**Chapter 12**

**HRM, Health and Wellbeing**

### Global HRM: Food and eating at work: a matter of taste, politics or basic human rights?

Food is fundamental to who we are as human beings. It sustains us biologically, but it is also rich in cultural meaning. Until recently, however, food and eating have received little attention from HR professionals. The success of TV programmes such as Jamie Oliver’s *Food Revolution* suggests, however, that this may be about to change. For Oliver, control over food preparation is an empowering process that enables ordinary people to lead healthier lives, even in times of economic hardship.

Others, like journalist and author Michael Pollan, have drawn attention to the emergence of a ‘food movement’, a loose coalition of groups intent on raising public awareness of the dangers associated with the food industry. In a recent discussion of the food movement, Pollan (2010) writes:

perhaps the food movement’s strongest claim on public attention today is the fact that the American diet of highly processed food laced with added fats and sugars is responsible for the epidemic of chronic diseases that threatens to bankrupt the health care system.

Struggles for change in the food system have met with surprising resistance. The food industry wields considerable economic and political power, and its ties with large work organizations are complex. For a variety of reasons, senior managers may not wish to alter existing agreements with large vendors who provide services to work organizations. Cost is the obvious rationale: companies award contracts to the lowest bidder. Yet short-term savings may divert attention from the long-term negative consequences of their choices.

**Stop!** How might the challenge of food at work unfold in national settings where local markets have not been penetrated by the fast-food industry and various food service monopolies?

This is a useful exercise in thinking about the challenges of cross-cultural management. First consider one of Jamie Oliver’s most important reform initiatives – food services in the state school systems of Great Britain and the USA. This reform has parallels in developing countries where advocates for change see the improvement of school-based food services as a vehicle for social progress.

But what about the private sector? There is very little research on the food and eating policies of private work organizations in developing countries, but it is reasonable to believe that the challenges facing HR professionals may be somewhat different from those faced in developed countries. First, this is because food and eating require time and space, and these do not contribute directly to the production of goods or services. Second, in developed countries, we take for granted that employers will allocate this time and space, but in developing countries struggles to improve the quality of food and eating options at work may be less about resisting the fast-food industry and more about establishing basic standards.

**Sources and further information:** See Pollan (2010) for more information.

Conduct a web search on the phrase ‘food revolution’ to find out about the range of Jamie Oliver’s contributions to this topic.

Note: This feature was written by David MacLennan at Thompson Rivers University.

While attention has been focused on developing healthy eating in schools, very little research has been carried out on the food and eating policies of private work organizations.