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PREGNANCY IN THE WORKPLACE: NAVIGATING CHALLENGES IN HEALTH AND SAFETY ROLES



Pregnancy is a transformative life stage, a time filled with both joy and challenges. For expecting women working in demanding fields such as Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), this period introduces unique complexities.

Maintaining personal health and well-being while at the same time fulfilling workplace responsibilities and expectations, becomes a balancing act of perseverance.

OHS professionals play a critical role in ensuring workplace safety and compliance. This responsibility often results in exposure to physically and mentally taxing environments, requiring meticulous attention to detail and adaptability. These demands can pose risks to both the pregnant employee and her unborn child. From physical challenges to workplace biases, managing a pregnancy in OHS roles is often accompanied by hurdles that demand thoughtful and practical solutions.

This blog aims to shed light on the unique risks faced by pregnant women in OHS roles and explore practical ways to address these challenges.

Additionally, it highlights strategies for these professionals to maintain their value and contributions in the workplace. By understanding and implementing inclusive policies, organisations can better support pregnant employees while ensuring their continued impact.

5 major risks for pregnant women as Health and Safety professionals

o Exposure to Hazardous Environments

Pregnant OHS professionals often work in environments where they encounter harmful chemicals, excessive noise, or physically unsafe conditions. These hazards can pose risks such as developmental issues for the foetus or complications for the mother. Proper risk assessments should be conducted to determine whether it is safe enough for the pregnant employee to work in the situation. Many case studies show that women working in clothing, textile, paint, plastic, pesticides and/or lead industries are at high risk for miscarriages, or are associated with birth defects and interference with the foetal development. These high-risk industries should practise even greater caution when pregnant employees work there, and ensure that the correct mitigation controls are in place.

Mitigation: Employers must assess and reassign high-risk tasks to other team members. Alternatively, pregnant employees can focus on tasks such as data analysis or compliance documentation, with minimal exposure to dangerous environments. Employers should also provide properly fitting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that accommodates physical changes during pregnancy.

o Physical Demands and Fatigue

Many OHS roles involve physically demanding tasks, such as inspecting equipment, climbing ladders or conducting site tours. Pregnancy can exacerbate fatigue, cause dizziness or reduce mobility, making these everyday tasks more challenging.

Mitigation: Job roles should be adjusted to minimise physical strain. Offering ergonomic support, such as adjustable seating or assistive equipment, can help. Flexible scheduling and reduced site visits ensure that pregnant employees can maintain productivity without overexerting themselves.

o Stress and Mental Health Challenges

Balancing pregnancy with a high-pressure OHS role often results in elevated stress. Tight deadlines, workplace hazards and concerns about job security can take a toll on *mental health*. Pregnant employees may worry about feeling undervalued or left behind during maternity leave, further exacerbating stress. An action plan that outlines clear responsibilities during pregnancy, preparation for maternity leave, and a structured “return-to-work” framework can significantly reduce anxiety for both the employee and employer. Additionally, employers should create a supportive culture by offering counselling services and encouraging open channels of communication.

Mitigation: A supportive workplace culture is crucial. Employers can provide access to counselling services and create an open dialogue for employees to express concerns. Encouraging pregnant workers to focus on strategic tasks rather than reactive responsibilities can reduce stress. An action plan for what lies ahead in the months heading towards the maternity leave and preparing a “back to work” action plan could assist the employee and her employer to know what is planned, and to have a sense of certainty regarding work security and reducing the stress and mental strain. This also helps the employer not to feel as though they are left unsupported when the employee goes on a 4-month maternity leave period.

o Discrimination and Bias

Pregnancy can sometimes be met with biases, including assumptions that a pregnant employee is less capable or committed since they are focused on the baby and all the relevant preparations. This perception may lead to exclusion from critical projects, conversations, planning, or opportunities for career advancement.

Mitigation: Organisations could educate employees on the importance of inclusivity. Highlighting the contributions of pregnant employees through recognition and engagement initiatives can counteract biases.

o Health Complications

Pregnancy often brings health-related challenges such as gestational diabetes, hypertension or morning sickness, which can interfere with job performance and safety. These complications may increase the risk of absenteeism or difficulty in managing responsibilities. Furthermore, the employee may need to take sick leave to manage the health complications, which could further influence their work capacity and availability.

Mitigation: Regular health check-ins and flexibility in workload allocation are vital. Employers can implement maternity-friendly policies, such as allowing work-from-home options or providing access to healthcare services onsite.

Practical ways pregnant women can enhance their value at work

o Effective Communication

Open and proactive communication with managers and colleagues helps set clear expectations. Pregnant employees can outline their limitations while emphasising their commitment to maintaining high standards of work.

o Focusing on Strategic Contributions

Pregnancy provides an opportunity to pivot towards less physically demanding yet impactful roles. Tasks such as policy formulation, conducting virtual training, or data-driven decision-making allow pregnant professionals to showcase their expertise and leadership.

o Knowledge Sharing and Mentorship

Pregnant employees can leverage their experience by mentoring or coaching junior colleagues or creating knowledge resources. This demonstrates initiative and ensures that their contributions are felt even during periods of reduced physical engagement.

o Advocacy for Inclusive Policies

By sharing their unique experiences, pregnant professionals can advocate for workplace improvements that benefit all employees. Proposing practical maternity-friendly initiatives reflects leadership and helps shape a more inclusive organisational culture.

o Confidence and Professionalism

Maintaining professionalism and confidence throughout pregnancy sends a powerful message. By continuing to deliver high-quality work and engaging positively with colleagues, pregnant employees reaffirm their value in the workplace.

In conclusion

Familiarising yourself with various applicable legislation, regulations and by-laws will equip you as employer to understand the demands of the industry better. Key legislation to consider includes the OHSA, Construction Regulations 2014, General Safety Regulations, and General Administrative Regulations.

SERR Synergy assists business owners with a comprehensive OHS service which creates and continuously develops a health and safety culture and system within the business that align with the business's internal policies and goals. We have a dedicated and qualified team that can assist.

About the Author: Inge-Marie joined our team in August 2018 and currently holds the title 'OHS Team Lead'. She holds a B.Com Business Management degree from UNISA and is currently studying towards her Honours degree. She has more than eight years' experience in the construction and health and safety industry, specialising in roof work and working at heights. She is currently responsible for a team of OHS professionals who work in various industries including construction, manufacturing, chemicals and oil, restaurants and transportation. As a certified internal auditor for Integrated Management Systems, she conducts internal audits for clients nationally and assists with the development and implementation of Integrated Management Systems (Safety, Health, Environment and Quality).

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