

Positive culture reducing barriers to seeking help in law firms

A landmark survey of wellness by Meritas Australia and New Zealand has revealed the majority of employees at small and medium-sized law firms feel that their mental health and wellbeing is important to their firm and that there is an open door policy which enables them to seek help.

The wellness survey provides a first-ever snapshot of wellbeing in small and medium-sized law firms, the largest category of employers in the legal sector in Australia and New Zealand.

The survey involved 200 employees at Meritas member firms, from partners through to non-legal professionals.

Respondents were asked questions about their work life, experiences with depression and anxiety, barriers to help-seeking behaviour and attitudes towards and experiences with their employer's mental health assistance program.

The wellness survey revealed a high prevalence of depression and anxiety at small and medium-sized law firms.

The survey also revealed that a positive workplace culture is among the most important factors influencing help-seeking behaviour.

A majority of respondents felt the issue of well-being was important to their employer and that there was an "open door" policy or someone they could talk to at their workplace about personal and professional issues which affected their performance.

When it comes to work life, most respondents said they found the demands of their work generally manageable.

Managing Partner of Swaab and Chair of Meritas Australia and New Zealand Regional Committee Mary Digiglio said law firms had done much to build a more resilient workforce in the past 10 years, however there was still a lot more work to be done to boost awareness and overcome barriers to help-seeking behaviour."

Stigma and a fear of reaching out remains a critical barrier that hinders many people from seeking help," Ms Digiglio said.

"We each need to take responsibility to look out for each other and continue to nurture a supportive and open culture to reduce the prevalence of mental illness in the legal profession."

Managing Partner of New Zealand-based Martelli McKegg Lawyers, Melissa Higham said the tendency of legal professionals towards perfectionism and a high-achiever mentality as well as the stress of everyday work-life including demanding workloads and high client expectations were factors that could put legal professionals at a greater risk of mental illness.

"We need to ensure that staff have adequate education and training about risk factors and how to identify if someone is experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety," Ms Higham said.

Ms Higham said the wellness survey was an important resource that could assist all small and medium-sized law firms to better direct their efforts to support the mental health and well-being of staff.

Key Statistics

Prevalence of depression and anxiety

- 63 per cent of respondents said they had experienced depression or they knew someone close to them in the workplace who had
- 85 per cent of respondents said they had experienced anxiety or they knew someone close to them in the workplace who had

Barriers to seeking help

- 38 per cent of respondents said they'd prefer to manage this themselves
- 26 per cent said they were worried about asking for help or what others might think of them
- 21 per cent said nothing would prevent them from accessing help
- Most respondents said if their firm offered more dialogue, resources, training, and/or initiatives around well-being they would be likely to use them

Workplace culture

- 83 per cent of respondents said well-being was an important issue at their firm
- 45 per cent said they felt there was an open door policy at work or they could talk to someone at their workplace about personal and professional issues which affected their performance

Work life

- 52 per cent of respondents said they worked on average between 35 hours to 45 hours per week
- 21 per cent said they worked between 45 hours to 55 hours
- 94 per cent of respondents said they found the demands of their work generally manageable

About Meritas

Founded in 1990, Meritas is the premier global alliance of independent law firms. As an invitation-only alliance, Meritas firms must adhere to our uncompromising service standards to retain membership status. With 183 top-ranking law firms spanning 92 countries, Meritas delivers exceptional legal knowledge, personal attention and proven value to clients worldwide. Media

Media Contact

Marianna Papadakis
marianna@mtmm.net.au
0414 729 006