

The Certification of a Profession

The field of disability management is expanding as the value of disability management strategies are proven. The human and financial costs of disability are staggering. The Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada indicates there were 396,000 lost time work-related claims in Canada in 2001 (AWCBC, 2002). In the non-occupational area, there is no central source to capture claims data; however, it is known that health benefit payments represented \$12.5 billion in 2000 (CILH, 2002).

The financial impact is only one small part of the picture when you stop to consider the nature and extent of human pain, suffering and disruption of lifestyle that accompanies each and every one of these disabling conditions. Currently, the employment status for persons with disabilities is poor and not improving. Hiring rates for persons with disabilities are currently running at 0.9% of all new hires in Canada, creating a very compelling argument that unless attachment to the pre-disability employer is maintained through effective return to work and disability management strategies, finding alternate employment will likely prove to be an extremely frustrating experience (Government of Canada Labour Program, 2000).

Driven by efforts to contain disability costs and comply with accommodation legislation, employers are looking for capable disability management practitioners. Part of the solution in reducing the human and financial costs is to minimize the impact of a disability after onset through

disability management (DM). The research indicates that early intervention and prompt return to work can decrease the likelihood of prolonged disability (Burgel & Gliniecki, 1986, Segal & Harris, 1993, Watson Wyatt, 1999). Further, it is known that staying at home may have a profound negative impact on the individual from a psychological perspective (Strosahl, 1998).

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Disability management refers to "a systematic, goal oriented process of actively minimizing the impact of an impairment on the individual's capacity to participate competitively in the work environment" (Tate, Habeck & Schwartz, 1986). In order to ensure that disability management practitioners and professionals possess the required competency to effectively provide DM services to workers and employers, the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) undertook the development of examinations as part of the certification process of Disability Management Professionals (DMP) and Return to Work Coordinators (RTWC). This article will describe this project, which follows the guidelines as set out by, and has been partially funded, by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), including the history and process of

making these professional designations a reality. The certification credential will serve to professionalize the field and provide employers, labour and providers with an indicator of the base competency level of those who provide DM services (i.e., a cluster of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes).

The Demand

Given the importance of the human and financial costs of disability to the Canadian economy and more specifically to employers and workers, attempts have been made to address the prerequisite education and experience required by DM practitioners and professionals. The National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) performed a labour market survey partially funded by HRDC early in 2002. In conjunction with the University of Northern British Columbia, McMaster University, Ryerson University, Mohawk College, and Human Resources Development Canada, employers, providers and unions were surveyed to help determine:

- current levels of education of practitioners and professionals working in the field of disability management and return to work;
- the need for education for those working in the field;
- the current and future needs for disability management in the workplace;
- the anticipated demand for this profession in the future;

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- the evidence of diversity and employment equity programs at worksites.

Historically, little information was available specific to what type or level of education is seen as required to fulfill these functions adequately. The information that is available comes from the United States. Other questions that arise are: what kind of education prospective employers, unions and providers would like to see; where eventual graduates of programs will find employment; and how satisfied organizations are with the status quo.

Relevant findings from the survey include:

- Direct training in disability management has occurred primarily through workshops and on the job.
- Both employers and providers believe that enhanced training would help improve current DM outcomes.
- There is a need for improvement on the part of all providers.
- There is a shortage of qualified and competent return to work practitioners and professionals.

- There will be an increased demand for these services in the next two to five years.
- It is very important that there be qualified return to work practitioners and professionals who can demonstrate a professional standard of practice (NIDMAR, 2002).

The survey allows us to draw the following conclusions, which are relevant to creating a disability management credential:

- Current levels and quality of DM service provision are less than adequate;
- There is a growing need for DM services;
- There is a demand for professionals trained in DM; and,
- There is a need for specific training in DM.

The results indicate that there is an awareness of the field of disability management and a growing need for specialists that possess the competency to deliver effective DM services.

The Evolution of the Need

In 1994, the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) evolved from the unique collaboration of employers, advocates for disabled workers, labour unions, and governments. NIDMAR's mission is:

"To reduce the human, social and economic costs of disability to workers, employers and society by providing education, research, policy development, and implementation resources to promote workplace-based reintegration programs (NIDMAR, p1)."

NIDMAR, an internationally recognized organization, draws on the support of both labour and management from a diverse range of industries. This cooperation facilitates the organization in meeting its disability management (DM) priorities and objectives in education, research and resource development (NIDMAR 1997).



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Through the work led by NIDMAR, the domain of disability management is captured in the nine core areas identified in the Occupational Standards in Disability Management document as Essential Skills and Competencies of the two “separate but related” professionals: the Certified Return to Work Coordinator and the Certified Disability Management Professional. (NIDMAR 1999, p 27). It is acknowledged that the level of application and the degree to which each profession will demonstrate these skills and competencies depends on a number of factors: workplace setting, organizational expectations and performance expectations for the position. In an independent study done in the United States (Currier, Chan, Berven, Habeck and Taylor, 2001), the two levels of professionals were confirmed using a Delphi approach with a panel of 44 experts in the field. The findings supported the NIDMAR conclusions that there was a common core of knowledge and functions but the salience of other areas depended on the focus of practice: individual level interventions or organizational. The important finding is that the roles of the two practitioner levels could be differentiated.

A certification process has a number of benchmarks and criteria. Certification eligibility criteria are usually based on experience and/or formal education and the successful passing of some form of examination. Supporting documentation is required in a variety of forms (i.e., educational transcripts, employer validation). Policies establish the specific eligibility criteria to sit for the examination and for retaking the examination in the event of failure. Once the certification designation is awarded, consideration must be

given to competency maintenance, re-certification and the fees associated with the various components of the certification process to ensure its sustainability.

Of interest to most is the design of the certification credential. The examination must be representative of the domains of disability management, relevant to the context of practice, and be constructed according to sound and defensible psychometric principles. This is necessary to ensure that the examination can withstand the scrutiny of critical review and possible legal action if there is a challenge to the denying of certification. As disability management is practice based, items focus on a problem or issue and require the candidate to exhibit a variety of reasoning levels. All of these points have been addressed in the development and construction of the two Canadian disability management certification credentials. The domains are identified within the Occupational Standards as previously discussed. The examination format is context based with multiple-choice questions (MCQ) and is capable of assessing higher level critical reasoning (Bowering and Wetmore, 1997). This is an important consideration as a candidate's performance on the test is the major element in the awarding of the designation of “certified.”

Disability management practitioners and professionals come from a variety of professional backgrounds and on the job training experiences. To meet the public's demand for accountability, competence and continued competence of practitioners, NIDMAR, with partial funding from HRDC, accepted the responsibility of developing a certification process for the field. The intent is to evaluate the core knowledge, skills and attitudes

identified as necessary for effective, efficient and safe practice (Browning, Bugbee, & Mullins, 1996). As NIDMAR is an independent organization, without affiliation with a specific profession, the certification process will have added credibility and reassurance for the public. Upon successful completion of the examination, the practitioners are deemed to have achieved an adequate level of knowledge, education and experience necessary to perform their roles (Buys, 2000). The examinations are focused on measuring entry-level knowledge.

The Making of the Examination

In order to create a valid and reliable examination, NIDMAR enlisted the assistance of Assessment Strategies Inc. (ASI). ASI is a Canadian company based in Ottawa that has assisted many professions with the development and administration of their certification credentials. Their stringent security procedures protect the confidentiality and integrity of all tests and results.

The first step was to compile two Examination Committees, of ten members each with eight participating at all times. One committee for the Disability Management Professionals examination, and the other for the Return to Work Coordinators examination. Each committee was initiated with national representatives and representation from a variety of key stakeholders. The primary role of each Committee was to review test materials, participate at critical points in the test development cycle such as competency and blueprint development, and approval of the examination to ensure sufficient

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expertise is required to write the examination.

Through a number of conference calls and sharing of documents, these committees were able to provide performance indicators for each of the core skills as outlined in the Occupational Standards for each examination. This information would be key for the item (question) writers in the development of the questions.

As stated by Jeff Curtis, HR Planning, Policy & Services Manager of Manitoba Telecom Systems (a member of the DMP Examination Committee), "As a committee, our critical first step was to identify the competencies that would be assessed through the certification credential. We had to absolutely ensure that the cluster of skills, knowledge, and behaviours to be measured through the examination were explicitly defined and agreed to before examination questions were developed."

The second major responsibility of the Examination Committee was to participate in the development of a blueprint. The blueprint lists the competencies, how they are weighted in the exam, the structure (i.e., number and kind of questions), and the content of questions (e.g. legislation and benefit programs, disability case management, ethical and professional conduct, etc.). This aspect of the blueprint is reproduced at the right. (see table 1) Each cell has a specified percentage range which represents the target number of questions to be on the examination. There is also a set of contextual variables that sets the stage of the question. This includes consideration of a client's age, gender, culture, the organizational culture and the specific environmental setting. This blueprint will be revised over time as needed to reflect practice

development.

The next step and by far the most time-consuming was the item (question) writing. For this activity, two Item Generation Committees were formed. A team of fourteen individuals for the disability management professional examination and sixteen for the return to work coordinator examination were invited to spend five days in Ottawa to write questions using ASI's proven process. These subject matter experts were selected from across Canada and represent a variety of stakeholders. They were from different disciplines such as occupational therapy, psychology, occupational health nursing, vocational rehabilitation, human resources, occupational health and

safety, and included labour, employer, provider, and academic representation. A bank of questions and case studies was developed.

Each Examination Committee then participated in a thorough review of an entire examination based on the specification of the consensus blueprint. The Committees reviewed each question to ensure that the content was appropriate, accurate and reflective of the established item criterion.

As stated by David Moorhouse, EFAP Advisory Committee, Council of Trade Unions, BC Rail (a member of the Return to Work Coordinators Examination Committee), "I was impressed by the level of scrutiny that the committee members gave to each

**TABLE 1 9 domains x 3 levels of reasoning
(knowledge, application & thinking)**

COGNITIVE DOMAIN				
		Knowledge /comprehension	Application	Critical thinking
Core Competencies based on the Occupational Standards	Disability Management Knowledge (Theory & Practice)			
	Legislation & Benefit Programs			
	Labour/Management Relations			
	Communication & Problem Solving			
	Disability Case Management			
	Return-to-work Coordination			
	Health, Psychosocial Prevention Functional Aspects of Disability			
	Program Management & Evaluation			
	Ethical & Professional Conduct			

step in the examination process. During development of the competencies, many hours were spent discussing the smallest details from many different points of view: practice, labour and academic."

In addition to this preparatory element of creating the examination(s), they will undergo a further, comprehensive review once field trials of the examinations are completed. The performance of all questions will be statistically analyzed and a key validation performed to determine their suitability for ongoing inclusion. Inappropriate questions with poor statistics will be deleted from the examination and /or revised before use in subsequent exams. The field trials of the examinations are set to be launched in early 2003. Developments can be monitored on the NIDMAR website www.nidmar.ca

The commencement of the Disability Management Professional and Return to Work Coordinator certification will provide a much needed accountable credential to a rapidly and continually emerging field that has clear identifiable elements that successfully reduce the human and financial costs of disabilities. That is how a certified profession is born!

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