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What's on Deck in 2024 for Legal

Conversations on mental health, artificial intelligence and progressive recruitment will continue to be top of mind for the legal industry in the new year.

If we have learned anything in recent years, it's that predicting trends can be a moot point.



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But as we close out 2023, there are three areas that seem likely to be top of mind in legal. From the pressing issues of mental health to the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and to reshaping recruitment strategies, the legal profession is poised for change.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

The legal profession, renowned for its rigorous demands and high-stress environments, has long grappled with a pervasive mental health crisis.

Marsha Brown, PhD, is a licensed psychologist with expertise in stress management and collaborates with organizations and business leaders to comprehend the detrimental effects of stress on company culture, performance and individuals. She uses the Deconstructing Stress method to empower high-stress professionals, conducting corporate training and workshops that enable employees to enhance their overall quality of life and performance.

“People on a team are an investment, and if you’re investing in your team and you’re making sure that they have whole-body wellness, that is an asset to your organization,” Brown says.

In a nationwide study published by the National Library of Medicine in 2016, it was revealed that 28% of lawyers experience depression, 19% report anxiety, 21% have alcohol-related problems, 11% face drug use issues, and lawyers contemplate suicide at a rate two to three times higher than the general population, shedding light on concerning aspects of lawyer well-being — and the toll this can take on those who work in that environment.

As Brown elucidates, legal professionals often find themselves juggling a multitude of tasks, including managing diverse personalities within law firms. The weight of these demands frequently leads to overwhelming stress and eventual burnout. To cope, many turn to unhealthy outlets, such as alcohol or recreational drugs, further exacerbating depression and anxiety. Brown observes the need for intervention at an early stage and notes that this mental health crisis begins in law school, where unyielding deadlines and relentless pressure set the stage for future struggles.

“For a lot of people, they find themselves super overwhelmed, and then they get to the point where they’re burned out,” Brown says.

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While the statistics are unsettling, Brown believes there is hope on the horizon. Some law firms have begun implementing wellness programs that offer resources for mental health care, which have shown promising results. Moreover, encouraging staff to take mental health days and setting boundaries, as Brown emphasizes, are essential steps in fostering a supportive work environment. It’s vital for leadership to lead by example, respecting their team members’ off-hours and not expecting them to respond to emails outside of work.

Furthermore, Brown underscores the importance of the change in the legal industry and the somber future if no action is taken. She suggests that management have personal conversations with employees, provide mental health services and evenly spread the workload.

“Not having a focus on whole health or whole well-being is a recipe for depression, anxiety and drug abuse,” Brown says. “If nothing is done, there will continue to be significant increases in depression, anxiety, substance use and suicide among legal professionals.”

FAST CHANGE AND FOCUS ON DIVERSITY IN RECRUITMENT

Struggling to hire talent will continue to be an issue into 2024. That’s because while law firms’ criteria have not changed, the criteria of the new generation of lawyers have, says Sharon Meit Abrahams, EdD, President of Legal Talent Advisors, LLC, and a member of the South Florida Chapter.

“A lot of law firms don’t know how to make those changes; they don’t know how to update their culture to fit the desires of the younger generation,” Abrahams says.

She explains that the younger generation does not feel as strong of a need to become partners and is more comfortable with good salaries instead of overworking and pushing for bonuses.

As more industries adopt remote or hybrid work schedules, many firms are reverting back to prepandemic policies for in-office hours. However, employees are expecting flexibility. Abrahams suggests firms look closely at their remote and hybrid policies to maximize success and help with recruitment.

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In order to recruit not just good lawyers and legal support staff, but people who strive to make money for the firm, Abrahams advises hiring people who understand how law firms make money and ask tougher questions that focus on the business side.

As the industry works to improve diversity within firm leadership, it’s not just enough to attract diverse talent — firms need steps in place to implement evenly assigned work.

“If I was a firm that wanted to hire a really nice diverse group of people, then a work assignment system helps assure that everybody’s getting good work, challenging work and work that helps them grow and develop,” she says.

AI CONTINUES TO RISE IN THE LEGAL INDUSTRY

Artificial intelligence (AI) made its way regularly into the headlines for 2023 — for good and bad. That’s not likely to be different in 2024, as companies continue to refine the tech to make it more reliable.

Robert Plotkin, a Founding Partner of Blueshift and a software patent attorney, is an AI expert and uses it daily. He says that it not only enhances accuracy but also saves valuable time — a key point for firms.

Plotkin emphasizes that AI’s growing proficiency in document review and legal research is a significant trend. AI-powered tools, like large language models, offer natural language search results that streamline legal research. However, he cautions that the risk lies in the potential for AI to generate inaccurate or erroneous text, demanding human supervision to manage these risks effectively.

AI is reshaping the structure of law firms by empowering junior lawyers to produce high-quality legal advice and documents, reducing the need for extensive supervision from senior lawyers, Plotkin says.

“On the other hand, it can enable a senior lawyer to do work with less assistance from junior lawyers because the AI might be doing a lot of the detailed work, like research and writing that a junior lawyer might have done for them,” Plotkin says.

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However, he notes that this enhanced efficiency could hurt the industry due to its accessibility to clients who can use AI tools for self-help, obtaining answers to legal questions, or even drafting documents independently.

As the legal industry navigates these technological changes, Plotkin suggests that firms must invest in staying current with technology trends. Ignoring AI could lead to substantial shifts in the industry, putting firms at a disadvantage.

“AI is absolutely unavoidable in the legal profession,” Plotkin says. “Legal clients are likely to start using AI tools themselves, which will put pressure on law firms to adopt AI responsibly to improve the quality and efficiency of their services.”

But AI’s impact is not limited to document review and legal research; it also plays a pivotal role in recruitment. It can analyze data to assess potential candidates, identify the best fit, and streamline the hiring process. This approach ensures that law firms hire the most suitable professionals and diversify their workforce effectively.

“Staying on top of the technology and remaining agile is key for law firms,” Plotkin says.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we look toward 2024, it seems these trends are more than just passing conversations. Firms will continue to grapple with how to manage mental health, hire and recruit top professionals with more diverse backgrounds and discover new ways to work with AI to improve efficiency and workflow. Look for additional coverage on all three of these topics in *Legal Management* in the coming year.

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About the Author

Amina Sergazina (they/she) is an immigrant from Kazakhstan who is passionate about justice. They believe in power of journalism and view it not just as a tool for awareness but also as one to change the world for the better. In 2018 they, along with their mother and little brother, immigrated to the United States in Chicago. Sergazina grew up on American movies and always dreamed of living in the U.S. They were granted a full ride scholarship to Columbia College Chicago and graduated in May of 2023 with a bachelor's in journalism.

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