snacks are expanding to other industries and use cases.

Here are a few examples we've seen at ezCater:

- A retailer ordering food for multiple shifts to celebrate hitting store goals
- A major-league sports team ordering healthy meals for the team on the road
- A medical residency program ordering meals for required meetings
- A construction company ordering cold smoothies for the crew on a hot day

Supporting ESG and DEI goals

A thoughtfully managed food for work program can help businesses with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals, including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

Government offices and educational institutions, for example, may be required to order from local, independent restaurants, or those owned by women, veterans, or other underrepresented groups. Other businesses may simply want to order from such restaurants to support their community.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) may want to celebrate holidays or heritage months by ordering specific cuisines or restaurant choices. And, accommodating the dietary requirements of various religions and cultures can help foster a more inclusive environment and sense of belonging.

Food for work: Making a difference that can't be ignored

The data paints a clear picture: feeding employees creates real value for businesses at an affordable cost. As hiring becomes more challenging, productivity becomes more critical, and just getting the team into the office becomes an ongoing issue, a food for work program can provide benefits for companies of all kinds.

As we've shown in this report,

1. Food motivates attendance, productivity, and engagement – driving business results
2. Employer-provided food is a powerful and cost-effective perk with great ROI for hiring & retention

3. There are many different ways to provide food to employees depending on a company's needs and work environment
4. Food for work continues to evolve and can help a wide variety of workplaces with a broad range of challenges

Food for work isn't just a nice-to-have – it's a must-have. Smart companies should adopt food for work programs now if they haven't already – or expand what they have to get even more value.



About ezCater

ezCater is the most trusted provider of corporate food solutions.

With over 100,000 restaurants across the US on its platform, ezCater provides flexible and scalable food solutions for everything from recurring employee meals to one-off events such as sales calls and board meetings.

ezCater is purpose-built for food for work and supported by best-in-class customer service, enabling companies to centralize and manage their food spend in a single, customizable platform.

