

The attitudes and experience of workplace catering staff regarding food sustainability: a qualitative study

A Boulter and L Blanchard

School of Life and Medical Sciences, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield AL10 9AB

Corresponding Author: A Boulter, alice_boulter@hotmail.com

Background: In the UK, the staff catering industry provides about 11% of meals eaten out and 53,300 tonnes of food and material waste each year ⁽¹⁾. Yet, most research on food sustainability (FS) focuses on other retail sectors and healthcare settings, e.g. ^(2,3). To support workplace catering services, the aim of this study was to explore the attitudes and experience of their staff regarding the provision and promotion of sustainable food.

Methods: Staff from catering companies in South East England were recruited through convenience sampling. Food services had to be within a workplace or on a business site and mainly serve employees. Semi structured one-to-one interviews of 25-60 minutes were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by AB. Data was analysed in NVivo 11 using the FS values ⁽⁴⁾ and principles ⁽⁵⁾ as frameworks to assess knowledge and practices. Barriers and motivations were explored with thematic analysis. Data about the application of principles and barriers were compiled by site since they related to the sites' environment and not the interviewees themselves. LB read all transcripts and verified the themes. Ethical approval: University of Hertfordshire LMS/UG/UH/03915.

Results: Seven employees and three managers from seven companies participated. Most felt that their site could play a role in FS. Environment was the most frequently cited value, followed by health. Social, economic and governance aspects were rarely mentioned. Reducing waste was the most reported principle actioned, mainly by providing compostable or reusable tableware and offering tap water. Few sites recycled. Very few offered sustainably sourced fish, organic or Fairtrade products. Four themes for barriers emerged among the seven sites: customer's demand, especially its unpredictability and the popularity of meat and plastic bottles: "A lot of people [...] still want meat" (S3); material resources: "Go direct to the farm [...] comes with a big price" (S2); lack of education: "We don't get training" (S3); and organisational structure: "We can only order the products that they have authorised" (S9). Three themes were identified as motivators among the 10 participants: profit: "It's really [...] popular, so they have let me carry on" (S8) or to reduce food waste; to enhance reputation or inspire people: "Only [number] other companies globally that have got this accolade" (M1); and consumption trends: "there is a rise in vegetarian" (M7) (S=staff, M=manager).

Discussion: The findings show a positive awareness for FS, particularly the environment, but limited action and understanding of the broader concept. Knowledge of FS and how to integrate it was perceived as key by health professionals and hospital food service managers to implement it ⁽²⁾. Like in our results, the latter also needed more institutional support and applied only a few aspects of FS. Lastly, customers' demand remains a priority ^(2,3). It was seen as both a barrier and motivator, which might reflect different awareness levels and values of clients ⁽⁶⁾.

Conclusion: Support to staff catering services to implement FS practices is needed with a focus on education of both staff and the public, organisational processes, and customer attractiveness; but studies with larger and representative samples that directly measure practices are needed.

References

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