

Australian & New Zealand Meritas Wellness Survey 2019

The wellbeing of everyone working in the legal sector is a subject being examined worldwide. This includes the pioneering work done in 2009 by the Brain and Mind Institute in Australia for the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation (now called The Minds Count Foundation) and the first national study in the US in 2016 which led to the American Bar Association developing the Well-being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers.

Each of the Meritas firms in the ANZ region has programs or initiatives within their business which assists with the wellbeing of their employees. The purpose of this survey was to assess the current awareness of, and interest in, the wellbeing of people across the Meritas member firms in ANZ.

In an interview with Lawyers Weekly Swaab's managing partner and the Chair of the Meritas ANZ Management Committee, Mary Digiglio, said the most pertinent findings of the research were those that showed evidence of the benefits of promoting permission for conversation, education regarding wellbeing, mental health conditions and building resilience. Most of the Meritas firms surveyed have been actively committed to wellbeing for a number of years and I believe that this commitment is starting to evidence a change in attitude, awareness and behaviour for the better, for example:

- **76%** of survey respondents are more likely or very likely to use resources, training and be involved if dialogue around wellbeing in the law, if it was offered by their firm.
- **45%** of survey respondents feel there is an 'open door' policy or someone they can talk to in the workplace about personal or professional issues that might affect their performance
- **96%** of respondents felt their workload was generally manageable.

In my view, all staff (not just lawyers) in law firms can tell the difference between genuine workplace measures to address wellness issues and paying lip service to the issue. That is why a strong firm culture is so important. If a firm does not have a culture that permits and promotes a continued conversation about mental health conditions and permits behaviour from its people which is not consistent with a healthy workplace, then that firm's commitment to wellness issues is short of genuine.

Leaders who discuss openly how they have dealt with real people with issues or how they would deal with people with issues (whilst maintaining anonymity and confidentiality) is a powerful message for all involved. The best way to alleviate concerns is 'real evidence' that those who have revealed their vulnerability and utilized the open-door policy have found it beneficial to their career, personal development and to their career prospects.

Mary Digiglio – Managing Partner Swaab

ENDS.