



## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND PRIVATE SECTOR DISABILITY MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA, CANADA, CHINA AND SWITZERLAND A comparative study

In recent years demographic change and an increasing shortage of qualified workers have presented new challenges for both developed and developing economies. Strategies to face these challenges have included increased company activities to retain their existing labour force and, specifically, the use of disability management. Disability management (DM) has been established worldwide as a valuable approach, not only with a view to improving return-to-work programmes and thereby retain-

ing employees, but also to improving working conditions and organizational development for disabled people. The International Labour Organization (ILO) sees DM as crucial to supporting workers whose employment is threatened by illness or accident and bringing people back to work. However, despite the widespread adoption of DM, comparative international research among private companies in this area is minimal.

### FACTS AND FIGURES

#### Partners:

University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW); University of Northern British Columbia; The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Griffith University; the Hong Kong Workers' Health Centre China

#### Beneficiary country:

Australia, Canada, China, Switzerland

#### Timeframe:

2013 to present

#### Budget:

In-kind

### THE RESPONSE

This project responds to an urgent need to improve knowledge about the implementation and impact of DM in private companies. Australia, Canada, China and Switzerland were chosen to provide heterogeneous samples that will allow an analysis of the impact of different welfare systems on DM.

The aim of the research project is to answer the following research questions:

- What factors influence a private company's choice to implement a DM programme?
- What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of a DM programme?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of current DM systems?
- What value do employees see in DM in terms of their job satisfaction, physical and mental health, employee morale, workplace attendance, etc.?

The answers to these questions will give us a broader picture of DM activities in private companies around the world through an interdisciplinary approach involving business, education, health, psychology and sociology.

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are applied in the project, including surveys and structured and semi-structured interviews.



*"The findings we get will show how disability management in private and public companies in different countries has been implemented, how it works at the workplace, and the overall results. This first international comparative research on disability management will contribute substantially to the overall knowledge on disability management in companies in Canada, China, Australia and Switzerland."*

Professor  
Dr. Thomas Geisen,  
Project Coordinator

## RESULTS

The research is the most substantial international, comparative study on DM in private companies to date:

- 32 companies in four countries are covered by the research, representing approximately 500,000 employees.
- 32 company case studies, 128 semi-structured interviews, and 960 questionnaires will be analysed.

By the end of 2014 the qualitative and quantitative research instruments had been finalized, and ethical approval was completed.

In August 2014 data collection started in four countries, in which most of the participating companies were selected. Data were analysed as they were collected based on grounded theory methodology. The process of data gathering and data analysis has been discussed within the international research group and conclusions were drawn.

The next steps will be the finalization of the national case studies, cross-country comparison and the discussion of the national findings. The final results will be delivered in November 2015. In 2016, the findings of the study will be presented at an international conference on Disability Management.

The project will produce deliverable outputs, including academic and industry publications, conference proceedings that are both academic and practice-based, presentations for companies, and contributions to state and national inquiry management – thus allowing the research to reach a wide variety of stakeholders.



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### **BENEFITS OF PARTNERING**

- The ILO provides consultation and conceptual support throughout the programme, and contributes to the dissemination of the research findings.
- Cross-national research informs further developments in DM practice.
- The inclusion of multiple countries will increase international collaboration and promote DM within a variety of national contexts.
- Companies will gain new insights into central DM concepts, which will help them manage demographic changes within their workforce and address potential shortages of qualified workers.
- Social policy and social institutions will benefit from the findings by gaining a greater understanding of those reintegration strategies that work best in companies, and of ways in which they can be promoted and conducted most efficiently.
- Education professionals will be able to apply the findings of the research in the teaching of DM and rehabilitation counselling.