

LEADERSHIP IN DEI



David B. Simmonds

senior vice-president,
global chief communications
and sustainability officer
Great-West Lifeco
and Canada Life



Shelley Sjoberg

assistant vice-president,
product development
and support
Canada Life



How does Canada Life promote diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within its own workforce?

David: Our goal is to be a workplace that reflects the communities we live in—with an inclusive, safe and welcoming culture that ensures everyone is valued as their full selves. Building on our actions over the past five years, leaders at Canada Life are showing up to support our employee resource groups, including Pride and Abilities First. These groups bring us together for honest and real conversations—and last year, membership in our ERGs more than doubled.

I joined Canada Life because senior leaders in the organization said, “We want to make sure we’re building the best possible culture, and we know we have room to grow.” That ambition sets the tone for leaders across the organization and reflects how we’re showing up for employees.

How do you measure the success of your DEI initiatives?

David: Success with DEI starts with setting goals that hold us accountable. We committed to grow our representation of women in leadership roles to 50 per cent and underrepresented groups to 25 per cent by 2030. We also committed to increase the representation and career development of Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities by 2027.

We developed an employment equity action plan that identifies how

we can attract, retain and grow diverse talent, alongside several programs that help us achieve that goal. Last year, we completed our first company-wide self-identification survey to identify business areas and functions where we can grow talent from within, and map where we need to recruit new talent. We’re very grateful that so many employees supported this work.

How can plan sponsors integrate DEI into their benefits plans?

Shelley: Plans are a huge investment and it’s difficult to make changes. That said, sponsors really need to have a vision for DEI within their organization and a solid understanding of who their employees are. By creating a plan with members in mind, sponsors can make the right changes to meet their needs and attract talent. Plan sponsors should be speaking to members about the particular benefits that matter to them most and try to reflect these in the plan. Vision and dental care benefits are very common, but there are many others that aren’t talked about openly—like support for menopause. Being open with how we talk about the important things that impact plan members is a crucial step.

How have you updated your benefits offerings to accommodate a diverse range of plan member needs?

Shelley: We’ve focused on building solutions that remove barriers and meet plan members wherever they are,

such as virtual health care. We’re also extending gender affirmation supports to our entire business. One in 300 Canadians identifies as transgender or non-binary, and half say their health-care needs aren’t met. Adding this coverage will help support these individuals’ financial, physical and mental wellbeing.

What products are you looking forward to implementing?

Shelley: We’re excited to be working on family-building benefits. Canadians are taking different paths to build a family—whether they’re single and wanting to preserve their fertility, a same-gender couple wanting to start a family or a couple struggling to conceive. Helping individuals on this journey is one way you can really impact many different groups of people and we want to be very thoughtful in how we’re supporting those different paths.

We’re also researching ways to improve benefits for Indigenous plan members. There are a wide range of wellness and medicinal practices in Indigenous communities, which means we can’t take a broad-brush approach. We’ll need to learn more and consult with experts in order to be truly successful in this area.