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Want mentally healthy workers? Make them take the stairs

A large law practice finds work environment and habits are big influence on the mental health of staff, writes Katie Walsh.



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Physical health is linked to mental health, and law firms are among those picking up the cues. Supplied

by Katie Walsh

Want mentally healthy workers? Make them take the stairs.

What might sound flippant is part of a growing trend of employers boosting the mental health of stressed, anxiety-ridden workers through a better physical environment, based on sound research that shows a positive productivity and psychological impact.

Law firm Minter Ellison is among them, having redesigned its Sydney office this year: staff are housed in light, open spaces that are low on walls, they must pass an internal stairway adjacent to vast windows with stunning views before reaching the lifts, luring them to use their legs instead, and they are encouraged to work in activity-based areas rather than closed offices. Healthier minds might not have been the primary motivator but it's a critical side-effect.

"It's interrupting the workflow – you're breaking up your work day with movement," said Mental Health Association NSW workplace health promotion network co-ordinator Sharon Leadbetter.

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King & Wood Mallesons partner John Canning is driving the firm to support mental health. Sahlan Hayes

"It's moving your bin further away, taking the stairs ... it improves concentration and reduces fatigue, which affects your work output.

"The physical environment impacts in lots of ways, whether it's ergonomic or light and space or collaboration, it depends what a workplace is wanting to achieve but there's research to show links across all of those."

"It's about happier employees. Keeping people sedentary for hours is not helping. There really isn't any excuse any more for businesses to say they can't do anything. Don't wait for people to be unwell."

One of the most common misconceptions that people face is that mental health means mental illness, Ms Leadbetter said.

"Sometimes people come up to me and say 'mental health, I don't have that'.

"I say 'you do... we all do'. It's like physical health. You move up and down your whole life.

"The aim is to teach people skills so if they do fall, they can bounce back."

Law, accounting, finance firms: all have bad rates of mental health, she says.

Minters is among the more than 100 law firms, universities and others signed up to the landmark [Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation guidelines, an initiative to tackle severe levels of depression in the legal profession that has had a dramatic uptake in its fledgling first year.](#)

Last week, it won a Mental Health Association NSW award for excellence in addressing mental health in the workplace.

Sydney and Newcastle-based McCabes Lawyers is among signatories and its initiatives extend beyond the realm of prioritising mentoring and work-life balance, to encouraging team sports, having a masseuse regularly visit, and working in an open, light-flooded work space that breaks down barriers between staff.

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breaking down barriers between junior and more senior members of staff [and allowing] natural light to flood the building," says principal Terry McCabe.

The firm has seen its staff turnover drop dramatically in recent years following efforts to boost mental health. It recently hosted the launch of a guide, *The Wellness Doctrines*, to help law students, graduates and young lawyers to create a healthy working life, written by lawyer Jerome Doraisamy following his own dark period.

Fellow signatory King & Wood Mallesons is training staff to spot colleagues in need in order to intervene and prevent issues, as well as providing the tools to recognise and deal with their own issues.

Partner John Canning is a key driver of the global firm's efforts, largely motivated by his own experience - he has bipolar disorder - and that of others. In the past year, he has been touched, directly or indirectly, by six suicides.

"I had a really bad time, but I got through that and life is good. That's only because I have a good support network - I understand my medication, I exercise, I don't drink, I talk a lot with my family.

"I'm lucky in a sense - I've got resources, I knew where to go. I want people to have the same experience I had."

Part of the initiative is to enhance communication - and not just between team members.

"Clients will say 'I want the document on Friday night'.

"I'll ask if they're going to read it over the weekend. Would a junior lawyer come in and say that? No, but we teach them to say that - we teach them to talk to clients and meet their deadlines, but so that we all communicate."

Mental Health Week runs nationwide until the end of the week.

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