



Managing a flexible workforce calls for certification



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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 accepted professional standard for disability management practice worldwide.

In some resource industries, the workforce doesn't reside at the worksite, while in others, it's a mix of both locals and not-so-locals. And in the highly competitive construction industry, a good safety record is a critical marketing tool. Almarie Visser is a disability adviser for Suncor Energy, based in Calgary. Last year, she achieved the CRTWC designation as part of a long-term administrative evolution that was launched after Suncor bought out Petro Canada in 2010. "Suncor has short-term self-insured disability for 26 weeks, so we receive the application and adjudicate the case," she explained.

"My previous experience was not in DM. I was a draftsman in a pulp and paper mill, and when we immigrated to Canada, we landed at Fort McMurray." Visser learned how to handle workers' compensation claims while working in a physician's office. She was subsequently hired by Suncor as WCB Administrator, where she handled all of Suncor's WCB claims from start to finish. After the merger in 2010, Suncor Energy Inc. developed and implemented an Integrated Disability Management Program.

Coming from a WCB-only background, Visser decided to take the online training through NIDMAR. "It took me three years. I took all 25 modules and then wrote the exam." While it was not a requirement for existing Suncor employees, certification is now required for all new hires. Suncor's IDM Program is rooted in the core NIDMAR principles, Visser said. "And I apply what I learned on a daily basis. Most helpful was the module on working within a unionized environment."

Visser's portfolio is the Suncor operation at the Alberta oilsands. Most of the workers are "commuters," living in temporary quarters on site and travelling home during their time off. Practicing DM for workers shuttling back and forth across Canada presents its own challenges.

Most are heavy equipment operators, and when a worker is unable to drive that heavy-haul truck or operate that massive shovel, accommodating them with meaningful work calls for flexibility. "Someone who is working on restrictions can't be put out on equipment in the field, so we have to find them something in an office environment." Heavy equipment operators do not, as a rule, respond well to sitting behind a desk punching a computer, Visser added.

Another hazard of DM for the commuter workforce is scheduling. Employees typically work six shifts on, six shifts off, which poses huge problems setting up workplace accommodations, Visser said. "Their lives are arranged according to their shift, and when you can accommodate them with modified work, that is typically on a Monday-to-Friday cycle."

Another complication can develop when that commuter flies home and takes his workplace injury or illness to his family physician. "If their doctor books them off for a month, there's nothing you can do to bring them back to work." That is regardless of whether the worker's specific complaint renders them incapable of performing modified duties or not. "That's where we employ our third-party provider and early support services, and try and get them re-assessed and get additional medical information, before they approach the family physician. We do that at arms-length so that we don't interfere with their medical care and treatment."

Visser now recommends the CRTWC to other professionals, and credits the NIDMAR system of online modules with allowing her to maintain a full-time job and run a household while acquiring her training and certification. And it doesn't hurt to add those letters beside your name. "It's opened a lot of opportunities. Since I became certified I have received lots of LinkedIn inquiries asking if I am available."



Katrina Leonard has decided to double down on her disability management qualifications. In 2014, she successfully completed the Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP) designation, and is scheduled to take the CRTWC exam in May 2015.

In January, Leonard was promoted to Human Resources Advisor at the Teck Highland Valley Copper Partnership mine in Logan Lake, BC. She now oversees the DM programs for approximately 1,400 employees who reside mainly, but not exclusively, in nearby communities. “There are some one-offs that come in from all different places, and they have secondary quarters in Logan Lake.”

Leonard, who comes from 100 Mile House, attended Thompson Rivers University. “I came [to Teck] from the forest industry with Weyerhaeuser,” Leonard said. The US-based forest giant had taken over the monolithic MacMillan Bloedel in 1997 and was already in the process of divesting and downsizing its interior operations when Leonard arrived in 2005. It was very much about learning on the fly.

“There wasn’t a lot of mentoring when I first got into Disability Management. Anything that was beyond a cut-and-dry RTW plan or a simple workers’ compensation claim, we had to outsource.”

In 2008, Weyerhaeuser began shutting down interior sawmills and Leonard found herself with no job to return to following a maternity leave. But after a three-year break, she was hired as a Health and Wellness Coordinator at Teck Highland Valley Copper Partnership.

Now in a supportive learning environment, Leonard acquired new skills in handling complex RTW procedures and a new understanding of the non-occupational side of DM. Her NIDMAR education began incrementally. “My mentor had both CDMP and CRTWC, and she encouraged me to register in the NIDMAR A and B modules, so I had baseline knowledge.”

But after cherry-picking modules to learn specific skills, Leonard said she was hooked. “The courses were fantastic and I absolutely loved them. It was the right path for me.”

Leonard said she was particularly impressed with the examination process. “The thing about the exam was that it was not just about having an understanding of the material. It was about having the understanding to apply the material. It was about taking the learnings and information that we were exposed to throughout the NIDMAR modules and actually applying them during the exam.”

And while considering specific questions on the exam, Leonard said she recognized how she had already applied those lessons to real-world cases she had managed at Teck Highland Valley Copper Partnership.

Leonard said she freely recommends the certification to other professionals. “I always like to have new challenges and make some form of progress within my own career. Obtaining the CDMP provided me with a more rounded understanding of DM and has provided me with tools that have assisted me in advancing in my career.”





Ann-Marie Gyldenbjerg faces an added set of considerations as Safety & Compensation Administrator for The State Group, a multi-trade construction firm with operations across North America, with its corporate office in Mississauga, Ontario. Construction companies have an added incentive to get their employees back to work in the event of illness or injury, over and above the bottom line.

In Ontario, WSIB claims are tracked on the all-important CAD-7 form, Gyldenbjerg explained. When a company's annual safety/claims costs are below the industry standard, WSIB pays a rebate. Go above the industry standard, WSIB applies a surcharge. The information is public. Prospective clients are able to make decisions based on a contractor's claims/safety performance, effectively making the CAD-7 a critical marketing tool.

After graduating from high school in the Niagara region, Gyldenbjerg began her post-secondary education at Brock University, but didn't stay long. "I went right into the workforce in administration. I had the ability to move up from basic administrative roles to operational and supervisor positions through work experience.

"For seven years, Gyldenbjerg worked in administration at her father's heavy construction equipment firm, while attending university part-time.

After taking a two-year break, she was subsequently hired by The State Group as a Safety Administrator. Gyldenbjerg soon found herself taking on greater responsibilities when the Corporate Safety Manager fell ill. "I got bumped up to work under the new Corporate Safety Manager."

Because The State Group does not have an HR department, the Safety Dept. manages WSIB claims. Gyldenbjerg did not have the training and the new manager did not have the time to train her. "So I took two courses in worker's compensation at Mohawk College to support my role in the company."

By this point, Gyldenbjerg had decided that she wanted to move into the RTW field, starting with WSIB claims. "The gentleman who taught the course had been at WSIB for 30 years. He was the one who told me about NIDMAR. He told me if I wanted to take on a supportive role like a RTW coordinator, or to work for WSIB, that a CRTWC would be a requirement."

The State Group fully supported Gyldenbjerg's goal to achieve certification and reimbursed her costs upon completion. When family crises arose, she was able to keep working and studying. "The staff at NIDMAR were extremely supportive and let me move two courses from the spring to the fall and a third course from fall to winter."

As a result of the re-scheduling, it took Gyldenbjerg six months longer to complete all the modules, but the flexibility of the NIDMAR program allowed her to succeed. "The great thing about it is that you can finish the training and certification while you're working, which was something I could never do at any other university, and because I could do it from home."

The training also expanded her capabilities by introducing her to RTW practices beyond the construction industry.

"I didn't have the health background and I didn't have the insurance background. When I wrote the exam, I think I was probably the only person there who wasn't working for the WSIB or an insurance company."

Gyldenbjerg said attaining her CRTWC has motivated her to seek further training to expand her horizons even further. And she knows where to find it.

"At this point I intend to do the Bachelor's degree program at PCU-WHS."