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### Eating at worksite in the Nordic Countries – from privacy to collectivity

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**Introduction**

A large proportion of citizens in the Nordic countries do not eat in accordance with the official recommendations. Only few meet the recommended intake of fat and sugar, intake of fruits and vegetables is below recommendations and many have a low intake of fish and whole-grain cereals ([Nordic Council of Ministers](http://www.norden.org/), 2006). Unhealthy eating patterns contribute to the growing prevalence of obesity and other lifestyle related disorders. Where this has traditionally been considered as a private matter and the responsibility of the individual, there is now a growing awareness and increasing interest for taking collective action in the promotion of health.

As a result companies increasingly engage in initiatives aimed at promoting healthy lifestyle in order to protect the health of their employees and the workplace seems to emerge as a potential promising setting for health promotion (WHO, 1986). A considerable part of the adult population nowadays eats one or more of the daily meals at worksite and this seem to have been driving a new interest in the settings based approach to health promotion in particular in the Nordic countries. Studies on worksite health promotion interventions has shown a positive return of investments (Trogdon et al, 2009) and increased productivity (Mills et al, 2007).

The call for healthier eating patterns seems to be mirrored by a growing interest from companies in staging and shaping the eating environment at worksite. As a result food and meals at worksite seems to have moved to the front stage in modern companies and this interest is reflected in interest from authorities and health promoting NGO’s. Food at work has become an issue and as such it has become an object of *governance* and despite cultural differences this governance seems to show interesting similarities in the Nordic countries. The current paper forms a part of the project *Better food work – Nordic and Baltic experiences* that has been initiated by Nordic Council of Ministers and aims at giving an overview of the emerging issue of food at work in a Nordic context.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to give an account on the way that food at work over the past decades has

become an *issue* and as such the object of *governance* in the Nordic countries. Governance in this context is as the actions taken by a broad range of stakeholders involved in the field and include among others companies, NGO’s, public authorities and research institutions.

***Method***

The existing literature on research, practice and policies on the topic of eating at worksite in the Nordic Countries has been reviewed. The main part of the literature originates from Denmark and Sweden and was identified in the Øresund Food Network project on food at work and has been published in the knowledge survey *Mat på arbetet dygnet runt?* (“Food at work round the clock?)”. Reports on eating at worksite from the other Nordic countries as well as from the Baltic countries are infrequent. As a starting point a search for literature was performed regarding technical and scientific literature. The literature was identified through a modified snowball sampling technique. In the snowball sampling technique knowledgeable study subjects are contacted and these in turn recruit future subjects from among their network. Through this technique the subjects identified evidence on projects, grey literature and policy initiatives that could inform this paper.

***Origin of worksite eating***

The increased focus on eating at worksite was originally a reaction on the changes in work conditions in industrialised countries. Worksite meal developed when more people became occupied in factories and had to do irregular working hours with shift work. The impact the irregular working hours has on the body functions; metabolic disruptions; was the foundation of making recommendations and research for eating at worksite. Thus the approach to eating at worksite was focused on the science of the body and its’ functions, rather than on the mind and the possible consequences food policies could have on the employees. Along with a more diverse interpretation and definition of health, the focus was assembled in a biological - psychological and social understanding, both in policies and practice. However focus has changed in the 90’s and carried through the 21st century to involve more social aspects as well as experiences and enjoyment related to the aspects of eating an eating together with colleagues.

The food as experience and source of enjoyment plays an increasing role in companies attempts to stage the food in canteens and dining facilities. Companies increasingly tend to use eating facilities and healthy food opportunities as corporate branding both directed to the public and as a strategy to recruit and retain employees, especially in knowledge-intensive enterprises and worksites. This means that there do not seem to be a best way of organising food at work; the companies seem to strive for uniqueness when they invent their particular way of providing meals for the employees.

At the same time the growing rates of overweight and obesity, and the concerns regarding the risk of unfavourable consequence on the performance and long term health of the employees, has had a significant effect over the past decades on company’s interest on the issue of eating at work.

Despite the similarities in the development of eating at worksite it is important to note that the food culture in the Nordic countries is different. This can be seen most significantly in Denmark and Sweden. In Sweden there is a tradition of two hot meals a day and thus also a longer tradition for worksite provided meals where as in Denmark the tradition for bringing a homemade cold lunch still plays a significant role although many companies has taken over the responsibility for food and meals.

***Structure of eating at work***

Companies are very different in terms of eating environment as well as in terms of working conditions offered to the employees (Thorsen et al., 2009). The structural conditions for food at worksite is dependent on parameters such as gender distribution and educational background of the employees, type of work, working hours and location of work tasks. The working conditions are not the only factors deciding what is eaten at work. The eating habits seem to be passed on from the personal life and social class to the worksite eating. And the other way around the conditions of the work reflects the base of the employees’ health.

This means that blue colour workers seems to have far less opportunities of making healthy choices at work than white colour workers. This is an important challenge for all involved in food and nutrition interventions at worksite and there is a great potential in making interventions within these types of worksites. A number of parameters seems to influence the usage of worksite canteens as well as the nutritional quality of foods consumed. These parameters include the accessibility of fruit and vegetables, prices of meals, way of serving – buffet vs. counter or fixed portions, local food policies and/or restrictions, duration of lunch break, pressure of working tasks as well as type, taste and quality of the food served.

***Health as a driver of worksite eating***

The emerging governance of food at work has been especially significant in the case of fruit and vegetable promoting initiatives. Examples include “6 om dagen”, ”Jobfrukkt”, ”Mødefrugt”, “Firmafrugt” and other fruit and vegetable initiatives that has helped companies to organise their provision of healthy food options. Food and nutrition guidelines and policies have been a preferred instrument in many companies.

Also diploma and certification schemes for canteens are common and used in several countries where task forces of nutritional experts are responsible for setting criteria and guidelines of how to produce and serve healthy meals. Canteen take-away is the most recent health promotion strategy in the field. The aspects of canteen take-away is wider than the nutritional health aspects, the fundamental idea is also to secure the work-life balance by helping the employees in their daily life, to avoid the stress it is to work full time and having a successful and healthy private life.

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**Conclusion**Despite the cultural differences among the Nordic countries there seems to be a general increasing interest from a number of different stakeholders in redesigning food at worksite. These include companies, public authorities, research institutions, trade unions and NGO’s. The driving factors for this redesign seems to include a number of factors. Increasing prevalence of obesity and overweight seems to be important. But also the influence food intake has on work performance and well being seems to be an important driver. In addition many companies put effort into staging food as a part of the experience of going to work and this seems to play an important role.

In general the fact that food became an issue and as a result the object of governing attempts (governance) from not only the companies but from a broad range of stakeholders. As a result the responsibility for food, nutrition and health seems to have been shifting from a private matter to collective matter. Public health strategies in the Nordic countries ([Nordic Council of Ministers](http://www.norden.org/), 2006) for as well as Corporate Social Responsibility strategies have fuelled this development and the research interest in the field has grown meanwhile.

***Discussion***

The paper shows that in contrast to healthy eating promotion interventions at school, worksite interventions in the Nordic countries are rarely evaluated. Thus one of the challenges is to generate scientific research providing specific knowledge on the evidence of health interventions at worksite. Especially there is a need to demonstrate whether interventions affect the employees positively in relation to food choices, health, absence, performance etc.

The paper also shows that there is a lack of sharing knowledge and experiences among practitioners, as well as among policy makers and among food and nutrition scientists. To secure a more goal-oriented approach more research is needed, to prove which initiatives makes positive or negative results for the employee as well as for the workplace, orientated towards physical conditions, social cohesion of eating and psychological aspects of health at work and workplace environment. For example through measuring consumed vegetables and fruits before, during and after a workplace intervention, and meanwhile gain access to more qualitative data of the employees job satisfaction, life status, sphere and work-life-balance.

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