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In 2010, just under 70 individuals across Canada successfully passed the professional certification examinations and achieved the designations of Certified Return to Work Coordinator (CRTWC) and Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP). The examinations are administered under the auspices of the International Disability Management Standards Council (IDMSC). These individuals join an ever-expanding body of certified professionals located in 10 countries around the world. In this first in a series, Canada's newly designated CDMPs and CRTWCs share insights into their backgrounds, current careers, and goals for the future.

CDMP facilitates collaboration at Department of National Defence

Bruce Christianson's job as Civilian Health and Return to Work Coordinator for the Directorate of General Safety at the Department of National Defence in Ottawa has the potential to impact as many as 30,000 civilian employees. He handles strategic planning, services, and policies in disability management for the department's civilian public servants across the country. (Canadian Forces members in the Department of National Defence fall under a separate jurisdiction.) Christianson, who holds a B.Sc. in physiotherapy and is a registered physiotherapist in Ontario, added CDMP to his credentials last year after successfully challenging the professional examination.

He previously worked for one year for Health Canada, largely conducting ergonomic assessments for federal public servants. Prior to that, he worked as a physiotherapist for the Canadian Back Institute helping people return to work. He was gratified at the time to be working in a clinical setting and able to help people there on a smaller one-on-one scale.

"I realized early on in my career that people need and want good communication, someone who helps and understands, and who they can trust."

He decided to make a career change, going from physiotherapy into disability management at a time when occupational therapy was perhaps a more widely recognized field. He was aware of NIDMAR's leadership role in disability management, believing that "the credentials were credible and worth getting." He had support from management at the Department of National Defence to go ahead and spend any time he needed on his education, ultimately gaining the CDMP designation.

Part of Christianson's role is to provide expert advice to senior management on disability management and return to work



issues. “As a professional in Health Sciences, the credentials help when presenting to senior leadership. It shows knowledge in this field,” he says.

Another key component of his job is managing the relationship with unions and other stakeholders inside and outside the department. “Being in the field now, I see the need for health and safety advisors, Human Resources, unions, doctors, and insurance providers to collaborate, and for there to be trust between employees and employers.”

The federal government’s comprehensive Disability Management Initiative also looks to the Department of National Defence for advice and leadership, as it fulfills a mandate to promote and guide all federal departments in reaching their capacity to effectively manage workplace disability.

Most recently, the DM Initiative Practitioners' Network, which is represented by many federal departments, was presented with a new Occupational Fitness Assessment Form, created by the Department of National Defence. The aim was to establish a consistent approach for the Federal Public Service when communicating with doctors and other allied health professionals. Christianson advises that valuable information sharing also occurs internally to DND during the National Return to Work Joint Committee meetings, held twice a year in Ottawa. He leads the discussions held with representatives from management and 11 cross-country unions.

This year, the department’s Return to Work Program is celebrating its 10th anniversary by launching an internal promotion with the goals of clarifying its roles and responsibilities, and achieving more visibility with employees, supervisors, middle management, and senior leadership. As part of the campaign, a National Joint Declaration supporting the DND Civilian Employee Return to Work Program was signed by the Deputy Minister of National Defence on the civilian side, the Chief of Defence on the military side, and by senior union officials. Supporting articles were published in the department’s *Health and Safety Digest*, while posters, brochures, training, awareness sessions, and poster reprints of the declaration were displayed at worksites to demonstrate support for the initiative at all levels.

Christianson’s credentials as a CDMP have also helped him in his role teaching return to work and DM to case managers and program advisors within the department. He emphasizes best practices, and how to best facilitate return to work as an employer and minimize impact on the organization. His three-day courses are held six or seven times a year. In the meantime, while he is not involved in day-to-day case management himself, he does take an advisory role in assisting program advisors, sometimes by getting in contact with key players, and helping them to achieve win-win situations.



When it comes to his future in the disability management field, he says he has no aspirations to work abroad, although his CDMP would give him that flexibility. Instead, he is able to take advantage of the best of both worlds, attending international conferences in the field on behalf of his employer. He plans to attend the International Forum in Disability Management in London, England in 2012, he says, mentioning the advantage of the designations bringing “more consistency in the field in DM.” He adds, “It makes it interesting to know we’ll all be talking about the same thing.”

CDMP advocates lifelong learning

Helga Wainwright, CDMP, has kept an emphasis on education throughout her career. A former disability management specialist for the past five years at British Columbia’s Provincial Health Services Authority, and later Vancouver Health, Wainwright’s on-the-job experience in disability management goes back 10 years to when she first began working in claims management. Her employer, Pacific Risk Management, specialized in workers’ compensation claims services for BC employers. At the same time, she was completing continuing education courses at the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) in Business Management and Human Resources.

Motivated by what she saw as a “real need to look at return to work processes,” in conjunction with managing workers’ compensation claims, she began to look around at what was available for training in the field and, in 2004, first began taking the NIDMAR modules. She completed the program in 2005. Her employers at Pacific Risk Management were supportive, agreeing that the program would benefit clients. An opportunity arose shortly after completing the program to work as a disability management specialist for Provincial Health Services Authority, where she stayed for over three years before moving on to Vancouver Health.

In November 2010, Wainwright went full circle and returned to her past employer, Pacific Risk Management, to work on a contract with a major grocery store chain. Now, as a disability management consultant, she helps with reviewing prior active WCB claims in getting them on track, while consulting and advising on setting up written policies and procedures, and the store’s WorkSafe BC disability management plan. Her extensive work on the modules has given her a well-rounded perspective.

“I’ve gained good insight into the importance of other roles and their focuses, which definitely includes human resources and labour relations.” Overall, she feels the modules covered a wide range of aspects in DM, helping her to see each individual claim on its own merits, and provided her with a good overview of long-term disability benefits and entitlements. She sees the modules in human rights, accommodations, and working in a



union environment as hugely valuable pieces of the whole picture when it comes to effective DM.

“You can go from one location to another, but it’s the same issues, the mental and physical barriers to return to work,” she says. “For disability management to be effective, there has to be communication. NIDMAR’s focus on facilitation and collaborating is great.”

But, when it comes to education, she’s not done yet. Wainwright recognizes the close affiliation between the human resources and disability management roles. She’s interested in possibly pursuing a degree in Human Resources and would enjoy “an opportunity to get that piece of paper.” In the same regard, she’s looking forward to the opening of the new Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences in BC this year. “I’m waiting to see what’s happening.”

Designation provides advantage in international job search

With world economic conditions affecting business in Canada and elsewhere, many highly qualified people are finding themselves looking for work due to corporate cut-backs and organizational change. Certified Occupational Health Nurse and CDMP Sandi Stewart had been employed since 2006 as an ability services manager at Alberta-based TELUS Sourcing Solutions, a wholly owned TELUS subsidiary providing a full range of Human Resources services to large external public sector organizations. She led a team of 13 case managers and administrative support workers. However, in late 2010, TELUS Sourcing Solutions folded its entire Alberta department responsible for health, safety, wellness and return to work. In all, 54 people lost their jobs.

However, the good news Stewart reports is that they have “all landed on their feet” and found work in disability management or related fields, including 35 who found new positions in the areas of health and wellness or safety. One reason for this, she notes, is that the oil and gas industry in Alberta is “starting to come back very nicely” and many found new employment in that sector.

As for her own aspirations, Stewart’s search may take a little longer since she is seeking a senior position equal to those she’s held in the past. And with her string of credentials – including RN, BScN, COHN(C), COHN, and CDMP – she is exceedingly well-qualified in her field.

Previously, Stewart spent 15 years in occupational health while working in Alberta’s petrochemical industry. In that job, she moved up quickly to become a team leader and regional coordinator in occupational health, handling general DM duties for the company. She followed that job with a move east to lead a team of multidisciplinary health professionals at a large automotive assembly plant in southern Ontario.



"It had its own unique challenges, different from oil and gas," she says. "But the basic principles were the same. People still became ill and needed to be rehabilitated, but there were different ways to accommodate them in coming back." Some of the particular return to work challenges faced by her team involved the repetitive strain injuries (RSIs) common to factory workers in the auto industry, as well as the "component of work not being challenging mentally."

After moving back to Alberta and joining the TELUS subsidiary, she was head of a team of diverse professionals with a variety of backgrounds, including nursing, rehabilitation, kinesiology, insurance adjudication, and human resources. At that point, she says, "There was an excellent culture in supporting people in career development." She began looking at what kind of credentials would benefit her team and could stand alone; she found NIDMAR.

"We all were doing return to work, so we started looking at the education modules to help people progress in the department or even to go elsewhere. It was something to hang their hat on."

A believer in lifelong learning, Stewart also wanted to keep her own skill set growing and sharp, and says earning the CDMP designation was the "logical next step."

The designation is a plus on her resumé, since she is specifically pursuing senior management positions in the disability management area of occupational health. She summarizes the prime target in her job search: "I tend to look for positions with bigger players." And that means she is not adverse to looking for work outside of Canada. She holds Occupational Health Nurse credentials in the U.S., and the CDMP is recognized in 10 countries.

"The international aspect of the designation was a big draw for me. It's really important for me to have that flexibility to be credentialled in areas other than in Alberta." Her ideal position, she says, is one with a focus on disability management with a global aspect.