Mental Health and Wellbeing in Legal Workplaces: A Global Guide

A practical framework for managing workplace risks and supporting sustainable performance

IBA Professional Wellbeing Commission

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Foreword

Work-related psychosocial risks are becoming one of the most significant occupational safety and health challenges in today's world of work. According to new International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates released in 2026, more than 840,000 deaths and nearly 45 million disability-adjusted life years are lost each year due to work-related psychosocial risk factors. The consequences extend well beyond workers' mental and physical health, affecting organisational productivity and the wider economy.

The legal profession faces particular pressures, including high workloads combined with tight deadlines, limited autonomy and control in the face of demanding client expectations, exposure to traumatic or distressing material and emotionally demanding work, and, in some settings, workplace bullying and harassment. In a profession where workers carry significant responsibilities and are expected to exercise sound judgement under pressure, failing to address these conditions can undermine their ability to work safely and sustainably. As this Guide highlights, the consequences may also extend beyond individual wellbeing to professional standards, the quality and integrity of legal practice and, ultimately, confidence in the rule of law. Addressing psychosocial risks in legal workplaces is therefore not only an occupational safety and health priority, but also an ethical and professional imperative.

Too often, efforts to address psychosocial risks have focused primarily on individual coping and support, through measures such as mindfulness or wellness programmes, or have responded only once problems have already emerged. The ILO's 2026 report, *The psychosocial working environment: Global developments and pathways for action*, places prevention at the centre. As the report makes clear, and as this Guide itself echoes, effective action requires addressing hazards at their source by focusing on the identifiable and modifiable features of work that shape the psychosocial working environment: how jobs are designed, how work is organised and managed, and the broader policies, practices and procedures that govern work.

Individual awareness, access to support and timely responses when workers experience difficulties all have an important role. However, they should complement, rather than replace, preventive action on the conditions in which work is performed. The priority must be to identify psychosocial hazards, assess the associated risks and, so far as is reasonably practicable, eliminate or reduce those risks at their source through organisational and collective measures.

This Guide offers concrete examples of preventive measures addressing the conditions in which legal work is performed and provides organisations, whatever their starting point, with a structured way to assess current practice and identify practical next steps toward stronger psychosocial risk management, better work design and greater integration of psychosocial risk prevention into organisational decision-making.

Within this preventive approach lies a further opportunity, where the goal moves beyond only preventing harm. When work is well designed, adequately resourced and effectively managed, the psychosocial working environment can itself support workers' health and wellbeing, engagement and sustainable performance. Creating healthy psychosocial working environments can therefore provide a foundation for stronger and more sustainable organisations.

This Guide offers a practical resource for legal organisations seeking to strengthen healthy psychosocial working environments and create conditions in which people can work safely, sustainably and with dignity. Its launch is also an opportunity to encourage continued dialogue, learning and collaboration across the profession, and to help ensure that psychosocial risk prevention becomes an integral part of the future of safe and healthy work.

Manal Azzi

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Acknowledgement

The development of *Mental Health and Wellbeing in Legal Workplaces: A Global Guide* reflects a shared commitment to addressing some of the most persistent and complex challenges within the legal profession. It brings together years of experience, insight and collaboration across disciplines, grounded in the recognition that mental health at work is shaped not only by individuals, but by the way work itself is designed, led and experienced.

We wish to acknowledge with sincere gratitude the many individuals whose expertise and generosity have shaped this work. In particular, we thank Dr Kathryn Page of byMany and Professor Tony LaMontagne, together with Ebony Melzak of Deakin University and Peter Kelly of Being Real, whose contributions have been instrumental in informing its direction. We thank Dr Carlo Caponecchia for his early contribution in speaking to the European Regional Working Party at a formative stage of this initiative.

We are equally grateful to members of the IBA Law Firm Human Resources Working Group, whose leadership and practical insights have helped ensure this Guide is grounded in organisational reality.

Our thanks extend to the IBA Wellbeing Commission for its vision and commitment, and in particular to Sara Carnegie, Director of Legal Projects at the IBA, whose guidance and dedication have been central to bringing this work to fruition.

This Guide is intended to do more than inform; it is designed to support a deliberate rethinking of how legal workplaces function, recognising that psychological health and safety, sustainability and performance are not competing priorities, but are fundamentally interconnected, and that the quality of work is inseparable from the conditions in which it is done.

As Co-Chairs, we are proud to present this work and deeply grateful to all those whose insight, commitment and collaboration have made it possible.

Lucinda Soon and **Desi Vlahos**

Co-Chairs, IBA Professional Wellbeing Commission

Introduction

All workers have a fundamental right to a safe and healthy workplace.[1] Supporting mental health is essential to uphold this right and aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 3 (good health and wellbeing) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth). Organisations are expected to minimise risk at its source through the way work is designed, led and resourced, supported by effective systems, culture and safe work design, with individual supports playing a complementary role.

For the legal profession, creating healthy workplaces is particularly urgent. The International Bar Association's (IBA) *Global Mental Wellbeing Study* (the Global Study) reported an average wellbeing score of 51 per cent among legal professionals, below the World Health Organization-Five (WHO-5) clinical threshold.[2]

These findings reflect decades of research showing high stress, burnout, anxiety and depression across the profession worldwide.

This Guide has been developed to help legal organisations foster healthier workplaces, supporting both their people and the long-term sustainability and integrity of the profession. It is aimed at HR professionals, firm leaders and managing partners, providing a clear, practical pathway to build supportive, resilient environments. While the guide recognises the importance of individual awareness, leadership capability and personal agency, its primary focus is on organisational structures, systems, culture and work design as the foundation for prevention.

It also responds to the 2024 IBA member survey,[3] which found low awareness of workplace wellbeing, limited engagement and challenges integrating wellbeing into organisational strategy. Strengthening workplace mental wellbeing is both an ethical and legal responsibility as well as a strategic

1 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (International Labour Organization, amended 2022).

2 Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (IBA, 2021), available at: www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-report-Mental-Wellbeing-in-the-Legal-Profession-A-Global-Study.

3 Workplace Wellbeing Survey 2024 Analysis and Discussion (IBA Professional Wellbeing Commission, 2025), available at: www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-Professional-Wellbeing-Commission-Survey-Results-2024.

opportunity. Evidence shows that healthier workplaces improve retention, productivity, decision-making and long-term organisational resilience. Embedding wellbeing into organisational strategy ensures firms remain competitive, sustainable and future-ready.

The Guide is structured to:

1. Explain why workplace mental wellbeing matters, the risks of inaction and the benefits of proactive strategies.
2. Summarise common risk factors affecting legal professionals' mental health, based on decades of research.
3. Introduce a psychosocial risk management approach, emphasising primary prevention through organisational controls, governance and work design, with secondary and individual-level supports alongside.

A practical and flexible framework is provided, recognising the unique needs and challenges of each organisation. It aligns with the WHO's workplace mental health guidelines and the WHO/International Labour Organization (ILO) joint policy brief.[4] Each step is presented in an accessible, actionable format, from securing leadership commitment and understanding current needs, to developing a comprehensive action plan and regularly monitoring progress, offering a clear path to safer, healthier and more resilient workplaces in law.

Workplace wellbeing in the legal profession matters

Traditional approaches often frame wellbeing as an individual responsibility, focused on achieving 'work-life balance' and supported primarily through perks, benefits or wellness programmes. This perspective treats work and life as separate, and assumes wellbeing can be addressed outside the way work itself is structured. While prevention is critical, it is equally important to ensure appropriate response strategies are in place when hazards or issues arise, including timely and effective responses when workers show signs of distress.

A more effective approach recognises that work is a key determinant of wellbeing. How work is designed, led and resourced, including workload, supervision, expectations, autonomy and workplace norms, not only influences mental health outcomes but actively shapes overall wellbeing. Organisations therefore share responsibility for creating conditions that enable people to perform sustainably. In this context, wellbeing is not an optional benefit but a function of organisational systems, leadership, and culture.[5]

In this Guide, mental wellbeing refers to mental, emotional and psychosocial health in the context of legal practice. This includes wellbeing at work regardless of its source, recognising that personal and work-related factors are often interconnected. The focus is on how these factors influence lawyers' capacity to perform their professional duties safely, ethically and sustainably. This broader scope reinforces that wellbeing is a shared responsibility, with organisations playing a central role through work design, culture and support systems, and with clear links to professional standards, performance and long-term sustainability.

Poor workplace wellbeing can undermine professional independence and, ultimately, confidence in the rule of law. For legal organisations, addressing workplace mental wellbeing is therefore both an ethical priority and central to maintaining professional standards and sustainable practice.

The consequences of poor wellbeing for lawyers

In October 2021, the IBA published the first global study focused on the mental wellbeing of legal professionals. Using the WHO-5 Mental Wellbeing Index, the study reported an average score of 51 per cent. Scores below 50 are used as a screening indicator that an individual may benefit from further

4 Mental Health at Work: Policy and Guidance (World Health Organization, 2022); Mental Health at Work: Policy Brief (WHO/ILO, 2022). The ILO's 2026 global report, *The psychosocial working environment: Global developments and pathways for action*, provides the ILO's latest framing in this area, placing prevention at the centre and emphasising action on the identifiable and modifiable features of work, including how jobs are designed, how work is organised and managed, and the broader policies and practices that govern work.

5 Employee well-being and engagement (Deloitte Insights, 13 March 2023).

assessment for depression (though they do not constitute a diagnosis). While averages should be interpreted with caution, a mean score at this level signals comparatively low wellbeing across the profession and suggests that many respondents may be experiencing distress.

These findings align with five decades of academic research identifying elevated levels of stress, anxiety, burnout and depression among lawyers worldwide, including heightened exposure to trauma in certain areas of practice.

Beyond the personal toll, poor workplace wellbeing carries significant organisational consequences. These include reduced productivity, increased absenteeism and turnover, higher healthcare and return-to-work costs, and reputational risk. The cost of inaction frequently exceeds the cost of prevention.[6]

The implications extend further still. Poor working conditions can impair lawyers' ability to meet professional standards, deliver high-quality client service and uphold their broader obligations to access to justice and the rule of law. Supporting lawyers' wellbeing is therefore not only a matter of individual or financial concern, but one of professional integrity and societal responsibility.

The benefits of healthy and safe workplaces in law

Addressing mental health and psychosocial risks in legal workplaces is both a professional responsibility and a strategic business imperative. Organisations that take a proactive approach consistently report improved productivity; stronger engagement; better recruitment and retention outcomes; and reduced absenteeism, conflict and turnover.

These outcomes increasingly reflect legal obligation, not aspiration. In Australia, work health and safety laws require persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) to identify, assess and control psychosocial hazards, including excessive job demands, vicarious trauma, role ambiguity and harmful workplace cultures, on the same basis as physical hazards. Case law reinforces that employers must take proactive steps where work poses a foreseeable risk to mental health.

Internationally, jurisdictions across Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and parts of Asia are progressively embedding psychosocial risk management into occupational health and safety frameworks. Standards such as ISO 45003 (*Psychological health and safety at work – Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks*) further formalise expectations in this area. Importantly, the focus extends beyond mental health conditions to reducing risks arising from psychosocial hazards more broadly, which are also associated with adverse physical health outcomes and overall wellbeing. Together, these developments signal a clear global shift: psychological health and safety at work is a governance and compliance issue, not merely a wellbeing initiative.

Importantly, many preventive measures align with sound management practice and can be implemented without significant cost. By embedding psychosocial risk management into everyday operations, legal organisations strengthen performance, reduce long-term costs and build cultures that support sustainable, ethical practice.

Common risk factors for the mental health and wellbeing of legal professionals

Legal organisations routinely identify, monitor and manage a range of operational risks to ensure compliance with local and international laws and the effective functioning of their businesses, including risks such as money laundering and cybersecurity. However, an often-overlooked area of risk arises from the way work is designed, managed and experienced, including working relationships and workplace interactions. These are commonly referred to as 'psychosocial risks'.

6 The Business Case for Wellbeing: A white paper for law firms, in-house counsel, their clients, and beyond (Mindful Business Charter, 2025).

What are psychosocial hazards and risks?

Psychosocial hazards are aspects of work, work design, management or the workplace environment that can affect a person's thoughts, emotions, behaviours and overall psychological system. While psychosocial hazards can create stress, it is important to note that stress itself is not an injury. However, if workers are exposed to stress frequently, over long periods, or at high levels, this can cause harm, depending on the nature of the hazards, the duration and frequency of exposure, and the combination of hazards present.[7]

Psychosocial risk arises when exposure to these hazards creates the possibility of harm, which may manifest as anxiety, depression, disrupted sleep, physical health conditions or social withdrawal. Risks often emerge from the interaction of multiple hazards and effective management focuses on preventing harm while supporting individuals experiencing adverse outcomes. For legal organisations, understanding and addressing psychosocial risks is central to fostering safe, healthy and resilient workplaces and sustaining business performance.

Whereas protective factors such as supportive environments and positive relationships promote wellbeing, protect mental health, foster resilience and provide lawyers with the essential resources to fulfill their professional duties, psychosocial risks can lead to issues such as stress, anxiety and burnout, affecting both individual wellbeing and overall workplace productivity.

The unique pressures faced by legal professionals make it a growing imperative for organisations to address psychosocial risks. Research evidence from the past five decades highlights several common risks affecting lawyers' wellbeing.[8]

7 See also The psychosocial working environment: Global developments and pathways for action (ILO, 2026).

8 For a review of the evidence base, see L Soon, A McDowall and KR Teoh, 'Towards a Context-Specific Approach to Understanding Lawyers' Well-being: A synthesis review and future research agenda' (2024), 31 (3), Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, 550–573.

Heavy workloads and billing pressures

Enlarged time-billing targets and heavy workloads can drive overwork and burnout, and incite overly competitive behaviours. Such conditions can erode professional collegiality and social connection in the workplace, and hinder opportunities to build the necessary competencies and skills required to meet professional obligations.

Lack of reward and recognition

Performance and progression reviews tend to focus heavily on financial metrics, with partner and associate remuneration structures tied to fees generated. This financial focus can generate perceptions of being valued for revenue generation over professionalism and skill, resulting in experiences of stress.

Poor supervision and leadership support

Remuneration structures and incentives are also typically tied to financial metrics rather than leadership behaviours and supportive supervision. Of the 186 legal organisations that completed the IBA Survey of Institutions as part of the Global Study, only 16 per cent said they provide leadership training on mental health.

A more recent study by the IBA Professional Wellbeing Commission reported that just under a third (31 per cent) of the 236 IBA members who took part agreed that their organisation provides line managers with sufficient resources to enable them to support the wellbeing of their team members.[9]

Lawyers in leadership positions, who are ideally placed to nurture healthier changes in the working environment, are often overwhelmed with little time to adequately supervise, mentor and manage their teams. Line managers are crucial to supporting workplace wellbeing, but do not receive the necessary recognition, support and training.

9 See n 3 above.

Client demands

Firms may prioritise meeting client demands without making meaningful changes to workloads, work design or broader working conditions. This can result in lawyers being expected to absorb unrealistic client expectations, increasing work-related stress and undermining efforts to create a more sustainable and healthy working environment.

Low job autonomy and control

Several studies across the globe have identified significant links between lawyers' job autonomy and wellbeing. Lawyers who perceive that their ability to control their workloads is constrained experience poorer wellbeing outcomes.

Work-life conflict

Heavy workload demands can lead many lawyers to experience difficulties maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Evidence suggests that work-life conflict is gender-biased (with female lawyers being particularly at risk), increases with the size of the organisation and can lead to increased risk of burnout.

Exposure to trauma

Some lawyers have been found to experience a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma arising from the nature of their work. For example, lawyers working in the fields of personal injury, clinical negligence, family, criminal and immigration law are often exposed to traumatic material through their work with clients who themselves have experienced significant trauma in their personal lives.

Workplace incivility, bullying and harassment

Heavy workloads and billing pressures, coupled with poor leadership and management practices, can reduce social connectedness at work and propagate a culture of incivility, bullying and harassment. The IBA's landmark survey on bullying and sexual harassment highlighted the prevalence and severity of these behaviours in the global legal profession.[10] These issues continue to present a significant risk to the wellbeing of legal professionals around the world.[11]

Stigma

The Global Study reported that many employees (41 per cent) feared discussing mental health issues due to potential career repercussions, while 32 per cent worried about differential treatment. Stigma of stress and poor wellbeing can hamper help-seeking behaviour and further complicate efforts to address these issues. Individuals struggling with their wellbeing may hesitate to disclose their conditions due to fears of negative career impacts.

The Covid-19 pandemic and rapid technological change have introduced new risks, such as those associated with remote working, blurred boundaries and financial insecurity. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to implement strategies that foster a safe and supportive work environment, recognising that to do so requires strategic effort, leadership buy-in and a risk management approach.

10 Us Too? Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession (IBA, 2018), available at: www.ibanet.org/bullying-and-sexual-harassment#research.

11 See for example: Independent review of bullying and harassment at the Bar. (Bar Council of England and Wales, 2025), available at: www.barcouncil.org.uk/support-for-barristers/bullying-and-harassment/review.html; 2024 Review of harassment in the legal profession (Government of South Australia, 2025), available at: www.equalopportunity.sa.gov.au/about-us/projects/legalprofession-review); Bullying in the Legal Profession: A Study of Illinois Lawyers' Experiences and Recommendations for Change (Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, 2024), available at: www.2civility.org/bullying-in-the-legal-profession/); 2023 Workplace Environment Survey (New Zealand Law Society, 2023), available at: www.lawsociety.org.nz/assets/About-Us-Documents/Workplace-Environment-Survey-2023/Legal-Workplace-Environment-Survey-FINAL-Report-17.10.2023.pdf)

What aspects of work could present a risk?

Psychosocial hazards arise from how work is designed, organised and managed, as well as the broader work environment. Common examples include:

Aspect of work	Examples of psychosocial hazards
Workload and pace of work	Excessive or sustained workload; high time pressure
Autonomy and control	Low job control or limited autonomy
Support and supervision	Poor supervision; lack of support
Roles and expectations	Unclear roles; unclear expectations; conflicting demands
Workplace behaviours	Exposure to harmful behaviours such as bullying and harassment
Work schedule	Long or unpredictable working hours
Emotional demands	High emotional demands; exposure to distressing matters
Workplace culture	Poor organisational culture; low psychological safety

These hazards may vary across teams, roles and practice areas; they should be assessed in context.

A staged approach to psychological health and safety

Legal organisations are at different stages in their approach to psychological health and safety. To support structured progression, consistent with research and sector work including that undertaken by Beyond Blue, this Guide outlines a four-stage pathway.[12]

This staged model helps organisations understand their current approach and identify practical next steps.

12 This staged model is a work in progress developed in collaboration between Beyond Blue and By Many. It draws on sector research and practice insights, including work led by Dr Kathryn Page (By Many). The model is evolving and should be cited accordingly, with appropriate acknowledgment to By Many.

For each stage:

- 'How to tell if you're here' provides indicators of current practice
- 'What to do next' outlines priority actions to support progression

Organisations may identify with more than one stage. The objective is progression, particularly from Stage 1 (commitment) to Stage 2 (structured risk management).

Stage 1 – Well workers

Foundational commitment and support are visible, but psychosocial risks are not yet systematically identified, assessed or managed.

How to tell if you're here:

- We have visible commitment (eg, policies, wellbeing initiatives, employee assistance programmes), but no formal psychosocial risk assessment
- Workloads and hours are not consistently tracked or reviewed
- Managers are not clearly accountable for team wellbeing
- Responses to stress or complaints are reactive rather than planned
- Wellbeing is treated as an individual responsibility (eg, resilience training)

What to do next:

- Introduce a basic psychosocial risk assessment (eg, survey, focus groups or data review)
- Start tracking workload, hours and key indicators of poor wellbeing (eg, turnover, absenteeism)
- Define manager responsibility for wellbeing and early intervention
- Establish clear, safe pathways for raising concerns
- Shift focus from individual support to identifying workplace causes of stress

Stage 2 – Safe workers

Psychosocial hazards such as excessive workload, exposure to trauma, inadequate supervision and unclear role expectations are actively identified and controlled through structured prevention.

How to tell if you're here:

- Psychosocial risks (eg, workload, supervision, role clarity) are actively identified
- Workloads and hours are monitored and discussed, not just assumed
- Managers are trained to recognise distress and respond early
- Some actions are taken to reduce risk (eg, redistributing work, supporting high-risk teams)
- Data (eg, overtime, complaints) is reviewed, but not always consistently acted on

What to do next:

- Strengthen consistency in how risks are managed across teams and leaders
- Improve workload planning and resourcing (not just monitoring)
- Embed regular check-ins and structured supervision practices
- Prioritise high-risk areas (eg, heavy workloads, trauma exposure)
- Ensure actions address root causes, not just symptoms

Stage 3 – Good work

Work design, supervision and resourcing practices are strengthened to reduce risk at source and support sustainable performance.

How to tell if you're here:

- Work is actively designed to support sustainable performance (not just managed after issues arise)
- Workload allocation, deadlines and resourcing are regularly reviewed and adjusted
- Roles, expectations and supervision are clear and consistent
- Teams are consulted on how work is organised and improved
- Leaders take active responsibility for creating supportive, well-functioning teams

What to do next:

- Align workload and resourcing decisions more closely with actual demand
- Strengthen leadership capability in managing people, not just delivering work
- Embed wellbeing considerations into all work design and operational decisions
- Expand support for high-risk practice areas (eg, structured rotations, debriefing)
- Ensure consistency across all teams and offices

Stage 4 – Good business

Psychological health and safety is fully embedded into governance, leadership accountability and strategic decision-making.

How to tell if you're here:

- Psychological health and safety is embedded in governance and business strategy
- Leaders receive and act on regular data about workload, wellbeing and risk
- Workload, resourcing and performance expectations are aligned at a system level
- Leadership behaviours reinforce psychological safety and accountability
- Wellbeing is integrated into how the organisation measures success

What to do next:

- Continuously refine systems using workforce data and feedback
- Anticipate and manage emerging risks (eg, change, growth, new practice areas)
- Strengthen alignment between HR, risk and operational leadership
- Share lessons and continuously improve practices across the organisation
- Maintain focus on long-term sustainability, not just short-term performance

Integrating risk management into legal work design

Applying the model in practice

Once an organisation understands its current stage and priority areas, the next step is to take a structured and integrated approach to action.

A psychosocial risk management approach is what distinguishes Stage 2 (Safe workers) from Stage 1 (Well workers). It moves an organisation from reacting to distress toward identifying hazards, assessing risk and implementing preventive controls.

Organisations can effectively protect and promote the mental health and wellbeing of legal professionals by:

1. adopting a holistic and integrated approach to managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace through interventions at the individual and organisational level; and
2. following a strategic process of risk assessment, action planning, risk reduction (interventions), evaluation and continual improvement.

A holistic and integrated approach.[13]

Workplace mental health interventions are more effective when designed as part of a holistic and integrated approach.[14]

An integrated system combines interventions that serve to prevent, protect and promote, and support mental health, at multiple levels targeted at the individual and organisation.[15] Following two decades of research evidence supporting its effectiveness, the integrated approach has informed international guidance in this area, including the 2022 WHO/ILO policy brief.The ILO's 2026 report places prevention at the centre, with priority given to organisational and collective measures addressing psychosocial risks at their source.[16]

13 AD LaMontagne, A Martin, KM Page, NJ Reavley, AJ Noblet, AJ Milner, T Keegel and PM Smith, 'Workplace mental health: developing an integrated intervention approach' (2014), BMC Psychiatry, 14, 131.

14 IJM Hendriksen, M Snoijer, BPH de Kok, J van Vilsteren, H. Hofstetter, 'Effectiveness of a multilevel workplace health promotion program on vitality, health, and work-related outcomes' ((2016), 58(6), Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 575–583.

15 See n 12 above

16 See n 4 above.

The framework brings together three strategic elements to address psychosocial hazards at work: prevent harm, promote positive aspects of work, and respond to problems, reflecting primary, secondary and tertiary approaches across organisational systems and individual supports.

Figure 1. Integrated approach to workplace mental health[17]

International best practice in workplace mental health supports an integrated approach as the most effective and sustainable way to improve organisational performance and worker wellbeing. It combines organisational measures with individual supports across all stages of employment, with a strong focus on primary prevention, especially through improving work design and conditions.[18]

17 Integrated approach to workplace mental health (Source: AD LaMontagne. Used with permission).

18 R Rugulies, B Aust, BA Greiner, N Kawakami, AD LaMontagne, IEH Madsen, 'Work-related causes of mental health conditions and interventions for their improvement in workplaces' (2023), 403, Lancet 1368–1381. See https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140- 6736(23)00869-3.

How to address psychosocial risks

Effective approaches focus on three complementary areas:

Prevent (address root causes)

- **Improve workload management and resourcing**
- **Clarify roles, expectations and priorities**
- **Strengthen supervision and leadership capability**
- **Design work to support autonomy, fairness and flexibility**

Promote (strengthen positive aspects of work)

- **Foster a supportive and respectful workplace culture**
- **Encourage recognition, inclusion and psychological safety**
- **Support professional development and career progression**

Respond (support individuals when needed)

- **Provide access to confidential support services**
- **Enable early identification and response to distress**
- **Support safe return to work and ongoing adjustments**

A balanced approach across all three areas is critical to achieving sustainable outcomes.

Quick self-assessment: workplace mental health in legal organisations

Purpose

This self-assessment helps organisations identify their current approach to workplace mental health and prioritise action, based on the integrated approach outlined above.

How to use

For each statement, select Yes / Partly / No based on current practice.

Preventing harm (workplace risks)			
We formally assess psychosocial risks (eg, workload, role clarity, supervision, exposure to trauma)	Y	P	N
We actively monitor workloads, hours and capacity across teams	Y	P	N
We take action to address excessive workload or unsafe working patterns	Y	P	N
Managers are trained and expected to identify and respond to early signs of distress	Y	P	N
We review data (eg, overtime, turnover, complaints) to identify risk trends	Y	P	N
Promoting healthy work			
Work is designed to support sustainable performance (eg, realistic deadlines, adequate resourcing)	Y	P	N
Roles, expectations and responsibilities are clear and consistently applied	Y	P	N
Employees have appropriate autonomy and input into how work is carried out	Y	P	N
Teams are supported to maintain respectful, inclusive and psychologically safe environments	Y	P	N
Good work practices (eg, supervision, recognition, development) are consistently applied	Y	P	N
Responding to issues and supporting people			
Employees feel safe raising concerns about workload or wellbeing	Y	P	N
We have clear, trusted processes for responding to mental health concerns	Y	P	N
Managers are supported to have effective conversations about mental health	Y	P	N
Adjustments are made when work becomes unsustainable or when someone is unwell	Y	P	N
We support recovery and return to work in a structured and consistent way	Y	P	N

What to do next

Use your results to:

- Identify priority gaps
- Focus on the next stage, not perfection
- Align actions with the 'What to do next' guidance in each stage

Interpreting your results

Mostly 'No'
→ You are likely operating at Stage 1 – Well workers
Focus: Move from awareness to structured risk identification and management

Mix of 'No' and 'Partly'
→ You are likely at Stage 2 – Safe workers
Focus: Strengthen consistency and address root causes of risk

Mostly 'Yes' (with some gaps)
→ You are likely at Stage 3 – Good work
Focus: Improve work design and embed sustainable practices

Consistently 'Yes' across all areas
→ You are likely at Stage 4 – Good business
Focus: Embed and continuously improve at a strategic level

Where most legal organisations currently sit

In practice, many legal organisations are operating at Stage 1 – Well workers. They have visible commitment to wellbeing such as policies, awareness training and access to support services, but have not yet systematically identified, assessed or managed psychosocial risks in the same way as other workplace hazards.

The objective of this guide is progression. For most organisations, the immediate and realistic goal is to move from visible commitment to Stage 2 – Safe Workers, embedding structured psychosocial risk management into everyday work practices.

This transition shifts the focus from support to prevention and establishes the foundation for healthier, more resilient workplaces. The detailed implementation framework later in this guide provides practical guidance to support progression through these stages.

The presence of these hazards does not indicate organisational failure. Rather, it signals the need to move from foundational commitment (Stage 1) to structured identification and management of psychosocial risks (Stage 2).

The following section outlines how legal organisations can take that next step.

Embedding an integrated approach in practice

An integrated approach to lawyers' wellbeing involves managing psychosocial risks alongside broader mental health needs in a structured and proactive way, consistent with other core business risks. Rather than a one-off or linear process, this is an ongoing cycle of identifying risks and needs, implementing actions and reviewing effectiveness over time.

Drawing on leading international evidence, effective workplace mental health strategies combine actions to prevent harm, promote positive aspects of work, and respond when individuals experience distress. These actions should be tailored to the organisation's context, size and risk profile.

This framework provides a structured approach to guide these efforts; however, it does not offer comprehensive 'how-to' guidance for implementation, which will need to be developed in line with each organisation's specific circumstances.

What this means in practice

This approach requires organisations to:

- identify and manage psychosocial risks
- design work to support sustainable performance
- provide appropriate support when issues arise

The following sections outline how organisations can assess their current approach and take action.

Putting the approach into action

While there is no single prescribed process, organisations should adopt a structured approach encompassing the following six steps:

Step 1. Establish leadership, governance and engagement

- Secure visible commitment from senior leadership
- Establish clear roles, responsibilities and governance structures
- Allocate appropriate resources
- Involve employees at all levels (e.g. lawyers, paralegals) to provide practical insight into how risks arise and how they can be addressed
- Create safe and trusted channels for consultation and feedback

Step 2. Identify and understand risks and needs

Understanding both psychosocial risks and broader workplace mental health needs is critical to ensuring that actions are appropriately targeted and effective. Organisations/workplaces should:

- undertake a psychosocial risk assessment to identify hazards arising from work design, management and the work environment;
- use validated tools where appropriate (eg, COPSOQ,[19] People at Work[20] and ISO 45003 guidance) to support a structured and evidence-based assessment;
- complement this with a broader assessment of workplace mental health needs, including employee experiences, existing supports and organisational capability;
- draw on multiple data sources (eg, surveys, focus groups, organisational data such as workload, absenteeism and turnover);
- review existing policies, programmes and supports to assess how effectively they are working in practice; and
- consider using structured organisational audit tools to identify gaps and maturity across prevention, promotion and response activities.

19 Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ). (nd). An internationally validated tool for assessing psychosocial factors at work. Retrieved from COPSOQ International Network/COPSOQ Australia.

20 People at Work. (nd). A validated psychosocial risk assessment tool for Australian workplaces. Retrieved from Australian Government (Comcare).

Tools and resources for assessing psychosocial risks

A range of validated tools and frameworks are available to support organisations in assessing psychosocial risks and broader workplace mental health needs, including:

- **COPSOQ (Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire)**
- **People at Work (Australian psychosocial risk assessment tool)**
- **ISO 45003 guidance on managing psychosocial risks**
- **Organisational self-audit tools (eg, workplace mental health maturity assessments)**

These tools can be used alongside internal data and employee consultation to inform a comprehensive assessment.

Step 3. Prioritise risks and plan actions

- Identify high-risk areas requiring prompt attention
- Consider the needs of different groups or practice areas
- Develop targeted actions that address root causes, particularly through improvements to work design and management practices
- Ensure actions are balanced across prevention, promotion and response, rather than relying solely on individual-level supports

Step 4. Implement actions

- Implement interventions across organisational, team, job and individual levels
- Focus on sustainable changes to how work is organised and delivered
- Document actions and monitor progress

Step 5. Monitor and evaluate

- Assess effectiveness using qualitative and quantitative data
- Seek honest staff feedback through trusted channels
- Communicate progress transparently, including what is working and what requires improvement

Step 6. Review and continuously improve

- Treat this as an ongoing cycle, not a one-off initiative
- Adapt actions based on feedback and emerging risks
- Embed psychosocial risk management into business-as-usual practices

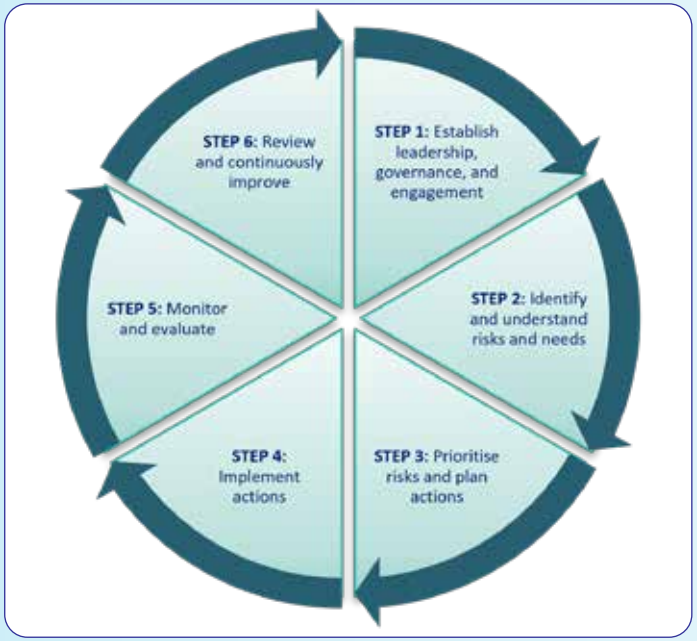

Figure 2. Embedding an integrated approach

Healthier workplaces for the wellbeing of legal professionals globally

A proactive approach to mental health in the legal profession not only safeguards the wellbeing of individuals working within it, but also enhances organisational resilience, performance and productivity.

This guide offers a structured and practical framework to help legal organisations systematically integrate workplace wellbeing into the strategic aims of their business, drawing on evidence-based practices recommended by the WHO and ILO. By embedding this approach within organisational risk management processes, legal organisations can cultivate psychologically safe and healthy workplaces while continuing to deliver high standards of service to clients.

To support implementation, this guide is accompanied by a suggested implementation framework, designed for organisations across jurisdictions and practice settings. The framework provides a structured yet flexible pathway that recognises differing starting points and levels of capacity. It outlines practical steps, clear indicators of progress and adaptable actions that organisations can strengthen over time.

Central to this approach is a staged model of progression, from foundational commitment and support, through structured identification and management of psychosocial risk, to strengthening work design and ultimately embedding psychological health and safety within governance and strategy. This progression provides a practical roadmap for moving from intention to systematic, sustained action.

The following section sets out this implementation framework in detail. Appendix 1 provides a hazard control matrix to assist organisations in identifying psychosocial hazards and selecting appropriate control measures to put proactive strategies into action.

For practical illustration, readers may refer to the updated case studies available on the IBA Professional Wellbeing Commission website, which demonstrate how a risk management approach to workplace wellbeing has been implemented in diverse legal contexts. Applying these lessons can assist organisations to address immediate risks while strengthening the long-term integrity, resilience and sustainability of the legal profession.

This commitment will not only respond to present challenges but contribute to progression along this pathway, supporting legal organisations to embed psychological health and safety as a core component of how work is designed, managed and delivered and strengthening the future integrity and sustainability of the profession.

Suggested implementation framework

This staged framework supports legal organisations to progressively strengthen psychological health and safety through organisational systems and work design.

Using this framework

Organisations should:

1. Identify which stage most closely reflects current practice
2. Consider whether the listed hazards are present in their context
3. Review whether the 'what this looks like' practices are observable and consistent
4. Identify priority gaps and strengthen systems progressively

Progression typically moves from:

Commitment and support → Structured risk management →
Work design → Strategic integration

Stage	Focus	Key psychosocial hazards to consider	What this looks like in practice
Stage 1 – Well workers	Establish commitment and foundational safeguards	• Role ambiguity and unclear expectations • Interpersonal conflict or incivility • Early workload strain • Low psychological safety	• Senior leaders publicly affirm commitment to psychological health and safety • Clear policies addressing conduct, harassment and safe workloads • Confidential and trusted pathways for raising concerns • A nominated leader accountable for wellbeing/psychosocial risk, supported by a representative cross-organisational group • Introductory training on respectful behaviour, recognising stress and understanding the organisation's approach to managing psychosocial risk (including prevention, promotion and response) • Access to confidential support services
Stage 2 – Safe workers	Identify and manage psychosocial risk in a structured way	• Excessive job demands and long hours • Poor supervisory support • Exposure to traumatic or distressing material • Inconsistent responses to complaints	• The organisation actively identifies psychosocial hazards (surveys, consultation, data review) • Workloads are monitored and reviewed rather than assumed manageable • Supervisors are trained to recognise distress and respond early • Trauma-exposed teams have structured debriefing or peer support • Data such as overtime, turnover and grievances are reviewed regularly • Managers are clearly accountable for addressing psychosocial risks

Stage	Focus	Key psychosocial hazards to consider	What this looks like in practice
Stage 3 – Good work	Design work to support sustainable performance and wellbeing	• Chronic workload intensity • High emotional demands (eg, adversarial conflict, client distress) • Unclear role boundaries • Poorly managed change	• Matter allocation and workload planning are transparent and regularly reviewed • Supervision is structured and consistent, not ad hoc • Role expectations are clearly defined and understood • Organisational change processes consider workload and wellbeing impacts • Teams are consulted on how work is organised and improved • Resource decisions are aligned with actual demand
Stage 4 – Good business	Integrate psychological health and safety into governance and strategy	• Cumulative stress across systems • Burnout and retention pressures • Systemic workload imbalance • Cultural or power-based risks	• Psychosocial risk is embedded in governance and enterprise risk discussions • Senior leaders receive regular reporting on workload and wellbeing trends • High-risk practice areas have tailored protective measures (eg, trauma rotation, peer review) • Leadership behaviours reinforce psychological safety • HR, risk and operational leaders work in alignment • The organisation reviews and refines its approach based on workforce data

Appendix I: Psychosocial hazard control matrix for legal work

This matrix outlines common psychosocial hazards encountered in legal practice and a practical menu of suggested controls that organisations can adopt, regardless of size, jurisdiction or maturity level. Controls range from foundational to advanced, allowing organisations to implement measures appropriate to their context.

Psychosocial hazard	Examples in legal practice	Suggested controls
Excessive job demands	Long hours, urgent filings, high-volume matters, sustained intensity, billable pressure	• Workload planning and matter resourcing • Safe-hours guidance and monitoring of overtime • Redistribution of work during peak periods • Rotations away from sustained high-intensity work • Adequate staffing levels
Low role clarity	Junior staff unsure of expectations; partner-associate mismatch; conflicting priorities	• Clear role descriptions and structured onboarding • Documented expectations for task ownership and communication • Regular check-ins and supervision plans • Clear work allocation processes
Poor organisational change management	Partner exits, restructures, mergers, rapid expansion or contraction	• Structured change briefings • Transparent communication at key decision points • Transition support for affected teams • Leadership Q&A and feedback channels
Exposure to traumatic or distressing material	Family violence, child protection matters, criminal evidence, refugee claims, regulatory enforcement	• Clinical debriefing and access to trauma-informed practitioners • Peer support programmes • Trauma-informed practice training • Caseload rotation and protected time after exposure • Clear boundaries for after-hours exposure

Psychosocial hazard	Examples in legal practice	Suggested controls
Inadequate leader or supervisor support	Hierarchical culture, low feedback quality, limited access to supervisors	• Leader capability training (supportive leadership, early intervention, communication) • Mentoring frameworks • Leadership performance expectations linked to supportiveness • Scheduled supervisory check-ins
Conflict, incivility or aggression	Adversarial litigation behaviours, bullying, hostile communications, microaggressions	• Behavioural and conduct standards • Clear reporting pathways and fair investigation processes • Conflict resolution and communication training • Early intervention frameworks and restorative approaches
Unreasonable hours/ poor work-life interface	Chronic after-hours work, unpredictable hours, urgent overnight tasks	• Workload forecasting tied to resourcing • Reasonable-contact expectations and after-hours boundaries • Team-based systems for managing peaks • Rostered availability or on-call rotations where relevant
Poor communication or consultation	Decisions made without staff input; misalignment during high-pressure matters	• Regular team meetings and structured communication channels • Mechanisms for consultation on workload, wellbeing, and change • Anonymous feedback options • Matter debriefs after challenging periods
Low autonomy/limited control over work	Junior lawyers with minimal input on timelines, unrealistic instructions, micromanagement	• Realistic deadline setting and workload negotiation • Encouraging autonomy in task execution • Structured delegation frameworks • Training for supervisors on autonomy-supportive practice
Moral injury/ethical stress	Being asked to act outside professional or personal ethics; exposure to injustice	• Ethics support processes and confidential guidance channels • Escalation pathways for ethical concerns • Ethics training and reflective practice groups