

The champion

Overcoming a massive personal setback, Wolfgang Zimmerman has devoted his life to supporting the rights of injured workers **by Celia Milne**

Wolfgang Zimmerman got into the disability management field "literally by accident." In 1977, at age 20 and with a bright future in civil forest engineering, Zimmerman was working on a forest crew on Vancouver Island, when the tree he was cutting fell and broke his back. "I made the wrong cut; I had no idea what the right cut was. I had no training. It was just 'here's the power saw, good luck'."

Zimmerman suffered a severe

spinal injury and is a paraplegic. He used a wheelchair for five years, and then learned to walk with the aid of braces and two canes. During his many years of hard work, rehabilitation and optimism for the future, he realized that what happened to him happens to a lot of workers. He became involved with the Disabled Workers Foundation of Canada and has been a long-time supporter of the rights of workers.

After the accident, Zimmerman retrained as an accountant and returned

to the forestry company where he had worked. In 1982, the company terminated Zimmerman and other injured workers. Only with the B.C. government's support were they able to get their jobs back. Once back, Zimmerman's job included creating a return-to-work strategy for the organization.

During that tumultuous time, Zimmerman and injured colleagues participated in the making of a film called "Every 12 Seconds," which focused on what work and life were like for people who had suffered workplace injuries. This built national awareness around the issue and served to finally bring the logging industry, workers' compensation, unions and the government together.

In 1994, Zimmerman launched the Victoria-based National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR),

of which he is the executive director. Through his tireless efforts, NIDMAR has become internationally recognized in its innovative return-to-work and disability management strategies.

The institute's work has several prongs: it develops programs to assist employers reintegrate injured workers; it supports workplaces to develop disability management programs; it provides an audit tool to measure organizational performance in disability management; it uses research to enhance education and product development; and it supports Rehadat Canada, an electronic information resource. NIDMAR also has its own university—Pacific Coast University for Workplace Sciences. Its professional and program standards are formally licensed in 14 countries, "and that number keeps growing," says Zimmerman.

One of Zimmerman's great contributions over the last several decades has been getting people to see the link between disability management and workplace health. "Disability management was non-existent [in those years]," he says. "Today it's so structurally different, with much greater respect by employers... There's a much greater level of awareness that not accommodating is unsustainable."

Still, he laments that far too many people with disabilities are unemployed, even in this robust economy. "We've come a long way but we have a long way to go." You can bet that Zimmerman—who was just about to leave on a whirlwind speaking tour in Auckland—won't stand still until more improvements are made. ■

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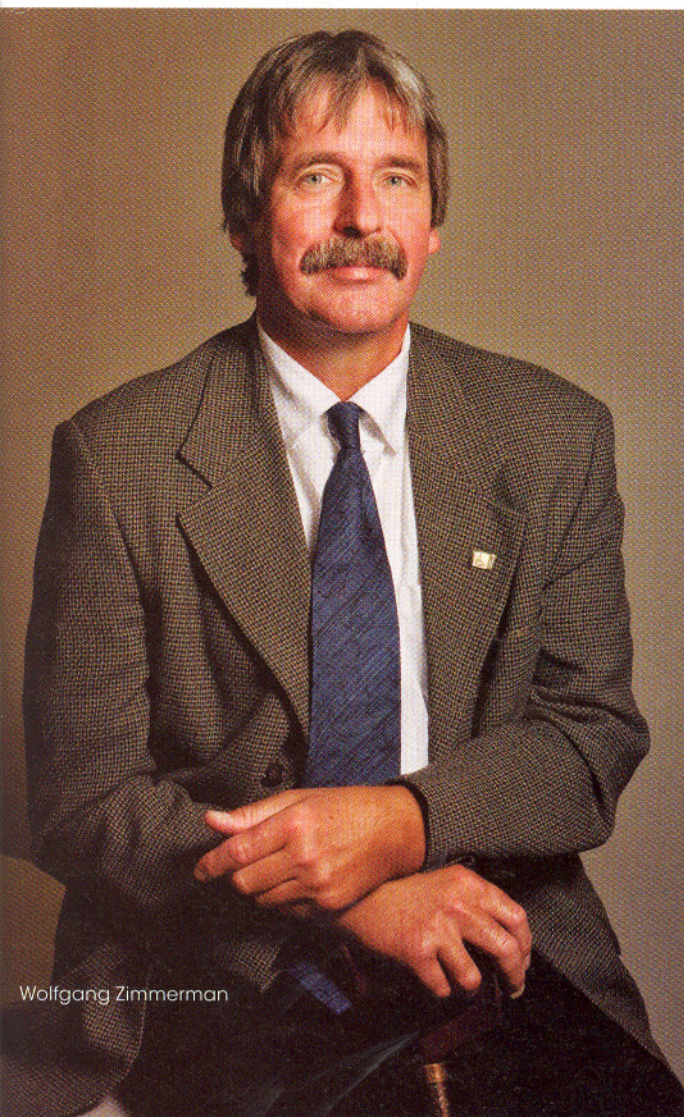


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