



JUST EAT
for business

The New Watercooler

***How shared meals are replacing
the office watercooler in the
hybrid era***

Research report from Just Eat for Business

Contents

Foreword	2
Introduction + Methodology	3
The evolving impact of hybrid working	4
The generational divide	6
Shared meals: the new ritual	8
Why it matters for business	10
Recommendations & about Just Eat for Business	11



Foreword by ***Dr Audrey Tang***

Chartered Psychologist (CPsychol) and
multi award-winning business author
and broadcaster

“You’ll always find me in the kitchen at parties”, Jona Lewie once sang, referring to a space away from the noise and performance of the party itself. Now, as any kitchen designer will tell you, the kitchen often is the party: nibbles, chat, support for the host, and informal conversation.

The office watercooler was the workplace equivalent: somewhere conversation could drift from the professional to the personal, where you’d catch up on a colleague’s family, or get an honest opinion on last night’s TV, if your mind was still at your desk.

It’s easy to underestimate the power of these micro-connections. But recent research from the Society for Workplace and Organizational Psychology found the workplace may be one of the few remaining antidotes to a loneliness epidemic now “risking becoming a public health crisis” (SWOP, 2023). As more of daily life becomes automated, the office may be one of the last reliable spaces for in-person contact, and the rise of hybrid working means we must be more intentional about our approach to preserve it.

I’ve had the pleasure of working with Just Eat for Business before, including

on last year’s More Than a Meal report, and this feels like a natural next chapter in that conversation: what happens when the watercooler itself disappears?

If connection is harder to come by, it’s worth asking what might replace it. Organisations need renovation, not just adaptation, and the provision of meals as varied and genuine as the people eating them has real potential here.

Many cultures have long understood this. Korea’s *pojangmaches*, or “street bars,” are one example of a space built for gathering after work. Just Eat for Business challenges us to go further still, toward the *ssanggabpocha*, the “equality bar”, where everyone sits as equals. A space to reconnect, check in, and ask for help, informally, as people.

Introduction + methodology

The traditional office watercooler was never really about the water. It was where relationships formed in the gaps between meetings, where ideas were shared without an agenda, and where office culture took shape without anyone planning it.

Hybrid working hasn't removed the need for those moments, but it has removed many of the everyday conditions that used to create them by accident. Fewer shared days in the office means fewer chance encounters, fewer informal catch-ups,

and fewer of the small interactions that used to build trust and familiarity between colleagues without anyone noticing it was happening.

This report sets out new research into exactly what's changed, who's feeling it most, and into the ritual that's quietly stepping in to fill the gap: **the shared meal**. Rather than a replacement for everything hybrid working has offered, it's a reminder that some things, left purely to chance, don't happen on their own anymore. They need a reason, a moment, and often, a table.



500

UK employees
with pre-COVID
office experience



500

UK employees
who started in
hybrid roles from
2020 onwards



300

UK people
managers

Fieldwork: OnePoll, 26 August - 8 September 2026

Methodology

This report draws on new research among 1,000 UK employees (split 50/50 between those with pre-COVID office experience and those who started in hybrid roles from 2020 onwards) and 300 UK people managers. Fieldwork was conducted by OnePoll between 26 August and 8 September 2026.

The evolving impact of hybrid working

When 300 UK people managers were asked what their team has lost most since shifting to hybrid working, spontaneous, casual conversation came out clearly on top (44%) – more than double the next most common answer, the ability to spot when a colleague is struggling (20%).

It's not that communication has broken down. Most managers say it's actually held up well: 84% say it's either improved (37%) or stayed about the same (47%) compared with before hybrid working. But this is exactly what makes the loss of spontaneous conversation so notable: teams are managing to keep the basics running, while still losing something specific and harder to measure. Structured communication can be scheduled. The unplanned, in-between moments can't, which is precisely why they're the hardest thing for hybrid teams to replace.



Employees feel this too: 58% of the 1,000 employees surveyed say they hold back from asking a question or raising an issue remotely, because it feels harder than doing so in person. That hesitation adds up. Multiply it across a team, a week, a year, and so on. It points to a steady erosion of the kind of casual problem-solving that used to happen without anyone having to ask for help out loud.

44%

of UK people managers say the single biggest thing their team has lost since shifting to hybrid is spontaneous, casual conversation

Base: 300 UK people managers, asked to select one option.

“

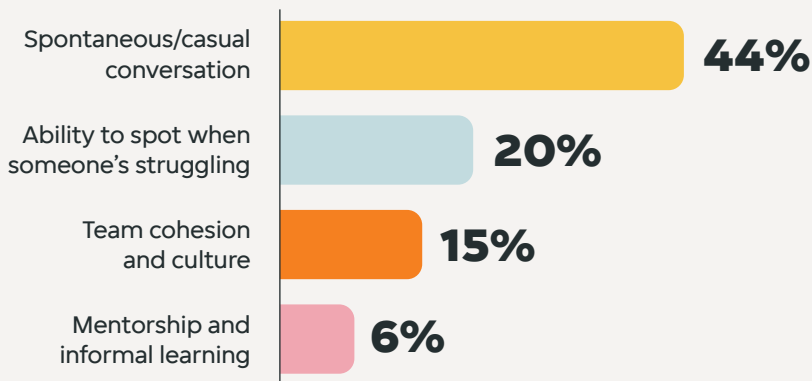
When we first learn to talk, conversation is organic. We learn to take turns, regulate our tone, and listen to each other almost by instinct. But the shift to text, email and digital platforms has changed that, leaving many of us less practised at the real thing. As a psychologist, I worry less that we're missing out on connection, and more that many who've grown up with digital communication genuinely don't know what they're missing.

Research from the University of Essex (2023) found that the more “weak ties” a person has, the clubs, networks and casual contacts in their life, the happier they tend to be. The workplace is a natural home for exactly this kind of tie. We feel more familiar with people through simple, repeated contact, and we like them better for it too. ‘Liking’ isn't itself a performance metric, but collaboration certainly is.

- Dr Audrey Tang, Chartered Psychologist

”

What have teams lost most since shifting to hybrid?



The generational divide



Connection at work doesn't look the same for everyone, and the data shows a clear generational pattern in both how connected people feel and where they find it.

Shared lunch areas in the office, such as canteens, breakout spaces and communal eating areas, are the single biggest source of casual chit-chat for those who started their careers post-2020 (40%), nearly double the rate among those with pre-2020 office experience (21%). Older and more established employees, by contrast,

lean more on the kitchen and the desk: those aged 45-54 are most likely to name the kitchen as their top spot for casual connection (34%), while those aged 35-44 lean most heavily on their desk area (34%).

In other words, where a “watercooler moment” happens now depends heavily on who you ask. For newer starters, it's increasingly happening over food. For everyone else, it's still scattered across the places office life has always lived: the kitchen, the desk, the corridor.

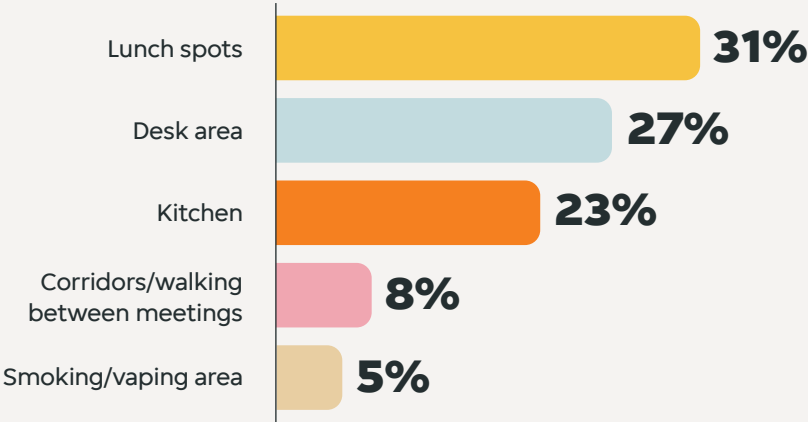
40%

of post-2020 starters say lunch spots are their main source of casual chit-chat at work, nearly double the rate among those with pre-COVID office experience (21%)

Base: 1,000 UK employees, split by career start date

The habits around asking a quick question are shifting too, and again, generationally. 57% of all employees default to walking over to a colleague's desk rather than messaging (23%) or emailing (9%), but this instinct fades sharply with age and experience: 73% of 55-64 year-olds will walk over, compared with just 48% of 25-34 year-olds, who are far more likely to reach for instant messaging instead.

Where do you get the most casual chit-chat?



“

What’s really interesting here is that younger employees, who’ve spent the least time in a traditional office, are the ones leaning hardest into food as a way to connect. It tells us something simple: given the chance, people will find their own watercooler moment. Ours just happens to be built around lunch.

- Tom Baxter, Managing Director at Just Eat for Business

”

Shared meals: the new ritual

With the old watercooler moments harder to come by, food is clearly stepping in to fill the gap, and this isn't a passive shift. People are actively choosing it.

86% of the 1,000 employees surveyed believe eating meals or taking breaks with colleagues helps build stronger work relationships. That belief runs even stronger among those newer to office life: 91% of post-2020 starters say the same, compared with 81% of those with pre-COVID experience, suggesting this isn't a nostalgic preference for "how things used to be", but a genuinely forward-looking view of how relationships get built now.

When asked what actually builds the strongest relationships with colleagues, team socials (38%) and team lunches (27%) come out ahead of in-person meetings (20%), instant messaging (6%) and video or phone



calls (4%). Notably, the two highest-ranked answers both involve food or informal social time, not scheduled, work-focused interaction, which says something about what people actually want from their colleagues beyond the day-to-day task list.

91%

of post-2020 starters believe eating meals or taking breaks with colleagues helps build stronger work relationships, versus 81% of those with pre-COVID office experience

Base: 1,000 UK employees, split by career start date

What builds the strongest relationships with colleagues?

- 1** Team socials **38%**
- 2** Team lunches **27%**
- 3** In-person meetings **20%**
- 4** Instant messaging **6%**
- 5** Video/phone calls **4%**

“

When we're stressed, our body signals it's not safe to eat, that's the 'fight or flight' response at work. Eating together sends the opposite signal: that there's no threat here. Share that moment with conversation, and we also release oxytocin, the bonding hormone. Food crosses seniority too: when leaders eat alongside their teams, it lays the groundwork for the more difficult conversations that follow, because people already feel safe with each other.

This matters most for newcomers. Regular, low-pressure meals give people a chance to simply become familiar faces, so that when something more serious comes up, the groundwork for trust is already there.

- Dr Audrey Tang, Chartered Psychologist

”

Why it matters for business

Hybrid working has brought real gains. Better work-life balance leading to happier teams is the single biggest benefit managers point to (53%), well ahead of flexible collaboration across time zones (21%) or more structured, focused meetings (15%). This isn't a report arguing hybrid working is a problem to be reversed.

But gains and losses sit side by side, and the data suggests food is already doing some of the work of closing that gap, whether businesses have planned for it or not. Among employees who started their careers from 2020 onwards, 47% say they've gone into the office specifically for a free team breakfast or lunch,

compared with 33% of those with pre-COVID office experience. For the newest generation of employees in particular, food isn't a side benefit of coming in, it's sometimes the reason.

53%

managers' top hybrid gain:
work-life balance

44%

managers' top hybrid loss:
spontaneous conversation

47%

early-career employees who've
gone in for a free team meal

“

Hybrid working has brought real benefits, and this isn't about trying to recreate the office exactly as it was before. But some of the things that used to happen naturally now need a little more intention behind them. With 44% of managers saying spontaneous, casual conversation is the biggest thing their teams have lost, shared food is one of the simplest ways to create a meaningful reason for people to come together. It's not about making people come into the office for the sake of it – it's about giving them something worth coming in for, and creating the space for those informal moments to happen.

- Tom Baxter, Managing Director at Just Eat for Business

”

Recommendations + about Just Eat for Business

Recommendations for employers



Build deliberate replacements for spontaneous moments: team lunches, not just team meetings



Use food as a reason to come in, not just a perk once there



Recognise that connection looks different for early-career employees vs those who remember the pre-COVID office



Treat lunch as a cultural investment, not an afterthought

About Just Eat for Business

Just Eat for Business is the UK's leading office food delivery marketplace and part of Just Eat Takeaway, the world's largest food delivery company.

Specialising in corporate catering, Just Eat for Business makes it easy for companies to provide delicious, high-quality meals for their teams, whether in the office or beyond. With a diverse selection of dishes from popular restaurants and caterers all in one place, it's the go-to platform for team lunches, meetings, and office events. Named Service Provider of the Year at the Office Management Awards 2024 through public vote, Just Eat for Business is renowned for its excellence in delivering seamless catering solutions to businesses of

all sizes.

Each week, Just Eat for Business serves over 30,000 employees across 600+ companies, delivering flexible and reliable food solutions tailored to modern workplaces. With a network of 500+ trusted restaurants and caterers across London and the UK, Just Eat for Business offers a wide variety of cuisines to suit every dietary need.

Committed to quality and safety, Just Eat for Business is STS accredited, and all their partners maintain an FSA hygiene rating of 3 or higher, ensuring every order meets high standards of excellence.



[Click to find out more about us](#)