

“PLAN SPONSORS WANT A DEEPER PARTNERSHIP WITH THEIR INSURER AND HEALTH PROVIDERS. THEY WANT ACCESS TO THE EXPERTISE TO HELP IDENTIFY RISKS AND DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THEIR ORGANIZATION.”

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Photography by: Rob Barnes

**What is an organizational health consultant (OHC) and what do you do?**

We are the employer’s strategic partner in absence and disability benefits. We work with our plan sponsors across the country to help them address their organizational health opportunities, and deliver programs and support to improve health and productivity. This year, we’ve expanded the team with additional experts in all key regions across the country and we’re continuing to grow. Our emphasis is on providing our plan sponsors with access to certified health professionals who have

the ability to deliver deep insight on an organization’s current state and to define innovative best practice approaches.

**What trends are you seeing in this area?**

Demographics are changing in Canada, and the aging workforce is a large component of organizational health issues. The recent recession, as well as the debt load of Canadians close to retirement age, has resulted in people deciding to stay in the workforce longer.

Along with the changing demographic, we are seeing an increase in physical

health conditions that affect organizational health. For example, The Arthritis Society released a report stating that more than 57% of people with arthritis report being employed; people go to work suffering from symptoms and struggle through that pain.

Mental health issues also remain a serious challenge for organizations and can be a significant cost to Canadian society – 500,000 Canadians are unable to work due to poor mental health, according to Statistics Canada and a report by Dewa, Chau and Dermer, so there’s a big economic burden around this.

# THE PERFORMERS

✕ CANADA’S INFLUENTIAL THOUGHT LEADERS ✕

“As benefits costs continue to rise, managing organizational health is a top business priority for many employers. Our best practice approach, including a dedicated team, distinctive tools, thorough analysis, and evidence-based insight, will generate optimum results and assist plan sponsors along the full organizational health continuum—from wellness and prevention to absence and disability management.”

A QUOTE FROM LORI CASSELMAN, AVP, PRACTICE EXCELLENCE & INNOVATION, SUN LIFE FINANCIAL

**Why are employers paying more attention to these issues today?**

These challenges contribute to absenteeism and the cost of that is high. Absenteeism costs the Canadian economy about \$16 billion a year, according to a 2013 report by The Conference Board of Canada on absenteeism trends in Canadian organizations. Absence rates, while generally steady, sit at about nine days per worker per annum in Canada, which is high in comparison to other countries, which have rates in the range of five to seven days, according to the 2013 report. Even with the high costs of absence, organizations aren’t doing a good job of tracking data. In its report, The Conference Board of Canada states that less than half of Canadian employers track absences, and far fewer measure the impact on their bottom line. That is a significant finding because tracking is the first step to managing absences.

**Why does Sun Life have its OHC team and what do you look for when adding members to the team?**

Plan sponsors want a deeper partnership with their insurer and health providers. They want access to the expertise to help identify risks and develop strategies for improvement in their organization. Our expanded service offering and dedicated team of experts provide just that. We can now give our disability clients additional strategic guidance. All of this has to be supported through service excellence and plan sponsor satisfaction. Our team keeps both of those top of mind. Each Organizational Health Consultant has strong industry-based expertise in the broader continuum of organizational health, disability and absence management, and has a proven track record of innovative thought leadership to support optimum results.

**How have plan sponsors typically approached organizational health?**

Most have lacked comprehensive, formalized programs around issues that influence employee health. This is starting to change and it should continue to change if we are to make serious gains in the impact of absences due to organizational health issues. Organizations are really taking a look at their structures as a whole. They’re challenging insurers and providers to offer more seamless and integrated solutions that align to support the goal of healthier employees who are at work and functioning well.

**How do your programs help?**

Our programs focus on aligning and supporting a plan sponsor’s organizational health needs. This year, we’ve built new tools and we have a new suite of resources. Our Organizational Health Self-Assessment (OHS) tool provides a snapshot of a company’s health, safety and wellness risks at the overall program level. It identifies a client’s initial needs through an easy-to-navigate online format supported by its Sun Life Organizational Health Consultant. We combine that with a disability data dashboard that aggregates critical disability and absence management data. We then process that data into an easy-to-use format and identify areas of concern and opportunities for improvement in a comprehensive report.

This is just the beginning. From this initial assessment process, we can provide recommendations, which could include developing or enhancing casual absence and disability management policies, delivering manager and employee education, and much more. We provide plan sponsors the opportunity to connect with the programs and resources they want to put in place that work to decrease the incidence of absence and disability.

We are also excited this year to have become the only group benefits provider in Canada to have established a formal relationship with the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR), and to offer extensive NIDMAR disability assessments and audits. This industry-leading process provides a complete analysis of a client’s disability management program and measurement of its performance.

**When would an organization call your team?**

Plan sponsors who are searching for deeper insight into issues related to high absenteeism and rising costs in their disability plans, those lacking up-to-date policies or those just looking to be more proactive and preventative in their organizational health framework should ask for our OHC team’s help. This can be at any point in the relationship, but ideally we work closely with our account executives to identify plan sponsors who are interested and begin working with them early, and then continue to maintain that support as we go. As our plan sponsors’ organizations grow and evolve, their practices can grow and evolve with them.

**And what’s the ultimate goal?**

It’s about making companies healthier. If a plan sponsor has healthy employees, it will have a healthy organization. Our support helps organizations take a greater integrated approach to workplace health, drawing along the continuum through initiatives that can be put in place to help change behaviours and mitigate absences.

