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COVER STORY

Inside the eating habits of CORPORATE PROFESSIONALS

"Dining at nice restaurants or ordering food delivery every day gets too expensive, so roadside Bangla hotels become our fallback. My main worry is hygiene. Every so often, government inspectors raid these places and uncover unsanitary kitchens or harmful ingredients. I don't fully trust the food, but when options are limited, I have no choice."

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Across Dhaka's corporate hubs, 7 AM is considered an exceptionally early start to the day. After all, most offices do not start their operations for another two hours. Yet, these areas have their own unique rhythm of busyness in these early hours. Shopkeepers chitchat with one another as they prepare breakfast items that will soon fill the offices around them. The most common breakfast served in these eateries is *shingara* and a cup of tea – a combination considered a snack at best across the country.

Most employees rely on these makeshift eateries to start their day. Md Mahidul Islam, an assistant manager at a leading conglomerate, shared that he has observed a tendency among people around him to skip breakfast in order to reach the office on time. He says, "Most people do not live close to the corporate hubs, especially those situated in Gulshan and Banani. These areas currently do not fall within the metro-rail network, which leaves many employees with the public bus as the other affordable transportation option."

"Unfortunately, public buses not only have a negative reputation for their unpredictable schedules but also often take the longest to reach the destination compared to other available transportation alternatives. Thus, corporate employees like me usually leave home by 7 in the morning to reach the office by 9 in order to cross a distance of maybe just 10 kilometres," he adds.

But long commutes are not the only reason employees may sacrifice breakfast. For some, the morning begins after a night of caregiving and interrupted sleep.

"Being the mother of a one-and-a-half-year-old, I rarely get the privilege of eight hours of uninterrupted sleep," says Maisha Tabassum, a graphic designer by profession. "I have to wake up several times every night to feed my baby and soothe her. This is why I subconsciously trade having a balanced, nutritious breakfast for 30 minutes of extra sleep before my office commute."

Maisha's experience points to another pressure on working professionals: the struggle to fit personal needs around work and caregiving responsibilities. For postpartum mothers, this can be particularly challenging, as childcare responsibilities often disproportionately fall on mothers. In such circumstances, breakfast can become one of the first things to be sacrificed, potentially compromising nutrition during a period when adequate nourishment is important for recovery and long-term health.

Yet, skipping breakfast or relying on unhealthy alternatives does not come without consequences, particularly for professionals whose work demands sustained concentration and decision-making.

"I have noticed a significant difference in my energy levels on the days I have skipped breakfast," says Kowshik Acharjee, an accounts payable lead at a multinational corporation (MNC).

"My work entails leading my team, dealing with different stakeholders, and communicating my perspective – tasks that require considerable mental effort. Thus, I usually avoid running on low fuel, as I find it difficult to focus on an empty stomach," Kowshik elaborates.

From 10:30 AM to 11:00 AM is the unofficial snack break in the corporate world. Colleagues put a short pause on their hustle for a quick cup of tea, usually from the stalls nearby. Tea, with milk and sugar, is the common beverage of choice here.

Kowshik says, "Since I work at an international organisation, I have had the opportunity to work closely with colleagues from India and China, two major tea-producing countries. It surprised me that they are usually more conscious about their caffeine intake compared to us, limiting themselves to just two cups of tea per day, and that too without any milk or sugar."

A cup of milk tea can contain roughly 35–60 calories, depending on how much milk and sugar is added. "For someone like me, who drinks around three cups a day, that could amount to roughly 105–180 calories, before considering the biscuits or snacks commonly eaten alongside tea. I have seen my colleagues consume even five to six cups of tea per day," he sighed.

This is an alarming statistic because the survival of South Asian populations during famines has led to a genetic adaptation that results in increased fat storage, leading to a greater risk of metabolic diseases such as type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

An eight-hour workday, five to six days a week, leaves little room for recreation for corporate professionals. In this environment, food has become a significant part of socialising. Nusrat Sultana, a communication professional, says colleagues often meet over lunch as a common team-bonding activity.

"Training sessions, birthday parties, and farewells are all very common corporate events which are incomplete without a feast. As someone transitioning from university to the workplace, I struggled to maintain my existing healthy eating habits while trying to navigate through this transition. The excess calorie intake, accompanied by a sedentary lifestyle, caused a 10-kilogram weight gain within my first year of joining the workforce."

Beyond being an integral part of workplace socialising, food has also become a coping mechanism for workplace loneliness.

Gallup's 2024 global report found that one in five employees feel lonely at work. Despite spending hours communicating with colleagues, some employees still miss having a "real" connection – moments of shared laughter, heartfelt conversations, and emotional support from their peers.

Nusrat mentioned that as careers progress, work responsibilities tend to increase significantly by the late 20s. As a result, it can become increasingly difficult to find a common time when all her friends are available.

She says, "I have noticed that cafes have come as a rescue to these individuals. Having a quiet cup of coffee there allows them a break from the monotony of life, without the subconscious need to justify their solitude to anyone."

In addition to workplace loneliness, a toxic work environment can also influence employees' eating habits. In the APA's 2024 Work in America survey, 15 percent of respondents described their workplace as somewhat or very toxic. The situation may be no different in Bangladesh, where workplace stress can take a toll on both employee well-being and productivity.

For some, food becomes an easy way to seek temporary relief from a stressful work environment. Kowshik recalls, "At one point in my life, I used to go out for lunch every other day. My office at that time was surrounded by restaurants offering a wide array of cuisines. Trying a new restaurant every other day not only gave me breathing space from my workspace but also acted as a quick dopamine hit. This is not a sustainable way of living, as I gained a substantial amount of weight within a short span of time – not only because of the higher calorie intake, but also, I believe, because of the higher cortisol levels."

On days when employees choose not to eat out, they often have access to subsidised meals at their workplace. These usually consist of rice, a source of protein such as fish or poultry, lentils, vegetable curry, and, sometimes, a fruit. The subsidy not only allows employees to have a relatively healthy and hygienic meal within their budget but also saves them the time and hassle of preparing and bringing lunch to work.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

However, with food prices continuing to rise, Mahidul fears that corporations may eventually pass these additional costs on to employees. He adds, "Businesses usually have a greater ability to absorb these expenses than we do as individuals. Thus, they should consider not putting tangible cost benefits over employee welfare, which I see as the key to an organisation's success in the long run."

For many office goers, subsidised workplace lunches aren't always a viable option, either because their employer doesn't offer the perk or because the food lacks appeal. On the other hand, bringing a homemade lunch presents its own challenge, which is a lack of preparation time.

Faced with these constraints, professionals like Didar Hossain, an HR manager at a garments company, frequently turn to local Bangla hotels near their offices.

"I prefer home-cooked food because the subsidised meals at work don't always taste good, even if they are affordably priced," Didar explains. "However, bringing lunch from home is only feasible occasionally. We rarely have time to cook in the morning or pack leftovers from the night before."



PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

He adds, "Dining at nice restaurants or ordering food delivery every day gets too expensive, so roadside Bangla hotels become our fallback. My main worry is hygiene. Every so often, government inspectors raid these places and uncover unsanitary kitchens or harmful ingredients. I don't fully trust the food, but when options are limited, I have no choice."

Water consumption is another often-overlooked aspect of their workday habits.

Nusrat said, "It is often difficult to keep track of how much water one consumes during a busy workday. I experience this even more so on days I must go for field visits. Although this may go unnoticed for a big chunk of the workday, I experience severe headaches caused by dehydration."

These pressures can make it difficult for corporate professionals to maintain healthy eating habits. Chowdhury Tasneem Hasin, Chief Clinical Dietician & HOD, Dietetics & Nutrition Department, at Continental Hospital PLC, says that, given these circumstances, corporate professionals can adopt a few personal initiatives to better navigate the structural limitations they face.

"Many corporate professionals say that they tend to miss breakfast because they are juggling responsibilities such as getting their children ready and dropping them off at school. As a result, they may subconsciously put their own needs at the end of the priority list. Many may notice the impact soon enough, such as poor focus and irritability throughout the day. For some, it may also contribute to weight gain in the long run if it leads to overeating during the next eating window," says Hasin.

"Where possible, making small adjustments to the routine may help. For instance, going to bed earlier could allow those who cite lack of sleep as a reason for skipping breakfast to make more time for it," she adds.

On the topic of caffeine consumption, Hasin advises against villainising tea and coffee, while also encouraging people to be mindful of their consumption. She says, "Tea and coffee are popular pick-me-up beverages that may stimulate one and invigorate them for the next work session. However, it is advised to limit ourselves to two-three cups of tea or coffee and make it a priority to drink two-three litres of water a day at the same time. Many aren't aware, but excessive caffeine intake can cause dehydration in some individuals. In a busy working environment, particularly in an air-conditioned room, it can be easy to lose track of how much water we are consuming, as one may not face the physical symptoms of dehydration as much."

Additionally, Hasin acknowledges that communal meals and corporate events are an integral part of workplace culture. However, she believes that maintaining a balance is key to a healthy lifestyle. Thus, she suggests that organising committees of these events can place healthier and nutrient-rich options alongside the usual fare.

"These changes do not necessarily require drastic adjustments. Rather, small, sustainable changes to daily routines can help professionals make healthier choices while managing the demands of their workday," she says.

The corporate diet, thus, is shaped by more than appetite. It is a product of the commute, the clock, the office culture, and the demands that fill the working day. For many professionals, eating better may therefore require not just better choices but also a workplace in which those choices are easier to make.

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