

# The sustainable workplace



**An introduction to the concept  
- and some good advice for those who get started**



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**MUCH MORE THAN  
JUST THE ENVIRONMENT**



## Sustainable workplaces also involve occupational health & safety, social inclusion and ethical principles.

Sustainability is not just about organic milk, unleaded petrol, energy-saving bulbs and all the other regards that have already become an established practise among green consumers, because sustainability is much more than consumption and the environment. The way in which we organise our everyday lives and our society should not prevent others from having their needs met. This is briefly what sustainability is about.

It is, for instance, not sustainable to organise the work so that employees experience physical or mental burnout; To exclude vulnerable groups in society completely from the working community – Or to damage the natural environment, as future generations will depend on it for survival.

Sustainability is thus about caring for nature and one another – Both people and the environment – At the local level as well and the global level.

## SUSTAINABILITY AT THE WORKPLACE

Sustainable workplaces are among the most important preconditions for developing a society in a sustainable direction.

There is hardly any workplace which is 100% sustainable. Sustainability is a horizon that can never fully be reached, but you can see to it that a maximum of activities and initiatives lead you in the right direction.

**An activity can be characterized as sustainable if it helps move the workplace towards one or more of the following goals:**

- Greater social responsibility – For instance by making room for groups that would otherwise find it difficult to find or to keep a normal job. This may be done by establishing flex jobs or introducing a staff policy on ethnic minorities.
- Greater ethical responsibility – For instance by demanding that fundamental values, such as human rights, are respected. It may also be obtained by



## PRECONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

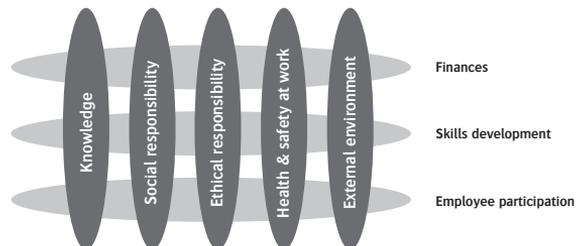
The four objectives for sustainability can only be met if the following three additional issues are also considered;

- demanding that suppliers provide documentation proving that they do not use child labour or in any way violate the fundamental ethical values of the workplace.
- Improving health & safety at work
    - By aiming to prevent both physical and psycho-social working environment problems. This may involve a reducing monotonous, repetitive work and stress and promoting job satisfaction and employee participation at the workplace.
  - Improving the natural environment
    - For instance by exploiting energy and materials more efficiently. This may involve using more environmentally friendly materials in production or manufacturing products that use less energy or that are easier to recycle.

- **Finances:** The initiatives must be financially risk-free so that they contribute to the stability of the workplace.
- **Employee participation:** Employees are to be actively involved in the planning and implementation of new initiatives.
- **Skills:** It must be ensured that the involved parties have or acquire the skills needed in order to participate.

These three final requirements are not just means to obtain greater sustainability, but are also aims in themselves. The connection between the various aims is illustrated through the below diagram.

### The TSW project's definition of sustainability







**GOOD REASONS  
FOR GETTING STARTED**

There are many reasons for taking sustainability seriously at the workplace. Financial incentives and having a good conscience are two of them.

A Danish workplace with offices in the city of Middelfart has chosen to focus on the consumption of resources at the workplace. Does the office staff, for instance, use more heating, electricity, water, paper etc. than necessary?

It is not just common sense that motivates the company to try to save money on consumption. The company also wants to show its customers, employees and the outside world that it makes an effort to be a sustainable workplace.

The high number of Danish and international companies working seriously with sustainability is, amongst others, due to the following two points:

- It often pays – due to the increased efficiency generated through the exploitation of all resources. An improved working environment may result in fewer days of sickness and increased productivity. To some companies there may also be a market for more sustainable products.
- It can improve the company's reputation – thereby making it easier for the company to retain its employees, customers, investors and liaisons – and to attract new ones. This is why many workplaces also make an effort to document their concern for society – for instance, through various forms for social-, green- or ethical accounts. And to some companies, it is simply a precondition for being able to sell their products to certain customers.





## **NOT JUST FOR YOUR OWN GOOD**

But often, there are also other reasons why employees and management launch this type of initiative – Reasons that are not directly linked to instant economic gain:

- **The employee gets to use more sides of him-/herself** because he/she gets the possibility to draw on a broader range of experiences, skills and interests in his/her daily work. For instance, many people are used to having far more responsibility in their family life and in their leisure time than at work.
- **We want to make the world a better place** – Even though most workplaces focus on finances and quality, most employees and managers are personally committed to ensuring a decent workplace which is organised to ensure the common good. When so many people strive to make their workplace more sustainable, this is neither due to pure idealism or cold calculation. The best examples are often based on a mixture of both; Unequivocal personal convictions as well as a keen eye for what's best for the workplace.





**ARE WE IN STEP?**



Creating a sustainable workplace is in everyone's interest – but it may also involve conflicts and dilemmas.

In a factory in the Danish city of Ølgod, the management and the employees share the aim of making the workplace more inclusive. But they emphasise different elements of the initiative.

To the management it is, amongst other things, about getting better at integrating new groups at the company – such as new citizens or persons with reduced working capacity.

Meanwhile the employees focus more on nurturing the working environment and on creating greater job satisfaction for the current employees.

These two considerations need not be conflicting. But the example serves to illustrate that sustainability is a scale which is not always in equilibrium. Improvements made for one group in one area may sometimes result in a deterioration of working conditions for others at the workplace.

## **INHERENT DILEMMAS**

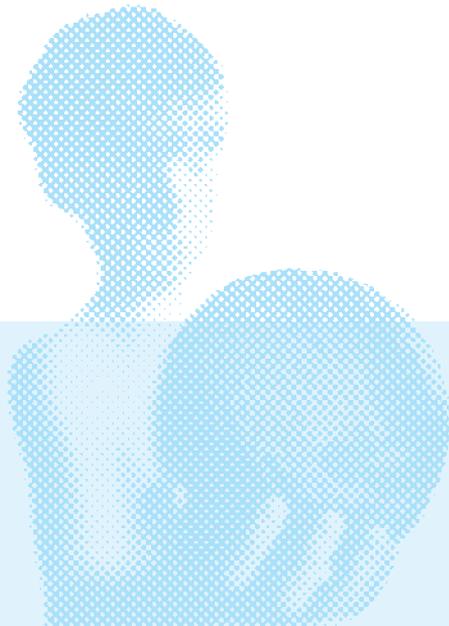
Quite often, sustainability presupposes that you counterbalance the various aims. Everyone knows of the conflict between a sustainable economy and a sustainable environment: It may be expensive to reduce pollution if the company does not cut down on resources at the same time, or works to improve its name or sells more environmentally friendly products.

In terms of the social aspect, two good objectives may stand in the way of one another. If the workplace gives many of the easy tasks to employees with reduced working capacity, this may increase the overall workload and thus the risk of attrition among the remaining staff.



## SUSTAINABILITY IS ESTABLISHED THROUGH DIALOGUE

In most areas, the management and the employees will be able to reach solutions that make the sustainable workplace a common cause. But this requires a good and thorough dialogue at the workplace so that the parties can agree on the contents and aims of the initiative in question.



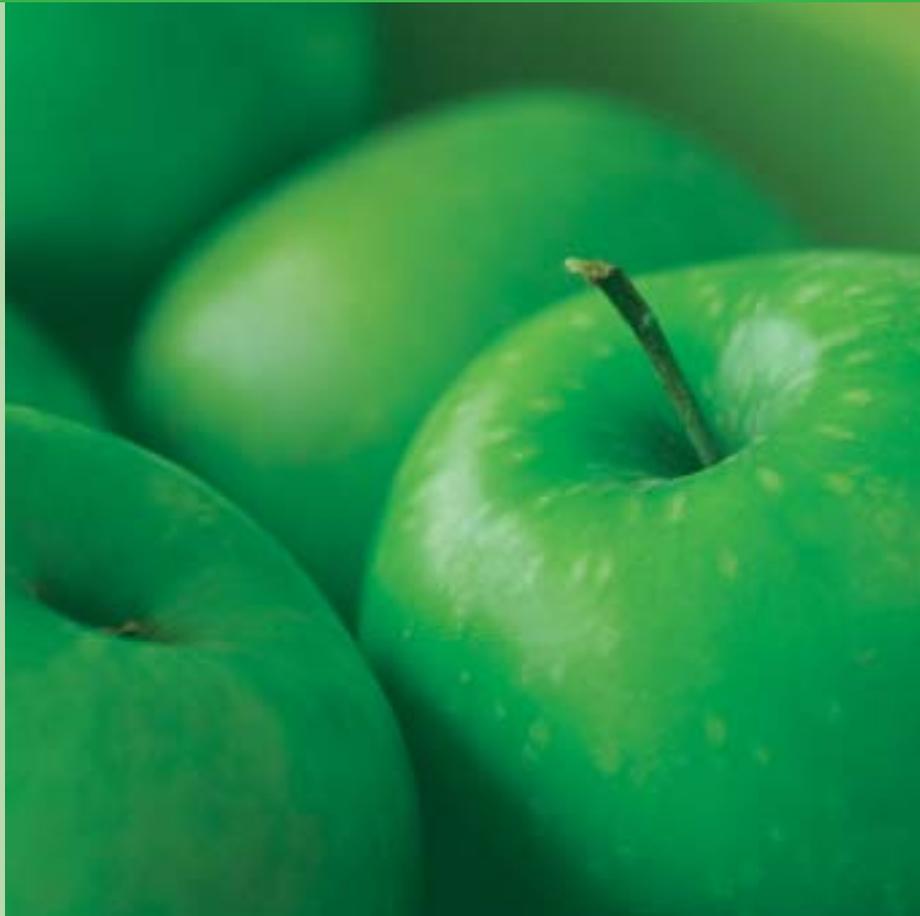
**A workplace can never be sustainable without involving the employees.**

**There are two reasons for this:**

- The employees are the ones that will be seeing to it that all the day-to-day tasks at the workplace reflect the principles on sustainability. Without their support, the project will surely fail.
- Involvement is not just a means. It is also a core value of the sustainability concept that people have the right to have influence on their own working lives.

It is therefore in everyone's interest that the employees are involved in the discussion, the planning and the implementation of the workplace initiatives to promote sustainability.





**SMALL STEPS  
TOWARDS LARGER GOALS**



## ARE VISIONS AND EVERYDAY LIFE COMPATIBLE?

You have to start off on a small scale and be specific, but you must not forget the long term objectives.

- “A healthier workplace – through a better physical and psycho-social working environment”.
- “Continuous improvements of the company’s health & safety conditions”.
- “Establishing social co-responsibility through job activation of marginalised groups”.

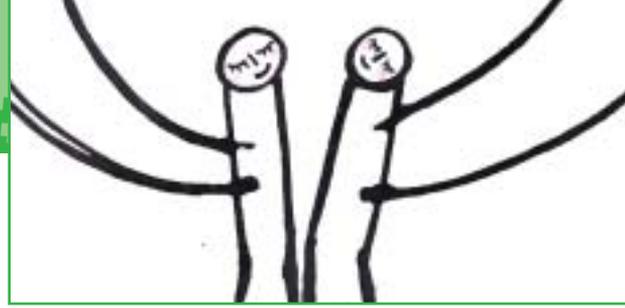
These are the titles of three very different projects that all come under the heading, “sustainability”.

But what makes these projects sustainability initiatives? Are they not just separate projects on health and safety at work, the environment and social issues, respectively?

**Yes**, if they are simply the management’s short-sighted and isolated response to a given challenge that the workplace faces.

**No**, if they have a long term perspective, if they are linked to other activities within the company and in the outside world and if they are defined in close dialogue with the employees.

And this might be the hardest thing of all in sustainability work; To be able to translate great visions to practical activities in the day-to-day running of the workplace. And the other way round: To be able to keep a sense of direction and know what the next step will be when carrying out minor improvements.



## SEEING THE GREATNESS IN SMALL THINGS

It is a bit like putting together a puzzle with an infinite number of pieces. You must be able to imagine how the completed puzzle looks while struggling hard to put together one of the corners. You must have a sense of fitting together the individual pieces. And it also requires a certain amount of patience as each piece may seem insignificant compared to the full picture.

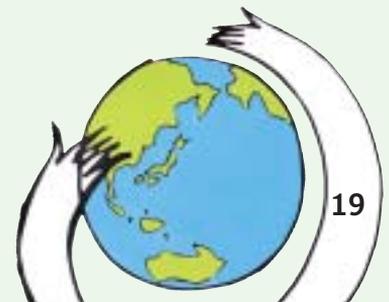
In fact, from the outset, you need to be prepared of the possibility that you may never be able to achieve your goal completely. In other words, the satisfaction in this work should come from moving in the right direction and not in achieving a certain goal.

The ideal is to be able to combine major and minor interests with the consideration for the external society.

## GETTING SMARTER ALONG THE WAY

Many people would like a recipe or roadmap telling them how to work with sustainability; But this does not exist. Each workplace must find its own version based on the challenges and opportunities it faces. However, one can find a great deal of inspiration in the experiences of other workplaces.

It is therefore also very important to extend the initiative as widely as possible at the workplace; Both in order to make use of as many skills and experiences as possible but also because the work represents a learning process that makes each participant wiser – thereby strengthening the workplace in its entirety.







**START OFF  
IN A SUSTAINABLE WAY**



Create visible results, involve your colleagues and take scepticism seriously. These are the three golden rules of sustainability work.

There are many ways in which to make a workplace more sustainable. The best piece of advice is to start off with the areas in which the motivation is the greatest and where the needs are most urgent; The areas where you will be able to make a visible difference. Because visible results always inspire people to press on. And it is better to complete a smaller project well than breaking one's back in the attempt to complete a major one.

When choosing your first initiative, there are at least two possible roads to take:

- **You can suggest entirely new initiatives or projects.** This may be to introduce sorting of rubbish or establishing special "sheltered jobs" for senior employees.
- **You can consider what the sustainability aspect of existing tasks might be.** For instance by considering whether your recruitment procedure makes it difficult for certain groups to enter the workplace.

An initiative may come from either side; employees or the management. But it is always important to involve the other party as quickly as possible. Your initiatives will not succeed without the support of both employees and the management.



## THE ROLE OF THE SHOP STEWARDS

Shop stewards play an important role in terms of getting their colleagues involved in the activities on sustainability that are launched. It is a good thing to make sure you have their moral support, but even better to involve as many as possible of them actively in various aspects of the practical work. In this connection, it is important to make use of the individual strengths of your colleagues.

Furthermore, it is important that the shop stewards participate in ensuring the coherence of a project, for instance by bringing focus to some of its inherent dilemmas. And furthermore, they need to keep in mind that it is not just about what the workplace will gain from the initiative here and now.

## TAKE SCEPTICISM SERIOUSLY

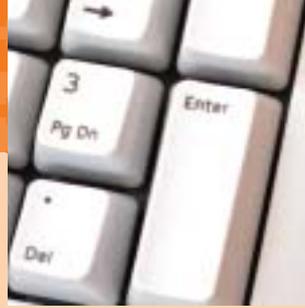
New initiatives are often met with a certain amount of scepticism. This may seem irritating, when you are very committed to the cause. But this resistance need not spring from narrow-mindedness or people thinking in grooves. It may also arise because the sustainability initiative has made the day-to-day work of these colleagues more cumbersome or strenuous.

Naturally, these kinds of objections must be taken seriously. Perhaps the initiative can be adjusted so that it suits all sides in a better way. And if it is still necessary to make a choice that will inevitably affect someone adversely, it is important to do so openly and on the basis of a proper dialogue.





**TOOLS  
AND MORE KNOWLEDGE**



Several tools and publications have been prepared in connection with our sustainability work:



**The social responsibility of the group:**

A tool which places the social responsibility of the workplace and the working group on the agenda. The aim is to be able to prepare a concrete action plan for the workplace. Among other things, this tool provides material for a discussion of how to prevent attrition, retain current employees and integrate vulnerable groups at the workplace. See [www.lo.dk/dba](http://www.lo.dk/dba)

**The knowledge index of the workplace:**

A tool to measure whether the workplace is good at organising its knowledge base and developing its employees. It consists of a number of questions for employees and managers on issues such as: training, learning and knowledge sharing at the workplace. This tool is also available in hard copy and in electronic form at [www.vidensindeks.dk](http://www.vidensindeks.dk)

**Dialogue on health and safety at work and sustainability:**

A tool that focuses on how the employees can participate in health & safety initiatives. It consists of a handbook providing advice on the planning and implementation of new health & safety initiatives. The tool also includes a number of dialogue cards that are useful in terms of launching a debate on relevant health and safety themes at the workplace. See [www.lo.dk/dba](http://www.lo.dk/dba)



All three tools can be acquired by referring to the publications order department, Tel + 45 35 24 60 00 while stocks last. The password for the electronic knowledge index can also be acquired by referring to LO, Ms Nina van Deurs at [nvd@lo.dk](mailto:nvd@lo.dk).

### **Written material**

We also have a collection of cases reporting on the specific sustainability initiatives of a number of Danish workplaces. The examples are based on a wide range of workplaces and types of projects. These cases can be downloaded from the FKC web site at [www.kompetence.dk](http://www.kompetence.dk).

### **Employee participation and sustainability**

A thematic workbook on the role of employees in sustainability projects. Who are the participants, in what areas of the project will they be participating and in what way? The booklet also provides concrete examples to the roles of employees and shop stewards in connection with the sustainability work of workplaces.

**This booklet can be downloaded from the LO web site, [www.lo.dk/dba](http://www.lo.dk/dba) – where you will also find many more publications from the LO-project, “The sustainable workplace”.**

## CONTACTS

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If the right approach is taken, sustainability efforts represent an asset, both to the individual workplace and to society as such.

An important precondition for creating sustainability is that workplaces take on a greater share of responsibility vis-à-vis society. Therefore, LO has made this effort one of its high-priority objectives.

This has, amongst others, resulted in the project “The sustainable workplace”, which serves as a basis for this booklet.

The booklet is targeted at shop stewards in the trade union movement. It is about the specific tasks to carry out in order to make your workplace more sustainable.

It is thus intended as a supplement for classes and courses on sustainability and related issues.

