



MAINTAINING HIGH PERFORMANCE AT LOW RISK

Achieving Work–Life Balance in Legal Practice

22 April 2026
12:00 - 14:00 CET
Zoom



Co-funded by the EU



MAINTAINING HIGH PERFORMANCE AT LOW RISK

Achieving Work–Life Balance in Legal Practice

Professor Richard Collier, Newcastle University, UK

Work-life balance, professional sustainability and young lawyers: why is culture change around wellbeing in the legal profession so hard to achieve?

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INTRODUCTION: THE FOCUS OF THIS PAPER



To be a good lawyer, one has to be a healthy lawyer. Sadly, our profession is falling short when it comes to well-being ... studies ... reveal that too many lawyers and law students experience chronic stress and high rates of depression ... the current state of lawyers' health cannot support a profession dedicated to client service and dependent on the public trust. The legal profession is already struggling [and] *we are at a crossroads.*

American Bar Association (2018) Report from the National Taskforce on Lawyer Wellbeing (my emphasis)

I: WHAT DO WE KNOW? EXPLORING THE RESEARCH BASE ON LAWYER WELLBEING



The Trajectory:

> the *systemic* nature of these problems, embedded within legal cultures, structures, practices and ideas about law's 'ways of thinking'

> providing advice and support is no longer enough – the need to create mentally healthy workplaces and rethink law's ways of working and professional culture



Ten 'Wellbeing Principles' : International Bar Association (2021) *Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study*

<https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-report-Mental-Wellbeing-in-the-Legal-Profession-A-Global-Study>

- (1) Mental wellbeing matters
- (2) Mental wellbeing is not weakness
- (3) Raising awareness is fundamental
- (4) A commitment to change and regular continuing assessment
- (5) Policies matter
- (6) It is essential to maintain an open dialogue and communication;
- (7) *Address systemic problems **
- (8) *Recognise intersectionalities **
- (9) Share good practice and
- (10) Learn from others

Digging deeper ... Recurring themes in the law's wellness literature



Wellbeing as a 'lightening rod' for a wide range of concerns about the changing nature of 'life in the law'...

Some examples

The legal sector is at a turning point. Our research highlights that people in the sector are facing significant strain, raising urgent questions about long-term sustainability. Unless decisive action is taken now, the profession risks losing people, further erosion of mental health and wellbeing and reduced public trust and confidence.



LawCare (2025) *Life in the Law Report*

<https://lawcare.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Life-in-the-Law-2025.pdf>>)

II YOUNG LAWYERS, SUSTAINABILITY AND WORK-LIFE: THREE THEMES OR QUESTIONS



1. Context: Situating the Law's Wellbeing Dynamic and Sustainability

A: Legal System and Jurisdiction

B: Area of Practice

2. Beyond Lawyer *Ill*-being: Wellness and Professional Identity

3. Wellbeing, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: The Intersectionality Question

International Bar Association (2026) *Raising the Bar: Women in Law Project* (launched March 2026) global report



6 recommendations:

1. The need for structural and cultural change around workplace initiatives
2. Embedding flexible work practices
3. Building sustainable career pathways for women
4. Supporting women's wellbeing
5. Recognising and supporting life stages and caring responsibilities
6. Support for solo practitioners, smaller workplaces and women in chambers

Gender balance has become more of a generational issue as younger men cry out to be able to spend more time with their children without that being a career limiting move and young women are fed up with unhelpful assumptions and bias. The challenge of intersectionality in the workplace also adds to the barriers faced by BAME, LGBT+ and disabled individuals. *We want to bring about true equality for all ... This will take involvement and commitment from all of us.* We believe that there is a compelling moral case and a business imperative for gender balance.

Christina Blacklaws, cited in Law Society *Women in Leadership in Law Toolkit* (London: Law Society, 2018), 2, my emphasis,





CONCLUDING REMARKS



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Michala Plachká & Katarína Čechová

Practical experiences from national Bars: initiatives and good practices

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The Human Factor in Legal Practice

- The most important tool in law → **the human mind**
- Mental health → **condition for doing our job well**
- Responsibility → **we carry the final decisions**
- Shift in the profession → **from hours to judgment**
- Limits of individual resilience → **system matters**
- A shared challenge → **role of CCBE & cooperation between Bars**

Introduction



Practical Experiences from National Bars

- Role of Bars in supporting sustainable legal practice
- From regulation → to wellbeing, performance & retention
- Focus: practical, scalable initiatives



Why This Matters



- Legal profession = high performance, high pressure
- Risks: burnout, attrition, mental health issues
- Especially critical for:
 - young lawyers
 - women lawyers
 - small firm practitioners



Key message:

Maintaining performance today requires systemic support, not just individual resilience.

Typical Bar Initiatives (International Perspective)



- Wellbeing & mental health programs
- Work–life balance training
- Mentoring & coaching schemes
- Flexible career path advocacy
- Diversity & inclusion platforms
- Practice management education
- Peer-support & confidential helplines



Czech Bar: Practical Approach



1. Structure: Making Sustainability Possible

- Trainees' Section → **voice of young lawyers**
- Part-time traineeships → **flexibility in career paths**
- Digitalisation & remote participation → **accessibility & less admin**

2. Community: Making It Manageable

- Conferences & discussions → **open, honest sharing**
- Professional meetups & Women in Law → **safe spaces**
- sharing real experiences: pressure, burnout, mistakes

Czech Bar: Practical Approach



3. Meaning: Making It Worth It

- Focus on purpose in legal work
 - *Lawyers to Children's Homes*: practical legal help, real-life impact
- reconnecting with **why we do this profession**

Slovak Bar: Current Approach



- Traditional focus:
 - Continuing legal education
 - Seminars & webinars (including wellbeing topics)
- Increasing focus on:
 - support for specific groups
 - sustainability of legal careers

Targeted Platforms (Key Strength)



Women Lawyers Platform

Young Lawyers Platform

→ act as *innovation hubs* within the Bar

Role:

- identify real-life challenges
- design practical, relevant content
- create community & peer support



Recent Practical Initiatives (Examples)



- Webinar: *Managing emotionally demanding client situations*
- Webinar: *Supporting mothers in legal practice*

Impact:

- addressing real-life pressure points
- normalizing discussion of challenges
- sharing practical coping strategies



Mentoring Programme (In Development)



- Structured mentoring for young lawyers
- Focus on:
 - career development
 - resilience
 - ethical and sustainable practice

Expected benefits:

- smoother transition into profession
- reduced early-career burnout
- stronger professional identity



Education Reform (Key Priority)



Expanding legal education beyond law:

New focus areas:

- law firm management
- remuneration systems
- leadership & motivation
- managing teams & young lawyers

Key idea:

Good lawyers ≠ automatically good managers



Closing: A shared Challenge

- Wellbeing \neq comfort
- Shared Challenges, Shared Solutions (Czech–Slovak example)
- Reality check
- What wellbeing in law really is

What Works (Lessons Learned)



- Small, targeted initiatives can have strong impact
- Peer-to-peer formats are highly effective
- Relevance > volume of activities
- Institutional support gives legitimacy to wellbeing topics



What More Can Bars Do



- Mental health support lines / confidential counselling
- Burnout prevention guidelines
- Flexible work recommendations
- Return-to-work programs (e.g. after parental leave)
- Leadership training for partners
- Data collection on lawyer wellbeing





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Desi Vlahos, Co-Chair IBA Professional Wellbeing Commission

**An International Perspective on Lawyer Wellbeing:
Drafting a New Professional Standard**

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Drafting a New Professional Standard



We regulate:

- Competence
- Conduct
- Client duties
- Conflicts

Assumes practitioners
can meet these
obligations

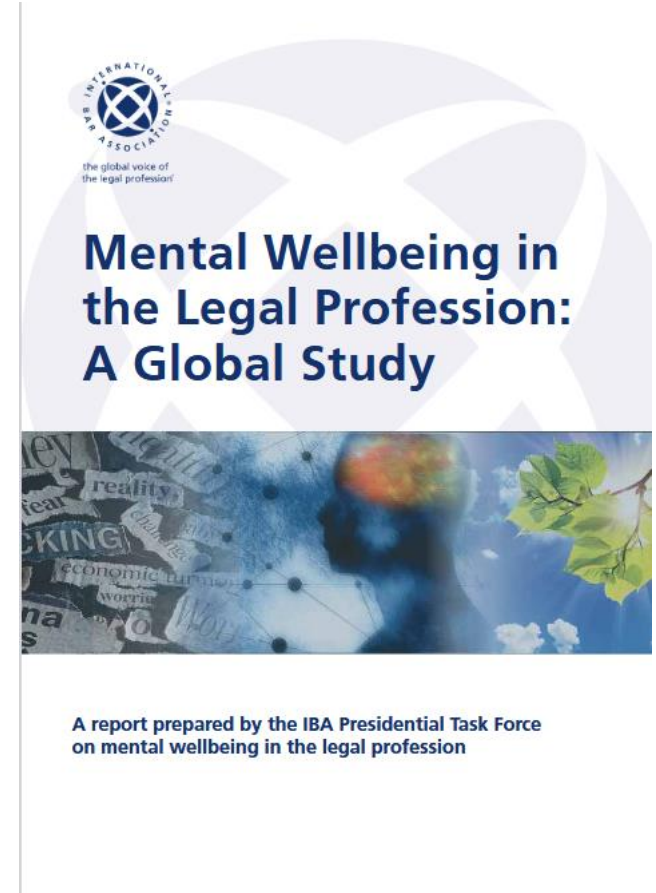
But not the conditions in which work is performed.

Working conditions: IBA Global Study (2021)



- 3,000+ legal professionals
- 50+ jurisdictions
- 41% report negative impact on wellbeing
- 49% (ages 24–29)
- High workload
- Time pressure
- Unpredictable hours
- Low control

High demand + low control + unpredictability = highest risk pattern





If risk is identifiable...what would it look like as a professional standard?

Let's draft....



A legal practitioner...



A legal practitioner, and where applicable the organisation within which they practise...



...must take reasonable steps...



...to identify, assess, and manage risks of psychological harm...



...arising from the allocation and management of work...



A legal practitioner, and where applicable the organisation within which they practise, must take reasonable steps to identify, assess, and manage risks of psychological harm arising from the allocation and management of work, so far as reasonably practicable.



What this means legally

A **positive duty** model:

- Identify hazards
- Assess risks
- Implement controls

Workload becomes a managed risk domain

Supervision extends to workload, not just output



CPD is not the answer

- Mandatory across the profession
- Focused on individual capability
- Does not regulate workload or work design

A training tool — not a systems control



Why this sits in professional regulation?

Competence is context-dependent

- Workload affects judgment
- Pressure affects capacity
- Systems affect ethical risk

Professional obligations assume workable conditions

The gap?



Occupational Health and Safety Law	Professional Regulation
Regulates systems of work	Regulates individual conduct
Focuses on workplace structures, policies, and environment	Focuses on behaviour and responsibilities of professionals
Manages psychosocial risk (e.g. stress, burnout, bullying)	Addresses ethical standards, discipline, and misconduct
Concerned with preventing harm at a system level	Concerned with accountability at an individual level

- No translation between the two
- But they describe the same working reality

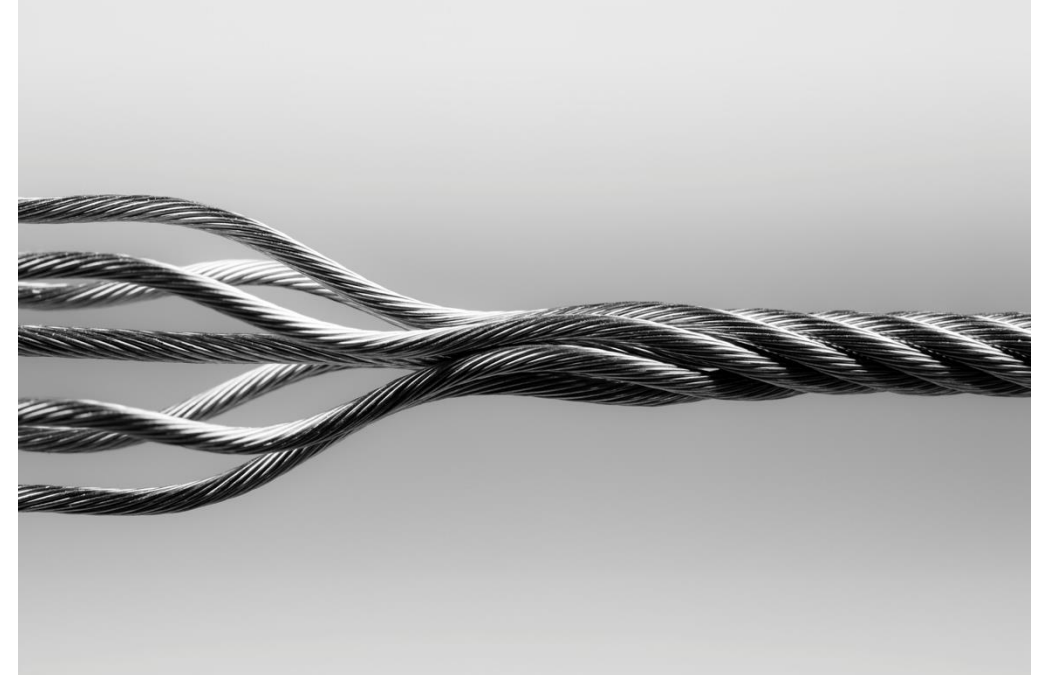
Stress Test

Key challenge:

- No clear thresholds
- Distributed responsibility (*attribution*)
- System-level risk (*enforceability*)

But foreseeability is well established

This is a drafting problem, not an evidentiary one



Systems and Data



Highest risk configuration:

- High workload
- Low control
- Unpredictability

Interaction matters more than volume



This is a structural pattern, not an exception



Who is most affected

49% (ages 24–29)

- Early career exposure
- Lower control
- Higher allocation intensity

Risk is not evenly distributed

Regulatory context: WHS Frameworks (International)



European Union

Safety and Health at Work Directive

Council Directive 89/391/EEC

Preventative, risk-based duty across all aspects of work

United Kingdom

Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (UK)

Broad employer duty; guidance addresses work-related stress

Australia

Psychosocial hazards formally regulated under WHS frameworks

Model Work Health and Safety Regulations 2011 (as adopted and amended)

Requires management of risks (e.g. workload, control, support)

Canada

National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety (voluntary)

Canada Labour Code (federal) – duties re harassment and violence

Sweden / Nordic jurisdictions

Organisational and social work environment regulation

Explicit focus on workload, working time, and bullying

Netherlands

Psychosocial workload (PSA) regulated in legislation

Includes stress, harassment, and workplace aggression

**Work design is
now a regulated
risk domain**

**But not in legal
professional
regulation**



IBA Mental Health and Wellbeing in Legal Workplaces: A Global Guide (emerging framework)



- Operational risk framework
- Psychosocial risk identification
- Work allocation + supervision focus



Translates WHS logic into legal practice settings

The Integrated Approach



ILO + WHO frameworks:

- Prevention
- Early intervention
- Organisational response

Shift from individual resilience → system design

Work itself becomes the intervention point

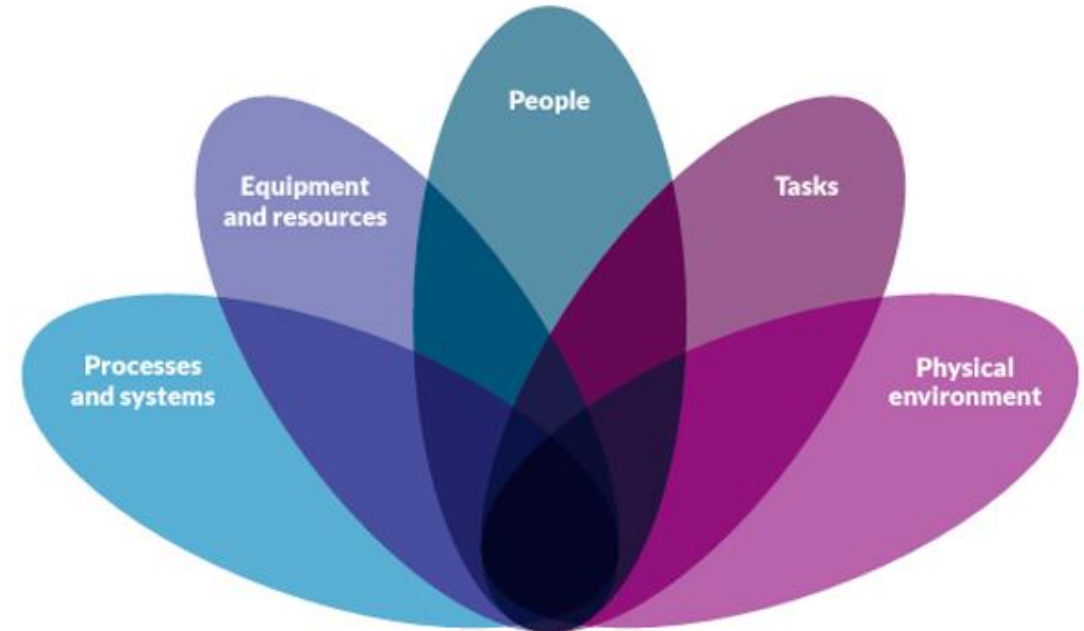


Figure: Integrated approach to workplace mental health

Good work design

Good work design = risk control

- Control over workload
- Predictability
- Clear prioritisation
- Effective supervision



Design determines sustainability of legal work



Clause 3

A legal practitioner, and where applicable the organisation within which they practise, must take reasonable steps to identify, assess, and manage risks of psychological harm arising from the allocation and management of work, so far as reasonably practicable.



What is implicit becomes explicit.

Once explicit, it becomes harder to ignore.