

## Free food at work is on the rise — but not everyone's happy

By [Linley Taber](#)

January 12, 2014 | 10:58pm



Boombox Inc. employees Elizabeth Dunne (left) and Ashley Joseph enjoy muffins from their on-site baker, but they say it makes dieting and staying healthy a struggle. [Christian Johnston](#)

As a busy working mom, 24-year-old Wendy Kirwan appreciates the convenience of the daily free hot lunch dished up at Kars4Kids, the Lakewood,

NJ, nonprofit where she serves as director of media relations. But the rich pastas, creamy soups and dressing-drenched salads whipped up by the company's new in-house chef?

"I'm trying to watch my weight, and this definitely doesn't help," says Kirwan, a Lakewood resident. "When everyone else is eating this great-looking food, it's hard not to slip up sometimes."

Time was, health-minded employees only had to fend off diet disrupters during the occasional onslaught of birthday cupcakes and holiday treats. But as more and more businesses take a cue from tech giants like Facebook and Google by plying employees with free snacks and meals, the resulting glut of gratis food is becoming a year-round free-for-all.

"Almost every startup has some form of free food available," says Hartford, Conn.-based employee-benefits consultant Carol Harnett. "It's just a way to make employees feel special, without the underlying capital of increasing somebody's actual salary."

Indeed. According to a February 2013 survey by delivery service Seamless.com, 60 percent of employees reported that having more food at the office would make them feel more valued and appreciated by their employer.

Weighty issues abound. "When you talk to employees, they will tell you most of them have gained weight," adds Harnett. "It's almost like the Freshman 15 — it's there, so you eat it."

Many companies now offer a selection of healthier fare, adds Harnett. But for those that haven't totally jumped on the wellness bandwagon, the ever-present provisions can turn the office into a landmine of temptation.

At Kars4Kids, the midday munchies can be hard to avoid, even though the chef, a local caterer, keeps the menu kosher and vegetarian, according to Kirwan. Specialties include home-style onion rings and gooey lasagna, and Kirwan says she sees lighter dishes on the menu only "sometimes."

“Even the salads are drenched in super-sweet dressings,” she says.

And because the company’s 100-plus employees are required to eat lunch in the food-filled cafeteria (a policy intended to reduce desk messes and promote employee camaraderie), the calorie fest can be impossible to escape.

“Even if you bring a packaged lunch from home, you’re left with luscious-looking delicacies staring you in the face, daring you to take a bite, which quickly turns into another,” she says.

Despite trying to limit her portion sizes, Kirwan cops to gaining about five pounds over the last two months, and says many of her female colleagues have also complained of the scale creeping up. They’ve even started warning new hires of the inevitable weight gain in their futures.

“They definitely have our best interests in mind — having lunch ready for us does make us more productive,” says Kirwan.

For some area offices, tempting treats are a key part of company culture. At Boombox Inc., a Chelsea branding agency, the company’s 50-plus employees gather around a popcorn machine to enjoy hot buttery kernels throughout the day, and bond over treats whipped up by a pastry-school student who visits several times a week.

“We spend so much of our time at work, it’s only fitting that food and cooking be at the center of our community here,” explains CEO John Hendricks. “When we designed this office [in 2005], we built a gourmet kitchen to encourage people to cook and enjoy their time in the office.”

But the steady influx of complimentary chow — including regular pizza parties and free bagel breakfasts every Friday — can be tough for dieters like copywriter Elizabeth Dunne, 25.

“The entire office smells like popcorn,” says the Bay Ridge resident. “When you’re in that environment, it is a little difficult” to resist digging in, she says.

Dunne copes instead by opting for a filling hot beverage. But, she says, “I will always break my diet for a bagel.”

According to Union Square nutritionist Laura Cipullo, the workplace setting itself can prompt overindulgence.

“Stress, fatigue and even an unfulfilling job trigger people to eat,” she explains. “Office eaters typically find themselves eating for non-hunger reasons.”

Cipullo suggests keeping a food log to identify stress eating, and trying out a new response — like grabbing some fresh air instead of a handful of M&Ms.

And don’t feel bad about asking employers to swap the carb-heavy snack stash for healthier fare, like carrots and hummus.

A January 2013 study from the Health Enhancement Research Organization, Brigham Young University and the Center for Health Research at Healthways found that employees who stick to healthy foods throughout the day are 25 percent more likely to have higher job performance.

“In terms of work productivity,” adds Cipullo, “it would be to the advantage of the corporation to provide healthier foods.”

For sales exec Josie Dressendofer, 43, the problem isn’t just the type of grub found at Midtown IT firm GGGGroup — it’s the sheer quantity.

The health-conscious triathlete finds herself facing a steady supply of crackers and nuts, plus weekly hot breakfast spreads.

“It’s nonstop food,” says Dressendofer, a Garment District resident. “It’s the reason I can’t get rid of those last ten pounds.”

And even though she says the free feasts make her 30-person company “more social” (“the lunch room is always packed,” she notes), there are signs that her coworkers have had enough.

“As soon as somebody walks in with more food, I can hear the collective sigh,” she says. “We all moan because we’ll invariably have to go taste it.”