Return to Work Literature: Counts, Themes, and Gaps

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Disability management is a systemic process designed to improve the reintegration and return to work outcomes experienced by managers and employees. As a corporate program, disability management outcomes are generally recognized as faster employee returns to work and reduced job accommodation costs. Recognizing that these outcomes are desirable, this study shows that there are gaps in the literature that limit our understanding of how these and other outcomes are produced from a human resource management perspective. The review of literature indicates main areas and gaps of attention in the literature body. Suggestions for further development of the literature are offered.

Keywords: return to work, vocational rehabilitation, ability management, disability management

INTRODUCTION

The disability management literature clearly notes that poor management of employee absences for longer-term illness or injury cost the employer, the employee, and society in general (Cullen, Williams, Shannon, Westmorland, & Amick III, 2005; Dyck, 2006; Harder & Scott, 2005; Social Development Canada, 2005). Lost productivity, insurance premiums, staff replacement, job accommodations and other costs related to disability management draw billions of dollars from the bottom line of North American corporations each year (Boden, Biddle & Speiler, 2001). For the employee, the costs are personal, with negative implications to their work career (Czajka & DeNisi, 1988) and to their health and well-being (Jones, 1997). And, because corporate mechanisms reciprocate influence with broader social cultures (Morgan, 1986), the competitive individualism that forms the core of many workplaces and drives distinctions between the 'capable' and 'incapable' serves to reinforce societal biases and actions against persons with working restrictions (McFarlin, Song, & Sonntag, 1991; Oliver, 1990). Despite these costs, social biases and economic agendas still sometimes manifest in discrimination against persons with disabilities (Harcourt, Lam & Harcourt, 2005). General resolve against this form of discrimination appears the world-over and is enacted through multiple channels, including legislation and public policy, medical knowledge and practice, and organizational programs and stakeholder relations (Stiensta, 2002).

The focal point of this paper is a review of the literature regarding organizational responses, including managerial behaviours, to issues of employee disability. Disability is a broad-ranging domain, and this paper centres on the return of employees to workplaces. An employee's return to work is an excellent proving ground for the value or effectiveness of precursor legislative and medical supports (Social Development Canada, 2004). It also exposes relevant organizational or managerial attitudes, and their willingness and ability to fulfill responsibilities that have been socially assigned to them (Gard & Larson, 2003). In this regard, legal aspects of disability management have been investigated (Lee, 1996; Williams,

2004), as have financial (Salkever, Shinogle & Purushothaman, 2000), and employee attitudes and behaviours (Keough, Nuwayhid, Gordon & Gucer, 2000; Kirsh & McKee, 2003). However, the human resource management point of view has received limited attention in the literature. Human resource management specifically and strategically attends to performance management, learning and development, productive work environments, and employee-organization fit (Daft, 2006; Wright & Boswell, 2002) which can be easily viewed as direct correlates to disability management.

Strategic human resource management is the "pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable the firm to achieve its goals" (Wright & McMahan, 1992: 298). This definition implies maximizing the fit between business strategy and management activities in order to effectively and purposefully manage human resources issues. Disability management is a human resource management issue because of its function to improve the overall performance of the organization through more effective responses to the health condition needs of specific employees. It is also a focal point for other management issues such as the changing mobility needs and injury/illness issues of an aging workforce (Bruyere, Erickson, & Van Looy, 2006), attracting and retaining marginalized groups in tight labour markets (Social Development Canada, 2004), and motivating employee engagement and provision of productive effort for all employees (Cubero, 2007; Curtis & Scott, 2003). Approaching disability management as a human resource management concern provides a clear path for connecting disability as a personal limitation issue with disability as a business issue.

This paper examines the nature and focus of published literature regarding disability management. There is an absence of a systematic review of the literature regarding disability management and thus it is presently uncertain if there is a dominant focus on certain lines of enquiry, or if certain gaps are present.

Disability Management and Scope Defined

Disability management is the proactive management of processes that "control the personal and economic costs of workplace injury and disability" (Shrey, 1995: 5). It is an organized, systemic response to issues of employee disability, and a deliberate and proactive effort to minimize the occurrence and cost of injuries and illnesses (Akabas, Gates & Warren, 1996). A comprehensive program for disability management combines all pre-event, at-event, and post-event initiatives (Krause, Frank, Dasinger, Sullivan, & Sinclair, 2021). This means that an effective disability management program works to help prevent injuries and illnesses from occurring in the first place, respond quickly with supports when they happen, and help employees reintegrate and return to work after their recovery.

The relevant literature is examined from an organization and management-centered view of the issues. The focus is on the person responsible (i.e., manager) for both effective implementation of disability management practices and their outcomes, and on the organizational forces that support or impede these activities (i.e., nature of policies, presence of programs). Providing input evidence from the managerial or organizational side of the equation is fundamental to a balanced understanding of the organizational system (versus insurance or medical patient system) that comes in to play when addressing employee reintegration and return to work issues.

Two additional parameters shape the scope of the paper. First, I focus on the post-event initiatives of disability management. These are the initiatives that work to facilitate and support the reintegration and return to work of employees after an illness or injury. Approaching disability management in this way enables concentration on issues that may be distinct from accident prevention and general occupational health and safety, and allows attention to issues that can be lost from view in a broader perspective. This perspective also better supports the inclusion of non-accident or non-work injuries or illness that necessitate prolonged employee absences, work accommodations, and reintegration and return to work efforts (e.g., diseases associated with aging, pain, chronic conditions, and mobility issues).

Second, the paper does not intend to speak to the new employment of persons with existing or developmental disabilities. Although similar issues of job accommodation and work group integration exist, the issues of prior working relationships, stakeholder interactions, and the implications for managing absences may be different for this group than employees already entrenched in the organization. While the findings of the review will subsequently speak to a smaller part of disability management, these limitations

help to center the research questions on areas that are quite important but receive less attention in the disability management literature.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Attention to organizational issues of disability can be linked to the disability rights movement of the 1970's (Johnstone, 2001). This movement increased awareness of life issues for persons with disabilities, including their employment and inclusion in the labour market. From this movement, laws such as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982 or the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992 were passed to prohibit employers from discriminating against qualified disabled applicants in the terms and conditions of their employment (Lee, 1996; Lynk, 1998). Subsequently, considerable research about the impact of disability-related legislation on businesses and the outcomes experienced by persons with disabilities became produced (Bruyere, Erickson, & VanLooy, 2003).

There appears to be two prominent lines of research in disability studies. The first line addresses issues of the employment of persons with disabilities in general, and the second line attends to the return to work of persons that developed or acquired disabilities during the course of their employment. This paper addresses the second line of enquiry - return to work.

Tallies of Published Articles

To review this literature, I conducted a thorough search of the Business Source Complete database, finding over 22,000 references related to disability issues, including over 3,500 academic articles (Table 1).

TABLE 1
RESULTS OF DATABASE SEARCH USING THESAURUS TERMS FOR DISABILITIES

Thesaurus Term	Total Articles	Academic Articles	% of Academic Articles per Term
Employee Fringe Benefits	17632	2220	13%
Employment Discrimination	1049	570	54%
Leave of Absence	1057	189	18%
Insurance, Disability	1369	172	13%
Vocational Rehabilitation	186	109	54%
Employment Re-entry	136	60	44%
Labour Laws and Legislation	98	58	59%
Employment Benefits	193	53	27%
Disability Retirement	157	38	24%
Employees with Disabilities	124	31	25%
Employee Injuries	110	26	24%
Return to Work	49	20	41%
Handicapped – Employment	5	3	60%
Insurance, Disability – Policies	14	2	14%
Temporary Disability Benefits	6	1	17%
Worker's Compensation	3	0	0%
Total	**22188**	**3552**	**16% (Average)**

However, despite this large body of research on disability management in an organizational context, issues of organization and management for the supervisors of persons returning from illness or injury are not well documented in a quality academic method. Just 16% of the published articles were academic – the remainder were largely papers by consulting companies.

Further, of the 3552 articles identified as being academic, only 46 were published in top-tier business journals (Table 2). This suggests that there is considerable opportunity for academic research within the general literature, and a paucity of grounded, well-produced research.

TABLE 2
DISABILITY MANAGEMENT ARTICLES IN TOP BUSINESS JOURNALS

Publication Title	Number of Disability Management Articles
Academy of Management (incl. Journal, Review, and Executive)	10
Administrative Science Quarterly	7
Human Resource Management Review	11
International Journal of Human Resource Management	5
Journal of Applied Psychology	9
Journal of Management	4
Total	**46**
Percentage of Academic Articles (Total = 3552)	**1.3%**

Published Articles Themes and Gaps

Generally speaking, the reviewed articles focus on disabled employees as a population sub-group. For example, books and philosophical articles cover topics about the social perceptions and injustices in Western society (Oliver, 1990) and around the world (Mayhew, 2003; Steinstra, 2002). Studies delve in the medical nature of rehabilitation (Krause, Frank, Dasinger, Sullivan & Sinclair, 2001), legal compulsions (Lee, 1996; Stone & Williams, 1997), and industrial relations frameworks that shape disability management practices (Armstrong & Greckol, 1999). And, models are presented to explain factors that impact how persons with disabilities are treated in the workplace (Jones, 1997; Stone & Colella, 1996). In general, the return to work of employees with disabilities is clearly a well-published topic.

Some contributions to the disability management literature have worked to understand disability issues from a more managerial perspective. For example, a few studies describe the stages of disability rehabilitation and employee reintegration and return to work (Thomason, Burton Jr, & Hyatt, 1998) and show linkages between disability management policies and procedures and disability management outcomes (Amick III, Habeck, Hunt, Fossel, Chapin, Keller, & Katz, 2000; Habeck, Scully, VanTol, & Hunt, 1998). These works show that there are principles and practices of disability management that are transferable across organizations. For example, we know that implementing disability management policies and practices in general helps employees return to work faster (Habeck & Leahy, 1991). We also know that disability management practices are associated with lower rates of employee disabilities and recidivism (Caveen & Goering, 2006) and manager training in disability management is important to achieving good outcomes (McLellan, Pransky & Shaw, 2001). However, we do not yet understand why these relationships exist and how they combine to achieve the goals of disability management in organizations.

Across the entire disability management literature few works attend clearly to management issues or focus on the actions of the manager in disability management. Of those publications that attend to management issues three themes of enquiry emerge. First, there is the study of job accommodations and manager or co-worker resistance to making the work environment changes that enable the returning employee to work productively (Colella, 2001; Florey & Harisson, 2000). Second, there is the study of legal compulsions upon managers for managing disabled staff fairly. For example: selection decisions (Harcourt, Lam & Harcourt, 2005; Stone & Williams, 1997), job analysis (Brannick, Brannick & Levine, 1992; Mitchell, Alliger & Morfopoulos, 1997), and performance and reward evaluations (Colella, DeNisi, & Varma, 1997 and 1998). Third, there is the study of management exchanges and interactions between supervisors and employees that influence the outcomes of the return to work process (Colella & Varma, 2001; Friesen, Yassi & Cooper, 2001; Gard & Larsson, 2003; Nieusenhuijsen, Verbeek, de Boer, Blonk, &

van Dijk, 2006). Together, these themes of enquiry begin to explain the management side of disability management.

Of these three themes of enquiry, the study of management exchanges and interactions is the least developed. Only a few articles and other references in the disability management literature speak directly to supervisor-employee interactions in disability management. For example, through empirical work Colella & Varma (2001) note that managers with higher quality exchange relationships with disabled employees are better able to recognize the quality of employees' performance. And, through qualitative research, Gard & Larsson (2003) show that managers want to provide better quality communication and interaction with returning staff and feel that this will improve the quality of return to work processes. Finally, the importance of having good communication and meaningful supervisory exchanges are reinforced by evidence from a handful of studies showing that quality relationships, clear social and process support, and general acceptance at the workplace are all significantly related to positive disability management outcomes (Colella, Paetzold, Belliveau, & Hollenbeck, 2004; Davis, 2005). However, because of paucity of research in this area, we are still limited in our understanding of the dynamics of interactions and interplays between supervisors and employees that lead to desirable disability management outcomes.

Finally, the relative infancy of research into organizational and management issues for employees reintegrating and returning to work is indicated not by what is in the literature, but what is not. Missing from the literature are contributions that overview the state of research on management-related disability issues to date (e.g., an annual review), suggest broad frameworks for understanding disability management in organizations, or call into question the assumptions and biases that underpin much disability-related research. And, despite an understanding that about 30% of organizations have chosen to implement a disability management program (Marsh Risk Consulting, 2003), and that the nature of programs vary between organizations (Dyck, 2006) there is not yet a clear understanding of which types of organizations implement programs, and why. Lastly, it is not clear if the results described in the literature (which are primarily produced in the United States of America) are applicable or transferable across national contexts and legal frameworks. This is an important point, particularly when considering that Shrey and Hursh (1999) note that there are significant differences in how disability management issues are addressed by legislation in Canada and the United States, and that American legislation more closely represents that of Germany than of Canada (National Institute of Disability Management and Research (1997). Further, for a variety of reasons, including values of individualism versus collectivism (Milaney, 2002) and colleague attitudes (versus senior management) towards supporting disability management practices (Westmorland & Buys, 2004) the philosophical and practical approaches to the reintegration of employees to workplaces may be different across national contexts.

Each of these examples of difference or contraction point to the importance of conducting disability management research that it is sensitive to or reflective of its national context. Thus, while there is a working assumption in the literature that disability management at the organizational level universally presents the same managerial issues and evokes the same attitudes, biases, and responses from supervisors across national boundaries, there is not yet clarification of the role of legal and systemic frameworks on disability management in the managerial context. In sum, the literature on the nature, content and performance of disability management programs in organizations provides valuable and insightful information, yet is still taking its first developmental steps.

CONCLUSION

Disability is a significant employment issue. Discrimination against persons with disabilities is connected to reductions in national productivity capacity (World Health Organization, 1981), and poor management of employee injuries and illnesses needlessly increase operating costs of organizations (Boden, Biddle & Speiler, 2001). In Canada, one worker is injured on the worksite every nine seconds, and one worker in 15 is injured on the job each year (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2000). Further, a Wattson Wyatt Worldwide (1997) survey of Canadian employers indicates that in addition to insurance premium costs paid to Workers Compensation Boards, providing benefits coverage under short

and long-term disability plans costs organizations an amount that is about equal to six per cent of payroll. The Government of Canada estimates that when indirect costs such as recruiting and training replacement workers, reduced productivity due to inexperienced workers, and overtime pay for other workers, the cost of employee accidents and illness to employers is approximately 9 billion dollars per year (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2000). Disability management programs – a systemic and organized response to employee disability issues, work to address these cost issues by increasing the employment of persons with disabilities through more effective reintegration and return to work practices (Akabas, Gates & Warren, 1996). With considerable stakes involved, it is clear that disability management is an important and increasingly critical subject for business operations and management research.

The management literature, however, is not evenly attendant to the issues that managers face when addressing employee return to work situations. The focus is mostly upon job accommodation requirements, and legal compulsions to accommodate employees returning to work. There is minimal attention to the actual exchanges and interactions of the manager and the employee that is returning to work. Further development on this third theme is likely helpful to manager that must actually hold the direct discussions with employees as they return to work and begin performance of work.

The literature body would also appear to be require more fulsome study and rigor such that it become published in higher tier outlets. Presently, just 1.3% of articles published in this domain are via top tier publishers which may indicate that academics have not catalyzed conversation in the field, or that the research conducted is not yet at the standards required. In either case, there is evidently ceiling room to work with.

Absent additional quality, academic enquiry and insight regarding employee return to work from a human resources management perspective, managers are likely to continue receiving guidance via consulting papers and vendor materials. While these may be of strong practical use, they are unlikely to provide unbiased perspective that truly permits deep understanding and thus meaningful improvement in the overall handling of employee returns to work.

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