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Wellness and the Great Awakening

It's Not Just a Buzzword Anymore

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Why There is a Need for a Wellness Program?

As John Williams Davis, an American politician and lawyer, said, “True, we [lawyers] build no bridges. We raise no towers.... [But] we take up other [people’s] burdens and by our efforts we make possible” a peaceful life in a peaceful state. Many lawyers have substantial responsibilities that often have major consequences for clients. The demands that flow from this privilege can mount and threaten our well-being. When signs of distress are ignored, the quality of work and life can deteriorate.

This has been and remains to be an issue in the legal and business communities. A 2016 study of nearly 13,000 currently practicing lawyers found that between 21 and 36 percent qualify as problem drinkers, approximately 28 percent experienced some level of depressive symptoms, and 18 percent experienced elevated anxiety. There also is evidence of suicide, work addiction, sleep deprivation, job dissatisfaction, a “diversity crisis” at the top of firms, work-life conflict, incivility, and chronic loneliness.ⁱ

Leaders have to recognize that changing their business’ culture is the right thing to do, and it is good for business. Poor mental health on the job hurts the bottom line, and it reflects in recruitment and retention. Younger professionals and those currently in schools prioritize mental health, and some of it stems from being generational.

Defining Well-Being

The National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being defines lawyer well-being as a continuous process whereby lawyers seek to thrive in each of the following areas: emotional health, occupational pursuits, creative or intellectual endeavors, sense of spirituality or greater purpose in life, physical health, and social connections with others. Lawyer well-being is part of a lawyer’s ethical duty of competence. It includes lawyers’ ability to make healthy, positive work/life choices to assure not only a quality of life within their families and communities, but also to help them make responsible decisions for their clients.ⁱⁱ This concept applies to professional workplace environments in most industries.

The Benefits of a Wellness Program

There are many benefits to creating, maintaining, and evolving a sustainable wellness strategy. A successful wellness program can promote some of the following:

- Wellness programs improve employee health behaviors – Includes getting proper sleep, physical activity, eating a healthy diet, not smoking, and moderate alcohol intake. Healthy behaviors lead to lower health risks, thereby leading to less chronic disease which results in lower healthcare costs for employees and employers.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Wellness programs improve productivity – Poor employee productivity can be defined as physically being at work but not working. When employees are at work but not fully functioning, more mistakes are made, and time and money are wasted. Wellness programs that focus on helping employees have good health behaviors will eventually have an impact on productivity.^{iv}
- Wellness programs can decrease absenteeism – Some reasons why wellness programs can reduce absenteeism, among others, are employees with good health behaviors and employees who can control stress.^v
- Wellness programs can improve employee recruitment and retention – Employers offering wellness programs show employees they are important and valued. Feeling valued and cared for also makes the employee more likely to recommend their employer to friends and associates, helping the company

Wellness Strategies in The Legal Community

recruit additional talent.^{vi}

- Wellness programs build and help sustain high employee morale – Employees have high employee morale when they are allowed to be creative, solve problems, feel safe and appreciated, develop self-esteem, and achieve personal goals and aspirations. Employees are happy when they have a sense of control over their lives and their health.^{vii}
- Improved company image – When a company invests in employee wellbeing, it builds a reputation among competitors and potential new hires.

When it comes to retention, professionals do not stay with employers that make them unhappy. When they leave, they take their talents and book of business and institutional knowledge with them, and businesses lose the investment they have made in these people. That employer then needs to recruit new professionals to handle the workload, maintain existing business and cultivate new business, which takes time and money. Employees that participate in wellness programs derive more satisfaction from their workplace and are more inclined to take ownership of their own assignments and give back to the employer. A comprehensive wellness program is going to improve employee health and improve the firm's bottom line. With an effective wellness program, employees' lives will improve, and it will help drive the success of the organization.

Achieving Wellness Within The Business Community

Wellness is not a one-size-fits-all concept because different people need different strategies to help them feel healthy and perform well. The culture and mindset of law firms continue to change, but many law firm environments make it difficult for legal professionals to achieve a level of wellness. Again, these barriers exist in businesses in many industries. Education, training, and development will be an essential component of employers' well-being initiatives. Well-being programs should focus on fostering cultures and individual competencies that support employees' optimal health, motivation, and performance.

The Individual Approach

For the individual, the path to wellness is a very personal journey, and you have to practice different strategies before finding a routine that best suits you. Wellness requires a holistic approach that touches various aspects of an individual's life to craft a more sustainable and healthy work-life balance. This may include some of the following factors:

- Nutrition – Preparing healthy meals or consuming healthier take-out options as opposed to fast and convenient foods can greatly improve an individual's health.^{viii}
- Mindfulness – Taking time for self-reflection is an important strategy for overall wellness that can be achieved through meditation, yoga, prayer, etc. There are many apps to help with guided meditation or calming sounds.^{ix}
- Physical activity – Studies show that sitting at a desk day after day increases the risk for heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and high blood pressure. Physical activity improves physical health while also strengthening mental wellness.^x
- Mental health – Many professionals do not feel safe seeking assistance or talking about their feelings out of fear that it could have a detrimental effect on their careers. This is why leadership support is necessary to promote discussions of wellness so individuals feel empowered and secure about reaching out for the help they need.

The Business Approach

Wellness policies have become a common expectation among job seekers, so companies can better situate themselves competitively to attract new talent. It promotes the culture and values of your business. Some of the ways companies can approach wellness strategies are as follows:

- Wellness events and fairs – Providing a routine event for employees to encourage participating in wellness which shows that employers care and view their employees to be valuable.^{xi}
- Provide wellness education – Develop a company-wide program that provides education and encourages conversation about health and wellness.
- Enlist leaders – Leadership commitment, support, and role modeling of desired behaviors helps drive organizational change.^{xii}
- Launch a well-being committee – Committee should include management, associates, HR, or any other relevant employees to represent all stakeholders.^{xiii}
- Define well-being – This subject may mean very different things to different people, so it is important to define well-being that best tailors to the business.^{xiv}
- Conduct a needs assessment – The purpose of this is to identify gaps between the desired and current state. The assessment might include stakeholder interviews or surveys to understand challenges to well-being that dominate an organization.^{xv}
- Identify priorities – Setting a narrow set of priorities and attainable goals can lead to accumulating “small wins”, which builds credibility and momentum.^{xvi}
- Create and execute an action plan – Discussion of concrete goals, obstacles to achieving them, and pathways for overcoming obstacles, and consider the sustainability of the program long-term.
- Create a well-being policy – Conveys that the organization prioritizes and values its employees as people and establishes expectations and intentions.^{xvii}
- Continually measure, evaluate, & improve – To develop and improve the program it will be important to continually evaluate the success of individual program elements such as attendance, participation, satisfaction, etc.^{xviii}

Well-being efforts must extend beyond detection and treatment and address root causes of poor health.^{xix} All stakeholders should participate in the development and delivery of educational materials and programming. The path to employee well-being starts with a viable action plan and continues to change with landscape of the business community.

ⁱ Patrick R. Krill, Ryan Johnson, and Linda Albert, *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2016, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4736291/pdf/adm-10-46.pdf>

ⁱⁱ *The path To Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations For Positive Change*, The Report Of The National Task Force On Lawyer Well-Being, August 2017, at 9, available at <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Steve Aldana, *The 7 Best Reasons To Have A Wellness Program: Benefits Of Wellness 2022*, Jan 6, 2023, available at <https://www.wellsteps.com/blog/2020/01/02/reasons-to-have-a-wellness-program-benefits-of-wellness/>

^{iv} Id.

^v Id.

^{vi} Id.

^{vii} Id.

^{viii} Id.

^{ix} Anne Brafford, Well-Being Toolkit For Lawyers And Legal Employers, 2020, available at https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/lawyer_assistance/lsc_colap_well-being_toolkit_for_lawyers_legal_employers.pdf

^x Id.

^{xi} Id.

^{xii} Id at 10.

^{xiii} Id at 10.

^{xiv} Id at 10.

^{xv} Id at 10.

^{xvi} Id at 10.

^{xvii} Id at 10.

^{xviii} Id at 10.

^{xix} The path To Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations For Positive Change, The Report Of The National Task Force On Lawyer Well-Being, August 2017, at 18, available at <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>