

Worker's Food Program: evaluating the knowledge of administrative and technical managers

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Abstract

The Workers' Food Program (WFP) aims to improve the nutritional status of workers. This study evaluated the knowledge of WFP's administrative and technical managers in promoting healthy diet and health and its interface with the program. The study comprised of eight companies registered in the WFP, located in Chapeco-SC, Brazil, having over 150 employees, canteen and nutritionists. We administered a questionnaire, and the recorded responses were transcribed and analyzed using the technique of content analysis. According to the office managers, the main reason why the company decided to join the WFP was tax incentives. The technical managers emphasized more often the benefit for workers. Asked about what WFP is, the administrative managers commented more frequently about the employee's welfare. On the same subject, the technical managers cited more features of the program. It was found that most of the technical and administrative managers responsible for WFP had vague knowledge about the program. It was observed that many managers put more emphasis on the tax benefits for the company than in highlighting the main objectives for employees; however, the technical managers showed to be more knowledgeable about the role of WFP in promoting the worker's health than the office managers.

Keywords: Workers. Collective Feeding. Nutrition Programs and Policies. Program Evaluation.

Introduction

The Worker's Food Program (WFP) was created by Law no. 6321 of April 14, 1976 and regulated by Decree no. 5 of January 14, 1991. The program is a partnership between the government, foodservices and workers and its priority is to serve low-income workers (earning less than five times the minimum wages per month). Its main goal is to improve the workers' nutritional condition with positive repercussions on the quality of life, reduction of accidents at work and the increase of productivity.¹

Data from the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE) showed that in 2007 10,057,848 workers in the country benefitted from the program, among them 464,741 in the state of Santa Catarina; of these, 285,664 ate in the companies where they worked, and 91,784 received meals through cooperation agreements. In the modality of meal services granted through cooperation agreements, the workers of the beneficiary company eat in restaurants associated with operators of vouchers, tickets, coupons, checks, etc.²

Geraldo, Bandoni & Jaime³ evaluated the nutritional aspects of the foods offered by companies that are beneficiary of the WFP, and the results showed the occurrence of high percentages of inadequacy in all variables studied relating to the nutrients intake recommended by WHO for the prevention of chronic diseases and the promotion of healthy eating.

As a consequence of the current epidemiological scenario of the Brazilian adult population, in 2006 the WFP's nutritional parameters were changed. Prior to such changes, the major meals should have at least 1,400 kcal and the smaller meals at least 300 kcal. The new recommendations prescribe now 600 to 800 kcal in the larger meals, and 300 to 400 kcal in the smaller ones, being possible an addition of 20% in both meals in relation to the total energy value.⁴

In addition, in the 1990s the promotion of healthy diets was included in the program, and the companies were encouraged to undertake nutrition educational actions.⁵ In 1999, the Tripartite Commission, constituted by representatives of the government, workers and employers, launched the *Orientação da Educação Alimentar* (Guide for Nutrition Education) aiming to provide guidance on food education actions.⁶ This commission, in conjunction with the Coordination of the WFP, proposed actions for the implementation of food and nutrition education, aiming to improve the nutritional status and reduce the incidence of non-communicable chronic diseases.⁷

The work environment is recognized as a strategic place for the promotion of health and healthy eating.⁸ The World Health Organization considers that the workplace should provide opportunities and encourage workers to make healthy choices.⁹ In this regard, the consolidation

of WFP as a program that aims to promote healthy eating at the workplace requires that their managers, who are responsible for the operation of this program in the companies, fully understand and accept this question.

Based on the above, a study was conducted in companies registered at the WFP in Chapecó, state of Santa Catarina, Brazil, aiming to evaluate the knowledge of the WFP's administrative and technical managers about the promotion of health and healthy eating and the interface of this theme with the program.

Method

This is a descriptive and quantitative case study in which the population was made up by companies enrolled at the WFP, according to the List of Beneficiary Companies available at the website of the Ministry of Health and Employment (MTE) based on reports from 2008 on.² Regarding the initial criteria for inclusion in the study, the companies should be located in the municipality of Chapecó-SC and have more than 150 employees. Sample selection was performed in March 2010 when 12 companies were identified (N = size of the population). Following such first selection, the companies that provided “cesta básica” (basic basket of foods) or meal-voucher to the employees or did not have a canteen and professional nutritionist in the company were excluded. As a result, the final sample (n) consisted of eight companies.

Aiming to determine the knowledge about the WFP, a questionnaire with open-ended questions were administered orally to the participant companies, containing four questions: 1) In your opinion, why your company decided to join the WFP? 2) If you had to explain to someone else what WFP is, what would you say? 3) Are you familiar with the booklet *Orientação da Educação Alimentar* (Guide for Food Education) published by MTE in 1999? If the answer was “yes”, the participant was referred to the last question: 4) Do you carry any action as recommended in the Guide for Food Education?

The questionnaire was administered to office managers (regardless their educational background: owners, managers, among others – 8 individuals) and to technicians (nutritionists – 8 individuals) responsible for the program in the company, totaling 16 respondents. This stage of the study was performed from April to May 2010, and the interviews were recorded after the participants have signed the Free and Informed Consent Form.

The recordings were transcribed and analyzed through the technique of contents analysis, allowing in this study the identification of the aspects by the frequency. Contents analysis is a set of techniques of communication analysis. This technique can be quantitative or qualitative. In the first, the frequency of the characteristics that are repeated in the content text is described. In the latter, the presence or not of a given characteristic or set of characteristics of contents in a given fraction of the text is observed.¹⁰

After transcription, the information was organized according to the categories of responses.¹¹ This step consisted basically in examining the oral material, as transcribed from the interviews, searching for key expressions. Such categorization did not take into consideration the number of respondents only but also the number of times that the answer appeared, because some respondents gave more than an answer for the same question. So, the cut-off option was frequency.

Results

Key expressions were extracted from the professionals' responses and grouped into central ideas. Chart 1 shows the categories of responses. Although "n" has been eight, some questions had more than eight responses because the same respondent gave more than one answer for the same question. So, the "n" of each question may be higher than the total "n" of the sample.

When asked about the reason why the company decided to join the WFP, among the key expressions the administrative managers mentioned the tax benefits granted to the company (n=5). According to one of the professionals, the company adhered to the program "to take advantage of the benefits that the Worker's Food Program grants to the beneficiary company". The professionals cited the benefit granted to workers (n=5), and also believed that the company registered in the program to comply with the law (n=1).

Regarding the technical managers participating in the present study, although they have mentioned tax incentives for the company (n=3), they emphasized more frequently the benefits for the workers (n=6) as one of the reasons that led the company to apply for the program. Other technical managers commented that the reason was contractual obligation (n=1) in the case of companies contracted out, and to increase production (n=1).

Neither the administrative managers nor the technical managers cited the benefits for the government, such as: reduction of costs and investments in health, economic growth and social welfare.

Asked about what WFP is, the administrative managers commented more often about the employees' well-being (n=4), followed by the answer that it is a benefit granted to the company (n=3) and that it is the worker's food program (n=3). It was also commented that it is a program of the federal government (n=1) to improve the nutritional condition of workers with monthly income of up to five minimum wages. (n=1). It could be seen that the office managers have a superficial knowledge of the program, focusing on some aspects related to the benefits offered to the company and employees, but their knowledge was superficial.

The technical managers, compared to the administrative ones, when asked about what the WFP was, mentioned more characteristics of the program. As one of the professionals said, the WFP

[...] is a worker's food program where the company is engaged in providing balanced diet to the employees, in sufficient quantity and quality of foods, in addition to all the ... uh... follow-up work with the nutritionist [...].

The professionals commented more often on the balanced foods provided to the employees (n=5) and also that it is the worker's food program (n=4), which provides benefits to the company, such as more productivity gains (n=4). Less often, it was mentioned nutrition education (n=1), a federal government program (n=1), that the program helps keeping the employee in the company (n=1), and one professional was not able to respond.

When asked about the nutrition education guide issued by the Ministry of Labor and Employment, it was found that the office managers did not know it (n=4) or cannot explain it rightly (n=4). Among the technical managers, only one stated and showed to be knowledgeable about the guide; the others, including the administrative professionals, were not familiar with the guide (n=5) nor couldn't explain it correctly (n=2).

The administrative and technical managers who asserted being familiar with the guide were asked if they used to promote actions for the employees' nutrition education, as proposed by the guide. Among the administrative managers, one has not conducted any action; the others (n=3) said that the person responsible for the actions was the nutritionist. Among the technical managers, four professionals commented that they carried out nutrition education, either through bulletin boards or interns.

Chart 1. Responses categorization. Chapecó-SC, 2010.

Key expressions	Central idea
1. In your opinion, why your company decided to join the WFP?	
Benefit for the workers	
Better quality of life for the workers	Benefit for the workers
To offer meals to employees	
Tax benefits for the company	Tax benefit for the company
Compliance with the law	Compliance with the law
Contractual obligation	Contractual obligation
To improve production	To improve production
2. If you had to explain to someone else what the WFP is, what would you say?	
Employee's well-being	
Benefit for the workers	
Assurance of the workers' health	Employee's well-being
Balanced diet	
It is the Worker's Food Program	
It is the Worker's Food Program	It is the Worker's Food Program
Benefit for the company	
It helps the company to provide food	Benefit for the company
Program of the Federal Government	Program of the Federal Government
It helps improve the nutritional condition of workers who earn up to 5 minimum wages/month	It helps improve the nutritional condition of workers who earn up to 5 minimum wages/month
Nutrition education	Nutrition education
To keep the employee in the company	To keep the employee in the company
Doesn't know	Doesn't know

3. Are you familiar with the *Orientação da Educação Alimentar (Guide for Food Education)* issued by the Ministry of Labor and Employment in 1999?

No	No
Couldn't explain correctly	Couldn't explain correctly
Yes	Yes

4. Do you carry out any action as proposed in the Guide for Food Education?

Did not respond	Did not respond
Nutritionist does (but could not explain exactly what the guide is)	Nutritionist does (but could not explain exactly what the guide is)
No	No
Nutrition Education through bulletin boards	
Nutrition Education	Nutrition education
Nutrition Education for interns	

Source: developed by the authors.

Discussion

Similarly to the present study, Bandoni, Brasil & Jaime¹² assessed the knowledge of the WFU's managers and found that 32.2% of the key expressions emphasized the benefits of the program to the company. About the companies' decision to participate in the program, the authors mentioned in their study that the central idea "because of law" reveals a mistaken view of the nature of the program because adherence is not compulsory and is voluntary for the companies interested in participating.¹²

For the company, in addition to tax incentives (exemption of up to 4% in income tax) the program offers other benefits such as: increased productivity; improved integration between the employees and the company; reduced absenteeism (delays and absences); reduced turnover; exemption of social fees charged over the amount of meals provided.⁷

It should be emphasized that the main goal of WFP is not tax exemption but the improvement of the workers' nutritional status, aiming to promote health and the prevention of work-related diseases.⁷ According to Veloso & Santana,¹³ worker's food policies in Brazil are based on the notion that the workforce is the key element for economic production.

A balanced diet is crucial in the association of the worker's health with productivity. Scientific studies confirm the relation between a balanced diet and increased productivity, as well as low productivity rates in case of inadequate calorie intake.¹⁴ This shows the importance of nutrition to the organic balance not only to improve health but also from the economic point of view, i.e., as a condition for more energy expenditure and, consequently, more work capacity.¹⁵

It is known that poor diets can trigger consequences related to the reduction of the average lifetime, productivity, resistance to diseases, increased predisposition to work accidents and low work learning ability. It is worth highlighting that the supply of meals to employees during the workday can represent an increase of 10% in production.^{14,16}

Food and nutrition are basic requirements for health promotion and protection and enable the full potential of human growth and development, with quality of life and citizenship.¹⁷ Unhealthy diets and the lack of physical activity are the main causes of the major non-communicable diseases, such as heart diseases, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer, and contribute substantially to the global burden of morbidity, mortality and disability.¹⁸

In the study by Savio *et al.*¹⁹, the authors highlight the importance and need of a nutritionist in the forefront of a foodservice as a health promoter for the large number of customers that frequent this ever expanding business. According to Resolution CFN no. 380/2005, it is the nutritionist's responsibility, when exercising his/her duties in the workers' food program, to plan, organize, manage, supervise, evaluate the WFP's food and nutrition services, as well as provide food and nutrition education to the employees in public and private institutions through actions, programs and events, aiming at the prevention of diseases and the promotion and maintenance of health.²⁰

According to Bandoni, Brasil & Jaime¹², it is worrisome the finding that those directly responsible for the WFP are not familiar with the program and do not recognize it as a social program, as represented by 27.7% of the key expressions identified in their study. According to the authors, as the adherence to the program does not require training or qualification of the managers, being only necessary that the company completes a form to be entitled to participate, such responses can be partially explained. Thus, providing more information about the program and the training of the local managers are fundamental actions to achieve the full WFP's potential of promoting health food and nutrition.

The food education guide published by MTE, although it dates back to 1999, is an important tool because it discusses nutrition education, its importance, the benefits for the company, employees and society. In addition, it describes simple strategies to carry out nutrition education in the workplace, tips for each service provided, and in the exhibits one can find a questionnaire for health diagnosis, examples of menus and some advices regarding non-communicable chronic diseases.⁶

It can be seen that encouraging companies to provide educational actions to promote health is a goal to be pursued.²¹ The food education approach reflects an attempt to shift the genuinely energetic focus of worker's nutrition to a focus of health promotion and/or prevention of illnesses.²² However, despite the company's obligation to fulfill the nutritional requirements and provide food and nutrition education to the beneficiary workers, one of the program's weaknesses is exactly the lack of educational programs and activities aiming to promote health and stimulate good eating habits and a healthy life.⁷

It is the nutritionist's responsibility to care about disease prevention and health promotion. Besides nourishing well, a balanced diet can be an example for the creation of appropriate eating habits in the population. Thus, the adequacy of the meals served in a foodservice is of utmost importance as well as the formulation of strategies oriented to the promotion of health to improve the quality of life.¹⁴

It is known, however, that basic knowledge on nutrition and its efficient implementation become secondary issues in the daily routine of nutritionists in foodservices, and costs control becomes the primary goal since employers overvalue this aspect. Food itself becomes meaningless if the nutritionist does not make the association of foods, of the eating act and the individual. To this end, nutritionist's training and development should be focused both in teaching and learning, so as to be able to build and produce knowledge on food and nutrition.²³

Nutritionists, as educators, should understand that teaching is not the mere transference of knowledge, but an action that creates opportunities for building knowledge. Nutrition education is a thoroughgoing process, starting in the meals production and ending in serving, working as a constant guidance not only in the level of information but especially in raising awareness.²⁴

Nutritionist's training, as it has been currently conducted, i.e., aiming to train a professional for specific technical performances, can no longer be accepted. Higher education institutions, besides providing technical and scientific knowledge, need to prepare future professionals not only with technical and scientific competence but to understand the reality.²⁵ "A greater emphasis on the biological content to the detriment of the social one hinders undergraduates to deepen their knowledge, which would allow a better understanding of the determinants of the nutritional problems."²⁶ The lack of articulation between theory and practice in higher education ends up delivering deficient professionals.²⁷

The challenge for a healthy diet includes the mobilization of the public power and the segment of foods production, processing and marketing within a new ethical standard that would consider health as a key factor and guide of strategies and the social and economic relations in and between countries.

The Brazilian government, with the purpose of supplementing the income of part of the population that does not reach the minimum income level, uses programs of actions to indirectly provide income distribution and promote economic growth and development.¹⁵ But, according to Santos *et al.*²², it is necessary that the evaluation of programs becomes one of the basic and continuous activities of the government. This would allow the re-orientation and/or reformulation of their strategies in order to attain the planned goals.

It is necessary to evaluate the efficiency of the programs not only with regard to the results and the amount of investments and expenditures, but considering the difficulties or potentialities existing in the region where the programs are in operation.²⁹

The Public Health Service (SUS), through its *Humaniza SUS* program, shows that “one of the aspects that has attracted attention when health services are evaluated is the existence of unprepared professionals to deal with the subjective dimension that all health practices have.³⁰ Health education encompasses nutritional education, and the health practices should be included in the country’s health policies and be effective.

Conclusion

It was found that most of the technical and office managers responsible for the WFP in the company had superficial knowledge of the program. It was observed in the responses of various managers more emphasis on tax incentives for the company than on the main goals or benefits of the program for the employees. On the other hand, the technical managers showed to be more knowledgeable about the role played by the WFP in the worker’s health than the office managers.

Considering the findings of this study, it is also necessary to bring more information on the WFP to the target audience, so as to make workers aware of their rights and the actions developed by the program, inform and also educate the administrative and technical managers who are directly involved in the WFP’s operations and have responsibilities to fulfill.

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