



Career Change to DM Rewarding



IDMSC® International
Disability Management
Standards Council

The designations of Certified Return to Work Coordinator (CRTWC) and Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP), administered under the auspices of the International Disability Management Standards Council (IDMSC), are increasingly becoming the gold standard for disability management practice worldwide.

Some of Canada's CDMPs and CRTWCs relate their personal experiences leading to a rewarding career in disability management.

Ergonomics specialist emphasizes legal aspects of DM

Last spring, Dale Braun, a human resources advisor for Health and Recovery Services at BC Hydro, completed his CDMP certification. The public utility has 6,000 employees scattered across the province, from power line technicians to administrative personnel.

"We deal primarily with [non-occupational] sick leave, long-term disability and those 'struggling at work,'" Braun said. "We tend not to get a lot of easy RTW cases, but instead deal with a variety of cases including addictions and mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression."

Braun said he realized early in his career that he wanted to work towards prevention. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree, specialization in occupational biomechanics, from the University of Guelph in 1994. Braun worked in ergonomics in some of the assembly plants in the automotive industry in Ontario.

Looking for a change of scenery, Braun moved to BC, where he worked in an occupational rehabilitation clinic for four years before deciding that he preferred the preventative route. He went back into ergonomic consulting. "When you're doing ergonomics as a consultant, you're always trying to sell prevention."

It was during this time that Braun completed the NIDMAR modules, and then in 2009 he joined Seaspan Marine Corp as an RTW coordinator, working in occupational and non-occupational health, as well as ergonomics. In February 2012, he had an opportunity to join BC Hydro at a critical juncture in their health services program. "For about six years, BC Hydro had outsourced their RTW services, and they made a decision that they needed to bring back a lot of these services inside and set up new systems."

As one member of a team tasked with building a comprehensive DM program at BC Hydro, Braun decided to formalize his credentials by completing the CDMP examination. "I didn't need it previously, but in this role, it is more of a DM professional. It made sense for me to refresh my memory on some of the course work and to have the certification."

Braun believes anybody working in the DM field would be well advised to take DM training. He cited Case Law, the Human Rights Act and Duty to Accommodate as some of the key topics he studied. While it is a given that the goal of a DM professional is to help employees return to work safely, for the mutual benefit of the employer and the employee, each individual case involves human rights and labour relations legislation as much as medical factors. "For anybody in the industry, you have to be responsive to that relationship and keep your eye on the arbitrations. In the end, that is what dictates where our industry is going to go, and I plan to continue to learn about that."



Language skills and ER experience opened doors for DM specialist

Gina D'Alfonso parlayed her experience on the front lines of medical care and her background as a trilingual Quebecer into an exciting career as a DM specialist with private health service provider Morneau Shepell. In 2012, she earned her CDMP after successfully passing the professional certification examination.

D'Alfonso certified as a registered nurse at Vanier College in 1993 and followed that up with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Université de Montréal. Those early years saw the RN drawn into the fast-moving, high-stress world of the emergency room and the intensive care unit at hospitals in Montreal and Laval. "All that was really cool and I don't think I could be what I am today without that clinical experience," D'Alfonso said.

But with a growing family in mind, D'Alfonso's fluency in both official languages provided her the opportunity to change from shift work to a Monday through Friday schedule working in a urology clinic, with patients [mainly in French] and with research clinicians, who mainly worked in English.

Then in 2002, D'Alfonso was approached by ALCOA in Laval, to work in their occupational health and safety program. "They needed a bilingual nurse, but also someone familiar with the Allophone community, because there were many immigrant workers. My parents immigrated to Canada from southern Italy in the 1970s and our mother tongue at home was Italian."

While her medical and cultural credentials were impeccable, D'Alfonso admits she had a steep learning curve with her new employer. "When I got there, I had no idea what OHS was. They hired me because they needed a bilingual nurse, but the company was willing to provide extensive training. That was when I first got into DM and I absolutely fell in love with it."

When ALCOA began winding down some of its Quebec operations, D'Alfonso was reduced to three days per week, but her previous hospital employer reached out to the RN with the new skill set, employing her on her off days. "The government decided to amalgamate services. In 2006, we became Laval Centre, with 6,000 employees, and we were doing the OHS for the whole centre," D'Alfonso said.

In 2008, D'Alfonso joined Morneau Shepell's Laval office where she works with clients from across Canada. "I started at Morneau Shepell as a case manager. A year ago, I was promoted to DM specialist and auditor. It's all stuff that I love and I'm growing within that role. I've really found my calling with DM and OHS." D'Alfonso said the new certification gives her added confidence at her job. "Just to be able to put my CDMP after my RN does wonders for my ego – and you feel so 'backed-up'. It opens a whole new frontier on what's out there and what can be done."



Working with crime victims and at-risk youth whetted her appetite for training

With the successful completion of her CDMP certification, Amanda Harrison believes she has found her calling. Harrison, who is employed in the Human Resources department at the York Region District School Board, has combined scholastic achievement and hours of experience volunteering on the front lines of emergency services to prepare herself for a career in helping people find their way back into the workforce.

Harrison completed the first stage of her education in 2006, when she earned a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Psychology. She was hired by the York school board in a clerical capacity, and soon became interested in adult education. Taking a decidedly proactive approach, Harrison completed a Bachelor of Education through Brock University, followed by a certificate program in Counselling Techniques through Durham College.

“Even with all that, I realized I needed some experience in counselling and social work, so I worked at the York Region Children’s Aid Society, as an access worker, and I worked, on a volunteer basis, as a Victim Response Volunteer,” she said. At Children’s Aid, Harrison worked with at-risk youth and youth in custody; and with Victim Services of York Region, she counselled victims of crime and helped witnesses navigate their way through the court process. “Without that experience, I likely never would have gotten into DM,” she said.

At this juncture, the school board had posted an upcoming DM position. Harrison believed she had the required intellectual and emotional tools, but this was a new field entirely. “That’s when I saw the NIDMAR program and I started taking the modules to learn more about it. I fell in love with the field,” she said. “I thought, I want to get more involved and see where this takes me.”

Harrison believes she has entered a field that is on the verge of exponential growth. “With the introduction of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, all companies are required to have plans in place for everybody,” she said.

Looking into the future, Harrison said she would eventually like to become a case manager. “As a case manager, I would be hitting more aspects of DM – not only serving the employer, but also putting policies and procedures in place and setting up systems.

With a strong counselling background, Harrison said she was able to focus her studies on modules like Legislation. “That, for me, was the biggest learning curve. One of the big lessons is taking a look at the existing practices in your own workplace and determining where changes are needed.”