THE EVIDENCE FOR WORKFORCE NUTRITION PROGRAMMES

#WorkforceNutrition
THE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY OF WORKFORCE NUTRITION PROGRAMMES

Workforce nutrition programmes are a compelling part of the solution to malnutrition. Working together, the private and public sectors can improve the health of global workforces and significantly reduce the global burden of malnutrition in a wide variety of settings. Workplaces are unique settings for nutrition interventions: they provide repeated interaction with a captive audience, a contained environment that can be modified, and the potential for significant returns on investment, making workforce nutrition a potentially sustainable investment.

This folder contains evidence reviews for programmes in the following four areas:

- Healthy food at work
- Nutrition education
- Nutrition-focused health checks
- Breastfeeding support

We chose these areas because they are featured most commonly in the literature and are easy to implement alongside other health and wellness programme components.

KEY STATISTICS

- 1 in 3 people are malnourished.
- 2 billion are overweight or obese.
- 800 million are chronically undernourished.
- 58% of the global population will spend at least 1/3 of their adult lives at work.

Figure 1: The effects of poor diets on work output

Effects of poor diets → Symptoms → Work impact

- **Poor quality diets (long term)**
  - Insufficient intake of essential nutrients over time, or imbalances in energy needs/intake result in micronutrient deficiencies and/or overweight/obesity and associated non-communicable disease, poor immune response, reduced cognitive function, a.o.

- **Insufficient food quantity (short term)**
  - Hunger or inadequate energy intake affects health and reduces physical abilities

- **Overall reduced work capacity of individuals**
  - Cognitive and physical impairments prevent individuals reaching full human capital

- **Household level**
  - Decreased capacity for household work including food preparation, childcare, and leisure

- **Workplace/Farm level**
  - Decreased economic productivity and earnings; increased absenteeism and presenteeism

- **National level**
  - Reduced GDP

- **Business level**
  - Loss of revenue due to absenteeism, turnover, low-productivity.

Figure 1: The effects of poor diets on work output. Model adapted by GAIN from Collins and Roberts, 1988, and additional links from subsequent research from Victora et al., 2008, Gibson, 2013, Hoddinott et al. 2013 and Drake and Walker, 2004, and Haas and Brownlie, 2001.
What are workforce nutrition programmes?
Workforce nutrition programmes are a set of interventions that work through the existing structures of the workplace - whether a corporate office or tea plantation - to address fundamental aspects of nutrition amongst employees or supply chain workers. Ideally, these programmes aim to create improved access to - and demand for - safe and nutritious food, with the aim of changing employees’ behaviours around food consumption, and to improve their health and wellbeing. Breastfeeding support programmes are included in this definition, as they enable working parents to provide adequate nutrition to their infants: this is an investment in the nutritional health of future workforces.

Why do businesses profit from workforce nutrition programmes?
The pathways linking malnutrition to reduced work capacity are well documented, as are the negative impacts of malnutrition on business returns. The impact of malnutrition on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is also well-documented. See Figure 1.

How do workforce nutrition programmes tackle malnutrition?
Workforce nutrition programmes have an impact at several points along the pathway linking poor diets to negative business returns (see Figure 2). The evidence suggests that improving immediate access to healthier daily meals bring positive changes to both short term cognitive functions and long term nutritional health. These interventions can bring long-term behaviour change if they are coupled with education strategies, i.e. they can result in employees’ preference for healthy foods, and in their ability to make healthier nutritional choices for themselves and their families. Improved diets in the short and long term are linked to better work capacity, where absenteeism (missed working days) and presenteeism (present at work but unable to function at full capacity) are decreased. The effects of these changes reverberate onto business returns and, ultimately, GDP.

Are workforce nutrition programmes effective?
There is robust evidence that workforce nutrition programmes can be effective in improving employees’ nutritional health, and workplace nutrition programmes bring benefits beyond the employee. The literature reports the following outcomes:

Individual level outcomes observed:
- Increased job satisfaction
- Reduced sick days
- Increased wage earnings
- Better nutrition knowledge
- Higher consumption of healthy foods
- Adequate intake of energy and micro-nutrients
- Weight loss and mitigating the risks of non-communicable diseases (e.g. diabetes)
- Increased duration of exclusive breastfeeding

Business level productivity outcomes observed:
- Reduced absenteeism
- Enhanced productivity
- Reduced medical costs from 25-30%
- Returns on investment of up to 6:1
- Significantly lowered rates of accidents and mistakes
All of the programmes assessed in these broader health programmes included some component of nutrition, i.e. outcomes caused by poor diets (e.g. too high or too low Body Mass Index, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension). Other common components of workplace health programmes are mental and emotional health interventions, or stress and physical activity; these may have contributed to the outcomes listed above.

To read more about the programmatic evidence on the four main intervention areas, please refer to the evidence briefs in this folder. These outline the possible interventions, review the literature to date, suggest best practices, and showcase success stories from front-runner businesses.

Full references can be downloaded in a longer version of this brief at www.gainhealth.org.

**Further information**
For further information about the workforce nutrition programme, please visit [www.gainhealth.org](http://www.gainhealth.org).

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References


