WORKPLACE DINING / BUYER GUIDE

Corporate Dining Services: Models, Costs & Buyer Checklist

Corporate dining services can include an on-site café, delivered meals, staffed service, catering, markets, or a combination. The useful starting point is your attendance, meal schedule, space, and funding approach. Put those assumptions in one brief before asking providers for a price.

01 Choose the operating model around the workday.

A headquarters café, a shift-based operation, and an office with changing attendance need different answers. Use the table to narrow the questions you bring to providers; it is a planning framework, not a provider ranking.

Model	What to establish	Question to ask
On-site production	Kitchen capacity, staffing, receiving, storage, equipment, utilities, and meal periods.	What is included in operating the kitchen, and who funds equipment work?
Delivered meals	Ordering cutoffs, delivery windows, receiving, holding, service, and cleanup.	Who owns the experience between delivery and the end of service?
Market or grab-and-go	Access hours, replenishment, assortment, payment, waste, and support.	What changes when sales or attendance differ from the plan?
Hybrid service	Which model serves each day, shift, location, or meal period.	Who coordinates the different services and reconciles the total cost?

02 Measure the population you can actually serve.

Headcount is different from daily attendance, diners, meals, and transactions. Record each separately. A person eating breakfast and lunch creates two meals. Someone buying only coffee may create a transaction without buying a meal.

Build a short weekday schedule with typical and peak attendance, shifts, meal periods, and known closures. Use actual attendance or sales records when available. When you need an assumption, label it and ask the provider how the operating plan changes if it is wrong.

03 A useful first brief

"We have 500 people on site on a typical service day. We want lunch on 22 days in this example month. We are testing participation assumptions of 40%, 60%, and 80%. These are planning scenarios, not measured participation."

04 Separate the experience from the commercial model.

A staffed café describes the service. It does not tell you how the employer and provider settle costs. Ask how food, labor, management, sales revenue, employer contributions, and other charges are treated. Request a reconciliation showing the employer's expected cash cost.

If a meal price already covers an expense, adding the expense again overstates the budget. If a quote excludes staffing or equipment, leaving those out understates it. Put recurring charges and opening investment on separate lines.

05 Give each provider the same assignment.

- List sites, meal periods, service hours, and estimated volumes with units.
- Describe the kitchen, storage, equipment, and access that exist today.
- Set responsibilities for food, labor, cleaning, payment, reporting, and maintenance.
- State your funding assumptions and ask for exclusions explicitly.
- Request the same pricing period and volume scenarios from everyone.
- Ask how they would staff, launch, review, and adjust the program.

06 Look for evidence relevant to your operation.

Ask for comparable operating experience, the proposed management structure, availability in your location, and references the provider has permission to share. A broad service claim is a starting point for questions. Verify the actual team, capacity, and proposed scope for your project.

07 What should you have before the first conversation?

You do not need a perfect forecast. Bring a clear problem, a realistic service schedule, your best volume assumptions, and a list of unknowns. The project brief builder organizes those inputs and gives you a document to use in the conversation.

Put your next decision in focus.

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