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# How to Run Successful Lunch and Learn Events

## Learning While You Eat

There's no such thing as a free lunch, but for employees in many organizations, "lunch and learn" events come close!

These informal training or development sessions take place while you eat, and in return for your time and participation, your boss picks up the check.

In this article, we explore how this approach can increase engagement and motivate your people to learn. But it's not suitable for every training situation, so we also point out the pitfalls to avoid, and give you eight tips for running successful lunch and learns that benefit everyone.

## What Are Lunch and Learns?

Lunch and learns are also known as "learn at lunch" or "brown bag" events ("brown bag" refers to the way that people traditionally packed their lunch for work). Each session typically lasts for between 30 and 45 minutes.

Because they take place during lunch, they are generally voluntary and have a less formal atmosphere than a structured training session or seminar.

A lunch and learn event is an opportunity for co-workers from different teams to meet and share their skills and expertise. It could be a one-off session, where your new business manager outlines your company's sales strategy, for example. Or it could be a course that takes place over several weeks, such as your development team teaching the basics of coding.

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But lunch and learns don't have to focus on your core business activities. They can also offer a great platform to promote life skills like **physical fitness** ⊕ or **well-being** ⊕, to publicize volunteering opportunities or your organization's **charity work** ⊕, or to engage with outside experts, for example.

As an incentive to attend, the food is normally paid for by the employer. But if an event has been set up at short notice, or if the participants prefer, people can bring along their own food instead.

### Note:

Because they are optional, lunch and learn events are not suitable for mandatory legal training, for teaching essential core skills, or for sharing important information company-wide.

## The Benefits of Lunch and Learns

Lunch and learns offer a sociable, collaborative alternative to traditional "top-down" or classroom-based learning. This makes them a great way to foster a **culture of learning** ⊕ and knowledge sharing in your organization. This can encourage teamwork and cooperation, and help to **break down silos** ⊕.

Learning more about other people's tasks and responsibilities is good for your team members' **professional development** ⊕. It can make them more flexible, more responsive to changing business conditions, and better able to step in when others are absent. (See our article on **Cross-Training** ⊕ for more on this.)

A lunch and learn session can also be a "safe" environment for people to develop their confidence in **presenting** ⊕ and **public speaking** ⊕. It can be far less intimidating to stand up in front of your co-workers over lunch than to take centre stage for an audience of potential clients, for example.

And finally, providing attendees with complimentary food is a way for your organization to show that it appreciates its people, and their hard work.

## The Drawbacks of Lunch and Learns

Despite these advantages, lunch and learns do have some limitations.

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First, be wary of taking up too much of your people's personal time. Some of us like to socialize during lunch, but **others** ⊕ need this time to relax and recharge. They might start to feel resentful if they feel obliged to attend, or if the events take place too often.

Conversely, **"extra-milers"** ⊕ or those who are prone to **"hurry sickness"** ⊕ may feel that they're missing out if they **don't** attend. Adding lunchtime meetings to an already busy work schedule can put your team members under greater pressure, no matter how useful or enjoyable the events may be.

Another drawback is that lunch and learns may tend to rule out **remote workers** ⊕ and those who work **part-time** ⊕, and this can make these colleagues feel isolated or excluded.

There is also a risk that a limited choice of food options could lead you to inadvertently exclude people who have particular dietary requirements. Make sure that you know in advance who will be attending, and consult them on their needs and preferences.

## 8 Tips For Successful Lunch and Learns

There are no hard-and-fast rules that govern the way you run your lunch and learns. It's up to you to decide what's appropriate for your organization and what will benefit your people.

But there are some practical considerations that apply in most circumstances, so here are eight tips to take on board when you're planning a lunch and learn event:

### 1. Decide What You Want to Achieve

Whether the focus is on life skills, team development or business goals, remember that you're asking your people to give up their lunch break. Good food will encourage them, but there's more to a successful lunch and learn than just free pizza!

So, make sure that your event is worthwhile, relevant and interesting. If the subject resonates, people will be happy to attend. For inspiration, ask your people what matters to them, both in and out of work, and what they want or need to learn.

### 2. Know the Numbers

Decide in advance whether the event will be for a targeted (or specifically invited) group of participants, or whether it's open to everyone.

In either case, send invites and ask people to respond promptly, so you know how many people

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### 3. Focus on the Food

The lunches will need to be prepared and paid for, so you may need to agree a budget with HR or your manager, liaise with your catering or facilities manager, or agree how you will claim back the cost.

Think carefully about what kind of food you will serve. Much will depend on your budget, but light, healthy snacks that you can eat with your fingers are often a good option – they're less distracting than hot meals and create less mess.

If your lunch and learns happen regularly, try to vary the menu occasionally to keep people interested. And make sure there's enough for the speakers as well as the attendees!

Also think about whether you need to source cutlery, plates and so on, and about who will clean up after the meeting.

### 4. Choose an Appropriate Venue

Areas that are equipped for eating – canteens, atriums, and breakout spaces, for instance – are often popular venues for lunch and learns.

They can be prone to noise and interruptions, however, so consider conference and meeting rooms, too. These are more likely to offer projection facilities, and may have better access to power sockets.

Alternatively, you may choose to host your lunch and learn offsite. If so, research your venue carefully and double-check your booking in advance of the event.

### 5. Choose a Frequency

In many organizations, lunch and learns are regular events. For example, weekly Fridays are popular for lighter topics with a more relaxed, "weekend" feel.

But if your sessions will be more skills-based or business-oriented, monthly or occasional sessions will reduce the risk of "learning fatigue."

### 6. Remember Remote Workers

Audio and video conferencing apps such as **Skype** and **GoToMeeting** can enable remote co-workers to take part in lunch and learns in "real time."

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If this isn't possible – if there's a major time difference, for example – consider recording the session instead and making it available to everyone in your organization.

## 7. Promote the Event

People won't come to your lunch and learn if they don't know it's happening!

Publicize your event as soon as your speaker and venue are confirmed, and give people as much time as possible to respond. Emails are easily overlooked, so send out calendar invites, use your company's intranet or **Slack** channels, and maybe put up some physical posters or flyers, too.

Aim to create a "buzz" around your program of lunch and learn events, and make it clear that ideas and contributions are welcome.

## 8. Break the Ice

Discussion and participation are key to the success of a lunch and learn event, even if it's centered around a PowerPoint presentation or a keynote speaker.

Think about ways to break down barriers and get people involved. The attendees may not all know one another, so this can be as simple as asking everyone to introduce themselves before you begin, or finding out what interests them about this particular session. You'll find many more ideas for getting things moving in our article, **Ice Breakers** .

### Tip:

Read our article on **World Cafés**  to learn about another approach to collaborating, sharing knowledge, and gathering insights in an informal, conversational setting.

### Key Points

"Lunch and learns" are voluntary meetings, training sessions, or presentations that take place during lunch, and where food is provided by the employer.

They bring together people from across your organization in an informal atmosphere to collaborate and learn, and can drive personal, team and business development.

To plan a successful lunch and learn program, consider your themes and objectives, the number of people that will attend, how often the events will take place, the amount and type of food you will provide, and the venue you'll need. Then, promote the events throughout your company and encourage your people to contribute.

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