

No safety in the number

Companies are making more of an effort to bring injured staff back to work, write

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When Wolfgang Zimmermann was 20, his first day on the job, he was handed a power saw and a sheet of instructions on how to fell a tree. "Good luck, go for it," he was told.

The tree "barber-chaired," as he puts it. The undercut was not big enough, the tree split up the middle, a portion shot out "and nailed me in the back... and that was it."

Mr. Zimmermann's back was broken, and he would spend the next five years of his life in a wheelchair. But he was back working for Vancouver-based MacMillan Bloedel Ltd., at an administrative job, within six months of his accident.

"Essentially, what got me through this was my job and my family," Mr. Zimmermann, now executive director of the National Institute of Disability Management and Research, said in an interview this week.

However, most people who become seriously disabled or ill during their working lives never return to work, he said. Instead, they are sent home to collect disability benefits or social assistance.

The standard approach is this: "Here is your disability package. Call us when you are 100 per cent. Meantime, we are going to back-fill your position with someone else," Mr. Zimmermann said.

This is not only devastating to the disabled employee, it is tremendously costly, he said.

A study released yesterday by Toronto-based Watson Wyatt estimates "the annual costs of employee absence due to illness and disability" at \$16-billion a year.

However, Mr. Zimmermann said, a small but growing number of Canadian employers are taking a different approach to disability management: rather than paying their disabled employees off, they are bringing them back.

But time is of the essence. A person who has been off work for six months has a 50-per-cent chance of returning, a person who has been off for a year has a 20-per-cent likelihood of returning, "and that drops to 10 per cent after two years."

With the support of governments, unions and some major corporations in Canada, the institute has designed return-to-work models that are starting to be adopted around the world. Last week, Mr. Zimmermann was in Germany, where the German unit of Ford Motor Co. is training both labour and management employees through certification programs developed by the Canadian institute.

Ford's German unit has now returned 300 employees to work through this approach "at an annual saving of 10 million euros in long-term disability [costs]," he said.

In Canada, Weyerhaeuser Canada Ltd. of Kamloops, B.C., Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd. of Calgary, MacMillan Bloedel and the Communications Energy and Paperworkers union are among the pioneers of this new approach to disability management.

Canadian companies, through their joint labour-management health and safety committees, have been more successful on the preventive side — "not that you can ever let up," Mr. Zimmermann said.

According to the federal government, in 2001, more than 900 people died in Canada as a result of work-related accidents or illnesses. Young workers were the highest-risk group; approximately 28 per cent of all accident victims who were compensated for time off were between the ages of 15 and 29.

See INJURED on page C5



DIANA NETHERCOTT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Wolfgang Zimmermann: 'It's me today, it could be somebody else tomorrow. We just never know.'

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Young workers are more prone to accidents

INJURED from page C1

The three sectors with the greatest number of accidents were manufacturing, retail, health and social services.

Last year, 60 young workers between the ages of 15 and 24 were killed on the job across Canada. More than 63,000 were injured. A number of provincial jurisdictions have launched educational campaigns aimed at informing young workers about the risks, as well as their right to work in a safe environment. And, when accidents do occur, employers are hit with stiffer penalties than in the past.

Under legislation recently introduced by the federal government, senior company officials could face criminal charges for employ-

ees' on-the-job injuries and companies could also be fined up to \$1-million for allowing unsafe working conditions.

Each province and territory is struggling with this issue.

In British Columbia, the latest statistics show that while over all young-worker injuries and fatalities are decreasing, permanent disabilities, such as broken backs and third-degree burns, are not going down.

In Ontario, which has the largest number of young workers, the government is starting to slowly see results from a massive education and awareness program it introduced in the late 1990s, according to Don Hall, co-ordinator of prevention with Ontario's Ministry of Labour. "There was a

rate of decline [for injuries] with all workers, except young workers. That rate was flat. We weren't having an impact there."

In September, 1999, the government began phasing health and safety information into most areas of the high-school curriculum. Studies have shown that young workers are more prone to accidents for a number of reasons, such as lack of experience, proper safety training and their ignorance of provincial labour legislation.

"We recognized that to shape young workers' attitudes and behaviours about health and safety, it needed to be ingrained into the high-school curriculum. We wanted to give them the skills and knowledge at a very early age."

The Ontario curriculum covers

everything from workers' rights and ergonomics to operating heavy machinery and the proper handling of chemicals. Teachers are also given information to educate students about other hazards, including stress and repetitive stress injuries. Ontario is the only province that has weaved all this information into its high-school curriculum, according to Mr. Hall.

A marketing campaign has also been launched every summer to warn students about workplace safety and their rights. This spring, the ministry launched a new Web site for young workers that has posted basic information about workplace safety and young workers' rights.

"We are starting to see results," Mr. Hall said. In Ontario, from

1996 to 2000 the number of young workers injured rose 16 per cent to 17,089. However, that number started to turn around in 2001. It was the first time since 1996 the injury list didn't go up — the number of lost-time injuries (meaning the person lost at least one day of work) dropped to 15,113 from 17,089.

"And I always hate to say this, but we are seeing results in the whole area of fatalities," Mr. Hall said. "They've dropped over the years. And so far this year, touch wood, we've only had one young worker fatality, whereas we had eight last year." In 2001, there were 13 young workers killed on the job in Ontario.

Mr. Zimmermann said in an interview from his office in Port Al-

berni, B.C., that the skill of the first-aid attendants who were first on the scene of his 1977 accident saved his life.

And MacMillan Bloedel's efforts to reintegrate him into the work force after the accident ensured his livelihood. A graduate of forestry and accounting programs, he has since switched employers and is now on secondment from his position at Weyerhaeuser Canada.

Mr. Zimmermann learned to walk again, with the aid of canes and leg braces. As executive director of the institute, he is constantly on the move, promoting return-to-work programs as both a cost-saver for employers and as "a life-line" to disabled workers.

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