

Implementing breastfeeding support at factories in Viet Nam

Viewed from outside, the [ofi nuts factory](#) in Pleiku, Viet Nam, is unremarkable, like many factories: a collection of large warehouses sitting on about five hectares on the outskirts of a city.



Women processing walnuts at one of ofi's factories in Viet Nam. Roughly 85% of its factories' employees are women

But inside, it bustles with activity during its hours of operation: 600 employees, most of them women, are processing cashew kernels from raw nuts. The employees come from Pleiku, a city of about 200,000 people in central Viet Nam, and its environs.

"We know that workforce nutrition has numerous and cascading benefits," said Clara Tessler, ofi's global Nutrition & Health Manager. *"Increased productivity, less absenteeism, improved employer-employee relationships, and reduced illness are just a few of these. So, it's a win-win to invest in workforce nutrition."*

That recognition led the company to assess its efforts to support workforce nutrition. The assessment looked at nutrition support the company provides to its workforce across four different areas, one of which was breastfeeding and maternal care.

Beyond improving employees' well-being and satisfaction, the benefits of supporting breastfeeding in the workplace on breastfeeding outcomes is well established. [Research shows](#) that:

- Female workers who have lactation breaks are nearly 62 times more likely to continue breastfeeding than those who do not;

- Female workers who are supported and encouraged by their colleagues and/or supervisors are more than twice as likely to continue breastfeeding than those who do not; and
- Female workers with access to a dedicated lactation room are more than twice as likely to continue breastfeeding than those who do not.

"We did a benchmarking of the nutrition support we provide at all our factories in Viet Nam," Kulhans Singhvi, ofi's Pleiku cashew factory manager, explained. The company then turned to Alive & Thrive as a partner to develop a workplace lactation support program for its employees.

"These support programs include one-on-one sessions with mothers, ongoing counseling, advisory information available online, and trainings with managers and with staff," Tessler said. *"We've also created breastfeeding rooms equipped with the necessary equipment for mothers to breastfeed or express. It has been amazing to see the uptake from our female employees."*



ofi nuts' lactation support program included both in-person and online workshops for employees, allowing them to obtain support even when they were not physically at their work sites.

The program seeks to provide female employees who wish to continue breastfeeding when returning to work the space, time and support they need to do so:

- Space: On-site lactation rooms to provide a clean, private space for moms to express and store breastmilk, or breastfeed their babies.
- Time: Sufficient lactation breaks to provide mothers the opportunity to express and store their breastmilk or take the necessary time to breastfeed their babies.

- Support: Having a workplace culture that is supportive of breastfeeding to help mothers feel comfortable taking breaks to express breastmilk or breastfeed.

“Women can continue breastfeeding when they return to work, but they need the support of their employers and colleagues,” said Duong Vu, regional technical specialist with Alive & Thrive East Asia Pacific. *“This program uses focused communication materials and tools to mobilize company leaders, managers, and infirmery staff to create a more family-friendly environment.”*



Lactation rooms, set up properly, provide employees privacy and a sanitary space to pump and/or breastfeed.

The program included support from a breastfeeding specialist who provided information and advice to employees in workshops and through coaching. In-person training workshops were accompanied by online workshops for employees who could not attend the in-person events – often because they were on maternity leave. A WhatsApp group was set up allowing employees to ask the specialist questions at any time.

“In my hometown, everyone simply has children and raises them without ever learning anything,” said Huy, an employee at a factory in Gia Lai, Viet Nam, that processes cashews. *“Since I joined the coaching, I’ve learned a lot of new information and now feel more prepared to give birth to my first child.”*

The training workshops provided new information about breastfeeding, employees said.

“The factory’s baby-care coaching was so useful – it included a lot of information that I did not know or completely misunderstood before,” said Ngo Thi Lien, an employee at one of the factories that processes walnuts. *“I am going to do it right for my upcoming baby. The lactation room is available at the factory so when I return to work, I can express, store my milk, and bring it home to feed my baby instead of wasting it.”*