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Inclusion and Wellness in the Legal Sector: Survey Results

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to better understand how lawyers feel at work, the obstacles to greater inclusion and wellbeing in law firms, and the changes that can be made to achieve more inclusive workplace cultures.

This is important because inclusive organisations cultivate cultures that produce higher productivity, retention, engagement, morale and innovation. As such fostering inclusive workplaces has become imperative to business success, as organisations with higher levels of staff engagement are shown to be 21 per cent more profitable than their competitors.

By addressing the following questions, the findings of this survey will help partners, senior management and D&I/HR professionals understand attitudes to inclusion and wellbeing within the sector, and gain an understanding of what is needed to create more inclusive, engaged and profitable businesses.

Research Questions:

- How do lawyers currently feel at work? Do they feel valued, respected and engaged?
- Are the current inclusion and wellbeing policies at their firm perceived to be effective? In other words, is the positive intent of law firms translating into positive outcomes?
- What are the perceived barriers to greater inclusion and wellbeing in the legal sector?
- What changes could law firms and the partnership make to increase employee engagement?

Key Findings

Part 1: Individual Experience

Key Insights:

- The results reported satisfaction across all measures (respect, fair treatment, and care for wellbeing) fell by 10 per cent when asked about the behaviour and attitudes of partners compared with the approach of the firm as a whole
- Respondents not fully aware of the inclusion and wellbeing policies that their firm has in place
- Wellness policies are judged to be less effective than policies to address inclusion and diversity
- Senior associates shown to be the most disenfranchised and least engaged of the survey population

The first part of the survey was designed to gauge individual experience and current thoughts on the effectiveness of firm-wide policies to address inclusion and wellbeing.

The survey showed that the majority of respondents feel respected, valued and treated fairly where they work.

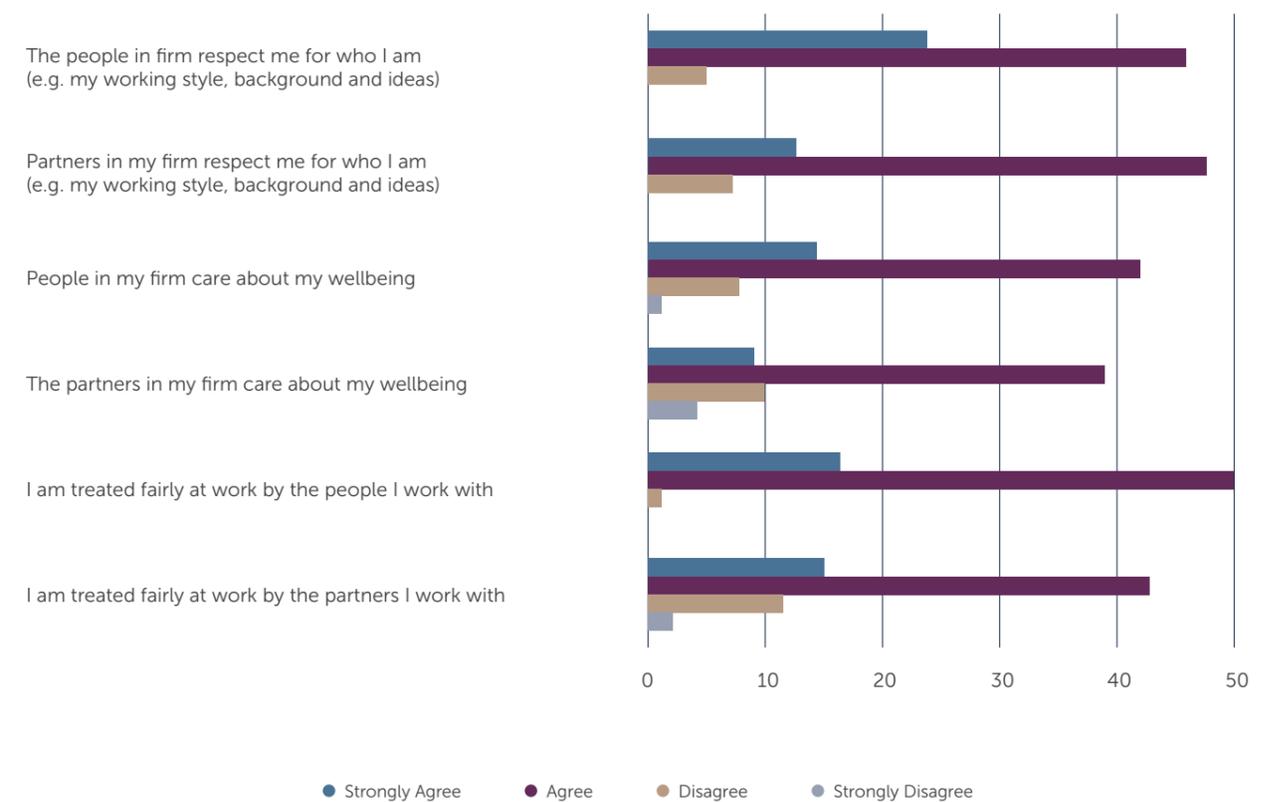
87.5 per cent of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the people in their firm respected them for who they are, with 82 per cent stating that they are treated fairly by those that they work with. 71 per cent of respondents also agreed that their firm cared about their wellbeing. However, these figures dropped by 10 percentage points when individuals were asked how they were treated by partners. Despite 50 per cent of respondents agreeing that partners had favourites in the associate group, 73 per cent stated that they felt valued by the partners they worked with.

Regarding the policies themselves, two-thirds of respondents agreed that their firms had initiatives or systems in place to encourage both inclusion and respect for the individual and wellbeing. However, 16 and 20 per cent of respondents stated that their firm did not have inclusion and wellness policies in place respectively.

When asked about the effectiveness of these policies, only 42 per cent of respondents considered them to be effective, whilst 30 per cent remained neutral on the matter. Of the two, wellness policies were considered to be less effective, with 28 per cent doubting their efficacy compared to 16 per cent when D&I policies were considered.

Senior associates were shown to be the most disenfranchised group, being the highest number of respondents to disagree that their firm (and partners) respected them and cared about their wellbeing. They were also the most likely to perceive favouritism at work, and to judge their firm's inclusion and wellbeing policies as being less effective.

Workplace Culture and Partner Treatment



Part 2: Obstacles to Inclusion and Wellbeing in Law Firms

Key Insights:

- Revenue generation and client demands were judged to be the greatest obstacles to greater inclusion and wellbeing in law firms
- When pressed, client demands were outlined as the single greatest factor inhibiting more inclusive workplaces
- These findings were consistent across legal roles
- These findings suggest that both the demands of clients alongside alternative billing structures such as fixed, flat, blended or capped fees need to be considered to help promote change in the legal sector

The second part of the survey asked respondents to outline the greatest obstacles to inclusion and wellbeing at the firm where they work. Of these, revenue generation / billable hours targets and client demands were judged to be the greatest hurdles, with 70 per cent and 65 per cent of respondents selecting these answers respectively. The demand placed on partners, lack of role models and the need to sacrifice work-life balance also featured highly as obstacles to greater inclusion and wellbeing within law firms.

However, client demands emerged as the single greatest obstacle to more inclusive workplaces, with over a third of respondents outlining it as the main barrier to change within their firms. This finding was consistent across partners, senior associates and associates, with the latter ranking revenue generation, sacrifice in work-life balance and a lack of support from partners as other important factors.

Which is the biggest obstacle to inclusion and wellbeing at the place where you work?

	Percentage %
Client demands	36.1%
Revenue generation / billable hours targets	26.5%
The need to sacrifice work-life balance in pursuit of promotion at my firm	13.3%
The demands placed on partners, meaning they have no capacity to consider these issues	12%
Lack of role models	9.6%
Support for inclusion and wellbeing policies from senior management	6%
Support for inclusion and wellbeing policies from Partners	4.8%
Access to mentoring and/or sponsorship schemes	4.8%
Access to flexible working arrangements	2.4%
Lack of consistency between senior managers	1.2%

When asked about what partners specifically could do to create more inclusive workplaces, behaviour change and more openly championing inclusion and wellbeing policies emerged as the greatest response, alongside more interaction with their teams and a greater commitment to work-life balance.

“Client demands emerged as the single greatest obstacle to more inclusive workplaces, with over a third of respondents outlining it as the main barrier to change within their firms.”

Part 3: Creating more inclusive workplace cultures

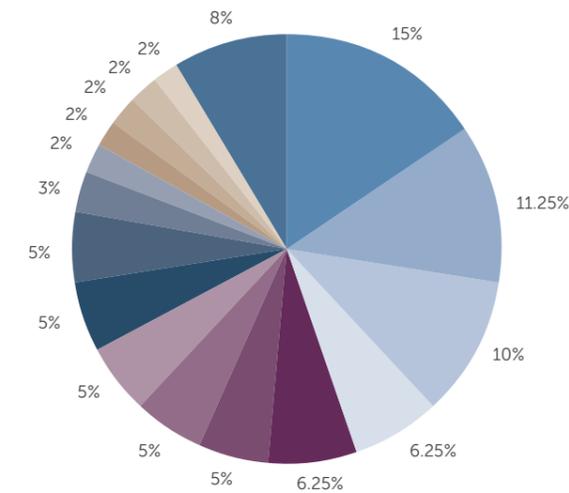
Key Insights:

- More genuine support from managers and partners was considered the greatest change needed to make law firms more inclusive workplaces
- This could be achieved by a positive behaviour change by partners and more openly championing inclusion and wellbeing policies
- More role models, greater commitment to flexible working and focus away from the billable hour model also emerged as key themes
- A significant number of respondents did not know what their firm or the partnership could do to become more inclusive

The final part of the survey asked respondents what changes their firm could make to create a more inclusive workplace culture. More genuine support from managers and partners emerged as the most consistent theme, with better communication and support, recognition of good work, and more consistency in the implementation of inclusion and wellbeing initiatives stated as prime examples by respondents.

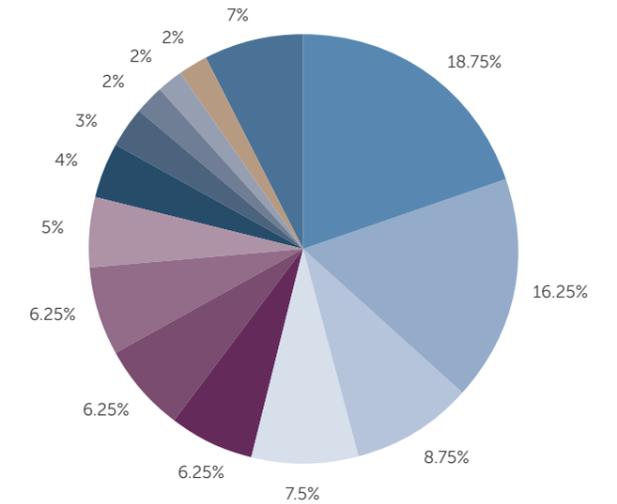
A greater number of role models – whether this be female, BAME, part-time workers or champions in senior management – also emerged as a factor that would make law firms more inclusive, along with a greater emphasis (and commitment to) flexible working. Focus away from billable hour targets and more collaborative working styles recognising the different strengths of different people were also noted by a significant number of respondents, with 11 per cent admitting that they were unsure what changes their firm could make to become more inclusive.

What changes would make your firm's workplace culture more inclusive?



- Genuine support from managers and partners (communication/appreciation of hard work, consistency)
- Don't know
- Role Models
- Greater emphasis on agile and flexible working
- Recognition of different strengths of different people
- Less focus on billable hours targets
- A more diverse workforce
- Better feedback / follow ups
- Better Management
- Nothing
- Mentoring / Sponsorship
- Partners being more available
- Personal targets linked to remuneration
- Training
- Open Plan Working
- Different approach to inclusion policies
- Other

What changes would demonstrate to you that the partners at your firm care about the issues we have been asking about in this questionnaire?



- Change in behaviour
- Don't know
- More interaction and feedback
- Greater commitment to work-life balance / flexible working
- Less focus on billable hours
- Mentoring and support for associates
- Nothing
- Role models (female)
- Better initiatives to support wellbeing
- More active engagement from senior management
- Roles with defined hours
- Making changes within their team
- More inclusive promotion rounds
- Other

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Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this survey show that whilst the majority of respondents feel respected, valued and treated fairly where they work, shifts in the behaviour of partners and management, and focus away from traditional remuneration models are the changes needed to shift the needle on inclusion and wellness in law firms.

Based on the above findings, we have drawn together the following recommendations for partners and senior management:

1). Communicate your inclusion and wellbeing policies effectively

Our survey showed that not all respondents were aware of their firm's inclusion and wellbeing policies, with 27 per cent viewing them as ineffective and 28 per cent indifferent. Let your firm know how you are tackling issues of inclusion and wellbeing through well executed internal communication campaigns, which will both engage employees and secure buy-in from across the firm. If you are a partner, take an active role in understanding your firm's inclusion and wellbeing policies, and communicate with your team as to how such policies will benefit them, and how they work in practice.

2). Consider individual behaviour and attitude

Compared to their workplace culture more generally, respondents consistently perceived partners to treat them with less respect and fairness, and to care less about their individual wellbeing. More support by partners, and their greater championing of inclusion and wellness initiatives, were also shown to be the most desired change law firms could make to become more inclusive workplaces. Small actions such as taking the time to communicate effectively with your team, engaging in one to one discussions and finding out if there are any obstacles affecting the way someone performs, providing feedback and saying thank you go a long way to improving employee engagement within firms.

3). Resourcing and Client Demands

Finally, a combination of high client demand and the billable hour model were considered the biggest obstacle to greater inclusion and wellness in the legal sector. Firms need to consider if there is a way their client relationships can operate differently, from opening dialogue with clients on issues of inclusion and wellness, to considering how alternative billing structures can be used to harness both efficient and agile working. Not only does this maintain employee engagement, but ensures your firm remains competitive by considering flexible resourcing models.

Methodology

The survey was circulated online to law firms over a six week period. It received a range of responses representing a cross-section of legal roles, from solicitors, barristers and trainees, as well as D&I / HR specialists and business support teams (N = 80). An equal proportion of partners, senior associates and associates participated in the survey. The findings provide an important snapshot into current thinking and attitudes, particularly in relation to the perceived barriers to inclusion and how to influence change.

