

Expert view

*an interview with Marwan Shiblaq, president,
workforce absence*



Since joining Sedgwick in 2011, Marwan Shiblaq has worn a number of hats, succeeded in multiple leadership roles and made a lasting impression on myriad colleagues across the organization. We sat down with Marwan to learn a bit more about his journey, and to hear what he believes is in store for the future of workforce absence.

edge:

Before we dive into your newest adventure — taking the helm of Sedgwick’s workforce absence division — we’re always interested to hear what led our leaders to their current position. Can you give us the quick version of what brought you to us?

Marwan:

I came to Sedgwick after about 18 years with Nationwide, which is headquartered close to my home outside of Columbus, Ohio. *(editor’s note: Go Bucks.)* I worked predominantly in Nationwide Financial, but one of my proudest accomplishments during my tenure was pitching executives a “health and wellness” concept.

As it evolved, that concept resulted in the integration and acquisition of several organizations (including GatesMcDonald). Our strategy focused on supporting employees across the entire health continuum, including health promotion/wellness, disease management to end-of-life care, disability and leave, and a number of preemptive services related to chronic conditions.

In 2006, the organization asked me to help integrate the various sales teams and set up a sales structure based on our outlined health and wellness goals. Then, about a year later, they named me chief operating officer.

edge:

And how did that journey lead you to Sedgwick?

Marwan:

When Nationwide ultimately decided not to pursue that direction, Sedgwick recognized the opportunity and purchased that component of the business. They asked me to continue overseeing the absence and disability business, as well as a number of disability operations within Sedgwick. And here I am.

edge:

And how much you've accomplished for Sedgwick in the 10-plus years since! What were your thoughts when the Sedgwick leadership team approached you about assuming Darryl Hammann's role as [president of workforce absence](#)?

Marwan:

Darryl left big shoes to fill, no doubt — he retired from this position after a nearly 30-year-long career here at Sedgwick. I'm honored to follow in his footsteps and to oversee the continued growth of our workforce absence business. That, and it's an incredible team, one I'm especially proud to lead.

edge:

What has your role entailed so far?

Marwan:

It might sound counterintuitive, but for me, one of the first things on my to-do list has been to step back, in order to go forward. 2020 was a bit of a "false positive" for us. Turnover was quite low, and workforce absence services were considered essential throughout the pandemic, so we continued working full-steam ahead. Our team grew, and we believed we had adapted to a telecommuting environment without sacrificing productivity and that everyone had developed the necessary skills — including coping skills — to forge ahead.

As we began to shift our mindset from this being a temporary change to a permanent new way of working, we faced some challenges: burnout started to look different; turnover began to occur at a rate we had never seen before. New colleague assimilation in a virtual environment was difficult. They had never known Sedgwick before COVID-19, and hadn't had an opportunity to experience our "caring counts" culture firsthand. Turnover among those newest colleagues

increased significantly. So we had to take a step back and ask ourselves — which strategies will help our colleagues not just cope, but thrive?

Initially, my thought was to give colleagues one week in the office and one week working remotely. It would be the best of both worlds: collaboration and community interaction, with the benefits of telecommuting. It looked great on paper. Unfortunately, it didn't take into account a handful of variables we couldn't see coming, like issues with inflation, the conflict in Ukraine and its impact on the economy, ongoing supply chain issues, civil unrest, a resurgence of the pandemic ... needless to say, there's still a lot going on in 2022.

We had to acknowledge we are much closer to a fully telecommuting environment than an agile environment. Our job was to figure out how best to support our colleagues — both existing and new — in that space. We've also continued to grow, promoting colleagues into leadership roles, many of whom had never led a virtual team before. What tools would they need? What new ideas to embrace? Technology, sure, but also new strategies. So we shifted focus.

With our colleagues and teams spread throughout the country, now more than ever we need to create virtual opportunities to establish communities, address the challenges with isolationism head on, and find a way to help them establish, maintain and expand their support network. I think understanding the current challenges our colleagues — leaders and individual contributors alike — are facing will help us work better as a team, bottom-up and top-down, to address those needs one at a time.

Creating positive momentum that we can continue to build upon daily, weekly, monthly and into 2023 will put our organization and our people in a great position to not only sustain our past and present success but to further elevate the standard we set for the entire industry.


While our workplace may have changed, our imperatives have not: to put our leaders in a position where they can support and care for our colleagues, and our colleagues in a position where they can succeed in taking care of our clients and their employees.

edge:
How has our changing definition of the workplace affected workforce absence?

Marwan:
Workplace accommodations are definitely changing, for one thing, because the platform is changing. And those changes have created new requests. Mental health is a big component, and we're seeing more and more of these types of claims.

People are social — to different degrees, sure, but social nonetheless. Being in the office provides a particular kind of support system, the opportunity

for direct interaction — an impromptu water cooler chat, a quick question for a peer or supervisor — and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to feel and see empathy. All those small, daily moments help us feel like we're a part of something, a community, a team that performs the noble act of caring for and helping others. That type of benefit is hard to pinpoint, but it certainly doesn't exist in the same way in organizations, like us, experiencing a massive shift from brick and mortar to telecommuting. That is our collective focus at Sedgwick, how we capture that for new colleagues and maintain that for existing colleagues.



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edge:

Shifting gears, talk to us a bit about how Sedgwick is positioning the middle market.

Marwan:

Before we head down that path, I think there's a fundamental misunderstanding in a lot of circles about what "middle market" actually means. It's more than just a client of a certain size or type — it's about clients who are at a certain stage in their lifecycle.

Let's say we have two clients, each considered to be middle market based on their employee headcount. Just looking at that number ignores the nuances between those organizations; their goals and challenges are driven by many factors, not just their size.

I feel strongly that we shouldn't be a solution provider for everyone; trying to be everything to everyone can't be done well. We need to know who we are, who we can help, and focus on making a difference there. The products and services that add the greatest value are those that address the unique needs of our customers; to that end, the mid-market client journey is

a specific one, and one we're continuing to refine. There's so much room for growth in this space. So many emerging partnership opportunities. I know we're all excited to see where it goes.

edge:

What kind of opportunity do you see in the integrated space?

Marwan:

That's a complex issue, and it's a great idea in theory. The term "integrated" is typically defined as occupational and non-occupational together. The challenge is that internal structures on the occupational (e.g., workers' compensation) side usually report up through risk, while non-occupational (e.g., benefits) report up through human resources. To put together a truly comprehensive, integrated strategy, you need those two respective groups to agree on a shared goal or mission.

When we have both areas represented and aligned, it's a compelling value proposition that no one else in the market can replicate. As more clients evolve and look at their world holistically, our integrated capabilities will put us in a great position to expand our services and increase our customer base.

edge:

What kind of growth do you anticipate internationally?

Marwan:

We can all agree that workforce absence is a broad, global issue, one that's hardly contained to North America. The challenge abroad is that each respective country has their own cultural customs, their own political environment, their own language... it's hugely variable. We have a lot of U.S.-based, multinational clients who are absolutely interested in the opportunities, and we'll continue to explore potential solutions with internal stakeholders around the world.

Sedgwick's [recent acquisition of DHS](#) in Australia is a big step in this direction, taking what has been a theoretical expansion perspective for many years and bringing it to life. Kimberly George and Eric Malterre are leading this effort for Sedgwick and all of us are very excited about the possibilities. I think we'll see more clients looking for broader global support, and we'll link our U.S. programs and best practices to those global initiatives.

edge:

Without the benefit of a crystal ball, what do you see when you look ahead, not just in the near future but long term, in workforce absence?

Marwan:

I see everyone working through many of the same worries: talent acquisition and talent management, reevaluating their approach to achieving success, and in some cases redefining success entirely. Highly competitive industries, like tech, are going to continue to focus on making benefits more rich, creating more flexibility, offering more “carrots.” Much

of it is based on the makeup of their employee population — as it should be. It looks different for companies that work fully remote, or even hybrid, than it does for those that are dependent on on-site workers.

Organizations by and large have an overall culture, value system and some recognizable, clearly defined brand characteristics. But each organization also has subcultures ... and subcultures within those subcultures! At Sedgwick, about 99% of our workforce absence colleagues are now working from home. That’s 7,500 subcultures to account for as we conduct

training, provide support and guidance, foster growth and development, and create a sense of team.

So our primary focus today and into the future will be figuring out what approach will best address the “new needs” of our colleagues, and how we’ll succeed with any and every change — internal or external — that comes thereafter.

We’ll continue to work toward creating a “readiness culture” with a belief and attitude that we can take on anything that comes our way, confident that we’re ready and prepared to do so.

MARWAN SHIBLAQ

Marwan Shiblaq is president of Sedgwick’s workforce absence operations. With more than 25 years of experience in the insurance industry, he most recently served as a managing director in workforce absence, overseeing the teams servicing many of Sedgwick’s premier clients and one of the fastest-growing areas of the organization. He has also served as our senior vice president of disability and absence management, with responsibility for claims operations in multiple regional hubs. Prior to joining Sedgwick through an acquired company, he held numerous leadership positions, including chief operations officer with oversight responsibility for the company’s health, medical, absence and disability operations teams across all locations.