

LIFE IN BALANCE

Ford's wellness program puts equal weight on mind, body and soul

By Tammy Burns

Judy Bridgman knows all too well what it means to go through an emotionally trying time. Her son had a liver transplant when he was 10 years old, and the experience made her realize how illness and surgery can impact psychological well-being—and how difficult it can be to get the support you need. Fortunately, her employer provided that support.

At the time, Bridgman was working in financial reporting at Ford Motor Company of Canada in Oakville, Ont. Today, she is manager of total rewards administration, overseeing administration of the company's pension and benefits programs and drawing on her own experiences to help guide Ford's mental health initiatives.

Core Stability

In Bridgman's case, a healthy work/life balance was the key to helping her work through her ordeal. Faced with extreme family stress and endless medical appointments, she needed an employer that could grant her a flexible work arrangement without putting her career at risk.

That balance is the crux of Ford's mental health program—which, Bridgman stresses, isn't a mental health program in the traditional sense. Instead of focusing only on mental health, it emphasizes holistic wellness. This comprehensive program is centred on the belief that achieving mental wellness is more than just coping with stress or psychological illness; it's about balancing life and work, maintaining physical health



Judy Bridgman, manager, total rewards administration, Ford Motor Company of Canada

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PHOTO: JOHNNY LAM

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and participating in intrinsically rewarding activities.

To help employees maintain a better work/life balance, the company offers flexible hours, telecommuting options, an on-site childcare facility and a volunteer program that permits employees to take time off with pay to work with a local charity. In addition, Ford’s employee assistance program provides a variety of counselling options, including financial and legal planning, as well as a 24-hour distress line.

The wellness program also stresses the importance of physical health as a precursor to psychological health. Ford’s Canadian headquarters has a fitness centre, an outdoor walking path, a meditation room and weight-loss programs.

Employees are encouraged to make use of the fitness facilities at any time of day.

“If you exercise, you’re going to be better mentally and emotionally,” says Bridgman. “Employees have the ability to go outside

and go for a walk, or to go to the fitness centre if they need to pound something out that’s stressing them.”

Re-engaging Employees

The auto industry was hit particularly hard during the recession, leading to layoffs and plummeting employee morale. Now, Bridgman and the rest of the HR department are working hard to re-engage the workforce.


“Everything we have helps to contribute to your overall well-being, which ultimately contributes to better mental health,” says Bridgman. “We recognize that providing employees with flexibility and support results in greater job satisfaction, energy, creativity and commitment to the job.”

Employee information sessions and lunch and learns—featuring topics such as Living Well with Stress, Understanding Depressive Illness and Creating Balance in Your Life—are well

attended, and employees have provided encouraging feedback.

However, Ford recognizes that this is an area that is ever-evolving. As part of its ongoing efforts, Ford issues an annual employee survey to help determine what is important to employees and how they feel about their workplace.

Bridgman’s son is now in his 20s and is receiving the help he needs. But she says her experience has opened her eyes to the severity and prevalence of mental illness—and to the fact that few people are able to get the help they need.

“To me, it’s not a taboo subject. If somebody has a mental health issue, I’m not afraid to talk about it. I think we need to be more open and accepting, and people need to be able to admit, ‘Yeah, I might be suffering.’ Because when you have more support, you can cope.” 

Tammy Burns is associate editor of Benefits Canada.com. tammy.burns@rci.rogers.com



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