

Canada Post A Commitment to Change

The name says it all. The Disability Management Centre of Excellence at Canada Post was formed with the goal of “evolving a national set of standards to international best practices in program design and management” to make the federally regulated employer’s disability management program one of the best in the world. The Centre’s program managers wrote the CDMP examination in 2009 and are making a difference in employees’ lives in a diverse workplace with over 60,000 employees, spanning more than 4,000 locations across Canada.



Canada Post has provided disability management services for its employees for many years, but the program was in need of revitalizing. When Stefan Ginder was asked to take over the position of director, Canada Post Disability Management Centre of Excellence two years ago, he noted – despite pockets of awareness – there was a significant lack of knowledge and understanding of the disability management (DM) philosophy and the benefits DM brings to the company, its employees and their representatives. A comprehensive strategy was needed to re-energize and move the program forward.

“We know that one of the foundations for an effective disability management program is stakeholder understanding, involvement and support; however, many did not understand their role and questioned the value of the program. Employees were asking ‘What is it?’ and ‘Why are we doing this?’ We recognized that we had to go through a major effort to increase awareness and knowledge of the benefits effective DM brings to the company and to employees.”

Ginder, a 25-year Canada Post employee, had the diverse background needed to turn things around. He holds a Masters Certificate in Project Management from George Washington University and extensive labour relations and human resources experience through previous roles at Canada Post that included improving human resources practices for 60,000 employees in the Operations Group.

His first step was to increase the level of perception and understanding of the existing DM program. Although Canada Post had moved toward an evidence-based model, Ginder says that stakeholders were still using the old medical model that focused on disability alone. “We were looking for a more active and encompassing definition of what DM is,” he explains.

A three-pronged strategy was implemented that consisted of developing initiatives to broaden the understanding of the program, thereby reducing friction stemming from lack of knowledge and miscommunication; increase efforts to validate the program design and operation both internally and externally; and develop initiatives to engage all stakeholders, but especially the unions, while improving program outcomes. “We know that unions play a key role in an effective disability management program and we looked for opportunities to increase engagement and involvement of our unions in our program,” Ginder explains.

The next step was to increase knowledge and engagement about disability management from within the organization.



Back row l to r: Nathalie Acar, Team Assistant; Leah Lewis, Occupational Abilities Specialist; Pierre Gourgon, Occupational Abilities Manager. Front row l to r: Stefan Ginder, Director, Canada Post Centre of Excellence; Wolfgang Zimmermann, Executive Director, NIDMAR

Ginder launched a three-month in-house educational campaign that included slide presentations, webinars and conference calls with management, human resources staff and union executives across the country. The objective was to reveal the changed thinking behind a revitalized disability management program.

To bring home the point, Ginder involved Canada Post DM suppliers in developing a case management training approach that integrated two case studies: one, an employee off for a musculoskeletal injury and another with a mental health issue. These studies applied the program philosophies and provided a tangible model that illustrated how DM functions to help employees return to work by focusing on what Ginder calls the “whole person dynamic.” He adds, “Our motto is ‘giving you the support you need when you need it’ and the case studies were an effective tool to demonstrate the services we offer and how return to work barriers could be addressed – from medical to social, cultural to psychological.”

As Canada Post provides significant opportunities for accommodating employees with disabilities through a structured program, the Human Rights Commission showed interest in this approach. (Canada Post, as a federally regulated employer, is subject to the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.) In spring 2008, Canada Post asked the Commission to deliver a presentation to both management and the unions on the principles of accommodation, highlighting the importance of cooperation and support of all stakeholders in the accommodation process. Concurrently, Ginder learned more about NIDMAR and the consensus based approach. “We were really trying to increase involvement of stakeholders in the process and the NIDMAR standards of practice seemed ideally suited to our goals.”

He next asked NIDMAR Executive Director Wolfgang Zimmermann to speak at a follow-up session with management and union executives. “It was the beginning of a new focus on a model based on abilities not disabilities.” He stresses, “NIDMAR plays an essential role in our change efforts in a productive partnership.”

At the Disability Management Centre of Excellence, Ginder is supported by Pierre Gourgon, an occupational abilities manager with more than 20 years of experience in disability management and related fields at Canada Post, as well as by two other colleagues in this effort: Occupational Abilities Specialist Leah Lewis, whose background is in occupational health nursing, and Nathalie Acar, who assists the team in the area of statistical reporting.

External validation came about through a decision to undergo NIDMAR’s Consensus Based Disability Management Audit (CBDMA).

Audit led to CDMP professional accreditations

“The CBDMA is a great tool. Not only does it incorporate national and international best practice and provide a snapshot of our current program’s design effectiveness, it pinpoints ways to improve as well. Because of its consensus based approach, I also appreciated the opportunity it provided to engage the primary stakeholders,” Ginder noted.

The CDBMA results revealed that Canada Post has many of the features of best-in-class programs and identified opportunities for improvement. These included a need for higher levels of integration of services and procedures, greater stakeholder involvement, and better workplace-based programming. In response to the CBDMA findings, action plans were developed to close program gaps. In May 2009, Ginder, Gourgon and Lewis successfully wrote the CDMP professional examination and became CDMP certified.

Gourgon notes the method they took to prepare for the examination worked well for them, “Our approach was quite unique. We relied on our experience, which had recently been validated by the CBDMA, and added extensive reading and research on DM best practices.”

Lewis says, although she did not take all the modules, she was pleased NIDMAR granted her the opportunity to write the exam based on her experience and educational background, which includes a B.Sc.N. from McMaster University and a certificate program in Occupational Health Nursing from Mohawk College.

Of the modules she did complete, she explains, “The key thing that stands out to me about the online courses was the diversity of the participants. It was really interesting and enlightening to see the very different thoughts and ideas that came out during the online discussions.”

After all three successfully passed the examination, they incorporated CDMP accreditation as an objective for Canada Post DM regional managers.

Results show Canada Post DM Program on the right track

In the meantime, Ginder reports that the changes initiated by the DM Centre of Excellence are yielding positive results.

Typically, Canada Post sees about 14,000 cases a year of sick leave/short-term disability (STD) claims and 900 under long-term disability (LTD). An historical average duration of 162 days for STD claims is now down to 93 days. Previously, more than 50 percent of these claims included modified work duties with an average 102 days duration. The duration is now down to an average of 46 days. Disability management is ensuring that employees are brought back to work at the right time, to the right type of work in a safe and healthy manner.

Ginder advises there are a lot of cost-savings involved in these reductions that have come about because of the effectiveness of the DM program. In addition, a recent survey of employees on STD shows 74 percent are satisfied with the program as well.

As a best practice, Canada Post has now created a National Disability Management Advisory Committee of management members that meets every two weeks. These primary stakeholders within the organization have helped accelerate the pace of change needed to evolve DM program changes.

Consultations with union executives to discuss program issues also occur on a regular basis. Ginder explains, “These efforts with our partners and stakeholders are crucial to achieving our goal of obtaining international certification by the International Disability Management Standards Council in 2010.”

In June 2009, Canada Post hosted its second annual Occupational Abilities Management Conference, which brought together occupational abilities managers/coordinators, and workers’ compensation case specialists from across Canada. It was part of the effort embraced by Canada Post to have a DM program ranked as one of the best in the world, offering high quality, integrated and seamless service to employees, regardless of the nature of an absence.

As Gourgon concludes, “The CBDMA results – along with our success in achieving our CDMP designations – are external validation, from a business perspective, that demonstrates we are well on our way to achieving a best-in-class program. This is a beneficial outcome for all stakeholders, but especially for our employees, who deserve the best program to support them when they need it most.”