

On the cover



Marla Nicol, safety coordinator at Conifex, shows Kymm Ducharme, key account performance consultant at WorkSafeBC, the view from Conifex's Mackenzie location.

# Staying connected after an injury

By Jesse Marchand



When people were stopping them in the local coffee shop to talk about Conifex's recover-at-work program and new dedicated physiotherapist — the Conifex team knew they were onto something good.

When workers are disconnected from the workplace because of an injury, they experience much more than just lost work hours. Keeping those injured workers connected to their life and livelihood is at the root of successful recover-at-work and direct-access-to physiotherapy (DAP) programs at Conifex sawmill.

“Our recover-at-work program ensures that anyone who is ill or injured in our workplace — or even out of the workplace — has the proper tools to either recover or maintain their roles. And, if they need to be off work, we support them while they're off so that they will be able to return quickly,” says Kristen Gammel, Conifex's director of people and safety.

Conifex's program covers not just workers who were injured at work, but also those who have been injured outside of work. It's unusual, notes Gammel, but it works for this small community. Many people who

work at the mill are long-time employees. “If their livelihood is affected by a physical limitation, Conifex wants to help,” she adds.

“We wanted to better support employees so they would not experience loss at work,” she adds. “Loss includes more than lost work hours. It also includes a loss of sense of self, and a loss of connection that can come with being away from your everyday life. It's so much more than just being off work.”

## Staying connected to the team

Dale Parker, a superintendent for Conifex's Mackenzie sawmill, went through the recover-at-work and DAP program recently. He was supervising work on a plug on a blowline when something went awry. In the process of troubleshooting, he found the plug was not where it was supposed to be.

“Instead of stopping and reassessing, I stuck my hand in to pull debris out of the pipe. The pipe slipped and caught my thumb in the end of the pipe and the support structure,” says Parker, a superintendent for the Conifex sawmill.

The tendons on Parker's thumb were 80 percent severed and he needed surgery. Today, he's only able to bend his thumb 70 degrees, but it's not affecting his life at work thanks to a company-wide program to not only recover at work, but recognize all injuries and physical limitations, no matter how big or how small, with no stigma attached.

Parker wore a brace for 10 weeks, then went through physiotherapy. All the while, he was able to stay connected to his team — something that was very important to the 32-year veteran of the mill.

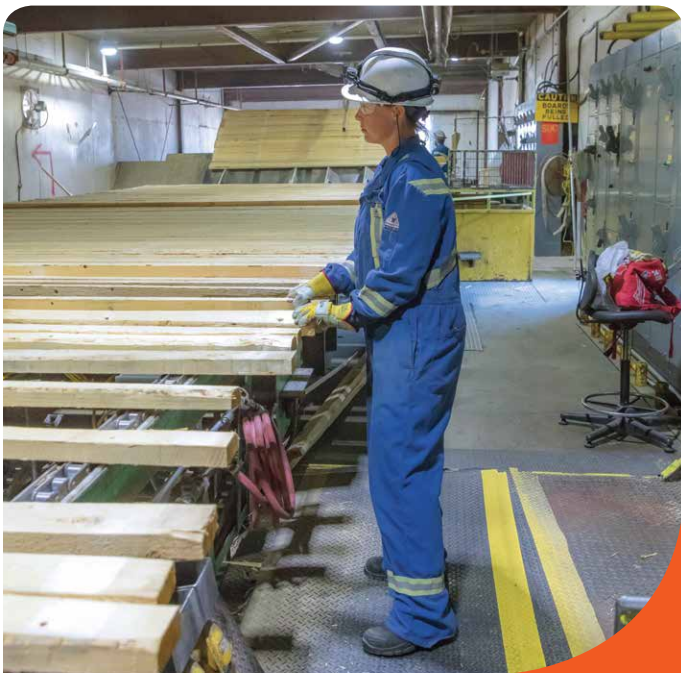
“The only time I was off was for surgery. I went back to work right after I was bandaged.”

While not all injured workers can be back at work as quickly, Parker was grateful that he wasn't pushed to the sidelines, something that had happened to him in the past with other injuries.

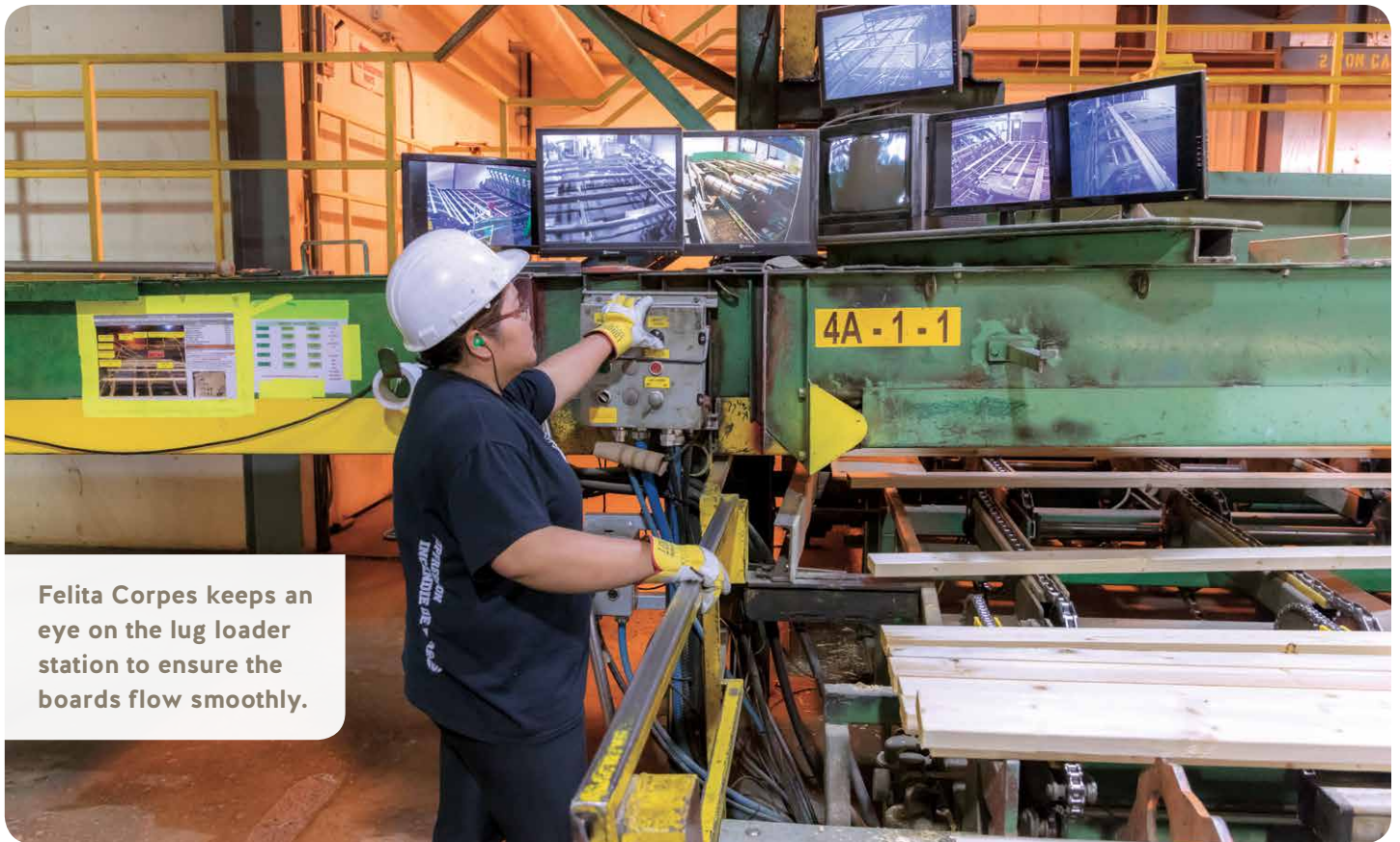
“I've sat at home with injuries. I had a shoulder separation one time and I sat at home for two weeks. I was going nuts,” he says. “Being able to stay at work and be functional was huge.”

## A physiotherapist of one's own

Part of Parker's ability to regain function in his hand was due to Conifex's program to provide direct access



Krista Bruner monitoring the planer feeder station to ensure the boards run smoothly through the planer.



Felita Corpes keeps an eye on the lug loader station to ensure the boards flow smoothly.

to physiotherapy (DAP). The DAP program puts workers in direct contact with a physiotherapist who can help them recover and make recommendations for what kind of activities they should perform or avoid.

To create a DAP program, you need a good physiotherapist. But finding one can take a little legwork. A district of only 3,500 people, Mackenzie wasn't exactly booming with physiotherapists when Gammel was trying to get the program off the ground.

Enter physiotherapist Hardeep Kandola. Born in England, he moved to Mackenzie with his wife, Anna, a kinesiologist, certified personal trainer, and registered dietitian. Anna grew up in the area and her passion for fitness and the outdoors brought her back.

With the Kandolas in town, Gammel saw an opportunity to bring expertise into the DAP program. "We knew we wanted to be able to get people in to see a physio within 24 hours, and we wanted to have someone really understand what the job tasks are in our mill."

She was able to turn Conifex into Hardeep Kandola's biggest client, and guarantee him a livelihood in the small community. To get him set up, she invited the Kandolas to visit the mill to understand the physicality

of the work and the ways in which workers were already using ergonomic factors to protect their bodies. Anna was able to complete a job-demands analysis that Hardeep could later use when assessing injuries.

"I'd never been in any sort of similar industry. I'd never been in a mill before," says Hardeep. "I was surprised by how much was going on. It was good to see what the workers generally do. For example, I had an opportunity to move some of the boards and I got to see how good the workers are at using leverage and the least force possible to move them."

Now, when a patient comes in, Hardeep has a general idea of the type of work they do and the tasks they might be doing when they return. This helps him better understand how the injury occurred, and how something similar could be avoided in the future.

### **'Recordables' are just part of the picture**

Creating recover-at-work and DAP programs was not something that happened overnight. First, Conifex had to assess its needs and create a system that both management and the union could get behind.

When Gammel came on in January of 2017, Conifex had a low injury rate but Gammel wanted to make sure that the rate wasn't because people weren't reporting minor injuries.

A low injury rate is good, but not if it comes at the expense of reporting injuries. "Recordables," as the industry calls recorded injuries, can be frowned upon. Introducing a recover-at-work program can sometimes increase these recordables.

"But that's not the most effective way to look at injury prevention and employee health," says Kymm Ducharme, a key account performance consultant in the Strategic Engagements department at WorkSafeBC. She and other WorkSafeBC departments partnered with Conifex to help develop its recover-at-work and DAP programs.

"Our experience has shown that being honest about injuries and creating a culture of caring for your workers will reduce recordables over time, as long-term time-loss claims eventually go down. There's also an effect on hiring and employee retention. When employees know you care about them and their well-being, it improves retention and employee engagement," adds Ducharme.

**"Loss includes more than lost work hours. It also includes a loss of sense of self, and a loss of connection that can come with being away from your everyday life."**

—Kristen Gammel, director of people and safety, Conifex

One of the ways that Conifex has introduced support is to introduce a limitations card that states what a worker's limitations are. They wear the cards on their person. Now, when supervisors see them performing duties they can ask to check the card and encourage the worker to not push and aggravate an injury. The program also reduces the stigma that having an injury is somehow shameful.

"You're not weak because you have limitations. You have support for those limitations," adds Ducharme.

## Tips for your return-to-work program

The Conifex team has plenty of advice for creating your own recover-at-work or direct-access-to-physiotherapy program. Here are some of their tips:

- 1 Appoint a facilitator for your program.**  
Appoint one person to be the point of contact for external medical staff, union representatives, and executives to connect with.
- 2 Create measures for your success.**  
What does success look like? To get buy-in from senior leadership, set up key performance indicators (KPIs) with your executives and report back every quarter.

- 3 Keep your union a part of the process.**  
Go to the table often during the planning process, and keep checking back about what is and isn't working.
- 4 Find a dedicated physiotherapist.**  
Find someone who can make dedicated time in their schedule and can become holistically part of the organization.
- 5 Support your front-line supervisors.**  
These are the members of your team with the daily face-to-face contact with the workers on the floor. Make sure supervisors have lots of support and are well trained in supervising modified work duties.



Changes at Conifex since introducing the program have been significant says, Ducharme. “Employees have really bought into and are promoting a culture of ‘being proactive about our health.’”

### ‘Can we have the same program?’

“Since we’ve been working with Conifex, we’ve been approached by other employers and workers asking the question ‘Can we have the same program?’” notes Ducharme.

To help with this, Conifex has partnered with the BC Forest Safety Council to help deliver training to other employers in the forestry industry. The council, in turn, is creating a committee and resources for other employers wanting to introduce a return-to-work model. Gammel has also presented to the Manufacturers Advisory Group to encourage other employers to create their own programs.

Conifex is also working with businesses in Fort St. James to partner on bringing a physiotherapist to town for that location. In the meantime, the Fort St. James location has introduced the same programs as the other locations, such as modified duties and first aid training and support. It may take a while, but the team



The team at Conifex gathers for a quick safety talk.

is hopeful they’ll match their Mackenzie program in other locations.

“Creating an effective injury management program doesn’t happen overnight. It’s not about creating a plan and putting it on a shelf, it’s about creating a new company culture,” says Ducharme. “My advice to employers wanting to create their own injury management program is to work through the hurdles. There are always hurdles you need to get through, from getting VPs and union members on board, to finding the right physiotherapist. The key is to keep working through it.” ☺

A promotional banner for the WorkSafeBC's Annual Education Conference for Community Physicians. The background is a scenic view of a lake with mountains in the distance. In the foreground, a wooden boardwalk runs along the water. A woman is walking a dog, a man is riding a bicycle, and a couple is standing and talking. The text is overlaid on the image.

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