



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP



What drew you to communications and marketing as a career?

I find great meaning in creating messaging and marketing that, at its core, helps people understand each other better and helps organizations communicate their "why." Crafting narratives that make the complex simple, or drive someone to take a positive action, has been a passion for as long as I can remember. I carried that passion into post-graduate work — at that time believing I would become a university professor. I earned a master's in English with a focus on Victorian literature and planned to get my Ph.D. A new path opened when I took an entry-level position supporting two managing partners in real estate investment banking: as material crossed my desk, I found myself revising messaging, helping to get points across more clearly and bringing my love of language to bear. A few months later, someone said, "You should do this for a living," and I decided to give communications and marketing a try. Twenty-plus years later, I still love helping people understand each other, helping organizations work more cohesively and, today, helping customers get more health from their benefits by better understanding the products and services available to them.

What do you like most about the group benefits industry?

It's complex, dynamic and we have a unique opportunity to help millions of Canadians live better, healthier lives. Group benefits programs and services are such important elements of people's everyday life and I'm fortunate to work for one of the leading and largest companies in this space in Canada. As I reflect on my own life and family — and take stock of those around me — it's very

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Nicole Welbanks
Assistant Vice-President,
Group Benefits
Marketing
Manulife

clear that few maximize or optimize the opportunities workplace benefits offer. This point was driven home for me when my son needed speech therapy as a young child: realizing my benefits plan could support us in that journey brought great comfort. So many Canadians covered by workplace benefits programs need help understanding how to get more value (and health) from these products and services, and the scale of that opportunity drives me and my team every day.

What challenges have you faced as a woman moving into leadership roles?

I've had the privilege of working across a variety of industries (financial services, insurance and mining, for example) and each was a different environment. Finding the right mentors and coaches as a woman in each of those environments was critical. Choosing to build a career while building a family can also be hugely challenging. Finding ways to



build resilience and adaptability — and ensuring I have a strong network of friends and supporters from all walks of life — has been vital.

How have you supported other women across Manulife in their career progression?

I'm part of Manulife's Global Women's Alliance, which is an employee resource group focused on advancing women in the workplace. This year, another leader and I partnered to mentor a group of other women from across Manulife. We held monthly sessions focused on topics like building your personal brand, forging the right kind of network and how to leverage feedback for growth. In addition, as I've built communications and marketing teams at Manulife, I've had the opportunity to lift up and champion many talented women. Supporting their growth and seeing them thrive has been one of the most rewarding parts of my career.

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How can workplaces better support women?

We need to do more and do better when it comes to addressing the specific health challenges women can face during different stages of their career — for example, family building and fertility, caring for infants and children, perimenopause and/or menopause. Too many women face significant challenges during one or more of these stages: their careers can suffer or stagnate or — in a worst-case scenario — they can feel compelled to leave the workforce altogether. Looking at group benefits specifically, we're putting increased focus on women's health, offering new products and services, and this is a

great start. These steps can help make a real difference in women's lives and careers.

More broadly, a confidence gap still exists. There's a saying that if a man meets 8 out of 10 qualifications for a position, he'll go after it, whereas women often wait until they feel they meet all 10. Sometimes, women need a leader who says, "You're 80 per cent of the way there and we'll support you to get you the rest of the way." Structured mentoring programs can also provide a space for trusted, vulnerable conversations about your career with tangible, constructive feedback.

Allyship from men is also critical. A few years ago, a male leader said to me, "It's time for a new challenge:

I think you should lead marketing for our group benefits business." I knew a lot, but there was still plenty I didn't know. He reminded me that as you move into more senior roles, it becomes less about being a subject matter expert and more about being a leader who can build a strong team, align people around a common vision, inspire action, ask the right questions and take a business in an exciting new direction. It's been a wonderful learning experience that has opened new career paths for me. That moment was a powerful reminder of what true allyship can unlock. It's about supporting women to lead with confidence and well-being at every stage of their lives and careers.

"As a mentor, I live by a simple leadership philosophy: treat people the way you'd like to be treated."

Cori Lawson-Roberts

Assistant Vice-President, Shared Services Canadian Disability & Group Life
Manulife

What was your career path to your current role?

I've been in the insurance industry for more than 30 years and, in that time, I've been through three acquisitions. Acquisitions can make or break your career because if you're not open to new challenges with the new company, opportunities may not come your way. It's also important to make your own opportunities. When I was first offered a role at Manulife, I recognized it as a valuable opportunity where I could contribute and grow, even though it wasn't perfectly aligned with my long-term goals. I developed a job profile





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Nicole Welbanks (left); Cori Lawson-Roberts (right)

that filled a gap I saw within the organization. They not only saw the value of the role I was proposing, but they went ahead and offered me the job. I knew this was an organization that wasn't afraid to take a chance, and neither was I. Thinking big and taking calculated risks has shaped my path ever since. Later, when I switched into disability, I made several lateral moves that equipped me with the subject matter expertise you need to be an AVP in a disability organization. Sometimes you need to move sideways to move up.

How important has mentorship been in your career?

I've been a mentee and a mentor and they're equally important. I've

been fortunate to work with mentors who saw my potential before I did and challenged me to take on new projects and roles I wouldn't have thought I was qualified for. I trusted their instincts, followed their leads and stretched beyond my scope in ways that helped me throughout my career. As a mentor, I live by a simple leadership philosophy: treat people the way you'd like to be treated. I also believe you learn as much, if not more, being a mentor to others.

What challenges can women face in the group benefits industry?

In the group benefits industry, women can face similar challenges that they would in other areas of work: work-life balance, career building, when to press on the gas and when not to and feeling present at work and at home. I'd add that the insurance industry has seen huge change in 30 years, with many women and female leaders now in traditionally male-dominated fields such as actuarial pricing, legal and underwriting. That's great to see. It shows how far we've come and where we're headed.

How do challenges impact women at different ages?

In my experience, people of all genders can face challenges throughout their career. So, while this is not unique to women, I think there are specific times in a woman's life where they face more challenges than others. For example, as women

age, they may be able to devote more time to their careers as childcare responsibilities ease. Often, though, those responsibilities collide with elder care support. This can happen in pivotal career stages, which can make advancement at work challenging. Furthermore, according to the Menopause and Work in Canada Report by the Menopause Foundation of Canada, one in 10 women leave the country's workforce because of unmanaged menopause symptoms.¹ It's one more reason why support at every stage of a woman's career really matters.

What changes would you like to see in the industry and individual workplaces to better support women?

There is a lot insurance carriers and employers can do! Part of the solution is more awareness, acceptance and support of women's issues. It's important to have open and supportive policies and programs, including flexible work arrangements, as well as supportive leaders — feeling heard and appreciated can go a very long way in a leader and employee relationship. Employee resource groups can help women connect with other women who are going through the same things. From a benefits perspective, employers can offer coverage for women that's meaningful to them at milestone times in their lives. That may include fertility planning, benefits during and after pregnancy (including maternity leave top-ups), mental-health support and coverage for hormone replacement therapy as women progress through menopause. When women are supported in meaningful ways, everyone can benefit.



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¹ Menopause in Canada Report, available at <https://menopausefoundationcanada.ca/menopause-in-canada-report/>