
Analysis

Law firms must reduce stress for younger lawyers

PREMIUM



Increased competition between law firms is piling pressure on young lawyers for whom routine 12-hour days are taking a toll, writes Howard Hymanson

Working for 12 hours a day for days on end with little respite over the weekend is commonplace for many lawyers, especially younger ones. It is too easy to lose sight of how deeply ingrained these unhealthy working patterns have become. And lawyers often fail to recognise that they are falling ill and that the demands of the job are to blame.

In this environment, lawyers often suffer in silence for too long, rather than obtaining medical assistance or taking steps to alleviate the pressure.

Of course, a career in the legal profession is rarely a realistic option for those seeking a stress-free life. Given the rewarding nature of the profession and the

responsibilities inherent in the job, a high level of day-to-day stress is to be expected and is indeed the thing that many lawyers thrive on.

However, an increasing problem for those dealing with workplace issues is the rising number of particularly younger lawyers for whom manageable stress is tipping over into psychiatric illness. Depression, anxiety disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome and heart conditions are not uncommon.

Since the launch of the first World Mental Health Day in 1992, the rise in the number of lawyers struggling to cope reflects to an extent the growth in mental illness among the general working population. More people are entering the world of work carrying a pre-existing vulnerability. Often pressures outside work also contribute to the development of psychiatric illness.

However, these societal issues are not the only factors at play. Lawyers are often overworked and some firms have to demand more of their lawyers simply to maintain current profit levels. Service level expectations from clients only increase and technological advances as well as internationalisation mean that there is little respite.

Few lawyers take action, let alone speak up about their stress levels. Taking a stand can be, or is seen to be, career limiting. Where claims are made, many firms will settle to keep matters confidential. That means that individual cases are dealt with, but the underlying cycle continues and too many individuals are forced to leave the profession.

In response, more firms have taken measures to attempt to manage ill health and meet their duty of care, such as providing occupational health physicians, “wellbeing” programmes and stress-management training courses.

There are more steps that firms can and perhaps should take. Individual targets need to be reviewed more flexibly and human resource departments need greater senior management support to stand up to those who take advantage of lawyers prepared to work themselves to the bone.

Working hours should be more proactively monitored and greater use should be made of trained resource managers who can intervene on a lawyer's behalf, without repercussions on career progression. And crucially, more needs to be done to manage annual hourly billing targets at some firms

Increased awareness of mental health issues is good -- but awareness must be coupled with greater action.

Howard Hymanson is a partner at Harbottle & Lewis, a London law firm