



Mental Wealth

MANY COMPANIES HAVE CHANGED THEIR PRIORITIES DUE TO THE RECESSION, BUT THEY SHOULDN'T NEGLECT THEIR MOST VALUABLE ASSETS.

I recently attended the Xeffects conference in Toronto on women and mental health in the workplace. After a morning of informative sessions, I wrote a brief article on the event, ensuring that it would be posted on our website and included in our daily e-newsletter. Then I moved on to the next task and thought no more of it.

Until the following day, when I received a number of emails on the article. Some people thanked me for drawing attention to an important issue. Others shared their personal experiences dealing with mental illness: the difficulties of trying to handle work commitments when they weren't feeling up to par; the stigma they faced; the challenges of getting their managers to understand what they were going through.

I was surprised and touched by these stories. For all of the events that we, as an industry, hold on mental health, for all of our efforts to encourage discussion, perhaps we're still not talking about it enough. And perhaps not in the right ways.

One of the main themes of the Xeffects conference was the need to stop thinking about mental illness and focus instead on mental wellness. It may seem like a nebulous concept, but there are practical ways that employers can support their employees and encourage mental well-being.

For example, giving people time off during the workday for medical appointments or support groups. Reintegrating employees after an absence in a graded way to ensure that they are neither overwhelmed nor under-stimulated. Teaching managers how to recognize symptoms and handle mental health issues with care. And, most important, ensuring that this knowledge and understanding cascades throughout the company to break down the barriers for employees seeking help.

Of course, mental wellness isn't an issue specific to women or confined to the work environment. But employers shouldn't lose sight of its importance—especially during an economic downturn like the one we are experiencing.

So many companies have mission statements stressing the value of human capital. When we focus only on maximizing resources and controlling costs, we run the risk of forgetting why we created such statements in the first place. **BC**

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Read the original article on our website at www.benefitscanada.com/commentary

Benefits CANADA



Benefits Canada is published by Rogers Publishing Limited, a division of Rogers Media Inc.

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Publications Mail Agreement No. 40070230 R10987. RETURN UNDELIVERABLE ITEMS TO: Benefits Canada Circulation Department, 7th Floor - One Mount Pleasant Road, Toronto ON M4Y 2Y5. Benefits Canada, established 1977, is published by Rogers Publishing Limited, a division of Rogers Media Inc. Rogers Publishing Limited, One Mount Pleasant Road, Toronto ON M4Y 2Y5. Montreal Office: 1200 Avenue McGill College, Bureau 800, Montreal, Quebec, H3B 4G7. Subscription Price: Canada \$108.00 per year. Outside Canada \$241.00 US per year. Single Copy Canada \$19.00. Benefits Canada is published 12 times per year except for occasional combined, expanded or premium issues, which count as two subscription issues. Printed in Canada. Subscriber Services: To subscribe, renew your subscription or change your address or information, please visit us at www.rogersb2bmedia.com/becca. Email: rogers@ctstonecanada.com. Mail: Benefits Canada Circulation Department, 7th Floor - One Mount Pleasant Road, Toronto ON M4Y 2Y5. Mail Preferences: Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to reputable companies whose products or services may be of interest to you. If you do not want your name to be made available, please contact us at rogers@ctstonecanada.com or update your profile at www.rogersb2bmedia.com/becca. Contents copyright ©2009 by Rogers Publishing Limited may not be reprinted without permission. Benefits Canada receives unsolicited materials (including letters to the editor, press releases, promotional items and images) from time to time. Benefits Canada, its affiliates and assignees may use, reproduce, publish, republish, distribute, store and archive such unsolicited submissions in whole or in part in any form or medium whatsoever, without compensation of any sort. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Publications Assistance Program toward our mailing costs. Our environmental policy is available at www.rogerspublishing.ca/environment.