

## **Shaping the Future:**

The role of foodservice in  
the post-pandemic office.



## Let's get started!

If the last couple of years taught us anything, it was that trying to predict the future is a perilous game. Early in the year, many industry experts were publishing reports on how the year would play out – unaware of the COVID chaos that was lurking just around the corner.

Although it's impossible to predict the future, we can help to shape it. This report shares what we think might happen in the world of workplace and office catering once it's safe for employees to return to their desks. We're building on our experience and capabilities to suggest insights and explore how we might be able to influence what is to come – for the better.

To start off, we've made a few assumptions. We're being optimistic and hoping the vaccine will put the virus on the back foot and have written this report based on an environment in which it gradually becomes safer for workspaces to reopen. We also believe that people will want to return to work – at least some of the time – when it finally feels safe.

We've been in workplace catering since 2005, so our experiences have taught us what to look out for when predicting change. Here are 4 themes we think workplace managers should keep an eye on as things start to reopen:

- 1. Genuine sustainability**
- 2. Employee safety**
- 3. Demand for workplace culture**
- 4. The flexible office**





## Genuine sustainability

Sir David Attenborough kicked off 2021 with a [message of hope](#), inspiring everyone to take the opportunity to protect the planet from climate change disaster. He stated that “this could be a year for positive change, for ourselves, for our planet and for the wonderful creatures with which we share it”.

The threat of climate change will continue to accelerate. The amount of CO2 in the atmosphere is reaching [record levels](#) every year, even in 2020 with the COVID pandemic. The tone was set by the UK government in January this year, when £3bn of UK climate finance was allocated to [supporting nature](#). The greatly anticipated [COP26](#) UN climate summit will also be held in Glasgow in November. One thing is for certain; this year is going to be anything but quiet on climate action.

As calls for sustainability grow louder we believe consumers, stakeholders and employees will expect genuine sustainability commitments from businesses. Employees will become increasingly aware of companies attempting 'greenwashing' with nice-sounding but underwhelming environmental policies and products.





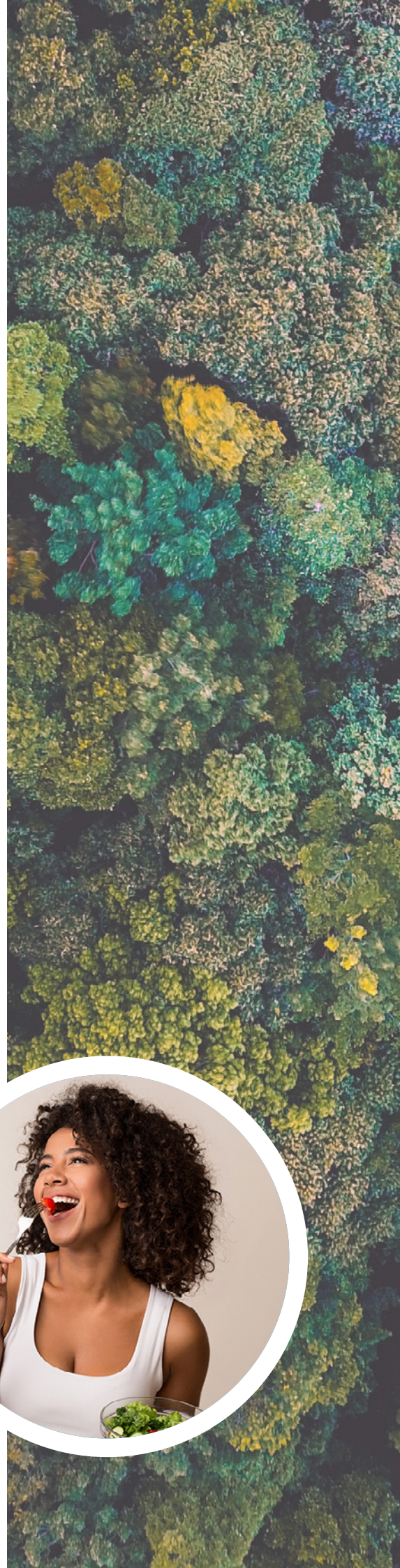
# “This year is going to be anything but quiet on climate action”

This was emphasised by the [World Economic Forum](#) in October 2020, “The COVID-19 crisis is likely to increase awareness that companies must consider societal needs and ethical standards, not just short-term profits”.

So what does this have to do with catering in the workplace? Attitudes are changing everywhere. Sustainability is a major priority at board or department level for 80% of facilities, according to a survey conducted by the [Facilities Show](#). So, when a facilities manager is tasked with rebooting their catering services after the pandemic, workplace caterers with a genuine record of sustainability will be sought after.

Opting for environmentally friendly catering is a great way for a company to demonstrate that it still takes corporate social responsibility seriously in a post-pandemic world. Ultimately, people now want to work for a company with wider purpose and [shared values](#). A company that has its employees sharing sustainably-made meals together has the power to create a feel good factor throughout the workplace, as well as protecting the planet.

**Our top tip:** One way you can determine if a caterer has a proactive sustainability agenda is by the green business certifications and memberships that they hold, from groups such as [The Planet Mark](#), [The Sustainable Restaurant Association](#), [B Corporation](#), [Carbon Disclosure Project](#), [EcoVadis](#) and ISO 14001 - to name a few!





## Employee safety

The question of when exactly employees can return to the workplace is a constantly moving goalpost and something we wouldn't dare to predict.

With the risk of restrictions still lingering and the movement towards flexible working arrangements, working from home isn't going anywhere any time soon - but neither is the physical workplace. Furthermore, we have seen many of our clients starting on a phased return to the office.

**“The challenge will be to keep that trust going once employees return to the office”**

What we can be more certain about is that employees are going to be concerned about their workplace safety when they return, and it'll be up to their company to make every effort to make them feel safe. When it comes to workplace catering, hygiene will be paramount in keeping employees happy.

Research from Sodexo and Harris in the 'Sodexo Insights Worklife Tracker' report uncovered that health and safety concerns at work were on the rise between June to October 2020 (63% in Oct vs 59% in June). Out of the respondents to their surveys, when going back to work, 38% worried about personal health linked to Covid and 35% worried about bringing the virus back home.<sup>1</sup>



1. Surveys conducted by Sodexo in partnership with Harris Interactive – Wave 1/ 4824 respondents. Wave 2 / 4897 respondents. Online interviews representative of employees across France, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, USA, Australia, China, data collected 11-16th June 2020 and 21-27th October 2020.





These statistics suggest that workplace managers will face challenges to match the expectations of returning employees. But with over half of people saying they would consider leaving their job if their [employer](#) didn't prioritize their safety, it's absolutely vital companies take this seriously in order to retain the talent that they need for growth.

A little bit of good news for workplace managers is that the report by [The Workforce Institute at UKG](#) found that a third of employees globally say they trust their employer more now than before the pandemic. So your efforts to help keep employees safe and happy hasn't gone unnoticed! The challenge will be to keep that trust going once employees return to the office - and keeping the canteen an infection-free zone will be part of that mission.

The chance for employees to take a proper lunch break has always been vital in keeping employees motivated and productive. This is echoed by [Ruchika Tulshyan](#) in one of her HBR articles, "I'd be willing to bet that more organizations could benefit from greater team effectiveness, and normalizing lunch is a great place to start, whether it's to reduce stress and burnout, encourage team-building, or foster an organizational culture that doesn't equate overwork with productivity".

Lunchtimes (and other meals too) will remain essential to wellbeing once employees return to the office, however a closer relationship will be needed between facilities and catering to ensure that doesn't cause safety scares or overcrowding. A good workplace caterer will already have drafted out a plan on how to keep employees safe on their return.



# Demand for workplace culture

Companies will have a unique set of challenges in adapting their company culture once COVID restrictions are eased. Remote working became a daily reality for the majority of office workers in 2020, with all the benefits and problems that came with it.

We shouldn't forget that there are also benefits for employees working in the office. A report from [Cushman & Wakefield](#) articulates that "impromptu collaboration and serendipitous discussions play a key role in creativity and innovation, highlighting the need for office space".

Those chats with colleagues on the way to meeting rooms, the casual discussions about industry trends over lunch and other similar office rituals are important. These seemingly inconsequential moments between employees have the power to trigger creativity and innovation within a company. Video calls don't always create the same organic flow of ideas that happen when colleagues meet face-to-face.

For many businesses, company culture has actually [thrived](#) during the pandemic. However businesses will need to be ready to evolve once again when it's practical for employees to spend some of their days in the workplace. When this happens, businesses should take the opportunity to boost their own company culture with quality face-to-face collaboration.





## What does this have to do with workplace catering?

We're not saying we have all the solutions, but adapting workplace catering to strengthen these bonds is something we think can make a real difference. Here's a few examples of how our own catering service has boosted our client's workplace culture:

- Hiring front-of-house staff with real social flair and alignment to the client company culture.
- Special pop-up food events that are inspired by London's diverse street market food.
- Marking celebrations from around the world with bespoke menus, such as Thanksgiving, St. Patrick's Day and Diwali.
- Daily changing menus that get teams talking, inspired by the latest food trends, international cuisine and in-season ingredients.





Sharing meals together is one of the great ideas that predates the invention of sliced bread. It's a chance for everyone to get together, slow down for a while and share stories. Wellbeing and shared meals could be just the thing to help colleagues reconnect and to feel part of workplace life once again.

The conversations between employees when they eat together can be a catalyst for innovation once workplace life resumes. [David Shrier](#), programme director at Oxford Cyber Futures, explains, "successful innovators build a foundation of trust around micro-interactions that occur in the workplace". Workplace catering, if well managed, can help employees ease back into workplace life.

The daily buzz in our clients canteens at lunchtime is something that we miss. Looking around we would see employees at ease, chatting about their mornings. We have no doubt that recreating these lunchtime experiences after the pandemic for our clients will be especially important for creating happy vibes throughout the workplace.

Once employees start to return to the workplace, their working lives will be considerably different than before the pandemic. We feel that contract caterers that understand the powerful connection between high quality meals and workplace culture will thrive.

Many companies will realise that by offering their employees a nourishing meal at work, they'll be sending a strong message that their wellness is a priority.





## The flexible office

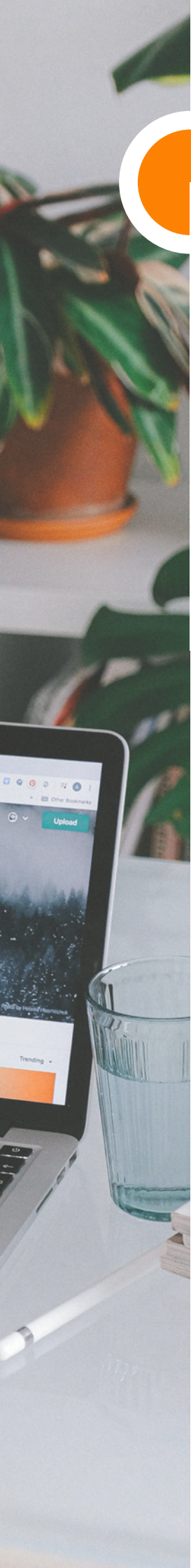
The 9 to 5 office culture will never return to its original state. Instead, we are likely to work in a hybrid way that incorporates the office, the home environment and third locations such as co-working spaces. Services, such as Sodexo's [Vital Spaces](#), are already being developed for a future of hybrid workplaces. [Julie Ennis](#), CEO, Corporate Services Sodexo UK & Ireland comments, "The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the workplace as we knew it, but that transformation was already underway". This change in working patterns will mean that workplaces will need to be physically reconfigured to be more open plan and better suited for collaboration.

Offices will be transformed into flexible, creative and social hubs. This is evident in the rise of [coworking spaces](#) that offer flexibility and prioritise health and wellbeing. Beyond the more [obvious transition](#) towards social coworking spaces, think yoga studios, wellness event programmes, reading rooms and on-site food services that support a [healthier lifestyle](#).

After all, promoting employee happiness does wonders for their [productivity](#). As the boundaries between home life and work life grow ever closer, companies might want to consider using some of the magic dust found in coworking spaces such as [TechHub](#) (Worldwide), [Greenhouse](#) (London) and [Huckletree](#) (Dublin, Manchester and London). Here's a [little example](#) from LinkedIn of a company that's already adapting to a future of flexible working.

There has also been a move away from central office locations to the fringes of the city so as to be closer to the employees' homes. [HR News](#) reports that their office consultants "are getting more enquiries for offices located on the fringes of cities and beyond as people opt for workspaces closer to home to avoid public transport and busy areas".

The close relationship between business and city centres looks to diminish after the pandemic, with Dror Poleg predicting in the [New York Times](#), "some work spaces in central employment districts may become housing, and some housing in residential areas may become work spaces."



If companies do move to the fringes of cities, established workplace caterers will need to make arrangements to provide their services outside the traditional 'central' business areas. At Fooditude, our delivered 'cloud kitchen' catering model is ready to do this.

Maybe we're biased, but we believe our model is the future of workplace catering. Food is prepared in our off-site kitchen and delivered to the client's site. We've invested in the very best equipment to ensure that the food arrives fresh. For clients this provides huge benefits, the big one being that companies don't have to waste space on an on-site kitchen. This means that old kitchen areas can be transformed into flexible spaces for social distancing and collaboration.

If offices do transform into spaces dedicated to creativity and collaboration, then lunchtime could become the secret weapon in increasing the flow of innovation. Companies such as Google, Pentagram and Netflix have long used this strategy to make their canteens into a relaxed and creative space.

[Micheal Beirut](#), one of the biggest names in the design world, speaks positively about lunchtime at Pentagram: "Even though we all sit in an open plan office, our teams often don't get to spend time with one another because of our structure: each partner has a group that functions autonomously. The lunch period provides a chance for everyone to sit side by side."

We feel that within the 'new normal' of flexible office working, meals shared between employees can make their time in the workplace feel more like a special occasion. Whether it's through high-quality catering or other initiatives, it will be important for companies to ensure that their employees relish their days working in the office.







**That's all folks!**

Office life is evolving and so are the food service requirements of employees. Companies need to be ready to adapt quickly to new ways of working. Having a strategy for food is part of this change. Providing the right food is likely to keep employees energised and engaged within their teams.

It's up to workplace caterers to step up to the challenge and adapt their services to this environment. This means providing the food with accompanying side dishes of sustainability, flexibility and a real people-focussed approach.

Whatever the future might bring, we are looking forward to energising our client's employees with nourishing and safely prepared meals. After all, there's no better way of saying 'welcome back' than a fresh tasty dish cooked from scratch.

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