

Canada's J.D. Irving, Limited – A Leader in Disability Management



J.D. Irving, Limited received a National Award of Excellence for their joint Disability Management Program in 2002, however, the seeds for the organization's successful program were planted long before at this diverse, multinational corporation that has been setting an example for international best practices in health and wellness, disability management and return to work for almost two decades.

The start of J.D. Irving, Limited's award-winning disability management (DM) program can be traced back to the early 1990s, when physiotherapist Lynn Irving began working as a consultant with the company, initially on an injury prevention program for the Shipbuilding Division and then expanding into an Occupational Rehabilitation and a Work Hardening clinic. Irving recalls even then, "There was a lot of discussion and momentum around the program."

In 1997, Irving sold her physiotherapist practice and joined J.D. Irving, Limited as an internal consultant with Irving Health Services, focusing on the establishment of Disability Management and Employee Health and Wellness programs. She notes DM initiatives gained traction with the establishment of internal case management, and the development of return to work policies and procedures.

Mary Martell, current Director of Irving Health Services, joined the company in 2000 as a case manager. Martell says that at the time, "There was a strong appetite to move forward and take the program further by transferring ownership to our operational divisions. We wanted to engage those who 'owned' the DM process with the opportunity to improve the process and results."

By 2001 Martell was leading the DM team, which collected data and compiled a Management Trend Report that was presented to senior management. The data told the story. It showed the cost of doing nothing versus the cost of rolling out a program that met international best practice standards.

The need to establish a standardized, formalized program for training DM managers in the various divisions was identified and approved. When it came to choosing a professional certification program, the IDMSC's program was the clear choice.

Once senior management was on board with the program, the challenge was to take a group of DM managers through the 25 modules in preparation for writing the professional examination leading to the Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP) designation.



At first Martell hesitated, and said that with a previous background in workers' compensation, she didn't plan to write the exam. She was encouraged by Irving to reconsider.

"Our goal was to standardize proactive disability management and adapt best practices throughout the company. CDMP increased the competency and credibility of our professional disability managers, which in turn increased the confidence level of senior management regarding our DM's level of expertise," says Irving.

Martell conceded, went through the modules and wrote the examination. She's glad she did. "It offered insight I hadn't thought about in managing injuries and issues around them."

"We partnered with NIDMAR and Mohawk College on a course that led to the examination. Eight of us studied 25 modules in six months, including three weeks of on-site classroom work," she explains. "It was intense, but gratifying in terms of the education and the team building that occurred," she adds.

After all eight managers successfully passed, the company hosted a celebration and formal presentation of their CDMP certificates. According to Irving, after the DM managers were certified, "It cemented the program. It helped the team gel and they became a force unto themselves. As a critical mass, they were able to share their knowledge and experience, driving it down to the front-line workers."

"This investment speaks to the commitment of our owners, the team and the leadership that we have," enthuses Martell. The organization's dedication to DM has moved forward unabated. "We continue to look at our data and are always looking for opportunities to close the gaps. We encourage employee feedback and 'out-of-the-box' thinking on our RTW. We're fearful of becoming complacent. Our team has a lot of energy and passion."

Joanna McLoughlin, Disability Manager, Retail Division and Heather Moss, Corporate Disability Manager for the company's Moncton based operations, are two members of Martell's team who embody that passion. Both were recruited by Martell from other human resources positions within the organization and both gained the CDMP designation with the original group of eight in 2005. In their respective areas, they've seen some excellent examples – small and large – of how creative thinking can benefit workers.

Martell gives a simple example. An employee with back problems found that a chair at home was more comfortable than the one at work. Staff brought the chair to the workplace to help accommodate the employee.

Other examples of "out-of-the-box thinking" included retrofitting an employee's car with hand brakes and accelerator controls on



the steering column of his car so he could travel back and forth to work. Another case included assisting an employee with obtaining a prosthesis through a third party provider (paid by the employer) that would have the durability and fit to ensure he could perform the physical demands of his job.

J.D. Irving, Limited's loyalty to its employees means there are many long-service staff members on its payroll. The company is tackling an aging employee population (with an average age of 42 years) with what Martell calls a "holistic quality of life" approach. She and her managers lead stay-at-work programs that deal with everything from ensuring early intervention, such as physiotherapy treatment for musculoskeletal issues, to helping employees maintain the right fit for prosthetics and other devices.

Moss and McLoughlin both cite examples of employees who were not necessarily ready for a full transition back to the workplace because of ongoing treatment for cancer, but who felt they could continue to contribute to the organization. The short-term return to work program focused on their quality of life during this difficult and sensitive time.

"We have evolved to the point that we're now more proactive," Martell explains. "Much effort is now placed on the 'upstream' component of the disability management continuum, more specifically on Wellness and Injury Prevention Education programs."

As a result, J.D. Irving, Limited is enjoying a much-coveted long-term disability (LTD) vacation, meaning a break on its LTD premiums. This is through extensive efforts of all the DM team members, with credit extended to Charlene Demerchant, Bonnie Murray, Paul Collier, Connie Bartlett, Pam Caissie and Sylvie West. The company's commitment to DM has delivered positive results to employees and the business. "The team is delivering return to work results that are 29 percent better than our disability insurance carrier's book of business. Our LTD claim volume has remained unchanged since 2002," advises Martell.

In her corporate disability manager role for the J.D. Irving Group Moncton companies – a diverse operating division encompassing everything from courier services to french fries to diaper products – Moss has 5,000 employees under her area of responsibility.

"I don't do it alone," she stresses. "Our program is structured. We have on-site RTW coordinators who stand shoulder-to-shoulder with supervisors and employees."

To keep all levels of employees informed about the organization's health and wellness, disability management and return to work initiatives, Martell emphasizes cost-effective methods with a lot of momentum, including webinars,

teleconferences and “rallying-the-team events.” Irving Health Services hosts face-to-face forums on a quarterly basis for DM managers across the divisions. In between, Martell notes there are regular teleconferences “where we can deal with issues in real time.”

Today, J.D. Irving, Limited, one of Canada’s largest and most successful private corporations, continues to be a leader in disability management best practices. Says Martell, “In ensuring the best level of service to our employees, we have made it a standard of employment for anyone who wishes to be a disability manager within the J.D. Irving organization, that not only do they have experience in the field, but that they have their certification as a CDMP or they have a willingness to pursue the education and the examination.”