



Stress, Performance, and the New Normal in Legal Work



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INTRODUCTION:

The Shifting Landscape of Legal Stress

The legal profession has always been demanding.

High stakes, tight deadlines, and significant responsibility are inherent to the work. Yet, recent findings show a fundamental shift in how stress is experienced. The conversation is moving beyond individual burnout and towards a more complex, systemic challenge.

While reported burnout has declined, a new pattern is emerging. Many lawyers are learning to cope with pressure more effectively, but they are often doing so individually, without expecting structural change from their workplace. Over time, this quiet acceptance of high workloads and constant availability creates a culture where stress becomes normalised.

This matters because stress is not only a wellbeing issue. It is also a performance design issue.

How work is structured, how leaders set expectations, and how lawyers manage pressure all shape whether high performance can be sustained over time.

This guide explores the practical responses available to both firms and individual lawyers, focusing on how to build a culture of sustainable performance rather than one of simple endurance.



1. How Firms Can Structure Work for Sustainable Performance

Stress in legal organisations is often treated as an individual resilience issue. In reality, many of the strongest drivers of stress are structural. These include workload visibility, expectations around availability, and how success is defined. Small changes in these areas can significantly improve sustainability without reducing performance.

Five Questions Leadership Teams Should Ask



Do our teams know what “good enough” looks like during a busy week?

When expectations are unclear during high-pressure periods, lawyers often default to perfectionism or excessive hours. Clear guidance on priorities and acceptable standards reduces unnecessary pressure.



Is workload visibility shared or hidden?

Workload stress often comes from uneven distribution rather than absolute volume. If leaders cannot see who is overloaded, work allocation becomes reactive and inconsistent.



Are partners rewarded only for billables or also for team sustainability?

What organisations reward shapes behaviour. If financial performance is the only signal of success, leadership behaviours that protect teams can become secondary.



Are junior lawyers comfortable saying they are overloaded?

In many firms, junior lawyers hesitate to speak up about capacity concerns. Leaders who actively ask about workload create a culture where pressure can be managed earlier.



Do we track stress signals before burnout occurs?

Burnout rarely appears suddenly. Patterns such as repeated overtime, cancelled leave, or declining engagement are often visible long before crisis points occur.



Practical Actions for Firms

- **Clarify Availability Expectations:** Define when lawyers are expected to respond outside normal hours and when recovery time should be protected.
- **Improve Workload Visibility:** Use simple tools that show allocation across teams to help leaders distribute work more evenly.
- **Model Sustainable Leadership Behaviour:** When partners take leave properly and acknowledge pressure openly, it sets a powerful cultural signal.
- **Reward Leadership that Supports Teams:** Mentoring, capability development, and workload management should be recognised as part of strong leadership.



Key Takeaways for Firms:

Sustainable performance is a design choice. By increasing workload visibility, clarifying expectations, and rewarding leadership that prioritises team wellbeing, firms can build an environment where high performance does not lead to burnout.

2. How Lawyers Can Manage Pressure in High-Demand Environments

Legal work will always involve demanding periods. The goal is not to eliminate pressure, but to build habits that allow lawyers to perform effectively without gradually exhausting themselves. Managing personal energy and setting clear boundaries are crucial for long-term success.



1. Manage Energy, Not Just Time

Many professionals manage their calendar carefully but ignore the energy required to sustain cognitive performance. Sustained performance depends on consistent recovery cycles, not constant output.

Small adjustments can make a meaningful difference:

- Take short movement breaks during long periods of desk work.
- Protect sleep as a non-negotiable performance factor.
- Avoid relying solely on caffeine to push through fatigue.

2. Set Boundaries that Protect Performance

In high-performing environments, the line between commitment and overwork can become blurred. Clear boundaries help maintain the capacity to deliver consistently over time. Examples include:

- Communicating when you are offline unless there is a genuine emergency.
- Fully disconnecting during leave periods.
- Pausing before responding to requests labelled “urgent”.

3. Protect Deep Work

Much of legal work requires extended concentration. Frequent interruptions and constant email monitoring significantly reduce productivity. Protecting uninterrupted work blocks can improve both efficiency and quality. Practical approaches include:

- Turning off notifications during focused work periods.
- Scheduling 60 to 90 minute deep work sessions for complex tasks.
- Batching administrative tasks rather than responding continuously.

4. Build Professional Durability

Long-term success in law depends not only on capability but also on the ability to sustain performance across demanding periods. Three habits are particularly valuable:

- **Seek Scaffolding Support:** Junior lawyers develop faster when they actively seek guidance and feedback.
- **Reconnect with Purpose:** Regularly stepping back to consider the broader impact of your work helps maintain motivation.
- **Normalise Asking for Help Early:** Seeking support, coaching, or mentorship is a sign of professional maturity, not weakness.



Key Takeaways for Lawyers:

Individual habits are powerful. By managing your energy, protecting your focus, and setting clear boundaries, you can navigate the pressures of legal work productively and build a durable, long-term career.





The Bigger Opportunity: From Coping to Thriving

Many lawyers have become highly skilled at coping with pressure individually. The next great opportunity for the profession is to ensure that organisations and leaders also shape environments where sustainable performance is not just possible, but expected.

When firms design work thoughtfully, and lawyers develop strong personal habits, stress becomes something that can be navigated productively rather than simply endured. This benefits not only wellbeing, but also the long-term performance and durability of the entire profession.

Ready to build a more sustainable future for your team?

FrontTier provides tailored workshops and coaching programmes designed to help law firms and legal professionals thrive.

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