

How to overcome labour and skills shortages in the contract catering sector

EFFAT-FoodServiceEurope Joint Declaration

EFFAT, the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions, and FoodServiceEurope, the employer association representing the contract catering industry at European level, agree that labour and skill shortages are one of the main challenges currently facing the sector.

Labour and skills shortages have a negative impact on both employers and workers. They make it harder to run catering operations smoothly and reduce service quality. At the same time, workers often have to work in smaller teams and take on extra tasks.

Against this background, EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope are proposing concrete solutions at the European and national levels, while fully respecting the autonomy of the social partners.

Specificities of the contract catering sector

The contract catering sector provides meals and related services to people living and working in communities, including those in public administrations, nurseries, schools, universities, hospitals, retirement homes and prisons. With an annual turnover of over €40 billion, the sector plays a significant economic role while fulfilling an essential social function.

It is composed of 33,000 enterprises, which employ over 1 million people across Europe. It is characterised by:

- **An ageing workforce:** The share of people aged 50–74 is around 20% in the European sector.
- **A highly competitive and labour-intensive sector, strongly dependent on public procurement:** Contract catering operates in a highly competitive environment, particularly within public procurement markets where contracts are frequently awarded on the basis of the lowest price within fixed-price frameworks.
- **Attractiveness and working conditions:** The contract catering sector offers important entry-level opportunities and diverse career pathways, while playing a vital social function in schools, hospitals, care facilities and public institutions. Like many parts of the hospitality and food service sector, it faces recruitment and skills challenges linked to demographic trends, changing labour market expectations and increasing demand for specialised skills. Ensuring attractive career prospects, opportunities for skills development, good working environments and flexible forms of work is therefore essential to strengthen the sector's attractiveness and long-term workforce supply. At the same time, **low wages** and **challenging working conditions** remain prevalent, including long, irregular working hours, as well as weekend and evening shifts in the healthcare sector. In the education sector, part-time schemes are predominant, resulting in lower wages, although they may offer a better work-life balance. The **constant change of economic operator**, following the loss of a contract, is a major issue in the sector, negatively affecting job stability, working conditions and career prospects of contract catering workers. Certain categories of catering workers are particularly exposed to **job-related risks**, including musculoskeletal disorders, accidents at work (such as slips and cuts), food allergies and psychosocial risks, even though many contract catering companies have introduced health and safety policies to mitigate these risks.

Skills and occupations mostly needed

Some of the most relevant labour shortages in the sector include lack of cooks, kitchen staff and cleaners. A skilled workforce is lacking in the sector particularly when it comes to **digital skills, notably in light of the increasing use of digital tools – including AI-based applications** – across all areas of the contract catering sector.

Green skills are also becoming increasingly important as contract catering companies seek to reduce their environmental impact and ensure sustainable development. In the future, greater need for skilled workers in the areas of circular economy practices, energy efficiency and green procurement is expected.

Solutions to overcome the skills and labour shortages

FoodServiceEurope and EFFAT agree on the following solutions to overcome the skills and labour shortages:

1. Revised public procurement rules must become a lever for the creation of quality jobs and the promotion of collective bargaining agreements.

Given the strong dependence of the contract catering sector on public procurement, the design and award of public contracts have a direct impact on employment conditions, investment capacity, skills development and the overall attractiveness of the sector. Public procurement must therefore be used strategically to support quality jobs, better wages and stability in employment and working conditions in the event of a change of economic operator. EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope reiterate the joint priorities to revise public procurement rules as set out in [their Best Value Guide, “Choosing Best Value in Contracting Food Services”](#), in their [Joint Declaration on Public Procurement and Collective Bargaining](#) (2023), and in [their Joint Position on the revision of the Public Procurement Directive](#) (September 2025).

- **Move away from the awarding of contracts solely on the basis of the lowest price** and instead mandate the use of quality-based award criteria.
- **Strengthen and clarify the horizontal social clause.**
- **Allow contracts to be adapted** in the event of significant changes in collective agreements, labour legislation or inflation.
- **Leverage the social function of the contract catering sector:** Public procurement can be a lever for sustainability and the creation of quality jobs, both in contract catering and in the agri-food sector.

2. Social dialogue and collective bargaining must be strengthened.

EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope agree on the **need to make the contract catering sector more attractive. Ensuring a good work-life balance, good wages and attractive working conditions are key.**

They also recommend the promotion of the contract catering sector **as a safe place to work**, through awareness-raising, risk assessment, training, reporting and problem-solving procedures, involving trade union representatives and national and European Work Councils. **Any existing form of violence must be tackled, and all workers and employers need to be protected.**

Social dialogue and collective bargaining can help offer attractive wages and working conditions that meet the expectations and interests of employers and workers, while promoting the image and attractiveness of the sector.

In this respect the swift transposition and implementation of the Minimum Wage Directive and the **strengthening of sectoral collective bargaining**, is key particularly in ensuring the continuity of a set of rights arising from collective bargaining despite the constant changes of employer that are typical in the sector.

Where appropriate, **transnational company agreements** can be an important leverage to raise labour standards, ensure equal treatment and support dialogue and cooperation between management and trade unions in transnational companies, ensuring the respect for the autonomy of national social partners.

3. Promoting education and training in the sector.

EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope agree that **upskilling and reskilling are important** for boosting the attractiveness of the contract catering sector, developing attractive career paths, anticipating changes, related in particular to digitalisation and AI and achieving a just transition.

Qualification and training strategies should be developed with the involvement of social partners at a national level, in close cooperation with governments and educational establishments, by:

- **Implementing apprenticeships or similar initial vocational training schemes** in countries where they do not exist in line with the [Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships](#).
- **Anticipating future skills needed**, and promoting workers access to training, reskilling and upskilling opportunities throughout their careers.
- **Offering attractive career perspectives** to workers in the contract catering sector, which is crucial to retain experienced workforce.
- **Developing the transfer of knowledge and skills from** senior to junior workers through structured mentoring and intergenerational learning initiatives.

EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope further suggest:

- Enhancing the value and recognition of qualifications and promoting high-quality jobs in the sector.
- Facilitating the recognition of certifications and skills across the EU, while fully respecting Member States' competences.
- Using the green and digital transition as an opportunity to create qualified jobs and offer sustainable career prospects for workers.

4. Ensuring fair labour mobility

EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope acknowledge that labour mobility can contribute to addressing labour shortages in the contract catering sector, provided that it is rooted in fairness, equal treatment and respect for workers' rights. Labour mobility should not be used to undermine wages and working conditions or contribute to social dumping. It should not replace investment in training, upskilling and employment opportunities for the existing workforce.

It should complement continued efforts to improve the attractiveness of the sector through quality jobs and better working conditions and wages, increase labour market participation and invest in the skills and training of the existing workforce.

Whether workers are recruited from within or outside the EU, equal treatment, decent working conditions and full respect for applicable labour standards and collective agreements must be ensured, regardless of workers' nationality or migration status.

EFFAT and FoodServiceEurope therefore support fair and transparent recruitment practices including the regulation or certification of recruitment agencies as well as measures to prevent abuse and exploitation and ensure the protection of workers, in particular through the effective enforcement of their rights. They also support the recognition of qualifications and skills, while taking into account the impact of labour mobility on both countries of origin and destination and fully respecting Member States' competences and the role and autonomy of social partners.

Conclusion

Labour and skills shortages in the contract catering sector are a shared structural challenge that requires coordinated action at European and national level. Ensuring the long-term sustainability and attractiveness of the sector demands a coherent approach that combines a supportive regulatory framework to revise public procurement rules, strong social dialogue and collective bargaining, and forward-looking investment in skills and training. Labour mobility should always be based on fairness and equal treatment.

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