BEYOND THE LOCALVORES: Lessons Learned in Exploring Food Consumption in Vermont
Introduction

In an effort to increase understanding of individual consumer food buying and eating habits in and out of work, the Intervale Food Hub and Skillet Design and Marketing launched a research project to conduct a survey and a series of focus groups at workplaces in Chittenden County, Vermont. The goals of this initiative included gaining insight into workplace food culture and understanding the perceived benefits of participating in a workplace local food delivery program. Intervale Food Hub set out to gather the information needed to create strategies for encouraging greater employee participation in the local food movement. We are pleased to share the lessons learned with our community and beyond.

The survey and focus groups provided insight into the value of local food delivery at the workplace for potential employers and their employees. The findings inspire potential ways to increase overall participation by employees at workplaces and enhance the perceived value of local food delivery.

Key Takeaways:

- Understand individual consumer buying and eating habits in and out of work
- Understand workplace food culture
- Understand value for consuming local food

Lesson: Understand factors that drive local food delivery workplace participation.

- Convenience (including delivery day, place, time, etc.)
- Supporting local farmers and economy
- Supporting year-round production of food in Vermont
- Superior quality of food including taste and freshness
- Health benefits of eating fresh, local food
- Workplace incentives provided by management
Lesson: Values of employers will vary.

The level of importance various employers place on workplace wellness varies. Some offer comprehensive wellness programs including onsite fitness classes and local food workplace delivery subsidies while others provide garden plots for employee use. Others simply feel it is not their role to provide employees with healthy foods or influence their choices or habits. It is important to understand the existing programs of each potential employer site before opening a dialogue.

Key Takeaway:

- Employers with COMPREHENSIVE WELLNESS PROGRAMS are a great place to start. Some offer interest free loans for wellness initiatives such as gym memberships and may be open to adding memberships for LOCAL FOOD WORKPLACE DELIVERY to their list of acceptable uses for loans.

Lesson: Understand the goals of workplace wellness initiatives.

- Common Goals of Employee Workplace Wellness Initiatives:
  - Foster efficient, healthy, happy employees
  - Help employees create a work/life balance
  - Educate employees about local foods, eating well, and sustainable food practices
  - Empower employees and help build a food community at work
  - Create positive role models for employees
  - Offer local, sustainably grown food in the workplace
  - Support local economy
  - Make eating well and exercising more convenient for employees
Lesson: Don't overstep the employer/employee boundary.

Most agree that eating a healthy diet is a part of wellness. But lack of agreement exists on what role employers play in their employees’ food choices and how food fits into the workplace. Some employers provide healthy, local foods in onsite cafes, garden plots for employees, or offer subsidies for purchasing local food subscriptions. Other employers avoid taking risks of overstepping their role by becoming involved in the food choices employees make. One example is when management stopped providing unhealthy foods such as donuts, bagels, and candy in the office. While management set out to doing something positive, employees became upset to lose the snacks they enjoy. Some feel that local food could eventually fit into their workplace if their staff received more education about the local food economy and could experiment with trial programs for workplace food delivery.

Key Takeaway:

- Once healthy, local food is more commonplace, employers might be more open to working food into workplace wellness.

Lesson: Understand who your customer is.

Through the survey and research process, the Intervale Food Hub found that their primary customer is a woman in her late 20’s to mid-30’s, has ample income and either lives with their partner or is married.
Lesson: Understand the values of customers as they relate to local food consumption.

Through extensive conversations with customers, the Intervale Food Hub learned that the values that were most prevalent with their customers included: wellness is connected to eating local, seasonal and high-quality foods.

They also value having a guaranteed, year-round source of local food while supporting year-round food production in Vermont.

Lesson: Determine what messages will connect with customers.

- Eating local is the tastiest way to stay healthy.
- Support your local farmers all year long. Join the Intervale Food Hub.

Key Takeaway:

- EXPLORE the possibility of advocating for a food mentor role in the workplace.

Lesson: Understand the role of food in workplace relationships.

The role that food plays in workplace relationships can vary between employers. Messages range from coworkers discussing favorite recipes, new restaurants, foods they like to cook and eat, diet, health and nutrition issues, sources of food, and gardening. In environments where management invests considerably in raising food and health awareness in the workplace, food-related discussions are more intense. Employees are influenced by each other and can even feel peer pressure to eat well and buy local.
Lesson: Work with employers to implement tools to increase participation at each site.

- Create flyers and other printed collateral to post in public spaces.
- Provide content relating to healthy food culture in the workplace for posting on company social media sites.
- Provide content for email updates and newsletters coming from management about food-related issues and healthy lifestyle choices.
- Provide content about local farms, local products and restaurants using local foods.
- Work with employers to develop incentive programs.
- Schedule visits from outreach representative (from food organization) to answer employee questions and receive feedback.
- Discuss ways that employers can make healthy choices easy and accessible (i.e., providing water bottles for employees, offering healthy food and drink options, etc.)
- Encourage strong messaging from the employers supporting and encouraging healthy lifestyles and healthy choices for their employees.
- Encourage and suggest opportunities to show food-related movies.
- Offer samples of local foods at lunch and/or in break rooms.
- Schedule visits by farmers for Q&A sessions.
- Schedule cooking demos with local chefs and farmers.
- Encourage recipe exchanges.
- Suggest employers host potlucks and provide recipes using local food.
- Work with employers to offer discounts or coupons to purchase local food.
- Develop instructional videos about preparing local food.
- Discuss local food subscription payment plans and options with employers.
- Explore ways to offer trial options for shares.
- Organize onsite cooking lessons.
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For more information see the Intervale Farm to Business Impact Report or contact the Intervale Food Hub Manager, Sona Desai at sona@intervale.org or 802-660-0440 x112.

About Intervale Food Hub

Our Mission

The Intervale Food Hub is a local foods market offering convenient, year-round delivery. We collaborate with ecological farmers and food processors in our region to provide you with an array of the highest quality foods. We are nonprofit-owned and are cultivating a local economy that sustains healthy food, farms, land and people.

Our goal is to strengthen the relationship between you and your farmers. We believe in “community supported agriculture” where farmers and the community know, support and nourish one another. We provide 100% transparency and traceability, sharing the stories of our farms and offering you and your family assurance that you are receiving the freshest, healthiest and safest food available.

The Intervale Food Hub is committed to our farmers. We offer them a stable market, fair prices and advanced working capital, improving farm viability and quality of life. We also provide ongoing support to our farmers, enabling them to grow more food, diversify production, develop specialty products and push the limits of Vermont’s growing season.

When farms thrive, we all thrive.