

ensuring face masks are worn, and reminding people of social distancing (to name just a few cautions).

But when people are ready to eat, what does this tightly controlled environment look like? Can visits to restaurants or the comings and goings of food-delivery drivers throw a wrench into the best-laid plans? How can your staff be encouraged to enjoy their breaks within the safe space that your return-to-work committees have worked so hard to create?

This article aims to answer common questions while outlining how a well-managed food-service plan can promote a healthy environment.

Food is not the problem; behavior is critical

Consistently stated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Food & Drug Administration (FDA), COVID-19 is not a food-borne illness. While our industry has been encouraged by this, we cannot let our guard down. In the back and front of the house, clear guidelines are needed to promote healthy behavior.

In the back of the house, strict adherence to safety procedures has always been the modus operandi in well-run kitchens. The food-service industry is heavily regulated by the government and teams are accustomed to following strict procedures. New rules related to COVID-19 are relatively simple additions to the foundation of back-of-the-house discipline.

During the uncertainties of a pandemic, there is comfort to be found in structure at the front of the house. Trader Joe's, for example, is great inspiration from another industry. Associates and customers partner in following procedures that are clearly spelled out from the moment one approaches the front door. In much the same way, a well-managed food-at-work program should instill confidence in a workforce with trained staff proactively promoting a safe environment through set guidelines.

As corporate food-service providers and workplaces plan to relaunch services, food-related health and safety considerations can be broken down into the following overarching categories:

1. Ensure everyone onsite is healthy and protected.

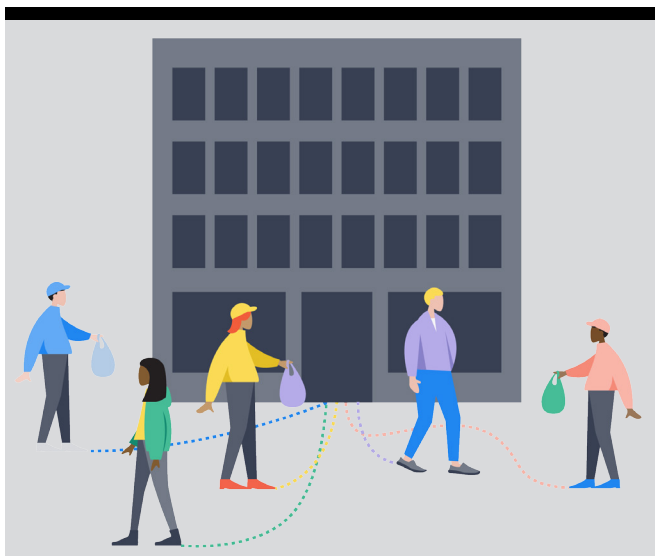


2. Promote social distancing during mealtimes.
3. Reduce contact with surfaces and sanitize frequently.
4. Address customer emotions so people feel safe and comfortable during meals.

Ensuring everyone onsite is healthy and protected

The following are generally found within the broader category of protecting people inside the workplace; however, they are still important to highlight as components of food-at-work best practices:

- Temperature checks are recommended for each person entering the facility (including food service workers), with 100.4°F/38°C and above considered to be fever level by the CDC. The Society for Human Resource Management provides detailed guidance on the specifics of planning and executing a temperature-check policy.
- The importance of handwashing should be heavily stressed, with instructions clearly explained in writing. Hand sanitizer should be readily available within the food-service area.
- Face masks should be worn by food-service employees, regardless of whether they are required as part of the workplace organization's broader personal-protective equipment (PPE) policy or not. Due to the nature of the job, food-service workers are prone to being in close proximity. The use of masks also helps instill confidence



among customers, especially if masks worn by people serving food are uniformly consistent or branded.

To avoid weak links in the chain, the contact your team has with others during the workday should be limited to people who adhere to your organization’s protocols as they relate to health screenings and the use of PPE. This should be a consideration when creating guidelines for employees exiting the building for their meals (i.e., take-out, and dine-in) and interacting with visiting delivery drivers.

Promoting social distancing during mealtimes

Commonly accepted social-distancing practices should, of course, be applied consistently throughout the workday, with broader policies addressing break rooms and dining areas. Specific mealtime considerations related to how and where food is served are covered here.

- Posters and floor markings should be used to promote social distancing. When we are hungry, the rules can go out the window, which is why visual cues are especially important during mealtimes.
- Consider time slots or reservations for meals. One simple way to do this is to assign times according to the first letter of an associate’s name.
- Made-to-order scenarios like grills and omelet bars in cafeterias should temporarily convert to an order-ahead system whenever possible.

- Multiple one-off food deliveries bring more people into the office. The coming and going of delivery drivers contributes to crowding in elevators and other common areas. To limit exposure in workplaces that choose to permit deliveries, employees should be encouraged to team up in placing bulk orders and meet their drivers outside the building.
- Leaving the building to visit restaurants for dine-in or take-out creates another period of heavy foot traffic in lobbies and elevator banks, the potential need to retake temperatures, and exposure to other people within facilities that have varied safety protocols.

Providing appealing in-house food options and subsidizing meals (even partially) are two strong ways to encourage team members to remain within the safe environment your team has worked so hard to provide. As with any business decision, costs should be weighed against benefits and risks.

Reducing contact with surfaces and sanitizing frequently

As clarified by the CDC on May 22, people can get the virus by touching a contaminated surface and then placing their hands on their nose or mouth; however, “this isn’t thought to be the main way the virus spreads.” While somewhat reassuring for the general population, by no means should this be a reason to discount the importance of keeping surfaces clean (always an important practice). Surface contact should still be limited, too, whenever possible. With that in mind, we recommend the following:

- Turn off self-checkout kiosks and place high-touch, unmonitored self-service areas on hold. Utilize trained staff members to serve items like soup, salad, and coffee.
- Food packaging should be wipeable and sealable, and cutlery should be individually wrapped.
- Food-service providers should sanitize surfaces on a regular basis, using disinfectants approved by the EPA for use against COVID-19.

In addition to keeping everyone as safe as possible, these practices can instill confidence in a post-lockdown world.

Addressing customer emotions so people feel safe and comfortable during meals

From how we interact with others to what we appreciate in life, we return to the workplace with a changed perspective of the outside world. Food, which often triggers sense-memories, is no exception. When handled correctly, mealtimes can be an opportunity to positively engage employees and boost morale.

- Food-service providers have the opportunity to put their customers at ease by highlighting all safety practices and being transparent in answering any questions.
- The sense of sterility from face masks is a double-edged sword. While they help us feel safe, masks also obscure facial expressions. Food-service staff should be encouraged to be especially friendly in tone and remember that it is possible to smile with your eyes. Name tags with a smiling picture can also help convey the human aspect.
- People are empathetic towards those most impacted by the pandemic. Food-service workers have been on the frontlines. Providing the option to leave a tip or recognizing staff members in internal communications like newsletters are great ways to help them feel appreciated.
- There is a strong social movement in most communities to support local businesses. Employers can take part in many ways – from procuring pastries from local bakeries for breakfast to inviting in local restaurants to serve lunch.
- After cooking at home for months, people are craving quality and variety in their meals. Employers should ask their food-service providers to offer meals that people will genuinely look forward to.

Employees are stepping outside of their comfort zone in order to enter the workplace. They will not only need to feel secure, but also appreciated. Food will always be a great way to keep people happy and engaged.

Getting (re)started

The bulleted points in this article can serve as key topics to bring up with your food-service provider as you plan to reopen your workplace. Since so much is still unknown about the months ahead, nothing should be written in stone. Not everyone will return to the office at once and population numbers will, understandably, fluctuate. Ask for flexibility wherever possible and see if your food-service provider can be creative in how they scale up over time through an adjustable, phased approach.

For workplaces with full-service cafeterias, it will not be feasible to relaunch operations until returning population levels reach a critical mass. But again, people still need to eat. As an example of how to feed smaller teams in these scenarios, Foda has placed temporary visiting-restaurant popup stations in the buildings where we manage cafeterias. Trained and certified local restaurant staffs bring fresh, authentic food and serve it during a two-hour window, following strict health and safety guidelines. Rotating the schedule of restaurants visiting on a daily basis provides a high degree of variety so employees are less inclined to want to venture outside the building. In many cases (but not all), employers subsidize a portion of the purchase for their teams as a token of appreciation for being onsite. As populations increase, additional popup stations are added until the cafeteria can reopen fully.

The global pandemic has created the need to make countless changes in the workplace. As we all know, necessity breeds innovation. Fodder for another article, it will be interesting to see how food at work will continue to evolve, even after COVID-19 is far behind us.



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