



*Photo: Brussels, Central Square
and the Grand Palace.*

Four European Countries Join the IDMSC



IT'S A FACT

Disabilities and chronic disorders are considered to be the main reasons for unemployment and exclusion from the labour market in Europe.

Four more countries have been added to the roster of those licensed to deliver NIDMAR's curriculum and grant the internationally accepted professional designations Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP) and Certified Return to Work Coordinator (CRTWC). NIDMAR has signed a licensing agreement with *Prevent*, the Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, covering Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and France. *Prevent* joins representatives from Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom as members of the IDMSC bringing the number of member countries to 13.

THE CASE FOR DM IN BELGIUM

Through education and training, *Prevent* helps businesses develop integrated prevention policies and guarantee health and safety standards at work. Based in Brussels, *Prevent* also has a social and policy-support function. It works on various international research projects; supports government at European, federal and regional levels; maintains contact with social partners and takes account of the collective aspect of welfare policy. Within this function, and to increase the return to work rate, *Prevent* is seeking to influence policy makers in establishing a legal framework.

"Our organization considers prevention as part of the business strategy," explains Managing Director Marc De Greef. "However it is one thing to guarantee health and safety standards at work, yet quite another to deal with the longer term consequences of accidents and health problems that do happen – especially in terms of having an established legal framework and specific company policies to promote the reintegration of the affected employees. For this, a new and complementary strategy and methodology is needed."



NIDMAR Executive Director Wolfgang Zimmermann signed an agreement with Prevent's Managing Director Prof. Marc De Greef on August 8, licensing the occupational health and safety organization to deliver NIDMAR's curriculum and grant the professional designations in Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and France.



Absenteeism costs Belgian businesses an estimated 6.6 billion euro a year. It also represents a huge societal cost; in Belgium the total cost for disablement benefits represents about eight percent of the total social expenditure.

Another main reason that Belgium is focusing attention on reintegration and retention is the emerging risk of the aging working population. A study carried out by a Belgian health insurance company shows that total absenteeism rises from the age of 45 and, more considerably, from the age of 55. This increased absenteeism among older employees is due to long-term illness absenteeism (especially illness lasting longer than one year). Older employees appear to be ill less frequently than their younger colleagues, but when they are excluded from the labour market, it is often for prolonged periods, or permanently.

Research conducted by *Prevent* revealed there is a compelling case for focusing attention on the issue of return to work after an accident or illness. Yet, in practice, there are few companies in Belgium that offer a proactive reintegration policy. The focus is mostly on individual assistance in the search for new employment for unemployed or inactive persons with occupational disabilities or long-standing health problems. Until recently, employers were rarely approached regarding responsibility for disabled persons, both current employees and job seekers.

DIFFERENT JURISDICTIONS, DIFFERENT DM

A common aspect in the countries covered under the agreement with *Prevent* is the *Bismarckian Social Health Insurance System*, which dictates a strict separation between the world of work and the world of social insurance. The health of a person at work is guided by occupational healthcare workers, but if an employee is unable to work, it is social insurance authorities who evaluate the situation. This "dual system" complicates the reintegration of people dealing with the long-term consequences of accidents and health problems.

At the same time, there are huge differences between the countries as to what extent employers are obliged to undertake action. In this arena, there are differing disability management needs in each of the countries involved.

Belgium

Employers in Belgium are hardly ever approached to become responsible for disabled persons, both current employees and job seekers. Disability management is dependent on the goodwill of the parties involved.

France

In France, concern about the outflow of disabled workers from employment, at a time of high and rising unemployment, prompted programmes in support of retention. A quota system requires six percent of employees to be people with a disability, and if this percentage is not met, companies have to pay a contribution to a fund. Larger enterprises are encouraged to develop integration plans covering retention,



rehabilitation and training as an alternative to paying the levy. Employers' associations are active in promoting job retention, but most enterprise activity is framed by the law. Return to work activity is dispersed among a range of agencies and providers. Improving coordination is a priority.

Luxembourg

Luxembourg has implemented an important policy aiming to rehabilitate and retain workers who suffer health problems or disabilities and cannot benefit from the disability compensation system. In the cases of those who are unable to continue to work in their last job, they can profit either from an internal or an external job reclassification. Internal reclassification consists of redeployment within the organization, with the possibility of adjusting the job or the way the work is organized. External redeployment consists of reclassification in the labour market.

By this means, the public authorities aim to keep as many workers as possible in the workforce via rehabilitation within the company (transfer to another workstation or work regime) or by transfer to a new employer. Every company with more than 25 workers has the obligation to apply this rehabilitation policy. To steer the reintegration process, the state created a department for workers with reduced labour capacity to take care of rehabilitation measures, training and vocational guidance. However, there are obstacles in that it is a top-down approach and there are already cases of employers fighting the decisions of the joint commission.

The Netherlands

There was a shift in responsibilities in the Netherlands in 2006. The government now determines a sensible level of protection for employees, while employers and employees decide together how that will be achieved in practice. Employers are motivated because of an obligation to pay employees who are off work through sickness for two years. Regardless of the cause, the employer is required to pay at least 70 percent of the last wage earned. Most employers take out private insurance to cover these costs. This measure is seen as a financial incentive for employers to look to vocational rehabilitation to return employees to work as quickly as possible and so reduce the amount of sick leave and disability. This reform agenda aims to emphasize workers' remaining capabilities and encourage them to be reintegrated into employment.

CERTIFICATION OFFERS QUALITY SOLUTIONS

In addressing the issue of employer responsibility, De Greef stresses "In such a complex matter, it is beneficial to exchange methods, to learn from other organizations and to experience how other nations deal with this issue. Because of this, *Prevent* took the initiative of signing an agreement with NIDMAR."

Yet, with the varying obligations of businesses in these countries, disability management must be tailored to deal with different sensitivities in addressing employers.

"In Belgium, employers need to be convinced of the advantages of reintegration; in Luxembourg there is more need to help with the administrative procedures and how to deal with the department for workers with reduced labour capacity; whereas in the Netherlands, disability management has to be focused on how the employer and employee can come together for the best solution," notes De Greef.

Overall, *Prevent* sees benefits for all involved in bringing NIDMAR's curriculum and the designations to the European countries under its license agreement, including:

An open job market: *Prevent* wants to contribute to a job market, which does not exclude people on the grounds of illness or accident, but which supports them by utilizing their work capabilities to the fullest.

Advantages for the employee: A successful reintegration has several advantages for the employee involved: payment of full salary, boost of self-esteem and strengthening of the emotional and economic health of the families involved. Moreover, reintegration has a positive influence on social life as colleagues are often considered as friends.

Advantages for the employer: For the company, a successful reintegration also involves numerous advantages, e.g., the direct and indirect expenses related to long-term absenteeism are reduced. Employers can retain experienced and motivated personnel and do not need to invest in training new people. The company gains experience with reintegration, which can contribute to a positive image for the company, a sign of corporate social responsibility and solidarity toward all its employees.



While its primary customers are businesses, through its agreement with NIDMAR, *Prevent* is seeking to educate intermediaries who can bring about successful reintegration processes dealing in a professional way with the challenges along the way.

De Greef concludes, “*Prevent* took this decision because our organization wants to engage itself in the matter of public health. Work affects public health and, to keep our social security system turning, we need a job market that can handle the longer term consequences of accidents and health problems. Therefore it is necessary that there are professionals in disability management who know how to manage the demands of the globalized job market and who can convince businesses of the importance of taking care of their human capital.”
