

# Stress, workplace culture and risk

## How a healthier workplace culture can help reduce the risk of claims

The traditional model in which a law practice operates is not always conducive to strong health and wellbeing practices. In many cases it can act as a barrier. Generally, solicitors must account for their working day and maintain a certain level of billable hours or targets to achieve “success”. Heavy workloads, tight deadlines and demanding clients can create a pressure cooker effect that can be difficult to escape.

### **The pressure cooker effect**

In a pressure cooker atmosphere, stress and anxiety are compounded. Coping mechanisms such as alcohol consumption and poor diet often emerge and only serve to perpetuate any stress and anxiety already present. Constant pressure is not sustainable and generally something has to give for some respite to occur. Technical errors or lapses in judgment can result and Lawcover often sees these issues manifest in claims, especially through simple errors such as missing key clauses from commercial contracts or missed limitation periods.

### **The knock-on effect**

Ongoing stress and pressure can have a negative impact on other employees. Even clients can sense when a solicitor is stressed or overstretched and employees can take on the stress of one another which compounds the problem and creates a negative work environment. Absenteeism and employee turnover may increase, stretching the capacity of others taking on the work. This has a knock-on effect, for example, in not ensuring there is time for file reviews or training and supervision of junior solicitors.

### **Tackle workplace culture at its roots**

Improving culture, health and wellbeing is more than just conducting an annual webinar. While this creates awareness it does not tackle the root cause of stress and workplace pressure. Create a long-term strategy and take the time to identify and investigate key pressure points. Put practical measures in place to tackle these and support individuals. When employees feel supported and know that there are systems and

structures in place, the barriers preventing healthy practices from occurring begin to break down and mental health and wellbeing becomes more accessible and acceptable.

## Engage employees

It may take time, but employees need to be heard. Engaging in a dialogue with colleagues can help identify their needs rather than presuming to know what those needs are. Once they are identified, enabling employees to contribute to strategies or policies that are aimed at improving their health and wellbeing is generally the most likely means of guaranteeing that the policies achieve what they set out to.

Ultimately a healthier and happier law practice is one that is likely to be more productive and provide a better and more reliable service to clients.

Improving the culture, health and wellbeing of a law practice certainly plays its part in helping to minimise the factors which create an ideal breeding ground for errors, oversights, and claims. It is not much of a stretch to view health and wellbeing as a significant risk management issue that needs to be addressed.

Visit Lawcover's Risk Management Resource Centre for more information on health and wellbeing in practice, including [The Resilient Lawyer](#), Risk on Air podcasts and Short Minutes videos.

If you or someone you know isn't travelling too well, contact the Solicitor Outreach Service (SOS) on **1800 592 296**.

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