

Denmark after dark

Working abroad may mean boring weekends. At Novo Nordisk, international employees in Denmark started a club to enhance networks at work and off duty.

Parliaments are not known for flinging open their doors to strangers. And nor are the Danes. But late in the evening on 10 October, thousands were waiting to enter Christiansborg: the Danish Parliament in Copenhagen. And not all were Danes. Among them were some 20 members of NNIC: Novo Nordisk International Club.

Polish, Canadian, Chinese, Indian, Dutch, US, German, British, Turkish and Mongolian colleagues were out for Copenhagen Culture Night; one of the biggest cultural festivals in Denmark. All were hoping to get a glimpse of Danish culture, and to meet other international Novo Nordisk employees working in Denmark.

A language barrier

Heather Palen works at Clinical Operations Haemostasis at Global Development in Bagsværd. She is one of the original promoters of the International Club, and according to her, one motive for starting NNIC was that it is challenging to get inside Danish culture. Especially due to the language barrier.

"Danes tend to speak Danish at lunch. They don't mean to be rude. It's just the norm. But it means that international colleagues are excluded from the more informal discussions."

Heather Palen, who is American, speaks impeccable Danish. But she kept meeting international colleagues who found the language problematic.

"When I started at Novo Nordisk eight years ago, all e-mails were in Danish. That has gotten much better. But you still see Danish language taking over in smaller project groups. This can be a major source of frustration for international colleagues who do not understand the language. And it was frustrations like these that sparked the initiative to create a club."

Good timing

Heather Palen and her international colleagues decided to take the matter to Alice Henriksen at



Esther Robles, Kirsten Ørgaard, Martin Campogna, Heather Palen, Alice Henriksen, Debra Nadine Hayman, Zhiguang Deng, Fernando Solimando, Andréanne Bouchard and Stela Amaral from Novo Nordisk's International Club.

Labour Relations and Care: Mobility Team. And their suggestions were perfectly timed.

"As a global company, Novo Nordisk needs to recruit and retain the best employees worldwide. So we had already decided to provide a greater level of support for the integration of our international employees. Since they had taken matters into their own hands it was just a question of joining forces."

Alice Henriksen soon discovered why a networking club would be valuable.

"We had a kick-off meeting to figure out what was important to foreigners living and working in Denmark. At a certain point, we split up in groups. One group came back with a post-

er with just the words 'Boring Weekends' written on it."

Meeting new people...

The club is funded by Corporate People and Organisation. Nevertheless it depends on initiative and hard work from its volunteers.

Like on this night at Christiansborg. NNIC volunteers Baya Tuvshintugs, Debra Hayman and Zhiguang Deng have arranged to meet some 20 international Novo Nordisk employees at the Parliament.

Tonight thousands of visitors get to roam the parliament building – even the parliament hall with its voting buttons. To some of the non-Danes it is bizarre beyond words that this is possible without visible security. But even here, the talk turns to shop time and again. And for Chinese Zhiguang Deng of Pharma IT, that's part of the point of the NNIC events.

"You meet new people. You find out new things about life in Denmark. Sometimes you even find out new things about the company."

...and Danes, even

And you don't just meet other foreigners, says Mongolian Baya Tuvshintugs from the

Graduate Programme in Product Supply:

"My first NNIC event was one of our 'It's finally Friday' bar nights that are held the last Friday of every month. And it was pretty cool. More than 30 people showed up. Even some Danes. It was really nice to meet them as well."

As the International Club exit the open doors of Christiansborg, Heather Palen says that the club is also about sharing insights on how to open the doors of Danish co-workers.

"The Danes are open. And they are interested. But it takes a lot of initiative on the part of the foreigner to create a sustained relationship with them. Learning the language and how to practise the concept of 'dansk hygge' (Danish cosiness) are among the most important ingredients I can think of."

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