

## THE AUSTRALIAN

## Mental issues affect majority in law firms

By **CHRIS MERRITT**, LEGAL AFFAIRS EDITOR  
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Depression and anxiety affect the overwhelming majority of law firm employees yet most prefer to either manage it themselves or are worried about a

The scale of the problem has been identified by a survey of 200 employees of small and medium-sized firms that found 63 per cent had experienced d had affected someone close to them in the workplace.

It also found that 85 per cent of respondents had experienced anxiety or knew it had affected someone close to them at work.

Yet 64 per cent either preferred to manage this themselves or were worried about what others might think if they asked for help.

These are the key findings from a survey of workplace wellness undertaken by Meritas Australia and New Zealand which is part of a global alliance of firms spanning 92 countries.

As well as identifying the extent of depression and anxiety, the survey also found that most respondents believed the issue of wellbeing was important and there was an open-door policy or someone with whom they could discuss how personal and professional issues were affecting their performance.

It found that 96 per cent believed the demands of their work were generally manageable and 52 per cent worked an average of between 35 and 45 hou

Mary Digiglio, who is the regional chairwoman of Meritas, said law firms had done much to build a more resilient workforce in the past 10 years but m done to encourage lawyers suffering depression and anxiety to seek help.

She was gratified by the finding that most employees were not working excessive hours and suspected this might be associated with the fact that the su with between 40 and 100 employees.

And while the high level of depression and anxiety was a matter for concern, “when you peel back the layers, there is now a lot more permission to tal said Ms Digiglio, who is also managing partner of Sydney firm Swaab.

“I suspect that statistic is the way it is because people now are more willing to talk about it and more willing to say ‘I know I can talk about this in this ridiculed;” Ms Digiglio said.

“Generally in society now there is less stigma around people getting help and less stigma around saying, ‘I have had some stress in my life over whatev the boil for a bit.”

The survey is the first snapshot of wellbeing in small to medium-sized law firms.

Melissa Higham, who is managing partner of New Zealand’s Martelli McKegg Lawyers, said the survey’s findings could help small and medium-sized fir

their efforts to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff.

She believed factors that could put lawyers at greater risk of mental illness included stress, perfectionism and a high-achiever mentality.

**CHRIS MERRITT, LEGAL AFFAIRS EDITOR**

Chris Merritt has been legal affairs editor at The Australian since 2005. He was previously at the Financial Review.