

Return-to-Office Foodservice

A Mixed Bag

By Rita Negrete-Rousseau

White-collar workers are somewhat returning to urban office buildings and suburban corporate campuses, but no big shifts have occurred, which leaves those running foodservice offerings still figuring it all out.

Business and industry (B&I) foodservice purveyors have adjusted faster to greater change in the last three years than perhaps in the half century prior to 2020. Their nimbleness – in both the pandemic period and post-pandemic recovery – is a good sign that they'll be able to adjust to any trends in the nation's workplaces for years to come.

"Corporate dining has really been a challenge, especially for management companies that signed an agreement prior to COVID," says foodservice design consultant **Arlene Spiegel of New York City-based Arlene Spiegel & Associates.** "And now, they're struggling to reimagine their contracts with clients," she says. Employers increasingly view foodservice as an "incentive, reward and enticement" for returning and new staffers.

As employers focus on foodservice to please their workers, companies that own office buildings are under the same pressure to offer higher-end food services as an amenity. Employers shopping for office space can afford to be choosy since there's a lot of square footage standing empty.

Doing More for Few

In many if not most cases, pre-pandemic foodservice operations won't work in today's offices, Spiegel says, if only because these facilities feed fewer people each weekday compared to 2019. "Building ownership may have invested tons of money on cafes that are never



coming back" she says "A facility that has been designed for 1,000 customers, and now serves only 400, creates so many inefficiencies. We're still trying to figure things out."

The Essential Role of Technology

"The young workforce in particular is very comfortable with technology," Spiegel says. "In truth, twentysomethings prefer not to talk to anyone; they're very happy just to order for carryout. Workers can be on the phone or computer and can order lunch by mobile app for pickup or delivery at a certain time. Employees get tremendous convenience, and employers get much more productive time from their workforce." In some buildings, ordering kiosks, not only in the dining room but near every elevator bank on every floor, provide an alternative preorder method, Spiegel reports.

Rethinking FOH & BOH

Spiegel mentions conversions of salad and soup bar stations from served to self-serve mode and calls out the usefulness of manufacturers' servery modules with food wells that can be switched from refrigerated to ambient temperature to heated.

"That allows for the same footprint to be used for specials and for different seasons," she says. "Operators are also using chafing dishes and mix-and-match merchandisers to accommodate a variety of self-service food items. All that allows them to reduce labor without reducing the menu too much." **FE&S**