

## **Mind Strengths article for New Law Journal**

Over the past few months, we have noticed some key indicators emerging that support our view that stress is manifesting itself in new ways as a result of the recession. Many legal firms have been making staff redundant for some time now, particularly where they once had large conveyancing teams. As many firms continue to cut costs, it is left up to the remaining employees to drive the business forward to profitability, as well as ensuring the safety of their own roles for the long term.

And that's precisely where the problem lies. In any downsizing operation, the employees who are lucky enough to keep their jobs inevitably take on more work, certainly put in longer hours to get the additional tasks done and some may sacrifice their work/life balance in the process.

In the work that we have undertaken with clients during 2009, the legal sector has been badly hit with this type of scenario. As solicitors are now starting to get busier and taking on more cases, the headcount is not changing to reflect the increased workload, at least, not for the moment. The additional pressure for staff can result in illness, underperformance and in some cases, has resulted in people moving firms to escape the stress.

It's interesting to note that 1 in 6 people suffer from workplace stress and those that are affected will underperform by over 30%. Industry figures suggest that as a business, you should expect to lose between £800-£1,000 per employee each year to stress. An alarming figure that only shows signs of an upward trend.

The recession has also been responsible for changes in payment structures which have been causing some lawyers major cash flow problems as the banks tighten their lending and overdraft facilities. We have found that many clients have been seeking cheaper ways of providing a solution to their problems and even negotiating solicitors fees to ensure they keep their costs down. In a market where new business opportunities may be limited, many firms find that this is the only way to keep business coming in.

During this difficult period, we have been working closely with a number of legal practitioners to advise them on the best methods to ensure that the health and wellbeing of their employees becomes a high priority. Simply put, no company wants to be faced with long term sickness absenteeism, under performance or losing key members of the team to stress.

Looking after the wellbeing of employees has fast become the number one priority and at Mind Strengths we ensure that we support clients with initiatives such as "drop in" Stress & Wellbeing Clinics, run by a qualified stress management consultant. These take place on client's premises at times to suit them and are run like doctors surgeries with a series of pre-booked mini appointments to allow staff to discuss issues in confidence.

If we find that any individual needs something more, we can place them on a 1-1 coaching programme to ensure that we work more intensively with that person to achieve quicker results. These sessions are underpinned by a unique personal assessment programme, allowing people to build up an accurate profile of their stressors. The more time spent on this type of essential service means better performance and less time away from the office.

The whole point of these programmes is to be as proactive as possible and compliment this with teaching preventative techniques. For larger groups of between 8-10 employees, interactive workshops provide a comprehensive insight into the world of stress awareness and stress

management and our programmes are accredited by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and carry CPD points for legal practitioners.

With many lawyers now working much longer hours to achieve results, there is a fine balance between serving the client and making sure that your personal life is not compromised. The work of a lawyer is stressful at the best of times and has certainly been put to the test over recent months.

By being one step ahead of the game and assessing the risk of stress in your business, you will certainly see an improvement in productivity, morale and absenteeism, in addition to saving money. In this economic climate, preventative stress management is a very worthwhile policy to adopt for all legal professionals.

*For more information on how to manage workplace stress and improve the wellbeing of your employees, please visit [www.mindstrengths.co.uk](http://www.mindstrengths.co.uk) or contact Ian Barratt – Director, Mind Strengths Ltd on 01634 314090 or via email to [info@mindstrengths.co.uk](mailto:info@mindstrengths.co.uk).*