



IDMSC Professionals Making a Difference in the Workplace



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In this third and final Bulletin focusing on Canada's Certified Disability Management Professionals (CDMPs) and Certified Return to Work Coordinators (CRTWCs), individuals from a wide cross-section of Canadian industries share stories regarding their careers, education, experience and the designations that have put them at the top of their field.

Lawyer pursues DM career at Canada Post

Susan Postill, LLB, CDMP, has taken a circuitous route to her current position as National WCB Manager for Canada Post. With a BA in English and Classical Studies, a master's degree in Church History – and a law degree – she initially articulated in Canada Post's legal department in Ontario where she handled files touching all areas of the corporation, including WCB issues. At the end of her articling year, an opportunity arose for her to take up a position at Canada Post in Edmonton handling workers' compensation board appeals for all of Alberta.

"I thought, I'll go there and do the job for a while and eventually get bored with that area of law and then I would move on to something else. But I never got bored with it," she says. "I still haven't learned all there is to know about the WCB systems across Canada and I quickly lost the expectation that I would get bored with WCB issues at some point."

That was 14 years ago. Postill returned to Ontario and continued handling WCB appeals for Canada Post. In addition, over the years she has done about four years of regular claims management alongside her appeals work and throughout her career has taken on the claims management for very complex cases on an as-needed basis. Along the way, she gained certificates in both Health and Safety and Alternative Dispute Resolution, and has recently passed her B level French exams.

Two and a half years ago, Postill moved into her current position in Canada Post's Disability Management Centre of Excellence in Ottawa, where her main duties are to spearhead the formulation of national WCB policies and procedures, and to manage overall WCB claims administration.

She thrives on variety in her job. Problem-solving, creating policies and procedures, and making program improvements involves liaising with statisticians, lawyers, and people in other departments, such as labour relations, human rights, safety, privacy, pay coding, and computer design, as well as with regional WCB and DM colleagues. The only common denominator, Postill advises, is that all the work has some connection to the WCB.

In working closely with so many others, Postill felt a need to establish her credentials in the DM field. "I wanted to obtain the



CDMP designation to bolster or validate my credibility. Some of my colleagues had the designation and I felt that they were considered to be more expert in the field of DM due to having the designation."

On the road to achieving it, she took the first two modules in the NIDMAR curriculum as part of a Canada Post conference. She found the first module to be the most helpful, because it outlines the basic premise of the NIDMAR philosophy. She notes, "Understanding the NIDMAR philosophy – openness, working together with unions and employees, and putting the needs of the employee front and centre – is the main key to success."

She explains that the main benefit she sees to becoming a CDMP is that it solidifies her credibility in the DM field quickly and easily. "When I am promoting an approach that I think Canada Post should take, I refer to best practices identified by NIDMAR and pointing out this fact tends to get much quicker buy in."

The designation's international recognition is another bonus for Postill, who says, "I have always had the idea in the back of my mind that I would like to move to England, so it is important to me to be able to take my credentials there without questions or hoops to jump through."

In the meantime, as both a lawyer and a CDMP, Postill has been able to make the best of her extensive education and experience, "I'm analytical, so I like the opportunity of analyzing, diagnosing a problem, and then trying to fix it."

Paramedic gains CRTWC designation

Nine years ago, Workplace Rehabilitation Coordinator Bea Brown, CRTWC, joined Maple Leaf Foods in Moncton, New Brunswick, starting out as a health and safety clerical assistant. With a background as a volunteer paramedic and a member of St. John Ambulance, she also looked after injured employees, administered first aid, provided claims forms and paperwork, and acted as a liaison between the employer and the workers' compensation board.

During the years, her job evolved. The company deleted its "kill floor" and there were fewer employee injuries of a serious nature. This left more time for Brown to branch out and assume new duties. About six years ago, she was moved into the role of disability management and return to work case manager. It was a role handed to her at a time, she says, when "I had no idea what I was doing. It was quite the learning experience. I said, 'I need help here.'"

In response, her boss brought up the idea of professional certification as a good place to start. Brown, who has taken several NIDMAR modules since 2005, achieved the CRTWC designation last year. Of the NIDMAR online program, she says, "It helped me to understand the whole DM process. Learning about legislation was key."



She found that one of the modules, in particular, made a major impact. "For me, the module on mental health issues was the most helpful. When it comes to physical injuries, broken bones or strains, I'm fine, but when it came to mental health, I had no idea. That was a big one for me and it gave me better insight."

Recently, Brown has taken on the role of communicating with workers who are off the job for non-work-related reasons. She discusses their medical progress and stays on top of when they might be able to return to work. She says that by staying in touch she benefits from knowing the history of their illness or injury, which makes her better prepared to help overcome barriers in their return to work.

Overall, Brown sees an increase in her own self-confidence since becoming certified, "I'm more secure in what I'm doing. I have my certification, and 'here's the proof.'" She notes that the designation is also supported and recognized by her employer, who paid for the modules. The company also supports a yearly professional development plan for employees and, as part of her plan, Brown is planning to write the CDMP examination in 2012.

In the meantime, she has been given considerable potential to develop her job, in conjunction with the opportunity to revamp the company's entire return to work program, seeing how it can be improved.

With that in mind, she is already looking at signing up for more modules this spring or next fall and is interested in two topics for now: the Code of Practice in Disability Management and evaluation of DM program outcomes.

When it comes to preparing for either the CRTWC or CDMP examination, Brown offers this tip: "You have to think of the injured or ill person foremost; they're the priority. You also have to think about the company's bottom line, but you have to put what's best for the person above the company."

Consultant services based on NIDMAR approach

Stephen Allen, B.Sc., CDMP, started his career as a kinesiologist working in frontline rehabilitation services at a multidisciplinary facility in Alberta. He specialized in occupational rehabilitation, functional capacity evaluation, ergonomic assessments, and job demands analysis.

He progressed to a management position where he was guiding large employers in finding case management solutions and managing disability in their workplaces. He began training others in occupational health and disability management, based on internal training, educational courses, and work experience.

In 2000, Allen began investigating standardized certification for DM, thinking at the time that it was "a mixed bag" of skills and experiences with the term used broadly by different groups, ranging from human resources to clinical services. Ironically



enough, he says, he began requiring frontline employees he hired to complete the professional certification, although he was not yet certified himself. "I was very much aware of the certification, but as a manager, my focus was on other issues relative to my own training."

That all changed when Allen left his employer in 2008 to form his own company, Allen Working Solutions, Inc., offering his services as a disability management and occupational health consultant. "Certification is high on your agenda when you're a consultant to make sure you're on the right track and project the right qualifications to potential employers," he explains.

He started with the basic module Introduction to Disability Management, because he wanted to understand the NIDMAR perspective and approach. He next tackled the Duty to Accommodate module and was impressed with the depth of the course and the legal background knowledge of the instructor. "Everybody knows what it is – undue hardship, duty to accommodate – but I wanted to be able to work on my feet instead of off a statement."

Now, even though he earned his CDMP last year, Allen is still benefiting from the modules and is now taking a timely course in "Emergency Preparedness and Accident Investigation."

As a private consultant, his work is varied with much of it coming from third party insurance companies and private employers. As soon as he became certified he noticed an immediate appreciation for his designation. "Many larger organizations are looking for a standardization of skill in disability management. My current contract is possibly very directly related to me carrying my CDMP." He has also seen more job postings asking for the CDMP or equivalent. "It's very nice to see across Canada," he says.

He highly recommends certification for anyone in the DM field. "At the very least, it qualifies you for what you are already doing and it may just open up opportunities that would not exist without it." He adds, "If you don't pursue the certification, you may just miss out and be precluded from potential opportunities."

Designation prepares CDMP for varied career choices

Karina Prokopchuk, BA, CDMP, has taken advantage of the flexibility enjoyed by many who've chosen a career in disability management. She recently joined Halton Healthcare as a Disability Management Specialist in the Occupational Health and Safety Division at Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital in Oakville, ON. She and her family live in Burlington and she was commuting two hours a day to her previous job in Niagara. Now, she says, "I'm doing a job I love, closer to home, 15 kilometres away door-to-door."

Prokopchuk's career arc has been an interesting one. She spent 13 years at Chrysler where she moved into Labour Relations in the Human Resources division and began working in disability



management and claims management. She says, "It was one of those roles you got put into and learned on the run. It was constantly evolving." She was drawn to the role, she says, because with a bachelor's degree in psychology, it was a natural step for her. Eventually, her DM role began to be more formalized as she gained insight by attending conferences, and taking courses and seminars.

Positions followed as a disability management specialist. She was then promoted to Occupational Health and Disability Manager for Niagara Casinos, where for more than two years she worked on program development and with injured and ill employees from table games dealers to maintenance staff, and hotel housekeepers to food services employees in catering and banquets.

In 2009, Prokopchuk did some research on certification and decided the best option was to take the NIDMAR modules. She took all the modules during one fast-paced year, when she was able to take advantage of classes held on Friday and Saturdays attending Mohawk College and completing some courses online. Niagara Casinos allowed her to "flex" her time and was overall highly supportive of her CDMP certification, which she achieved last year.

Prokopchuk says all the modules were "value-add." She continues, "Performing a job, you create a way of doing things. It's good to go back to the basics, to step back, and use a fresh set of eyes, asking 'Am I doing this the right way?'"

She found the legislative module was the most helpful, providing information on new case law, as well as resources for keeping on top of ongoing case law changes. Now that the CDMP exam is behind her, she has a few words of wisdom for those planning to write the examination this year: "For me, I started to review early and reviewed all the modules, going back through the module slides. I used the exam prep guide in the NIDMAR website, which was valuable in helping me get through the exam."

The knowledge gained through certification has been extremely useful in her current job at Halton Healthcare, which has responsibility for Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, as well as Milton District and Georgetown hospitals. At Oakville Trafalgar Memorial, Prokopchuk shares duties with another disability management specialist and an occupational health nurse. Their responsibilities are broken down by program. Prokopchuk manages the medical and surgical groups, complex claims, and all Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claims.

With the strong disability management background she brought to her new job, Prokopchuk has also been assigned to review Halton Healthcare's overall DM program with an eye to enhancements. In her view, understanding fairness and consistency are vital to the program. "If you need a policy or procedure to stop confusion, take the time to do it, instead of



firefighting,” she advises. “Get the proper resolution down on paper so the next time the scenario comes up, the groundwork is set, which is really important.”

She adds, “When doing program enhancement, always strive to achieve the NIDMAR ideal, which is to develop the best and most supportive program. Try to achieve that standard.” It’s a standard now recognized beyond Canada’s borders, which she sees as a plus. “Having an internationally recognized certification standard is really important. It helps when going to conferences and networking. You know that people are working toward the same goals around the world.”

Harmonizing provincial DM program

“I don’t go too far without my organizational chart these days,” Senior Advisor Lee Anne Labrecque, B.Sc.,CDMP, explains about her job in Claims Management at Alberta Health Services (AHS), which is in the midst of a major transition. Almost two years ago, the provincial government of Alberta brought together 14 different regional health care services and united them under the single banner of Alberta Health Services. Her current role is to develop one consistent disability management program by harmonizing the former entities’ processes into one provincial approach based on best practices.

Labrecque, who holds a degree in kinesiology, previously spent six years in a clinical setting conducting exercise therapy. She then joined Alberta Health and spent five years in a frontline DM position, handling everything from sick leave adjudication to STD, LTD, and WCB claims, before being promoted to senior advisor last year.

Working on a province-wide DM model at AHS has meant bringing together a variety of approaches. “A lot of best practices have surfaced in different areas, but we don’t have the DM systems platforms yet and are dealing with the challenges of 14 different payrolls and benefits systems. We are trying to move forward together.”

In that effort, Labrecque says the main approach is to identify, “What are the best practices?” and then collaborate with our stakeholders to bring our services up to that standard.” It’s a big job, though, involving about 20 ability managers on the frontlines and half a dozen administrative staff, responsible for about 90,000 AHS employees.

When the reorganization began about two years ago, she says that senior leadership didn’t fully understand the disability management function and staffing levels were reduced by half. Since then, service gaps emerged and while previous staff levels have not been restored, the department has been rebuilding. Nine more people will soon be in place with plans to hire an additional senior advisor. At the same time, services are being reviewed and streamlined to build efficiencies into the system. Labrecque’s task is to work with other senior advisors and



managers “to develop policies and procedures and do the legwork to support the ability managers in the frontline work.”

The CDMP designation she earned last year has helped her in the process of spearheading change. “It speaks volumes about your credibility in disability management. You’re working alongside occupational health nurses and people with health and safety certification, and you can stand back and say, ‘I also have my own certification and expertise in this field and that has value.’”

Labrecque began pursuing the CDMP about three years ago after a manager, who she says was “thinking outside the box” approached her with the idea. She thought, “This is great. We (non-nursing professionals) need more credibility as we were breaking into work that traditionally was completed by occupational health nurses.”

She took about half of NIDMAR’s modules, picking and choosing those where she felt she had the most to gain. Since she had already worked as an exercise therapist, she was confident in the WCB and RTW programs. So she focused on human resources, labour relations, and other areas of knowledge she wanted to strengthen.

The approach worked for her, and she advises others pursuing either of the designations to do the same thing. “We’re usually drawn to what is easy for us, but take the other approach. Focus in on your weaknesses, you’ll benefit the most.”

She also says it’s a good idea to take the modules consistently, then get to the exam and write it, because she says it’s harder to go back and find the time to study if there’s been a time lapse.

Overall, a big plus for her was the ability to take the modules online, since the course was outside her full-time job; plus, she was raising a family and didn’t live in a large urban centre. She says she enjoyed both the flexibility of posting online at her convenience and the back-and-forth communication with others in the field.

Although her family is young and there are no immediate plans to make changes, Labrecque is open to the idea of using her international designation to become more mobile in the future. “It’s important, it allows that movement and potential for growth in your career. It makes you feel you have the backing to look outside your borders.”