

Leading Through Innovation

**An Interview with John Miskel,
Head of Corporate Life & Pensions, Zurich North America Life**

EDITORS' NOTE John Miskel has held his current post since February 2015. Prior to joining Zurich, he was Vice President of Sales for Absence Management at Aon, Head of National Account Sales for Aetna, and Vice President of Sales, for Kemper National. He graduated from James Madison University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Marketing & Management and a Bachelor of Business Administration degree. He is a board member for the Integrated Benefits Institute.



John Miskel

Will you talk about some of the products that Zurich offers and how critical they are to the overall makeup of the company?

Zurich is the fifth largest property-casualty company in the United States offering a whole range of general insurance coverage for corporate customers. Zurich's market presence is a big boost for employers considering the absence management products offered by Zurich. In the U.S. market space, Zurich offers group disability and leave of absence management, plus group life and accidental death & dismemberment. The marketplace respects the Zurich brand, which makes it a lot easier for Corporate Life & Pensions to build or launch a new business and product for employee benefits for Zurich.

When you're launching new product in the U.S. market, is it challenging to differentiate?

There are insurance companies that have 100 years of experience in this business and already have established relationships. We don't want to come in and be just another insurance company. Our value proposition is going to be very strategic in terms of proactively working with customers to help them manage absence claims and self-insured short-term disability claims. If we establish ourselves as a flexible organization that is willing to customize and work with employers to help them solve their health and productivity needs, that should give Zurich a competitive advantage.

Zurich is going to lead by being different and innovative. We're going to challenge ourselves and the market to embrace innovative clinical claim processes coupled with exceptional technology in order to provide a unique experience for disabled employees and their employers. I believe that this will require employers to think differently about

how they and the industry as a whole measure the effectiveness of their insurance partners.

Was it difficult to find the talent you needed to build the team you desired to grow this business in North America?

Zurich had a fairly established team of individuals through the expatriate and captive business we had been offering over the past six years. We had an infrastructure there, but it was narrow in scope in terms of the overall capabilities that the market needed.

Through the experience of our new leadership team in the industry, we have been very successful at attracting the right talent from various insurance company backgrounds as well as third-party absence management administration backgrounds. People want to work here because of the innovative culture we have established, plus it gives them the opportunity to be a part of creating something they haven't had the chance to build before.

How critical is the role absence management plays in a company's risk management and what value does it bring to businesses?

Absence management has stretched the technology and compliance capabilities of many existing insurance carriers. The challenge for many employers is to stay compliant with federal regulations like the Family Medical Leave Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as various state leave regulations, many of which now include state paid leaves that in addition to federal leaves, operate on top of short-term disability and workers' compensation claims. New York is a great example – it just passed a paid family leave benefits law that will go into effect in 2018 that has to be administered along with the New York statutory disability benefits that are currently in effect.

The primary capabilities of employers that self-administer their leaves or those of their disability insurance providers may not have been addressing that need in the way employers wanted them to. This represents a significant opportunity for Zurich to come in with new technology and a high degree of talent and capability, to help customers manage complex leaves.

Zurich has also talked about the risks associated with the Income Protection Gap (IPG). What is IPG and how can businesses help close that gap?

The Income Protection Gap is real. Many employees have a very short amount of cash they can

survive on should they go out on a disability or suffer a life-changing event like the death of a primary earner in the family. Often, people have less than 30 days' worth of savings, according to a recent survey that Zurich sponsored.

Zurich is helping to make employees and employers aware that the gap in income protection is real. It represents an opportunity for the industry and employers to approach employees in a different way about buying insurance and thinking about their financial health. Zurich is at the forefront of this in terms of getting that message out.

The cost of poor health and lower productivity is significant when employees aren't at work. Employees who continue to miss work can impact not only the employer, but also the employees' ability to stay financially healthy, which can directly impact their own self-esteem. Zurich is putting a large effort into creating that awareness in the hope that we can shape employer and consultant views around the need for financial health, which often includes a requirement for increased savings for retirement plans and through the purchase of life and disability insurance.

Is it more effective that awareness-building is directed towards management or that it reaches the employees and builds a broader understanding?

It's a two-pronged approach. In today's environment, insurance companies, medical companies, and disability companies sell insurance in relationship with employers. Employers need to get the message to the employees about why insurance is important and to elevate the discussion around income protection, not just about buying insurance. Many people do not opt to buy life insurance or disability insurance. Others might take the lowest amount of insurance when they definitely need more. This might be because of their financial situations or because they don't understand the importance of having it, particularly if they go out on a disability or there is a death in the family.

The message needs to get to the employer and to the individual so they have a full awareness of how it works and why they could need it for themselves and their families.

Many people are unaware of the kind of innovation taking place in the insurance industry. What do you tell them about Zurich?

This organization offers opportunities for many different types of talent to come in, and be trained on various aspects, and move throughout the organization, either in a vertical or horizontal fashion as we grow. ●