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The New Power Lunch

Strategies for Brown-Bagging at Your Desk, With Executive Image Intact

By ALINA DIZIK and DANA MATTIOLI



Don't call it a lunchbox. As more executives are bringing their lunches to work, lunchbox makers are marketing bags that look like laptop bags, wine cooler totes, and purses to disguise what's inside. Alina Dizik explains.

They may look like laptop bags, boxy purses or even yoga bags. Just don't mistake them for lunchboxes.

Journal Community

Manufacturers have come up with dozens of satchels, bags and even full systems for the growing number of people who are skipping the takeout and bringing a home-packed lunch to work. Many of the new bags are inspired by Japanese bento boxes, the compartmentalized food trays that are traditionally filled with rice, vegetables, pickles and fish.

At formal companies, image-conscious managers need a carrying case roomy enough to hold an adult-size meal, functional enough to keep food from getting

soggy and cold, and stylish enough to be mistaken for an executive accessory.

And no matter where they work, no one really wants to be caught with dirty Tupperware.



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

An executive lunch that is easy to prepare, travels well and rewards the effort, from Wade Burch, executive chef at Southwest NY, in lower Manhattan. Salmon 'is good brain food,' he says.

Many products originally for kids now sell to adults, including the modular Oots! lunchbox, from a Dutch-design company based in Santa Fe, N.M.; Built NY's flexible, insulated bag made from machine-washable neoprene (the wetsuit material); or Laptop Lunches' bento boxes, created by two mothers in Santa Cruz, Calif., to encourage healthier eating. Many of the carriers come with nesting containers and stainless-steel sporks.

The small containers in the bento format encourage people to branch out from ham-and-cheese and dabble in dips, soups and salads. "The containers fit together like a puzzle," says Amy Hemmert, who co-founded the Laptop Lunches line in 2002. It "provides a framework

for people." Sales rose after the 2008 economic bust, and adults now account for nearly a third of Laptop Lunches sales, she says.

White-collar professionals, with 45% earning more than \$70,000 a year, are most likely to bring lunch to work, according to 2010 data from NPD Group, of Port Washington, N.Y., which tracks eating trends in an annual sample of 2,000 households.



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Some play off the bento format. Others don't look like lunchboxes at all.

Some senior managers say they bring lunch to save time, working at the desk straight through the meal. Controlling calories and keeping last night's dinner from going to waste are other perks.

That may be, but some executive coaches say it's a bad career move to eat lunch at your desk too often. "You're missing the bigger picture by bringing your lunch," says executive coach Regina Barr. "As an executive, it's important to constantly develop relationships, and eating alone to save time can ultimately hurt your career."

Relentless brown-bagging also can signal excessive frugality or poor time-management skills. "We've all heard the term 'executive presence'—and what we choose to eat plays into that executive image," Ms. Barr adds.

For those who insist, a professional-looking container is better than a grocery-store bag. But don't tell Alan Miller, chief executive of Universal Health Services Inc., of King of Prussia, Pa., who often brings his lunch in a



F.Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Laptop Lunches' lunch kit is a bento box disguised as electronics.



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shopping bag he has picked up while traveling for work. Last Friday, he used a bag from the Mandarin Oriental hotel, in New York.

Lunch alone at his desk two or three times a week is his opportunity to multi-task. He reads the paper and catches up on email over his tuna or chicken salad, with a diet iced-tea chaser. "I get a lot done," he says.

Fans of homemade lunches say the brown-bag stigma pretty much disappeared in the recession, when everyone felt pressure to become more productive. For some, the solo work-lunch now is a habit, a welcome chance to control their time and their food intake—especially if they attend a lot of breakfast and dinner meetings.

Alan Masarek, chief executive of software developer Quickoffice Inc., brings lunch to his Westport, Conn., office whenever he isn't on the road—part of a

nutrition-and-training regimen before an Ironman triathlon in July. He brings some lean protein like chicken breast or fish; a salad, vegetables or whole-grain pasta; and raw nuts and dried fruit for snacking.

Cajun Salmon Sandwich

Ingredients (Yield: 4 sandwiches):

- 2 6- to 7-ounce cans boneless, skinless wild Alaskan salmon, drained
 - 1/4 cup minced red onion
 - 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 - 1 teaspoon cajun spice
 - 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
 - 4 teaspoons olive-oil
 - mayonnaise
 - 8 slices sourdough bread
 - 8 slices tomato
 - 4 large Boston lettuce leaves
- Combine salmon, onion, lemon juice, cajun spice and pepper in a medium bowl.
- Spread 1 teaspoon of mayo on each of 4 slices of bread.
- Spread 1/2 cup salmon salad over the bread. To p with 2 tomato slices, a leaf of lettuce and another slice of bread.

"I'm kind of a health nut," says the 50-year-old, who has eaten this way for years. "My wife does most of the cooking, which is very helpful." He checks emails during lunch. "Eating has just worked its way into normal work," he adds.

Ira Bornstein felt a little hesitant about bringing a homemade lunch to work a few years ago. "Being an executive for many years, I wasn't a leftover-carrying kind of guy," says the 42-year-old chief operating officer at American Bancard, a Boca Raton, Fla., credit-card processing company.

Then, while eating in the company dining area, Mr. Bornstein noticed entry-level co-workers would stroll by and ask him a question. Soon, he realized he could bounce ideas off his younger colleagues, most of whom he would never see in meetings. "You open yourself up to this informal dialogue," he says. He now brings food from home—chicken Parmesan or leftover ribeye steak—whenever he doesn't have a scheduled lunch meeting.

At Remo Inc., a Valencia, Calif., drumhead manufacturer, Chief Executive Remo Belli and the company president set aside an hour almost every day to meet over home-prepared lunches at a conference table in Vice President Fredy Chen's office.

"We jokingly call it Fredy's Bar and Grill," says Mr. Belli, who often brings steamed fish in a leak-proof container.

Rebecca Portnoy, assistant professor of management at the Washington State University College of Business, is researching shared meals in the workplace.

Couscous Salad

INGREDIENTS:

2 cups chicken stock

10 ounces instant couscous

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 lemon, zested and juiced

1 small red onion, peeled, diced

1 large cucumber, peeled, seeded, diced

1 red bell pepper, cored, seeded, diced

1 bunch green onions, minced

1/4 cup dill leaves

Freshly ground black pepper

In a saucepan, bring the chicken stock and salt to a boil.

Place the couscous in a large, heat-proof bowl. Pour the boiling stock over the couscous, cover and let stand for 5 minutes. Remove cover, fluff couscous and allow to cool completely.

In a large bowl, combine olive oil, lemon juice and zest, red onion, cucumber, bell pepper and green onions. Add the cooled couscous and toss well. Stir in the dill leaves. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper.

She says eating home-cooked food together contributes to a sense of family. Employees may work better in teams after regularly sharing meals, and even sharing a store-bought lunch has benefits.

"There's a personal effect from sharing something so intimate," Prof. Portnoy says.

When Jack Yang, senior director of engineering at HomeAway.com, an Austin-based vacation-rentals website, started bringing his lunch in a bento box, his co-workers took notice. He turned it into a bonding opportunity. Every Friday, he emails 40 co-workers, then brings in a homemade lunch on Monday for the first eight to 12 people who respond. He charges each person \$8.

Menus have included green curry, ginger edamame dip and beef short ribs. The co-workers return clean bento boxes to him by Thursday. Mr. Yang writes about his lunches on a blog called Eating in a Box. The email list ranges from junior employees to senior managers. "Food is this great equalizer," says Mr. Yang, 36.

Predictably, creativity breeds competition. Eric Morgan, founder of Morgan and Company, a New Orleans

marketing firm, started bringing lunch (roast beef or ham-and-pepper-jack-cheese sandwiches) after moving into a kitchen-equipped office five months ago.

Now, "everyone is trying to one-up each other—making better sandwiches, bringing better leftovers," Mr. Morgan says. "Sometimes someone will bring a big pot of jambalaya."

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