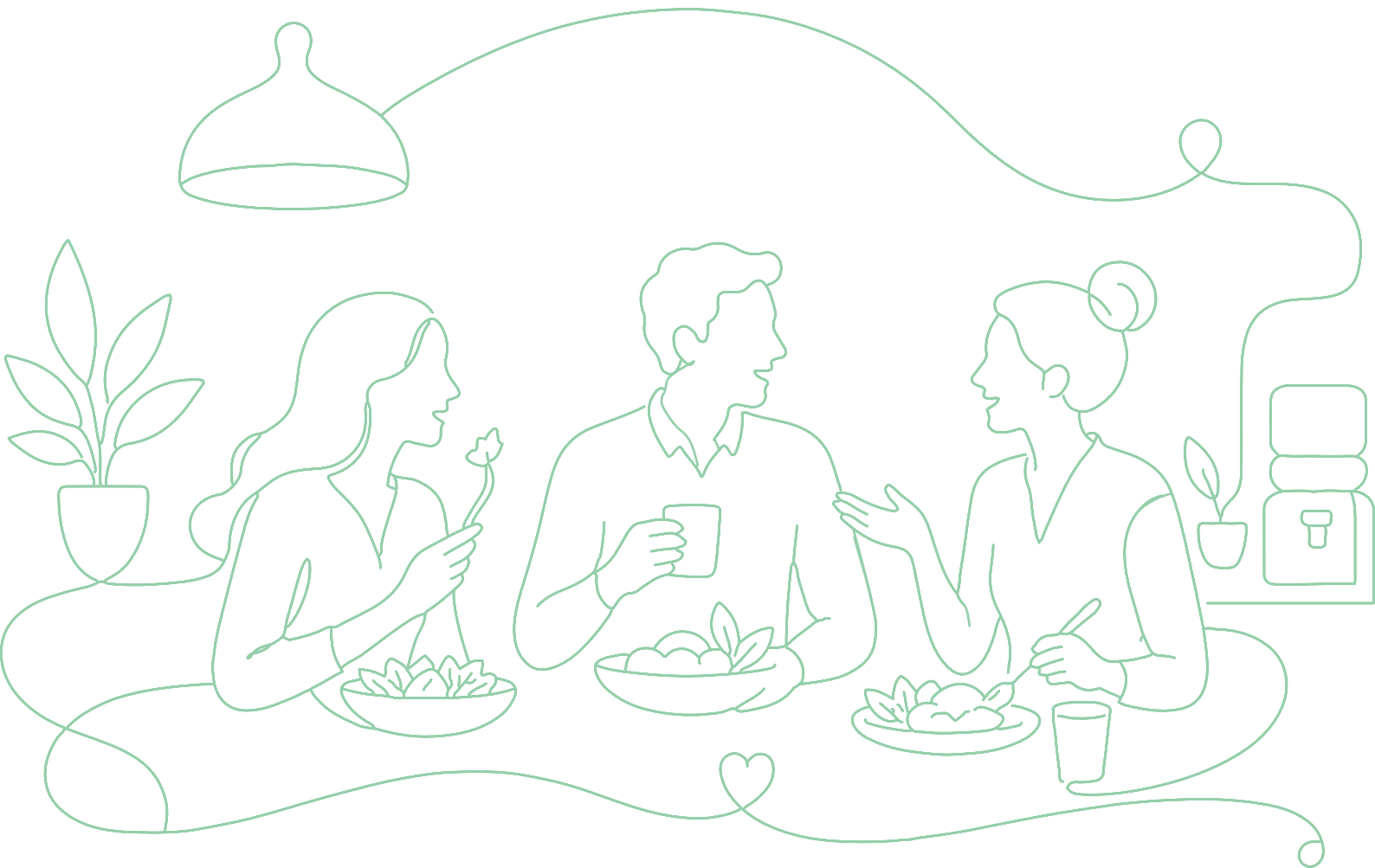


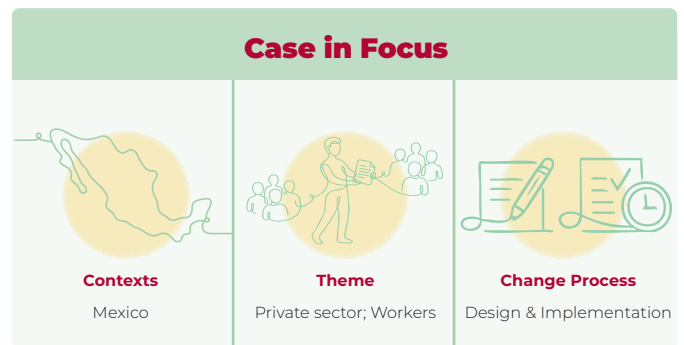
LEVERAGING THE POWER OF EMPLOYERS: A COMPANY LEADING THE CHARGE ON WORK-FORCE NUTRITION IN MEXICO



The workplace can be an important environment to influence nutrition and food choices. This case study examines the potential to use workplaces and employers as leverage points for improving nutrition and fostering larger food system shifts by considering efforts made by a leading global food company, headquartered in Mexico. It shows how companies can act to implement nutrition-supporting changes for their employees – and through this play a greater role in food system transformation.

Motivation

Many different sectors and actors have a role to play in food systems transformation; among these, employers are often overlooked. Yet adults can spend over two-thirds of their waking hours at work, making the workplace an important environment to influence health, knowledge, and choices, including those related to food. Investing in nutrition can yield benefits for workers in terms of better health and wellbeing, and for the employer in terms of worker motivation, performance, and reduced absenteeism. They can also have wider consequences: as large purchasers, companies can play a major role in influencing supply chains, and the knowledge and habits workers acquire in the workplace can percolate into their lives outside of work, potentially also influencing their families' food choices and health. Food companies have a particular opportunity here: by supporting their workers' nutrition, they can help to demonstrate their company's commitment to better nutrition for consumers, as well. This case study examines the experience of a multinational food company with supporting its workers' nutrition.



Case Study Context

In the context of the case study, 'workforce nutrition (WFN) programmes' refer to interventions to improve workers' nutrition within the work setting, including providing healthy food at work, educating workers on nutrition topics, providing access to health screening and counselling, and/or supporting breastfeeding at work. The focus is on Grupo Bimbo – a multinational food-producing and -distributing company operating in 39 countries. Grupo Bimbo was founded in 1945 and has over 100 brands, employing over 152,000 staff, with its headquarters in Mexico. Nutrition is a top health concern in Mexico, where over two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese. Bimbo was chosen as a case study because of the longevity, breadth, and successes of its WFN efforts. It can be seen as a particularly successful case of company-led WFN; indeed, the company has been ranked among the World's Best Employers and World's Most Ethical Companies.

The case study is based on six interviews conducted in 2025 with company staff involved with WFN and related wellbeing initiatives. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed; they were complemented by document review.

This case study was developed as part of the 'Exemplars of Food System Change' project of the Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which seeks to document examples of food system transformation in action and explore what enables and holds back change. You can access the full report for this case study at <https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.69>, and all the case studies here: <https://www.gainhealth.org/exemplars>

RESULTS

A flexible approach developed considering workers' voices

Bimbo's WFN approach has two main components: healthy canteens and nutrition communication and education. It also provides some support for nutrition-related health checks, such as through an annual Health Week that offers staff access to low-cost lab tests (including nutrition-related ones, such as blood glucose), and breastfeeding—which company policy refers to as a 'human right'.

The Healthy Canteens programme seeks to provide all workers with access to a balanced diet. Healthy menus are a daily, optional alternative to the standard menus and prioritise vegetables, fruit, and legumes and water as the beverage of choice while limiting fried, battered, or breaded food to only once a month, with limited added salt, sugar, and fat. While menus are based on best practices, flexibility is also central: concerted efforts are made to avoid healthiness compromising taste, and menus are adapted to reflect local food heritage and context. While hard data are lacking, anecdotal reports suggest the healthy menus are chosen by about half of workers. Both menus are partly subsidised by Bimbo, and a somewhat higher subsidy is provided for the healthy menu, resulting in prices perceived by interviewees as 'very affordable.'

The path to adoption wasn't always smooth, though. Staff described the process of gaining support for the Healthy Canteens as 'frustrating' and 'quite challenging', with colleagues fearing that healthy menus would mean tasteless ones. Concessionaires who operated canteens were particularly concerned about their bottom lines, seeing healthy menus as not sellable. A long process of sensitisation, with arguments grounded in worker wellbeing, was needed to convince key stakeholders to come on board.

Being flexible, co-creating, and centring workers were central to a successful design of the approach:



“Find someone locally who knows how to cook, who has that special touch, but add healthy ingredients. We're not fighting against the food culture of each area. We just want to complement it with healthy ingredients. If I really like tacos, let's make some taquitos with roast beef or roast chicken breast. And then you add your pico de gallo and your avocado and your beans and your soup.

[E]ven though you are the guide for the programmes, take off your expert hat and listen to people, listen to the leaders in the workplace, listen to the union, if applicable, listen to the employees and then adapt.

A similar flexibility is embodied in the company's nutrition education approach, which recognises the complex forces that shape food choices. Audiences are offered multiple entry points into the idea of 'eating well' – of physical benefits, emotional benefits, performance, taste, culture, environmental sustainability, responsible consumption, and similar. This seems to have helped broaden the resonance of messages and reduce resistance to messaging that leans too heavily in one direction, such as 'healthy eating' (which may trigger fears of pressure to lose weight) or 'workforce nutrition' (which may be perceived as prioritising business benefits). The messaging is also flexible in terms of platform. Messages on an electronic internal communication channel is the main outlet, but information is also adapted for use in physical spaces like bakeries, where staff do not necessarily have access to computers, and leaflets, infographics, expert talks, workshops, and a telephone line are also offered. The 'messengers' are also varied – from company leaders, through scientific experts, to peers. However, the company's diversity and scale can make it difficult to ensure inclusive approaches that are also consistent across settings.

Evidence-based and evidence-generating

The design of Bimbo's WFN programme is evidence-based. The 'healthy eating plate' guidance is used to design evidence-based menus, and Bimbo has developed its own Global Healthy Canteen Checklist and Standard, with 35 mandatory and 5 desirable points, that it applies across workplaces. Worksite-level statistics on health indicators have been used to convince Canteen Committees to adopt healthier menus, and data-based situational diagnoses (e.g., with data on local nutrition context and business-related health outcomes, like absenteeism) feed into planning location-specific programmes. There are also checklists and inspections for canteens and breastfeeding rooms, and staff can provide feedback through comment boxes and surveys. All this data flows to supervisory staff – who have a culture of using results to produce action plans, with high expectations that they are followed. Bimbo created its own Global Well-Being Observatory with the goal of measuring, in a more comprehensive, centralised way, the impact of organisational wellbeing activities (including WFN) across its 39 countries. At present, rigorous data on impact is limited, but work on revising indicators is underway.



A strong basis in company culture, with support all the way from the top

Bimbo's WFN approach, and broader wellbeing initiative, are founded in a key company principle: 'We value the person'. Interviewees described this as a core company philosophy, from founding to present, noting 'Our associates [staff members] must be treated with respect, fairness, trust and care, and this is our golden rule' and 'in all decisions, the person is always taken in deep consideration.' Staff wellbeing initiatives, including WFN, were linked to this belief, and interviewees felt this limited resistance to them among staff. While interviewees were also aware of the business bottom line – e.g., reducing staff turnover, increasing loyalty – improving wellbeing was seen as the foundational, and sufficient, justification for WFN.

The commitment of leaders, including the most senior amongst them, was perceived as crucial for advancing WFN and broader wellbeing initiatives at Bimbo. The company CEO and Executive Chairman were both seen as very committed to staff wellbeing. The CEO (who departed in November 2025) was a particular champion for nutrition, both externally and internally: improving the nutrition profile of Bimbo products and staff nutrition was a standing point on his agenda. He was seen by interviewees as having greatly helped 'to push these actions more, align them faster, with a very clear commitment'. This commitment, however, needed to be reinforced among local worksite leaders, some of whom had to climb a learning curve; accountability structures, with wellbeing staff being able to challenge leaders on progress, have helped to ensure this happens. In contrast to the strong internal support, WFN 'champion' roles played by external partners (e.g., university professors, health professionals, global experts) were limited.

Managing potential conflicts between product portfolio and workers' nutrition

Alongside nutritious foods, Bimbo produces foods that most healthy eating recommendations would describe as 'best to be consumed in moderation', such as cakes, pastries, and chips. In the company vocabulary, these products are part of its 'occasional portfolio'. Risks of conflicts of values or compromises of integrity with a WFN programme are thus high. For example, limiting staff access to certain of the company's products in canteens could cause staff to question the value of their work supporting these products.

In some ways, Bimbo's focus on food can reinforce WFN: the company's stated purpose is 'nourishing a better world', which can be directly connected to nourishing the workforce. Their in-house nutrition expertise and existing communications materials on food and nutrition facilitate staff outreach. And there are specific business benefits of nutrition education for the workforce – it could allow sales staff to sell Bimbo products more effectively, innovation staff to develop new products, and workers in general to be better company ambassadors.



...we do this [nutrition education] to strengthen and empower our employees, firstly so that they can be spokespersons for our products and ingredients, and secondly, so that they can make better choices about their diet.

They [the team within Bimbo] are the ones in charge of setting these goals for positive nutrition, fortification, portion control, and clean labelling. It's our job to inform them, just as we inform consumers and investors.



But there are also tensions. The company's portfolio containing 'occasional' or less healthy products can make it delicate for the company to engage with employees on healthy eating. It has necessitated some actions that may weaken the WFN programme's overall effectiveness, such as providing free or discounted Bimbo products in canteens. Partners who are overly strong in promoting information at odds with Bimbo's product portfolio—e.g., a nutritionist who recommended keto diets excluding bread—may be discouraged. Some staff may see company-provided research on nutrition as suspect due to its business interests. Business considerations can also shape which topics are prioritised in nutrition communication and education.

The interviews demonstrated that staff try to uphold integrity and transparency while navigating these tensions. Solutions are sought primarily through moderation, pragmatism, and 'nudge' approaches that foreground some (healthier) alternatives while still preserving access to others. For example, the healthy menu does not include desserts, and Bimbo's own products are not prominently positioned in the Healthy Canteens. This is guided by a philosophy of 'everything in moderation', with acceptance of occasional indulgence and individual choice. Scientific research is used to inform nutrition education, partially to counteract audiences' potential suspicion of bias. As one interviewee explained, '[staff might claim] "Oh, they're saying that because they sell it." So, what we try to do is just that, be objective with the information'. However, there were instances where the tensions remained or were resolved in line with business interests, such as hosting Bimbo 'El Globo' bakeries and cafés on company premises, with a large offering of 'occasional' foods.

The potential tension can also be motivator for broader change by the company. The nutritional quality of its product portfolio is currently evolving, with an intent to have cleaner labels and healthier products. While many factors driving this evolution are external, such as market demand or new regulations, preserving integrity is also a driver:



[W]e cannot talk about nutrition with our associates if we do not make a good advice in our portfolio, and... [how it] can be part of a healthy diet. We need to work in different lines of actions to also be transparent and credible with our different audiences. And one of ... the most important are our associates [staff].



Institutionalisation within company policies and structures

Nutrition is closely integrated in Bimbo's safety and wellbeing model, policies, and structures. 'Healthy diets' is one of the five 'pillars' of Bimbo's wellbeing model, alongside Physical Activity, Life Balance, Health, and Work-life. The approach is guided by 'a Bimbo wellbeing recipe': every employee needs to feel that they matter, that they belong, that they can, that they contribute, and that they are respected. There are also 'principles' through which wellbeing actions are put into place: conviction, confidentiality, flexibility, and collaboration.

Ten internal policies and strategies support staff wellbeing activities in Bimbo, including six directly referring to nutrition. This formal institutionalisation helped ensure the success of the WFN initiatives. Interviewees saw it as giving power, legitimacy, and reassurance that 'what we are doing is right', as well as providing specific guidelines on how to proceed—though they also acknowledged that implementation was 'the hard part' compared to policy-writing.



The policy gives you...the power to say, 'you have this responsibility,' it's enshrined in a policy. ... it is not what Dr [name] or so-and-so says, but rather it is a policy that the company supports. So, it gives you the power to have that responsibility to care, and it has an impact that is doubled than if we did not have that policy.



While one main team responsible for WFN at Bimbo (Safety & Well-being), specific WFN tasks are allocated to different parts of the company. For example, nutrition communication and education are led by the product R&D team, who have scientific knowledge on food and nutrition and may be seen as more objective than, for example, the marketing team. Overall, delegating across the company helps to align roles with skills and ensure broader buy-in and leverage. While Headquarters aims to ensure consistent approaches across the company, localisation and integration into specific worksites are led by local Well-Being Committees, which are instrumental in implementing WFN and broader wellbeing activities.

While this integration has generally been a positive force in supporting WFN, it can have downsides: nutrition-related activities compete for attention and resources with a broad range of other wellbeing activities, and there may be local differences in how much nutrition is prioritised within these.



Though not without challenges

While Bimbo overall has largely succeeded at developing and implementing a strong WFN programme, it has not been without challenges. A few of these related to broader norms and mindsets around nutrition and health. Some staff saw nutrition and health as being personal or private topics – not necessarily something an employer should be concerned with. Similarly, staff tended to avoid acting on nutrition and health issues, due to the urgency of other priorities, budget limitations, a tendency to take one’s health for granted, or fear of bad news. Health often needed to deteriorate significantly before action was taken. Some also took the WFN programmes for granted, leaving staff implementing them feeling the efforts were underappreciated. Communications and activities sometimes got lost amid information overload and lack of visibility. Despite the strong internal infrastructure, actual services (e.g., providing food for canteens or health checks for staff) were often outsourced to external providers; this could sometimes lead to uncertain quality or limited flexibility in meeting workers’ needs—which could undermine the programme’s reputation.



BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO CHANGE

ENABLERS

Implementation of workforce nutrition at Grupo Bimbo was facilitated by:

- *A strong company culture of ‘valuing the person’, with commitment from senior leadership*
- *Alignment with the company’s food focus*
- *Expansive internal structures and policies supporting staff wellbeing initiatives*
- *An evidence-based and data-driven approach*
- *Flexibility and diversity of activities*
- *Localisation, co-creation, and inclusion of diverse staff voices in design*
- *Ownership and supporting roles being spread across the company*

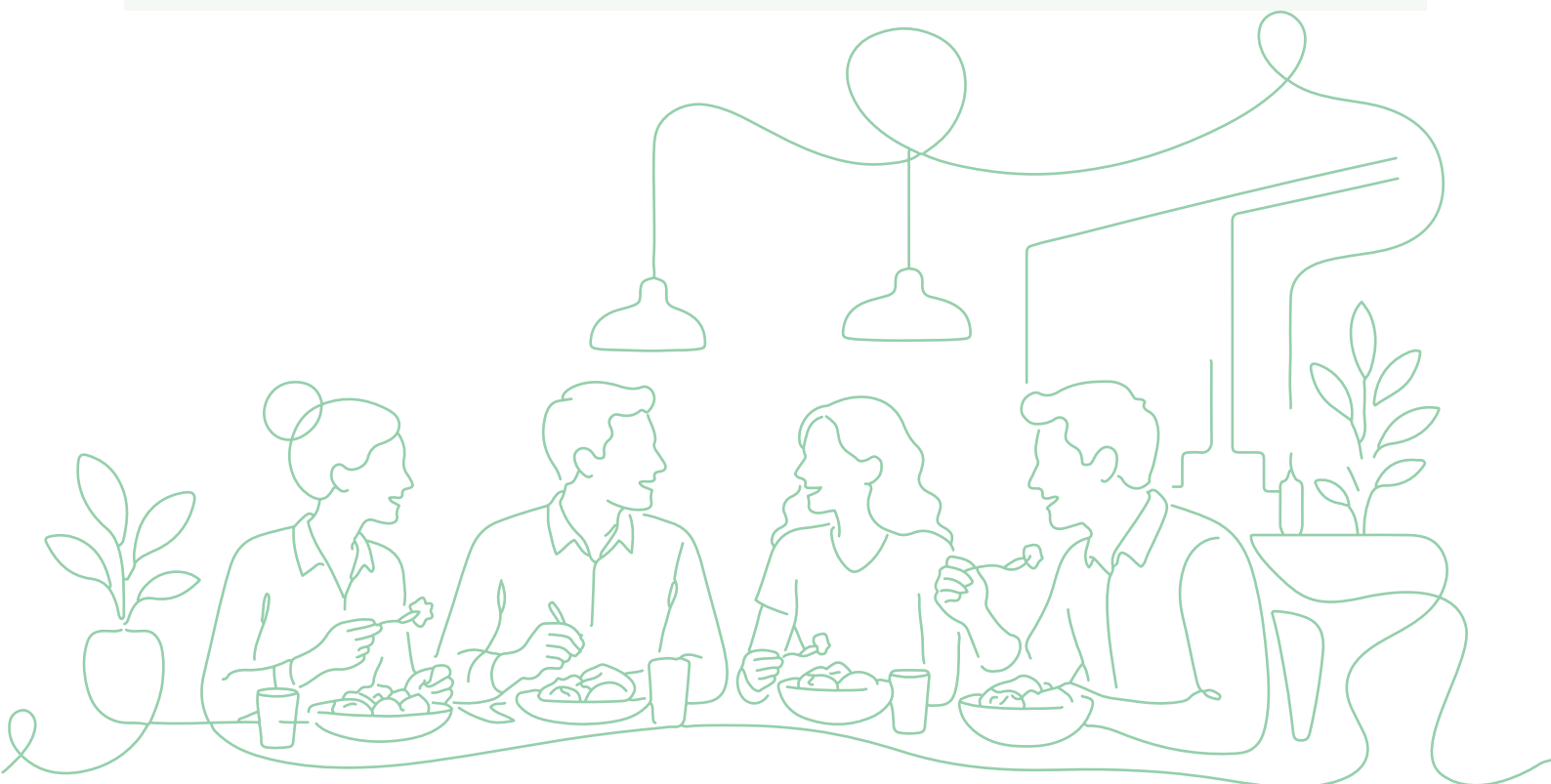
BARRIERS

Barriers it faced included:

- *Norms and biases around nutrition and health*
- *Tensions with the company’s ‘occasional’ product portfolio*
- *Challenges prioritising nutrition among other wellbeing topics*
- *Reliance on sometimes weaker external service providers*
- *Challenges collecting rigorous data on uptake and impact*

Conclusion

Workplaces and employers can be powerful leverage points for enacting changes, but they have been underemphasised in work on food system transformation. This case study examined the design and implementation of workforce nutrition approaches at Grupo Bimbo. The results showed the importance of a supportive company culture and infrastructure for worker wellbeing, flexible and data-driven approaches co-designed with staff, and spreading ownership and roles across the company. It also highlighted some potential barriers, such as tensions with the company's product portfolio and biases around nutrition. In addition, the potential of workplace interventions to foster truly systemic changes may be greater if adopting a broader 'food systems' approach, considering not only nutrition but also issues like environmental sustainability and equitable food supply chain practices; a company such as Bimbo has the potential to leverage not only its large purchasing power but also its own portfolio to motivate broader market-level shifts in practices.



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Sources:

Food Systems Dashboard Mexico Country Profile