IT'S TIME TO
RETHINK OFFICE CAKE

Office cake consumption in the UK:
an exploration of its characteristics and
associated attitudes among office workers

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Text in blue italics throughout this report are verbatim quotes from an open-ended item towards the end of the research questionnaire: "If there is anything else you would like to say about the topic of office cake, please tell us".

Key messages from the research

This study's evidence provides employers and employees with the opportunity to start a conversation about the cake culture in their workplaces. The opinions and attitudes of almost 1000 UK office workers suggest that small changes could achieve a healthier, more productive balance between the social benefits and health risks of workplace cake culture. Importantly, evidence suggests the changes would be acceptable to a majority of office workers provided the changes are introduced with employee consultation and collaboration.

Office cake culture appears to be popular not necessarily because of the cake itself but because of the social benefits of colleagues getting together during the working day. Despite this, almost all survey respondents (95%) said the ideal frequency for office cake would be once a week or less; 41% said once a month would be ideal. This is significantly less than the current availability of at least once a week for the majority (86%) of respondents.

A practical suggestion, supported by this study's evidence, would be to still have cake, but less often so that it becomes a treat again – an occasion to look forward to. Other changes implicated by this research and supported by other studies would be to keep cake out of sight until cake time (as opposed to being on display and available all day) and to offer fruit as well as cake.

Rethinking office cake culture could contribute to a culture of health in the workplace which research shows has several benefits for both employers and employees. Creating a culture of health in the workplace also has implications for public health in the UK.

Key findings

- Office cake culture influences employees' eating habits and the workplace eating environment.
- A third of respondents said office cake had led to weight gain and difficulty controlling bodyweight, over a third said it made it hard to eat healthily at work, and over half said it made it harder to stick to a weight loss diet.
- Office cake was available at least once a week to 86% of respondents.
- People eat office cake "if it's there". If it was available, 92% said they ate it at least sometimes; 41% said they often or always ate it. 36% said they never refuse it.
- Two thirds of respondents ate office cake at least once a week.
- People don't want office cake as often as it is currently available. 95% of respondents said the ideal frequency would be once a week or less. 41% said the ideal frequency would be once a month.
- A substantial majority of respondents valued social benefits of office cake culture such as it cheering people up and bringing people together.

Implications

- Office cake could affect employee health and, therefore, productivity.
- Office cake could be undermining the effects of wellbeing and health promotion programmes and reducing return on investment on wellbeing spend.
- There is a mandate for reducing office cake consumption. People want office cake less often than it is currently available. However, the social aspects are valued and present opportunities for organisations to enhance workplace culture.
- Subtle changes to the workplace environment to reduce the availability and prominence of office cake could reduce consumption without perceived removal of individuals' choice.
- Rethinking office cake culture could enhance employee health, improve productivity and improve return on investment on health and wellbeing programmes.

Recommendations

- Encourage a conversation around how often people actually want office cake – it will probably be less than you think.
- Make cake special again. Propose that work teams/departments voluntarily opt to have a weekly 'cake day' (or less frequently if they prefer). Birthdays and special occasions could all be acknowledged and celebrated on the next cake day.
- Have a conversation about whether anyone would mind if edible treats were no longer brought back from holidays or business trips. Alternatively gifts from foreign trips could be saved for cake day.
- Stop having cakes openly displayed all day. Instead, agree a 'cake time' with colleagues. Until then, store cakes out of sight, ideally in opaque containers in a cupboard. This will prevent mindless grazing and enhance the benefits of coming together for a sociable break on the agreed day/time.
- Use the out of sight, out of mind approach in kitchens and cafeterias. Keep kitchen surfaces clear of unhealthy food, biscuits etc. Make healthy alternatives more prominent and accessible. In cafeterias, place plentiful healthy options at eye-level and fewer, less-healthy options lower down.
- Offer a healthier alternative to cake. Depending on the preferences of the people involved, this could be something savoury, fruit, nuts, or veg and dips for example.
- To get the social benefits of eating and talking together, what about a team picnic lunch as an alternative to cake and other unhealthy snacks. Then the treats are instead of lunch not as well as lunch.
- Over half of respondents thought meeting refreshments at their workplace did not offer enough healthy options. Consult employees (and clients) on alternatives.

"The post-holiday 'I've been to ... and I bought you back...' is a habit people need to get out of."

"We consume office cake once a month at most, it's a treat and is regarded as such. We enjoy it."

"There is so much office cake that it is no longer considered a treat in my opinion."

Introduction

Rationale for the research

This report arose from research conducted as part of an MSc in Obesity & Weight Management at the University of Chester. The research explored the characteristics of, attitudes towards and opinions about office cake culture and was the first academic study into the topic.

Office cake culture is the popular phenomenon whereby workers and managers supply cakes and sweet treats for colleagues to share. 940 UK office workers completed a voluntary, anonymous, confidential online questionnaire. The questionnaire asked respondents about cake culture in their workplace, their own office cake behaviour and attitudes, and their opinions on office cake in general.

The study was approved by the University of Chester Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee, reference 1241/17/LW/CSN.

Why is this research important?

Obesity, its associated diseases (including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal problems, cancers and mental ill health[1)] and rising obesity-related healthcare costs continue to present a major challenge to public health and health spending[2]. The UK has the highest obesity rates in Western Europe with over two thirds of adults being overweight or obese[3]. In 2015, 27% of the population were obese, almost double the rate in 1990[3].

Obesity is one of the most common workplace health problems[4] and is strongly linked to sickness absence[5,6,7] with over 16 million work days lost to obesity-related issues in the UK in 2002[8]. In addition, increasing levels of sedentary behaviour in the workplace contribute to sickness absence[9,10] because sitting is linked to coronary and diabetes-related health risk factors[11]. It is estimated that two thirds of working hours are spent sitting[12].

The workplace can be used to promote a healthier lifestyle

Unhealthier employees are less productive than healthier employees[13]. However, improving employees' diet and physical activity levels has been shown to increase employee health and productivity, and reduce absenteeism and presenteeism[14,15].

The workplace is recognised as an important setting to promote healthy lifestyle choices[4, 16-19]. It gives access to 75% of the UK population[20] and employees spend two thirds of their waking lives at work[1]. Systematic reviews have found that the most effective workplace health promotion programmes are multicomponent[21,22] and include an element of environmental modification to improve diet quality and eating behaviour[17,23,24]. In other words, the more successful initiatives involve dietary change and/or increased physical activity, *and* changes to the workplace environment that make it easier for

employees to access healthy food and harder to access unhealthy food. Consequently, the healthy choice becomes the easy choice without effort or willpower[25-28]. Environment modification is also potentially cheaper and reaches more people than individually-targeted behaviour change approaches such as weight loss and exercise programmes[29,30].

Could health promotion programmes be more effective?

Although workplace health promotion programmes often help prevent further weight gain and improve food choices and eating habits, they rarely achieve clinically-meaningful weight loss[31]. This can be due to logistical issues with a programme's implementation or design, resistance from employees or influences outside the workplace[32-34]. However, another factor could be the change in eating behaviour over recent decades which has seen a rise in eating frequency and snacking[35-37]. Eating frequency and snack frequency are linked to increased food intake and weight increase[36,38,39].

Neither snacking in the workplace nor its effects on employee health have been widely researched although one recent study found unhealthy snacking was significantly more likely in the workplace[40]. Research into snacking in general shows unhealthy snacks are associated with consumption of added sugar[41-42] and several studies identify cake and similar sweet baked goods as the primary energy contributors to snack food[37, 42-44]. The links between added sugars and obesity and ill-health are well-established[45,46].

In the UK, office cake has become a prominent form of workplace snacking and the Royal College of Surgeons Faculty of Dental Surgeons has speculated that it contributes to obesity and oral ill-health[47]. A recent survey by a snack manufacturer found women consumed 100,000 calories a year at work through sweet and savoury snacks[48].

So several questions arise. Does increased unhealthy snacking in the workplace limit the effects of health promotion programmes? Is the time and money organisations invest in providing healthy options in the canteen, exercise facilities and other wellness initiatives being undermined by office cake culture? Or are there benefits to office cake culture that make it worthwhile?

To date there is no academic research into office cake consumption so it is hard for organisations to know how or whether to respond. Therefore the aim of this research was to explore the characteristics of office cake culture in the UK and the attitudes of office workers towards it. 'Office cake' was defined as cakes or other sweet treats (biscuits, pastries, confectionery) taken into the workplace to share with colleagues, as opposed to items taken in for personal consumption.

Research results

940 UK office workers completed the office cake questionnaire, of which 39.3% were male. Mean body mass index (BMI) was 25.9 kg/m² which is defined as overweight by the World Health Organisation and the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence.

Characteristics of office cake culture

- Office cake was available at least once or twice a week for 86% of respondents, and was available daily for 8% of full time workers (Figure 1).
- The most common reason for office cake was celebratory events such as birthdays, retirements and promotions (94% of respondents), followed by meeting/event leftovers (55% of respondents), TV/charity-inspired events (49% of respondents) and rewards from managers (38% of respondent). 42% said no reason was needed for office cake (Figure 2).
- Almost half (48%) the respondents said there was a regular cake occasion in their workplace with names like Cake Day, Fat Friday, Cake Club, Friday Feeling and Doughnut Day.
- 71% said cakes were displayed on a table or desk in the main working area.
- 47% said fruit was available as an alternative to cake, while 37% said no alternative was available.
- Half (51%) the respondents said 'hardly any' office cake was home made.
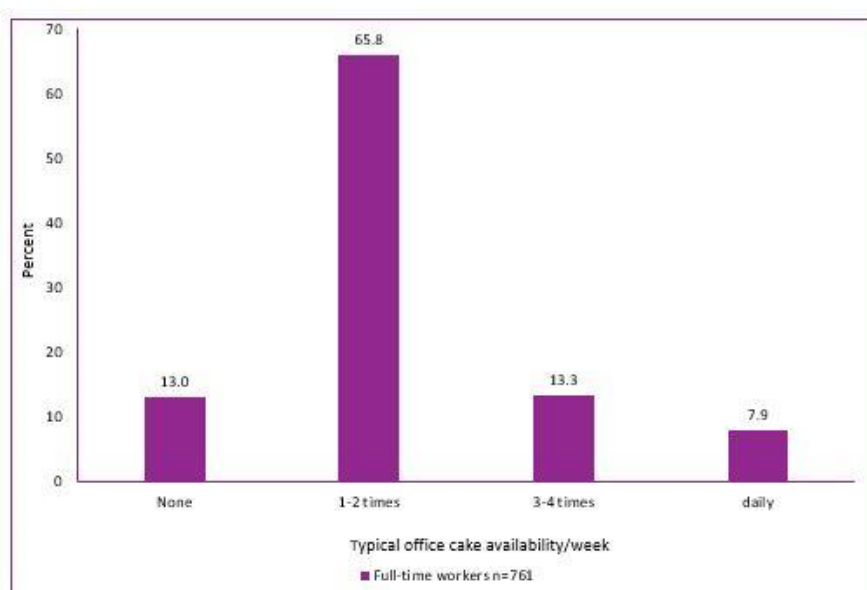- Half (51%) the respondents said meeting refreshments were not healthy enough.

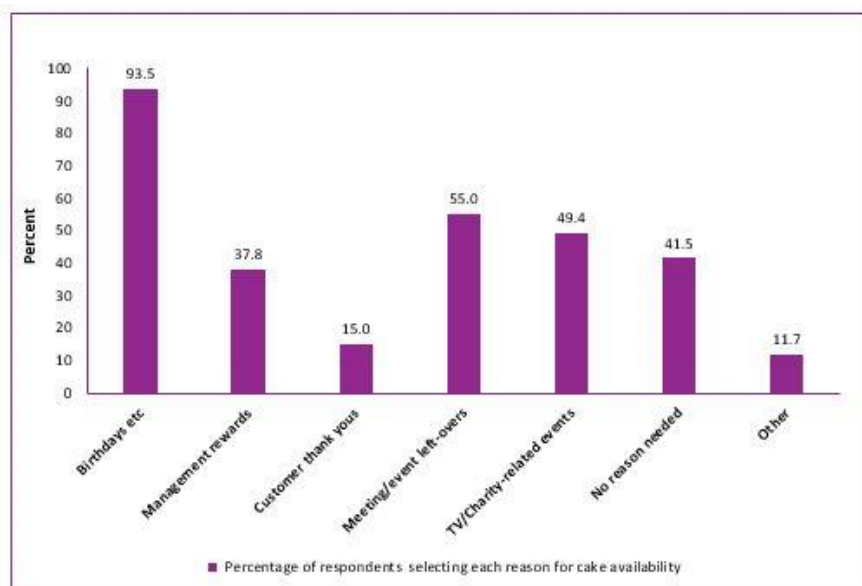**Figure 1: Typical weekly cake availability**

Figure 2: Reasons for having office cake

"Office cake is unavoidable. It's intimately linked to birthdays and since we're a large department we have office cake twice a week. And then more in meetings etc."

"The restaurant tried to start an afternoon cake trolley service, but it failed due to the free cakes available!"

Office cake behaviours and attitudes

How often cake was eaten

- Two thirds of full time workers ate office cake at least once or twice a week.
- When cake was available, 92% ate it at least sometimes and 41% often or always ate it.
- Half (51%) often or always found it easy to refuse office cake if they did not want it.
- 36% never refused cake if it was offered.

  "Should be just on birthdays - we seem to have extended this to every occasion."

Colleagues sometimes influenced cake consumption

- 23% said they often or always found it hard to refuse office cake if everyone else is eating it.
- 52% said colleagues persuaded them to change their mind at least sometimes if they had initially turned down cake. 12% were often or always persuaded.
- 37% said they themselves were the biggest influencer when deciding whether to have office cake, 30% were most influenced by work colleagues and 20% most influenced by family and friends.
- Substantial majorities of respondents said they never felt they caused offence (61%) or felt hurt if cake they had brought in to share was refused (72%). However, although 78% said they were never made to feel uncomfortable if they refused office cake, 18% said they were made to feel uncomfortable sometimes/about half the time.

"This culture is bad, most people don't want to partake, but feel they have to as others have provided food."

"Even insulin-dependent diabetics struggle to resist temptation when it is put in front of you and you are away from family!"

How people felt about their own cake consumption

- 28% of respondents often or always found cake hard to resist, even if they were not hungry or had just eaten a meal.
- 62% regretted eating office cake at least sometimes; 22% often or always regretted eating it.
- 22% were often or always distracted by the thought, smell or sight of office cake.
- 58% thought they would eat less cake if it was out of sight.
- Over half the respondents never took action to avoid or compensate for cake consumption. Examples from those who did take action or compensate included taking extra exercise, eating a smaller meal later in the day or leaving the room.

"They would be a real problem if I didn't exercise so much…"

"I don't blame office cake for my bad eating habits but it would help if the cakes weren't there."

"I'm fat and have no self control around food. If anyone leaves snacks within arm's length..."

How office cake affected people's health and wellbeing

- For 31% of respondents, office cake consumption had led to weight gain; 35% said it led to difficulty controlling bodyweight, 38% said it made it difficult to eat healthily at work, and 59% said cake made it harder to stick to a weight loss diet.
- 52% said they would like their workplace to do more to help their health.

"I find that almost everyone in the office is overweight. They think I'm slightly eccentric because I don't eat cake/soda etc but I have a healthy body..."

"Horrified at the cake consumption (& shapes!) of many office workers. Something is very wrong..."

"Insidious poison."

Respondents' opinions on office cake in general

Social benefits of office cake culture were recognised and appreciated

Generally office cake was considered to offer social benefits such as bringing people together and cheering people up (Figure 3).
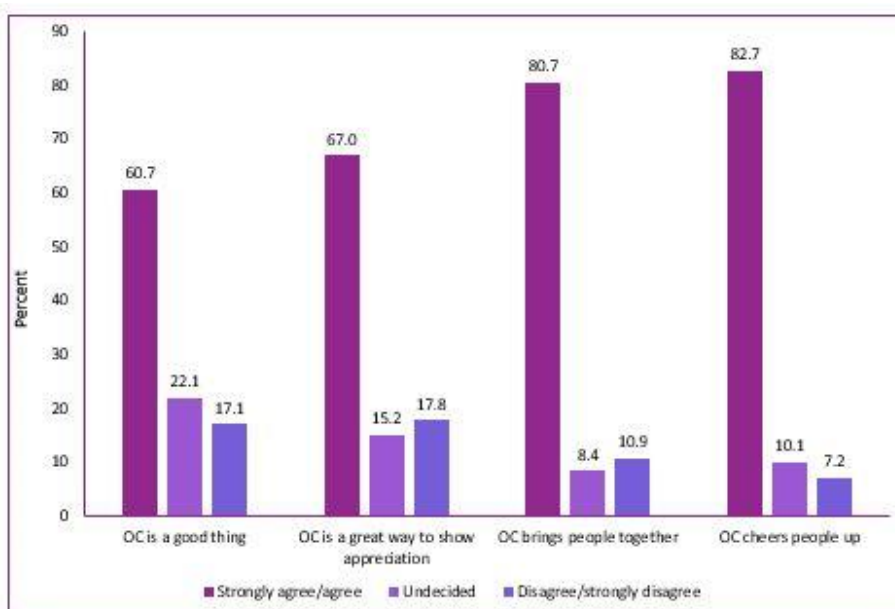

Figure 3: Opinions about office cake in general

"Adults don't need cake to motivate them. Treat your workforce like adults."

"It's a lazy way to appreciate people and feeds our addiction to sugar."

"As a manager of 20 people I would like a small fund to show appreciation in a more meaningful way - vouchers, money, experience. It's bad that it always has to be about food."

What is the ideal frequency for office cake?

Almost all (95%) respondents said the ideal frequency for office cake was once a week or less. The most popular frequency was once a month, selected by 41% of respondents (Figure 4). Additionally, just under half of all respondents (48%) said that the best alternative to office cake would be to still have it, but less often (Table 1).
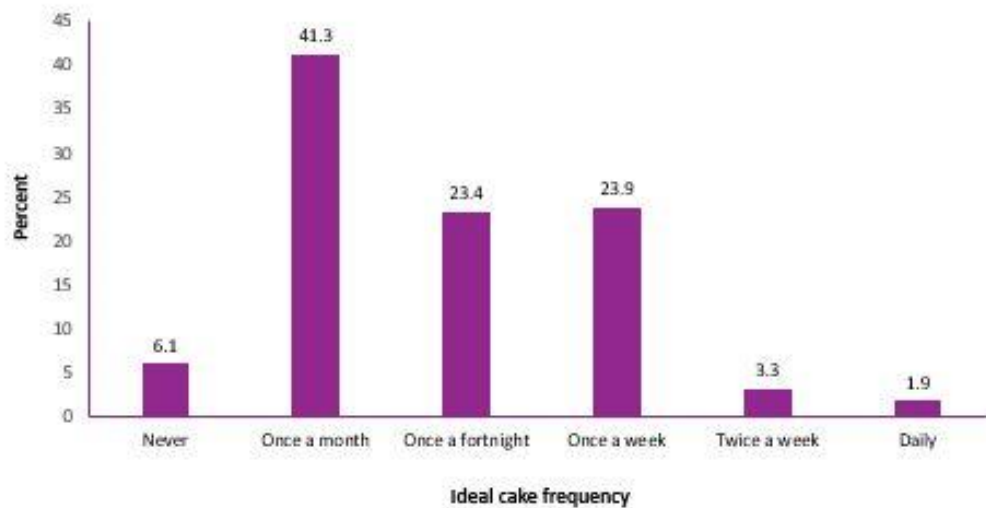

Figure 6: Opinions on ideal frequency for office cake

Table 1: Preferred office cake alternatives

Suggested cake alternative	Percentage of respondents selecting
Fruit	52%
Cake less often	48%
Nuts	33%
Vegetables/dips	33%
'Healthier' cake	20%
Cheese	18%
There is no alternative	16%
Other	7%

Office cake culture might not be all about the cake

Office workers' support for initiatives to reduce office cake consumption was mixed. Just over a third (36%) said they would support a reduction in their workplace (36%), while a third (34%) would not support a reduction and just under a third remained undecided (30%). This is intriguing since 86% of respondents reported having access to office cake at least once or twice a week, so, to achieve the once a week or less that 95% said they wanted, a reduction would be necessary.

This finding suggests people may be conflicted when weighing up the positive social aspects of office cake culture with its negative health consequences.

It is possible that people said they like office cake because they like the social gathering, not necessarily the cake. Office cake culture might not be all about office cake.

"They are a feel good factor"but if limited would have a greater affect [sic] than if available constantly. Maybe fruit bowl available Monday to Thursday and cake on Friday."

"A cake on a rare occasion should not be a bad thing. Everyone is old enough to know whether they would like one or not."

"No one forces the cake on you, you don't have to eat it, but it's nice to at least congratulate the person offering if its birthdays/special events etc. It's a chance for a few mins of downtime with colleagues to build relationships, chat about non work, and a natural break before getting stuck in again. This is where most of the benefit is."

"I like the social aspect of bringing in cakes, but I would personally prefer savoury treats."

Implications for employers

Office cake culture could undermine workplace health promotion and reduce health promotion return on investment

Unless compensated for, anything that encourages people to eat excess energy-dense food in addition to food eaten at meals will affect body weight. This could counteract measures taken by employers to enhance employee physical, mental and emotional health. A third of respondents said that office cake had contributed to an increase in their weight, had made their weight harder to control and made it harder to eat healthily at work. A third reported they never refused cake if it was offered and over half said they never avoided or compensated for eating it.

So we have a situation where extra food is being consumed in the workplace without compensation. The overall study found no correlation between how often people ate office cake and body mass index (BMI) (and was not designed to do so). However the mean BMI for all respondents (25.9 kg/m^2) was in the overweight category. So, although it will not be the only factor, it cannot be ruled out that office cake culture contributes to employee weight gain.

"This annoys me. Everyone in our workforce wants to lose weight (or needs to), so why so much bloody cake?!"

The workplace environment can promote office cake consumption

Several items in the questionnaire related to the effects of environmental factors on office cake consumption. Environmental factors include aspects of the office surroundings that employees see, hear, smell or interact with.

71% of respondents said office cake is displayed on a desk or table in the main working area. Coupled with the data that 41% respondents would often or always eat cake if it was available and over half reported being distracted by the sight, smell or thought of office cake to some extent, it is reasonable to propose that a display of office cake encourages people to eat it. Robust evidence supports this proposition. The thought, sight or smell of palatable food stimulates hunger[49] and motivation to eat[50,51] which is why it is the key premise underpinning food and drink marketing. Furthermore, most respondents said they thought they would eat less cake if it was out of sight. This, too, is consistent with evidence – including from workplace-based studies - that consumption of palatable food decreases if it is further away, less visible or less accessible[52-56].

Combined with the finding that most people want cake once a week or less, this suggests people would not particularly miss cake if it was not there as often. If it were less visible or accessible, or not available as frequently, consumption may

reduce without people being disappointed, feeling deprived or perceiving that cake consumption was being unfairly controlled. The concepts of choice architecture and nudge theory may be appropriate to subtly alter the

workplace environment, enabling employees to make heathier choices without effort or the perception that they are being told what they can and cannot eat.

"I think it provides too big a temptation for people who struggle to control their weight. It normalises unhealthy eating."

"Office cake, sweets and treats are situated by the photocopier! We need somewhere to hide them."

Gathering together socially in the workplace is powerful and valued

There is a mandate for having office cake less often than it is currently available, but also clear evidence that people would not want to lose its social benefits.

An interesting discrepancy exists between the almost unanimous support for an ideal office cake frequency of once a week or less and the relative lack of support for the intervention that would be needed to achieve a lower level of consumption.

An explanation for this could relate to commensality – the practice of eating and drinking together socially. Research has shown commensality to be associated with improved cooperation and performance among workgroups, and

trust and connection between eating companions[57-60]. The Swedish concept of 'fika', the daily coffee gathering popular throughout Swedish workplaces and homes, is an example of this. It is possible that the consensus revealed in this study that office cake is a good thing, brings people together and cheers everyone up indicates an innate recognition among UK office workers of the value of commensality. However, it needs pointing out that a selection of cakes and snacks left on a table for people to help themselves to throughout the day, as is common in UK offices, does not constitute commensality and would be unlikely to have the same benefits.

"Would not want to see it removed as it has a positive effect in bringing people together. Just prefer that a fruit option is also offered, which it often is."

"The occasional office cake is a real treat that cheers everyone up."

Conclusions

Office cake culture may be doing more harm than good – both to employee health and organisations' bottom line. The links between sugar and extra calories and obesity are well-established. The office cake study found that office cake culture influences employee eating habits and increases their intake of sugar and extra calories. This extra calorie intake does not appear to be routinely compensated for and so weight gain, and its associated health risks, is the likely result.

Employees tend to eat office cake because it's there. They value the social aspects of office cake but 95% of respondents only want it once a week or less. This presents organisations with an exciting opportunity to work with employees to reduce workplace cake consumption while exploring ways to benefit from occasionally coming together socially during the working day.

This approach has the potential to reduce employee health risk, improve an organisation's cultural environment and improve return on investment on wellbeing spend. Furthermore, evidence indicates that employees who perceive their employer to be committed to employee health and wellbeing are actually healthier[61,62]. Rethinking office cake culture is a quick win whatever the size of an organisation's wellbeing budget.

A final word

Rethinking office cake could make a positive contribution to public health in the UK. On average, workers spend two thirds of their waking hours at work. If the workplace could become somewhere that healthy choices were easy choices and people could be free of the temptation of cakes and snacks for at least some of their waking hours, it would have the potential to improve the eating habits of the 75% of the UK population who work. Improving the culture of health in the workplace would access people across all socio-economic groups, age groups, education levels, ethnicities, geographies and industrial sectors. It could make a meaningful contribution to the UK's health in a way that the combined efforts of the best minds in politics, economics and industry have so far failed to achieve.

"People have addictions to many things but smoking, drugs, alcohol and gambling are all kept out of the workplace for health (and safety reasons) - the same protection is not given for people with eating conditions and these people are surrounded here by everything which is killing them - we have a duty of care to protect them from their addictions as best we can but it is definitely not done here. If you want to eat rubbish food till you drop - this place will happily supply it."

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About the researcher

Lou Walker, MSc

Lou is a researcher, speaker and writer on workplace health, obesity, and workplace cake culture.

After 16 years as a management training and leadership development consultant, Lou's interest in the effects of nutrition and physical activity on health and performance led to an MSc in Obesity & Weight Management at the University of Chester. Her MSc research project was the first academic study into office cake culture and the results have implications for employers, employees and health in the UK.

As a leadership development consultant, Lou worked as an associate for various consultancies, principally on behavioural diagnostics and personal development for clients in a variety of sectors including finance, pharma, construction, food and drink, and transport. Areas of particular experience include development and assessment centres, competency frameworks, coaching and management training. She is an accredited practitioner of the Harry Schroder High Performance Behaviour framework.

Before her consultancy career, Lou was an editor specialising in internal communications.

Contact Lou about lunch & learns, briefings, key notes to help you:

- improve employee health - which can lead to improved productivity and employee engagement
- harness and develop the morale-boosting aspects of office cake culture while minimising the health risks
- understand the latest research on the link between workplace health and wellbeing initiatives and employer value proposition
- use evidence-based social influencing techniques to create a culture of health in your workplace
- understand attitudes to cake culture in your workplace using a questionnaire so you can tailormake your response
- use evidence-based methods to change your workplace eating environment to make it easier for people to make a healthy choice.

Contact Lou:

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"Thank you for an illuminating briefing on office cake culture. We are committed to employee health and your research has opened avenues we didn't realise were available to us."

HR director

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