

LUNCH MONEY:

Understanding the Funding Structures for Workplace Lunch

This white paper explores the different ways companies fund food programs, and why the funding structure itself determines whether a food program meets company goals.

The paper looks specifically at meal stipends and individual ordering compare to centralized, company-funded catering programs.



Introduction: Two Ways Companies Fund Lunch

Most workplace lunch programs are funded in one of two ways:



Distributed Spend System - The money is pushed outward to employees through stipends, subsidies, debit-card allowances, and app-based individual ordering. Meals are purchased and consumed individually, often at desks, with minimal visibility into patterns or outcomes.



Centralized Spend Program - Spend is pooled into a unified, company-funded catering experience. Meals are shared onsite and data is collected centrally. This structure is used most often to strengthen culture and align food spend with organizational goals.

Why Food Strategy Matters



Food is one of the few levers that touches nearly everyone. Surveys repeatedly show that free or subsidized **food is one of the most valued benefits** among tech workers, with 57% of employees ranking it among the **most meaningful workplace offerings**.

A recent survey summarized in Inc. reported that 88% of business leaders believe a corporate meal program can increase in-office attendance, and **3 in 4 say catering is linked to better retention**.

The question is not whether you spend on food. It's whether that spend is working as hard as it could.

Distributed Spend Systems (stipends, meal allowances)

The Distributed Spend System refers to lunch benefits in which **companies allocate funds directly to employees**. This is typically through stipends, meal allowances, or app-based individual ordering.

These systems grew rapidly during the rise of hybrid and remote work because they offered flexibility, required little operational infrastructure, and allowed employees to select meals that met individual dietary needs and schedules.

Research on these programs shows several consistent patterns across workplaces. When lunch is sourced individually, **employees tend to eat at their desks or on their own schedules**.



Stipends work best when employees are not co-located.

Workplace studies indicate that this decentralization results in **fewer shared meals and fewer opportunities for informal interaction** throughout the day.

Stipends work best in organizations where employees are not co-located. When there is no shared workplace, there is no opportunity for communal dining or a centralized culinary program. Or, in environments where convenience is a top priority.

Providing individual **allowances ensures remote employees still receive a meaningful food benefit** without requiring physical infrastructure.





The Centralized Spend System

A Centralized Spend Program refers to a workplace lunch funding structure in which a company pools meal spend into a **single, company-funded catering program**.

Meals are prepared by a single team, served on-site (buffet-style or similar), and consumed in shared dining spaces.

This structure tends to be **most effective in environments where employees spend meaningful time on-site**, collaborate across teams, or when leadership aims to build culture, community, and operational visibility through food.

Shared Meals and Social Bonding Research

A growing body of **research underscores the social and organizational benefits of communal meals**. A field study of teams who ate together performed significantly better as a group than teams who dined separately.

Studies of “commensality,” the act of eating together, link shared meals with stronger interpersonal trust, greater life satisfaction, enhanced sense of community, and deeper social bonds.

In a workplace context, these social benefits translate into **more informal interaction, easier communication across silos, and a sense of belonging**.

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Ideal Environments for a Centralized Spend Program:

- In-office workdays are encouraged
- Work requires cross-team interaction
- Goals hinge on employee engagement, strong culture, and overall well-being
- Desire for operational efficiency and sustainability



Why the centralized funding structure better supports high-growth, ambitious teams

- Social eating increases trust, engagement, and life satisfaction
- **Teams that eat together regularly show significantly higher cooperative behavior** and group performance
- Shared meals offer a stable opportunity for informal communication, interdepartmental mixing, and **spontaneous ideation.**



Conclusion: aligning priorities with funding structure

Both funding structures have legitimate use cases.

Distributed spend remains well-suited for fully remote teams or where convenience is the top priority. It provides autonomy and simplicity in settings where communal dining is not central to the workday.

For organizations with priorities like improving in-office engagement and strengthening culture, a Centralized Spend Program offers advantages that distributed systems cannot replicate.

By pooling spend, companies create opportunities for employees to gather, gain visibility into participation and preferences, and reduce environmental impact through bulk preparation.



About us

Sifted's catering framework is purpose-built for tech companies that want food to play a meaningful role in workplace culture.

With globally inspired menus, chef-led culinary development, and dining formats that encourage employees to linger rather than isolate, Sifted transforms lunch into a predictable moment of connection.

Sifted layers a sophisticated analytics engine onto this shared experience providing attendance pattern, automatic portion and headcount adjustments and minimal waste.

Because spend is centralized, every dollar works harder. **From Sifted, clients receive more insight, more efficiency, more connection, and more cultural return.**



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