

Water—the office hero

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The culture of grabbing something quick to eat amid a mounting pile of to-dos at work often leads to making the wrong decisions when searching for something to eat in the workplace. Unplanned cake offerings and the emergence of 'food altars' – central places for leftovers from work meetings or unhealthy snacks present workers with a never-ending stream of choice. A recent study in the journal *Food, Culture & Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* reveals water to be the main redeemer of 'negative nutrition' in the workplace.

With reports of vitamin deficiency, heart disease, obesity and chronic illness and diabetes resulting from unhealthy eating patterns, many individuals are increasingly conscientious about what they eat limiting foods high in sugar, salt and fat, counting calories carefully. Researchers, Carolyn Thomas, Jennifer Sedell, Charlotte Biltekoff and Sara Schaefer explore eating habits in the workplace where "individuals frequently navigate treacherous food choice landscapes during the working day." How much self-control do individuals exert at work in relation to food? 25 office workers at the University of California, Davis recorded what they ate and where they consumed the food in a 24 hour period, rating their choices in terms of goodness and healthiness.

According to the study, it is not always possible to plan, buy, prepare and pack a selection of foods in advance of going in the workplace. It requires work and effort to eat healthily. Workplace eating is not just the procurement and preparation of food, it is far more complicated, 'invisible efforts.' Dietary goals for participants at work include: minimising carbohydrates avoiding fried food, calories and portion size.

The study demonstrates a matrix of food decision making, eating the correct foods can maximise work performance as does feeling good about choices made. Often skills required for a job such as patience, focus and diplomacy can be fuelled by the food eaten to enable the body and mind to function at optimal capacity. The authors note that "the wrong kind of fuel can derail the whole day." One example is from Karen whose morning muffin made her feel sleepy and sapped her energy levels.

The study examines the deterioration and amount of labour that goes into attempting to choose well or failing to select the right food in the workplace. Control is a big factor in workplace eating. Kevin who brings a packed lunch to work comments, "you control yourself much better when you dictate what you put in your lunch." However, encountering unplanned foods in common places can break down the best of intentions. One worker avoids buying treats at home, she comments, "I eat stuff that I like and I eat stuff that I see," but she cannot control the food types that appear in the workplace. The best of planners may prepare wholesome food to bring with them to work but even they cannot prepare for the birthday cake that magically appears in the afternoon or the scones that turn up at a meeting. One participant revealed that contemplating eating an unhealthy treat may sometimes occupy two hours of a morning meeting. The study shows that a lot of energy and time is dedicated to negotiating a myriad of feelings related to food at work.

The authors analyse the coined phrase, "food altar" - that spot where birthday cakes, leftover breakfast buffets, and other donated food wind up. These common zones account for the "majority of unconscious, unplanned and unhealthful eating decisions in the working day." Each act of passing through the altar requires thinking through the eating option challenging the ability for controlled choice. The authors state that their research "tracks the creative ways in which office workers

navigate the daily gauntlet of food altars, candy dishes, and other unexpected food offerings. For many, the solution is a fluid regularly referenced as a three-word incantation: '[water](#), water, water!'"

Water emerged as one of the most critical consumables in the research project. Repeatedly over 24 hours, the water cooler was always mentioned. For the workers placed in a vortex of unpredictability, the water bottle provides stability, offering a sense of control in unplanned conditions. Many workers drank water because it was available and easily accessible. Those who don't drink water at home, drank water at work. Water offered not only hydration, pleasurable taste or quality but it was also valued for encouraging movement within the workplace and viewed as a deterrent to avoid certain foods. Tom, a participant of the study said, "I'm thirsty but I drink water so that I won't snack as much." Water redeems the workplace food geography and "it is ultimately the same things that make the food landscape treacherous, that makes the water landscape so enjoyable."

Navigating [workplace food](#) choices requires mental labour, careful planning, calculations of calorie, carbohydrate and fat intake and their effects on work performance. Water provides the opportunity to make a positive nutrition choice.

More information: Abundance, Control and Water! Water! Water!: The Work of Eating at Work, [DOI: 10.1080/15528014.2016.1178533](https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2016.1178533)

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