

WELL-BEING IN LAW FIRMS: DOES IT REQUIRE DEDICATED PROFESSIONALS?

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by ilaria iaquinta

Well-being at work is becoming the frenzy of our times. It is a topic that has been raised by the entry of the younger generation into the labour market and has taken on increased relevance since the pandemic, and not only among the younger generations. Companies, law firms and advisory firms feel invested with the responsibility to also care for the well-being of their own employees. This is partly due to the ethical turn of the organisations and partly to their own interests. Several research pieces have shown that by ensuring employees feel good at work, companies will also retain talent, increase people's productivity and avoid absenteeism or resignations, to name just a few of the benefits.

Among lawyers, well-being has also become increasingly central because of the high pressure and heavy workloads of private practice. Many studies around the world show that lawyers have higher rates of mental ill health and substance misuse than the general population. A report published last year by the lawyer wellbeing charity LawCare found that 69% of lawyers (on 1,700 respondents) had experienced poor mental health in the year prior to the research, with the most common symptoms including anxiety, low mood and depression.

Last February, the Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA), the regulatory body of the Law Society of England and Wales, issued guidelines for the promotion of a positive work environment in law firms, produced by collecting feedbacks and suggestions from around 200 law practitioners. The guide recommends that law firms do "all reasonably practicable" to protect their staff from bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination by improving reporting procedures, promoting a safe environment where everyone can openly discuss problems, and encouraging a healthy and balanced top-down climate. Strategies to achieve these goals include the active involvement of top management in developing specific initiatives and in 'leading by example' on a daily basis.

Things are no different for in-house counsel. A survey conducted by Clyde & Co and Winmark at the end of the year found that 69% of general counsel (GCs) are concerned about the mental well-being of their co-workers. The report is based on interviews carried out with 140 corporate lawyers from all over the world. According to the sample, personal problems and concerns of their co-workers are a high-risk factor (80% of respondents) for the effectiveness of the legal department.

What does private life have to do with work? "Nothing, they are two separate and distinct things". That's what entire generations would say. But the latest Millennials and early Gen Z don't think so and are triggering a shift. We could argue for hours about whether this is right or wrong, but it would be pointless. What really matters is to address the issue, as it is real. One can also choose to continue ignoring it, but it then comes back like a boomerang on the profitability of the company or the law firm.

Why is it important to act? Because talent is the key to the future of workplaces. Without the right people, there is no growth and if people are not happy where they are, they leave (even for competitors). Moreover, an unhealthy working environment not only negatively affects the personal well-being of employees, but also their behaviour towards clients and, consequently, the ethical and service standards offered by the law firm.

However, the real question is another one: who should be in charge of improving the workplace? Some law firms are using technology, especially apps, to help lawyers manage their wellbeing. Among them Linklaters, Slaughter and May, Taylor Wessing and Eversheds Sutherland. But perhaps for such sensitive issues that affect the future of the law firm there is a need for skilled and dedicated experts. Clifford Chance has just hired one, for example, in June the firm recruited its first-ever global 'head of wellbeing' from Aon in London.

In this issue we will discuss well-being, and more generally talent inclusion, in our two cover stories. These topics are also in the interview with Barbara Levi, in an article dedicated to the ESG targets of in-house lawyers, and in a column dedicated to EU legislative developments to foster gender inclusion in the boards of directors of listed companies. We will also talk about digitalisation and artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and legal tech. On the in-house side, we will present the results of a survey on legal departments and budgets. Lastly, among other things, this issue also features a dedicated focus on the latest edition of the Legalcommunity Week.

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