

HEALTHY EATING BY DESIGN: 7 SIMPLE 'NUDGES' FOR THE WORKPLACE



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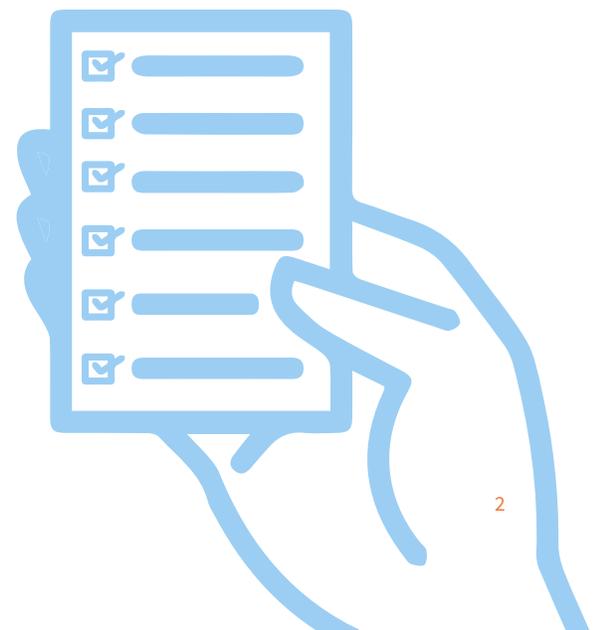
We worked with a larger insurance company to help them design workplace environments to encourage healthy eating and movement. To do this we did 3 behavioral audits of large well-known companies. We went into their cafeterias, their offices and their gyms. Then, we applied behavioral research to make recommendations that could drive behavior change. Below we offer 7 tips from the intensive research project that could be used in any workplace cafeterias.

WHAT'S A BEHAVIORAL DIAGNOSIS?

The process of figuring out how well something is designed to encourage a key behavior is what we call a Behavioral Diagnosis. It is a detailed, step by step analysis of how users actually behave, and it starts once you know what your key behavior is.

WHY DO A BEHAVIORAL DIAGNOSIS?

A behavioral diagnosis is an approach to problem solving that starts with deeply understanding the important influence of the environment on people's decisions. By zooming in to each step and every detail of the whole process surrounding the key behavior, it becomes much easier to figure out the where, when and how of tweaking the environment.

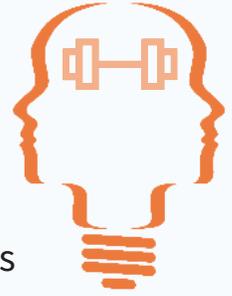


WHO THIS IS FOR:

Health and Benefits Managers

Catering or Cafeteria Managers

On-site Nutrition Specialists or Registered Dietitians



Research in behavioral economics suggests that small and subtle cues in our environment, like the order of food items on the cafeteria line, influence our decisions every day. These environmental cues and suggestions, sometimes known as choice architecture, can influence how and what we eat, since much of our decisions are made quickly, without careful consideration. For example, we might grab a convenient candy bar at the checkout register without much thought, rather than think carefully about whether this choice helps meet our long-term health goals. If food is presented in a different way, it can help ‘nudge’ people’s consumption towards healthier options. A key contribution of behavioral economics has been to highlight how we can make it easier for people to make choices more in line with their goals.

One of the best opportunities to promote healthy eating behaviors is to carefully consider the design, layout and policies of facilities where food is provided and consumed, such as the workplace cafeteria and break room. Eating facilities are not designed neutrally – they give cues about what, where, when and how much to eat. By applying insights from behavioral economics, onsite eating facilities can be designed in ways that nudge people towards eating more healthfully. Below, we offer a list of 7 subtle and simple tips that can be used to enhance onsite workplace efforts by making the most of what you already provide.



1. MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES THE DEFAULT OPTION



Why? Many people are more likely to stick with the status quo and select the default food option than to seek out or actively choose an alternative option.¹ Defaults refer to the food option, choice or behavior that is selected automatically (or pre-selected) for us.

- ✓ Offer a healthy side dish or salad as the default option paired with an entrée (such that a starch as a side dish must be requested).²
- ✓ Offer an option to downsize portions (such as a half order) in the cafeteria. Cafeteria staff can ask people whether they'd like this option.³
- ✓ Make at least one of the daily specials a healthy option since people may look to these specials when in doubt about what to choose.⁴

2. ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO PLAN MEALS AHEAD



Why? We make better decisions for ourselves when we make them in advance. When we engage in 'pre-planning behavior' (such as by packing a lunch at home), we are more likely to behave in accordance with our goals to be healthy.

- ✓ Provide a refrigerator and microwave in the break room to allow employees to easily store and heat healthy food prepared from home.
- ✓ Post the menus of at least 3 healthy restaurants near the office common space to help people plan ahead when they choose to eat out.
- ✓ Offer an option to pre-order food in the morning so that it's ready in time for lunch.

3. INCREASE/DECREASE THE AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHY/UNHEALTHY OPTIONS



Why? To put it simply, by making healthy foods and drinks more available, people will be more likely to choose them. Decreasing the availability and accessibility of unhealthy items introduces a barrier that will discourage consumption.⁵

- ✓ Increase the availability of healthy food options, such as by providing free fruit in the break room. Healthy food options should also be available in the cafeteria, (these could include a salad bar, and providing at least two options for healthy entrées, side-dishes and desserts).
- ✓ Decrease the availability and visibility of unhealthy items, such as by removing unhealthy condiments and snacks from the break room (or at least placing them out of sight).⁶
- ✓ Make water the most available drink option by providing water in the food serving area, the dining room and the cafeteria (for free!). Water should be accessible within a one-minute walk of any work area, and should be available in more locations than sugary beverages.

4. MAKE HEALTHY OPTIONS THE MOST CONVENIENT OPTIONS.



Why? Related to availability, food options that are displayed first and that are the easiest to access will be more likely to be selected.

- ✓ Place healthiest options at eye-level, such as on shelves or within vending machines.
- ✓ Replace unhealthy snacks from the check-out register and replace them with healthier options (or make unhealthy snacks harder to reach).⁷ Consider providing a “grab-and-go” section near the register with only healthy items like fruit and salads.
- ✓ Present healthiest items first in the salad bar (unhealthy items like bacon bits should be displayed last). Relatedly, make oil and vinegar the easiest to reach/most prominently displayed dressings at the salad bar.

5. HELP PEOPLE EXERT SELF-CONTROL



Why? Nudges that promote self-control strategies are promising tools to encourage behaviors in line with their goals to be healthy. These strategies help keep people on track to meet their health goals even in contexts in which they are tempted by unhealthy indulgences.

- ✓ Remove TVs from dining areas, as distractions cause us both to eat more during that meal, as well as snack more later on.⁸
- ✓ Place a mirror behind unhealthy items, since people are less likely to indulge in front of one.⁹
- ✓ Provide a discount for paying for food with cash since the pain of paying in cash can curb impulsive urges to purchase unhealthy foods.
- ✓ Display sample sizes in a visual and intelligible way (such as an image of a sample portion along with nutritional information) to make portion sizes easier to measure both for diners and cafeteria staff.
- ✓ Pair green labels (which we associate with ‘Go’) with healthy foods, and pair red labels (‘Stop’) with unhealthy foods to remind people to proceed in moderation.¹⁰

6. DESIGN SERVEWARE TO GET PEOPLE TO EAT LESS WITHOUT NOTICING



Why? Shape, sizes, and colors of objects influence our perception of ‘fullness.’ Large plates make us think our food portions are smaller than they are, and white plates make our plates look emptier.

- ✓ Encourage small-plate usage by providing smaller plates (10 inches or smaller) or including a sign that tells people that people with bigger dishes tend to eat more.¹¹
- ✓ Place tall skinny glasses near unhealthy beverages (instead of short, fat ones), since we tend to pour less volume into tall glasses.¹²
- ✓ Use small, easy to control serving utensils and portion-controlled dispensers for unhealthy items (like salad dressing).

7. FOCUS ON A MORE ATTRACTIVE BENEFIT THAN 'HEALTHY'



Why? Providing some kind of incentive —financial, social, recreational, reputational or otherwise—is another strategy that can make behavior change easier.

- Subsidize or discount healthy foods (but don't call them out for being healthy).¹³
- Create a fast-pass check register for healthy food to motivate people to avoid a wait.
- Provide fun activities in the break room (like a ping pong table) to encourage use of the break room for lunch.



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Irrational Labs is a nonprofit that applies and tests insights from behavioral economics to address product, marketing, and societal problems. We have deep expertise in partnering with companies and organizations to design and test behavioral interventions to increase people's health, wealth and happiness. We also frequently lead workshops with companies to integrate the behavioral science approach into their organizations.

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