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Why wellbeing is more than just an HR issue

At a time when workplace wellbeing is in the spotlight more than ever before, law firm leaders and managers must acknowledge their role in creating positive working environments that will assist employees and their firms, writes Keegan Luiters.

The social, economic and health implications of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past 12 months have brought the role of wellbeing into sharp focus for many practices.

For many professionals, the implications of the pandemic have included a shift in their perspective on workplace wellbeing as homes became offices and, in many cases, workdays got longer despite not commuting. There is an ongoing need for law firms and leaders to take an approach that balances the business needs of operating in a challenging and rapidly changing environment and the individual needs of staff.

Burnout fears

Across a range of industries, recent McCrindle research of 1160 employed Australians identified workplace wellbeing as the top-ranked expectation of employment, with more than seven in 10 workers (72 per cent) saying it is either extremely important or very important to them. Specifically related to the legal industry, this research came to the following conclusion: “The legal profession, perhaps more than most sectors, faces significant health concerns from people being overworked and stressed, which not only impacts people’s personal health and ability to thrive, it also leads to increased absenteeism, turnover and impaired productivity.”

Concerns about wellbeing – or the absence of measures to address it – is widespread within law. A report from the UK Law Society’s Junior Lawyers Division released in 2018 suggests that the issue is prevalent in the legal industry globally. Findings in the report included the fact that more than “90 per cent of respondents had experienced stress in their role, with 26 per cent of those respondents experiencing severe/extreme levels of stress”. Furthermore, “more than 38 per cent of respondents stated that they had experienced a mental health problem in the last month (whether formally diagnosed or not)”.

These are clearly not desirable outcomes for either staff members or firms. Wellbeing, however, is about more than just burnout or similar negative experiences. An individual's wellbeing combines physical, social and mental aspects that interact. While an employer cannot reasonably be expected to be wholly responsible for an employee's overall wellbeing, it would be remiss of them to ignore the role that the workplace has on employee wellbeing.

Beyond merely avoiding the negative aspects of low wellbeing, it is worth remembering that higher levels of wellbeing have a positive impact. Among a range of benefits, supporting employee wellbeing has been linked to improvements in individual performance and productivity, engagement, reduced absenteeism and talent retention. What then, is the role of leadership in law firms to support wellbeing?

Time to step up

The first step is to acknowledge that leaders have a role to play. Many people view employee wellbeing as a responsibility of human resources or senior leadership. While it is true that organisational policies and practices have an influence on employee wellbeing, it is also true that managers and leaders have a significant impact on workplace wellbeing.

A 2014 paper, whose lead author is from the University of Queensland, found that managers can increase productivity levels and prevent burnout by helping employees feel part of a group. Professor Alex Haslam, of UQ, was quoted as saying that "research clearly illustrates that leaders in the workplace also have an important role to play in improving employee wellbeing".

This view is supported by a 2015 paper by Dr Gordon Spence, who found that many organisationally led workplace wellbeing initiatives fail to achieve their objectives for various reasons. In part, this was found to be because they didn't give employees what they most needed – namely, "the basic psychological needs of:

- autonomy (the need to feel that one's actions are self-initiated and volitional);
- competence (the need to feel effective in the world); and
- relatedness (the need to experience warm, caring connection with others)."

It is through this lens that leaders and managers can create working environments that promote wellbeing – and the associated positive benefits.

Access to many of the levers of external motivation, such as salary and status through promotion, are often out of scope or limited for leaders at many levels within firms. In some ways, this is a benefit. Promotions and pay rises alone are not typically associated with increased levels of engagement, performance, motivation or wellbeing over time.

Leaders who can step bravely beyond thinking of teams as simply a unit of resources under their command and control to recognising teams as a dynamic collection of people who can be greater than the sum of their parts are often rewarded with engaged and high-performing teams. Most leaders and managers can benefit greatly from aspects within their control; namely, creating environments that support autonomy, relatedness and competence. The ability to apply these principles for themselves, as well as others, can set themselves and their teams up for sustainable high performance.

Keegan Luiters is an independent consultant who works with leaders, teams and organisations to lift their performance. His book, *Team Up*, explores how and why to take a deliberate approach to team performance. Visit www.keeganluiters.com for more information, or connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).

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