

An inclusive workplace for pregnant women

By improving working conditions for pregnant employees, companies can create a better environment for wellbeing and collaboration – and retain talented employees who are on maternity leave.

By Kristine Seest

A pregnant employee is an opportunity for a company to demonstrate that it is an inclusive workplace that makes an effort to retain talented employees and support wellbeing and internal collaboration. The company can do this by prioritizing the dialogue with the pregnant woman and by taking into account her needs and wishes in relation to her work performance. This is a focus at the optician chain Louis Nielsen, which has just been named Denmark's Best Place of Work for the second year in a row by Great Place To Work. With 79 stores in Denmark, Louis Nielsen employs more than 1,000 employees, some of whom are in the phase of life where they are starting a family.

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Ulla Beck

HR Consultant, Louis Nielsen

»75 percent of our sales assistants and opticians are women – and many are of childbearing age. We want to make an extra effort to ensure that pregnant employees have a good pregnancy experience at our workplace. We do this because we want to support them during this special period so that they have a good pregnancy and because we really want them to return after their maternity leave,« says Louis Nielsen's HR Consultant Ulla Beck, who is the main driving force behind the special program for pregnant employees.

Targeted communication

One of the initiatives is a series of webinars for pregnant employees and store partners that are held at regular intervals so that employees and store partners can participate when the need arises. In the webinar

for pregnant women and in the information material that has been prepared, Louis Nielsen emphasizes that communication must be targeted at the employees.

»We have allied ourselves with professionals to be able to offer a really good pregnancy program that addresses employees directly and at eye level,« says Ulla Beck.

Louis Nielsen has been advised by WTW Corporate Health & Wellbeing, which has led to a collaboration with gynecological obstetric physiotherapist Louise Packert Niebe, who specializes in pregnancy, postnatal care and treatment of pelvic floor pains. She is well acquainted with what the working day is like in the stores, and in the webinars for pregnant women, Louise Packert Niebe shows what exercises and stretches employees can do while at work and what they can do at home to alleviate some of the discomfort that can occur during pregnancy.

»It has been of great importance that Louise Packert Niebe has visited our stores. She has seen the specific working conditions and based on this, she has put together a program that is particularly well suited to our business and contains exercises that pregnant women can do in a small space, so it is not the space in the store that is the challenge,« says Ulla Beck.

»Congratulations on your pregnancy«

In the counselling aimed at store partners, the emphasis is on the good conversation that store managers can – and by law must – initiate when an employee becomes pregnant.

»People can be a little apprehensive about what you can talk to a pregnant employee about, so we give store partners tools to help them have a good dialogue,« says Ulla Beck and continues:

»If you own a store with four employees and one of them becomes pregnant, it is clear that a situation arises where tasks and responsibilities need to be reorganized. It is about having a dialogue with the pregnant woman, congratulating her on the pregnancy and organizing the work together so that, for example, the pregnant woman is pulled further back in the store, where customers receive instructions on how to use lenses and try on glasses, and where the employee has the opportunity to sit down,« says Ulla Beck.

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Maria Ebbesen

Senior Specialist
WTW Corporate Health & Wellbeing

According to the report 'Sickness absence among pregnant Danish women in the period 2011 to 2017' from DEFACTUM in the Central Denmark Region, there is good reason for a company to pay special attention to pregnancy among employees. The report shows that the average sickness absence rate for pregnant women is 13.5 percent, compared to 4.9 percent for the general population.

»Sickness absence among pregnant women can be both physical and psychological, which is why employers can benefit from trying to relieve the physical strain on the pregnant woman and at the same time make an effort to maintain the pregnant woman's motivation for work. We know that there is a correlation between low sickness absence and the opportunity to influence the planning of your own work. This also applies to

pregnant women,« says senior specialist Maria Ebbesen from WTW Corporate Health & Wellbeing, who has advised Louis Nielsen on the development of their pregnancy concept and the content of their webinars.

To ensure that a workplace is both safe and healthy, a workplace risk assessment (APV) must be carried out in connection with pregnancy, which takes into account the pregnancy and identifies whether there are working conditions that are challenging for the pregnant woman.

Returning after maternity leave

Seven out of ten Danes consider changing jobs after their maternity leave and 58 percent leave their workplace after starting a family. This is according to a survey conducted by the networking company Inspired Beyond Babies. And at Louis Nielsen, they are also aware of the time that comes after an employee has had a baby and been on maternity leave.

»We believe that a good pregnancy before you go on maternity leave makes it easier to return. If you have had a good experience and feel that you were seen during your pregnancy, you are more likely to want to come back. We really want to ensure that our employees feel connected to us as a workplace and we want to be there for them before and after their leave,« says Ulla Beck.

WTW Corporate Health & Wellbeing advises companies looking for recommendations on how to improve their work environment and create a corporate culture that includes pregnant women and meets the needs of employees in the phase of life when they are building a career and starting a family.