



►► A LACK OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE OFTEN CAUSES PROBLEMS IN OUR INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS BECAUSE THE NEEDS OF OUR FAMILY SYSTEMS ARE NEGLECTED. THE REALITY IS THE BEST EMPLOYEES WITH THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF COMPETENCE ARE THE ONES WHO PRIORITIZE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.



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Please reach out to LAP if you or someone you know is experiencing mental health or substance use problems. Give us a call at 312-726-6607 or email gethelp@illinoislap.org.

Workplace Stress

Real and practical advice for improving the legal profession.

THE ILLINOIS LAWYERS' ASSISTANCE PROGRAM'S (LAP) clinical team works diligently to improve the quality of life for those in the legal profession who share with us their personal experiences of suffering and difficulties as law students, lawyers, and judges.

We see firsthand the negative impact this profession can have on so many who serve the profession admirably and who diligently provide legal advice and counsel to the Illinois community. The question we are often asked is, "Why is there so much unhappiness, suffering, and personal and professional difficulties in this much-needed profession?" The answer is multifaceted and requires examinations of practice expectations, the way in which we create workplace communities and cultures, and the often-disregarded toxic behaviors that exist and are often tolerated within legal communities.

Pain points

Recently, I attended a conference in another city as a guest panelist and I was surrounded by legal professionals from different states and different types of practices and experiences. We began talking about the legal profession in general terms, and all those present shared common experiences while practicing law: of being harassed; of being excluded from important conversations; of being diminished by other attorneys; of being undervalued; and having feelings of being disposable, unimportant, and unaccepted within the workforce.

Even more fascinating, these legal professionals are now all esteemed members of the profession. Yet the common thread was unhealthy workplace cultures of people and communities, where people were not included, new and diverse thinking was not embraced,

and where highly intelligent people were not able to thrive and prosper. In time, legal professionals leave environments where they are not seen, where they are not encouraged to share their opinion and voice, and where there is a lack of inclusivity and diversity.

Maladaptive coping

The other common problem we see at LAP is the expectation that work-life balance is optional and devotion to the job is the ultimate, worthy sacrifice for achieving higher levels of leadership within the agency or firm. Upper management prioritizes people who work long hours, take little or no vacation, and always make themselves available to the firm and their clients.

These often excessively-high expectations put an incredible amount of pressure on us and our interpersonal relationships. While many people are able to do this for extended periods of time, some develop maladaptive coping mechanisms to blunt the effects of too many demands, the lack of time to resolve them, and not enough quality time to recuperate from the difficult work they do and the difficult problems they must solve. Those who cannot live up to their workplace expectations are cast aside, overlooked for promotions and partnerships, and often feel depressed and anxious. The message they receive is that they do not have what it takes to thrive and prosper in the legal profession.

Our legal profession has one of the highest rates of suicide and some of the highest rates of mental-health and substance-use problems. Why is this the case? Again, we must look to school and workplace cultures and the normalization of behaviors that other professions would consider unacceptable. When I say this, I ask all of you to determine

whether alcohol use assists your practice, and whether not monitoring personal time off promotes your well-being?

If you look at other workforce environments, access to alcohol is not tolerated within the workplace; many workforces also have eliminated alcohol at workplace-related social events. Additionally, workers are encouraged to use their personal time off on a yearly basis to encourage health and wellness. In contrast, the legal profession often provides alcohol at professional events and even within one's practice to help people cope with the difficulties they experience. Additionally, some encourage "soldiers" within the profession to push through without taking time off.

In fact, workforces that contact LAP with a problematic employee often extol the virtues of the person by referring to them as a "high producer" with little need for time off. However, I can say with certainty that such "virtues" often lead to higher levels of substance use and other maladaptive coping mechanisms when the office culture discourages taking breaks, vacations, and personal time off.

A lack of work-life balance often causes problems in our interpersonal relationships because the needs of our family systems are neglected. The reality is the best employees with the highest levels of competence are the ones who

prioritize their mental health and well-being. The Illinois Attorney Registration & Disciplinary Commission releases annual statistics that confirm this. In the previous fiscal year, 33 percent of attorneys who faced disciplinary procedures had mental-health or substance-use problems that increased their problematic behaviors.

What can we do

Workplaces can utilize a few simple strategies to increase job satisfaction, healthy workforce habits, and longevity in the profession. Here are several starting points. Feel free to review them and assess your own work or school culture:

- 1) Improve workplace cultures by encouraging time off. Prioritize health and well-being within the workforce.
- 2) Minimize the availability of alcohol within the workplace and at professional and social events.
- 3) Create a community of inclusion where all people are seen, heard, and supported.
- 4) Have a no-tolerance zone for bullying, microaggressions, and harassment within the workforce.
- 5) Develop robust mentoring programs of diverse members so that everyone can thrive and prosper.
- 6) Develop individual templates for growth and learning. Provide yearly reviews to monitor and encourage this growth.
- 7) Create opportunities for collaboration in all areas of work, and especially between senior and junior members.
- 8) Communicate directly and honestly.
- 9) Take a hard look at your workforce and determine whether there is equal representation at all levels.
- 10) Make work a safe place where people thrive and prosper and are invested in staying for the long term. Monitor attrition rates and determine why people are leaving. Implement preventative measures to eliminate problem areas.
- 11) Create educational opportunities whereby the workforce learns healthy strategies for successful teambuilding and collaborative processes, and identifies internal workplace cultural vulnerabilities discouraging long-term employee health and well-being.
- 12) Be conscious about the need to "debrief" from the emotional impact of difficult cases and/or clients; create internal processes and opportunities for debriefing that all employees are aware of and can regularly participate in. **EB**