

## **“Small, consistent changes can eventually lead to big health benefits” – *Dr Adeline Pretorius, University of Pretoria, South Africa***

In September this year the Workforce Nutrition Alliance (WNA) will kick off with training for the fourth Workforce Nutrition Masterclass cohort. A collaborative initiative of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and The Consumer Goods Forum (CGF) the masterclass is designed to support organisations with the planning, development and implementation of workforce nutrition programmes. The curriculum covers Breastfeeding at Work, Healthy food at Work, Nutrition Education and Nutrition-focused Health Checks, in addition to guiding participants in the practical application of such initiatives. During the Masterclass, participants receive a carefully crafted package of tools and resources to enhance the live virtual training sessions, delivered over 12 weeks.

Workforce nutrition is often embraced as an extension of company programmes related to employee wellness, employee retention goals, or sustainability, and the Masterclass is therefore well attended by representatives from organisations across the globe. The course is however not only restricted for use by Human Resource, Sustainability professionals or programme managers.

We caught up with Dr Adeline Pretorius, nutrition lecturer at the Department of Consumer and Food Sciences at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, who joined the Masterclass in an academic capacity and found inspiration for an intervention supporting female farmworkers in South Africa.

**Q: Please tell us about your interest in workforce nutrition for the project you are working on.**

**A:** It is well known that overnutrition is a global health concern. Simultaneously, in low- and middle-income countries such as South Africa, hunger and food insecurity continues to be a concern. The workplace has been identified as an effective platform for interventions to address malnutrition. We know that targeting women in the workforce may not only improve their own nutritional status, but also enable them to make healthier food choices for their families. For this reason, the Nutrition division in the Department of Consumer and Food Sciences at the University of Pretoria decided to implement a workforce nutrition program aimed at female farmworkers. A cattle farm, situated in a rural area near Pretoria, but within easy access, approximately half an hour's drive from the city, is involved in the program. Some employees may perform administrative office-based duties, whereas others may be required to do physical work ranging from moving and handling animals to handling carcasses and packing of meat cuts. The farm employs approximately 1,500 full time employees with about 40% being females. It is estimated that one-third of employees purchase subsidised canteen

meals, while most of the remaining staff would typically prepare a packed lunch at home to be enjoyed at work during their lunch hour.

**Q: Why did you decide to sign up for the WNA Masterclass programme?**

**A:** A preliminary assessment of a small group of women working on the farm indicated that almost half of the women suffered from overweight or obesity, putting them at risk of lifestyle-related noncommunicable diseases. This conforms with growing evidence that the prevalence of underweight among South African women is decreasing, while being replaced with overweight. These changes may be due to the affordability and increased consumption of large amounts of nutritionally inadequate foods, high in refined carbohydrates and energy, as demonstrated by the sales report of canteen meals at the farm.

Similar to local evidence, the assessment further indicated that despite the high numbers of overweight and obesity, only 34% of the women achieved a high dietary diversity score. Dietary diversity assessments are often used as a qualitative food intake measure, representing an individual's dietary adequacy, including micronutrients. We realised we needed to decide on an appropriate nutrition intervention programme to improve the nutritional health and well-being of employees, but it was a daunting task requiring forward planning!

Consequently, I decided to participate in the WNA Masterclass for guidance in developing and implementing a nutrition programme tailored for the farmworkers. Informed by the outcomes of the preliminary assessment and guided by WNA's masterclass, a nutrition intervention programme to address overnutrition and dietary diversity of women in the workplace has been developed and will be implemented during the second half of 2023.

**Q: What value did the WNA Masterclass bring to your programme?**

**A:** Although the implementation of our programme is still underway, the Masterclass was extremely helpful to plan and prioritise actions. We were guided through the planning and implementation process and introduced to numerous helpful tools. The WNA scorecard was especially helpful in prioritising the need to address "Healthy food at work" and "Nutrition education". Other worksheets, such as the "Ambassador mapping tool" and "Getting from goals to ideas" are well designed, practical, and helped to formulate achievable actions. Bouncing off ideas such as food displays, quizzes, and prize draws, with other participants, inspired activities that could be adapted and implemented in our setting.

**Q: What challenges did you experience in attending the WNA Masterclass programme?**

**A:** Time constraint has been one of the biggest challenges to plan and implement our workforce nutrition programme. However, the ongoing guidance from the WNA Masterclass presenters provided valuable and practical advice to overcome barriers. Attendance of the weekly sessions assisted in setting short term goals and organising thoughts and actions that may otherwise seem overwhelming. Appointing a voluntary "nutrition ambassador" has been

one of the most helpful recommendations to involve other employees and overcome our time limitations. Taking small steps was a valuable take-home message.

**Q: Do you have any recommendations for others considering joining the WNA Masterclass programme?**

**A:** Use the WNA tools to identify and prioritise the needs of your workforce. Set short term and achievable goals and involve employees. Small, consistent changes can eventually lead to big health benefits!

- *Dr Adeline Pretorius participated in the September-December 2022 cohort.*

*There are still a few spaces available for the upcoming WNA Masterclass which will run from 21 September to 14 December 2023. The time investment is approximately 2 hours per week for interactive sessions which includes live webinars and workshops with participants from organisations across the globe, and one-on-one coaching sessions. Click [here](#) to learn more.*