



**On October 8, 2013 The Conference Board of Canada signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) that allows the not-for-profit research organization to provide access to the Disability Management Self Assessment (DMSA) tool for its members, including more than 11,000 organizations and almost 250,000 individuals across Canada. The tool will be used to offer members customized assistance in benchmarking and improving their workplace disability management programs. It's all part of a progressive, integrated program developed with assistance from industry partners and designed to tackle the high toll absenteeism is taking in workplaces across the country.**

## Conference Board uses Disability Management Self Assessment Tool to tackle high-cost of absenteeism in Canada



### The Conference Board of Canada

Responding to employers' concerns about rising workplace absenteeism and its associated costs, about a year and a half ago, The Conference Board of Canada put together a small working group of academics, researchers, non-profit groups, and disability management stakeholders – including representatives from NIDMAR – to act as sounding boards to guide research into the issues. The research was funded, in part, by The Conference Board of Canada's Canadian Alliance for Sustainable Health Care (CASHC).

"We undertook a wide ranging research study to try to understand the drivers of absenteeism and to come up with action steps and strategies that employers can implement in the workplace," explains Karla Thorpe, Director of Workplace Health and Wellness Research at The Conference Board of Canada's head office in Ottawa.

#### Research reports analyze trends, recommend solutions, and identify gaps

In September 2013, The Conference Board of Canada released its first of three reports on the issue of absenteeism and its effects on the Canadian economy. The report, *Missing in Action – Absenteeism Trends in Canadian Organizations*, provided some startling statistics. In 2012 alone, absenteeism cost the Canadian economy \$16.6 billion, an estimated 2.4 percent of the gross national payroll. According to the report, the average full-time Canadian worker was absent for 9.3 days in 2011, almost two full work weeks. The statistics were higher for some age groups and certain occupational sub-sections. For example, workers between 55 and 64 years old were absent an average of 13.2 days, which as noted in the research, is not surprising considering that this age group is more vulnerable to chronic illness, diseases, and disability.

Thorpe confirms that the research results overall have had a major impact, "There has been a tremendous response from media and individual employers who have looked at the data. It's been eye-opening in terms of what it has cost the organizations and the economy." She adds that the first report "laid the foundation for the second."

The second report, *Creating an Effective Workplace Disability Management Program*, was released in October and outlined common elements of successful programs, including a focus on health promotion and disability prevention.



“We want employers to have the right policies and practices in place to not leave themselves or their workers vulnerable,” Thorpe emphasizes. She details other important elements including the early identification and prevention of physical and mental issues, and ensuring that workers are returned to their jobs in a timely manner, which is important from both a human and cost-management perspective.

She points out that the research identified two particularly vulnerable groups of workers: young workers and those over age 65, both of which are among the least likely to have extended health or short-term and long-term disability benefits. The problem, she cites in the case of young workers, is that many have only seasonal, temporary, or part-time jobs, which typically do not come with health benefits.

In terms of older workers, she notes that disability coverage is often terminated once a worker reaches the age of 65. But since the elimination of mandatory retirement “workplaces have been slow to keep pace, from an insurance perspective, with the number of seniors continuing to work in the face of higher life expectancies.”

Thorpe stresses that mental health issues are also a growing category of disability, confirming they are the “number one cause of both short-term and long-term disability leave in Canada.”

Gaps like these are among the subjects contained in the final report of the third-part series: *Disability Management: Opportunities for Employer Action*. The third report was presented by the Conference Board at a well-attended showcase event in Toronto on October 28 and 29 entitled “Disability Management and Benefits 2013: Driving Productivity with Effective Workplace Practices.”

### **DM self-assessment tool enables customization of workshop series**

Administered by NIDMAR, under the auspices of the International Disability Management Standards Council (IDMSC), the DMSA assessment tool was established a decade ago by senior representatives in business, labour, government, and other stakeholder groups from around the world. Today, it is helping The Conference Board of Canada take the message home to its members that effective disability management programs and processes can help reduce absenteeism and maintain worker health and productivity.

In conjunction with the release of its three seminal research reports on absenteeism and disability management, the Conference Board is holding a series of workshops in major cities across the country, running from January to May 2014. To be held in Ottawa, Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal, the workshops are co-sponsored by Sun Life Financial, Cira Medical Services, and Acclaim Ability Management. The workshops will offer participants access to experts in the areas of disability management, accommodation, and return to work.

Participants will be given the DMSA questionnaire to complete in advance and will be asked to send in the results beforehand to be reviewed. Thorpe advises, “Our intention is to offer them customized, individual assistance from experts in the room, who will analyze the information from the self-assessment tool in advance, identify gaps, and bring forth an action plan to help participants put effective DM programs together.” She emphasizes the workshops will be intentionally small, about 30 to 35 people, to allow for such personalized attention. An auditor licensed by the IDMSC to administer the DMSA tool will be on hand to provide a comprehensive review of the tool, and detail different best practice components.

In addition, the Conference Board will release the results of 10 case studies of representative Canadian employers – from small businesses to large public sector organizations – revealing the challenges they experienced on the journey toward establishing effective DM programs.

At each of the cross-Canada workshops, a local employer organization that has undergone the DMSA process will be spotlighted. Thorpe says, “Participants will see a real life example of the impacts and results these employers have been able to achieve.”

For Certified Disability Management Professionals (CDMPs) and Certified Return to Work Coordinators (CRTWCs), the workshops will provide an added benefit beyond helping them fine-tune their disability management practice; the workshops offer continuing education credit (CEC) hours toward maintenance of their certification.

**For more information on the Conference Board of Canada’s three study reports, upcoming workshop series, and instructional Webinars, go to: <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/>**

**For more information on the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR), please visit their website at: [www.nidmar.ca](http://www.nidmar.ca).**