The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for an increased focus on mental health in the legal industry. In a recent webinar from GCC Portfolio, Renee Branson, a principal at RB Consulting and Executive Director at the Sexual Assault Resource Agency, Deborah Knupp, Managing Director at GrowthPlay and Lisa Buchanan, Director of Marketing and Creative Services at GCC Portfolio discussed the importance of mental health and E-relationship building at law firms.

The coronavirus pandemic provided an opportunity to speak about mental health in a way that allowed it to be destigmatized. Many in the industry were experiencing the same feelings of anxiety and depression. As a result, the legal industry recognized mental health was something that needed to be discussed.

To address the issue of mental health in the legal industry, law firms need to understand what the biggest issues are, how to address them, and how to get support from leadership to tackle those issues.
What are the Biggest Mental Health Issues in the Legal Industry?

With many in the legal industry beginning to return to the office, Ms. Branson said she’s seen higher levels of anxiety, guilt, and ambivalence among workers. These feelings manifest in social reluctance among employees, as well as an increased need for remote work flexibilities.

“What we have experienced really is a trauma,” Ms. Branson said. “First of all, frame it for what it is.”

Ms. Knupp said there is a phenomenon called the “shadow pandemic” emerging as a long term effect of the coronavirus pandemic. This shadow pandemic encompasses feelings of mortality, neurological disorders, and other mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that are expected to last for years.

“We’re going to see a broad expanse of different things,” Ms. Branson said. “For folks who had COVID, we still don't know the long term neurological and mental health impacts of surviving that illness.”

For those who haven’t experienced COVID-19 firsthand, what the shadow pandemic could reveal are long term feelings of trauma. Ms. Branson said that once the pandemic subsides and people begin to feel a sense of security, they then begin to process the trauma they experienced during lockdown.

“That processing can take a short amount of time, or it can take years,” Ms. Branson said. “The way to keep that from feeling really overwhelming is to not add on really high expectations to yourself and others.”

Investing in mental health education for those in the legal industry is one way to help leadership be better coaches, issue spotters and counsel for their organizations and clients. This involves staying connected with clients to keep mental health issues a top priority. To achieve this, Ms. Branson said she utilizes what she calls a resilience library with six “books” that address mental health issues.

“One of those books is Connection,” she said. “When we feel disconnected from people and feel a lack of belonging and an inability to be authentic to ourselves, whatever burden we’re carrying feels twice as heavy. If they have a connection with someone that they can rely on, it helps ease [that burden].”

The law firms that are the most successful in addressing mental health issues are those that listen and adapt. Even though the coronavirus pandemic was a huge disruption, it also gave law firms the opportunity to adapt and examine their processes in order to better accommodate their employees’ needs.

“It’s really challenging right now because we do have this great ability to connect but also Zoom fatigue is real. We have to find new and different ways to stay connected...[especially] with small groups of folks, whether that’s done virtually or in person,” Ms. Branson said. “It’s about listening and being able to respond when you can.”

How Law Firms Can Connect Through E-Relationship Building
To tackle the issue of mental health during the pandemic, law firms need to be creative and innovative in the ways they reach out to employees. E-relationship building includes team-based activities, events, and communications. Ms. Buchanan said that one of the biggest changes GCC saw in the past year was law firms showing appreciation to their employees by acknowledging their hard work during challenging times.

With many feeling Zoom burnout, electronic and virtual communications are one way law firms are engaging with their employees and showing appreciation. These communications can be as simple as sending individual messages letting employees know they’re appreciated.

“It can be so impactful for a firm to say ‘thank you’ because we're all having a rough time,” Ms. Buchanan said. “Little things can be so impactful... and make a huge difference in somebody's life.”

Ms. Buchanan said the pandemic affected the way firms think in terms of focusing on small gestures instead of bigger initiatives. Investing in ways to give employees appreciation shows that the firm is focused on their wellbeing.

“I’m just blown away by the fact that our firms are so forward in being part of [mental health],” she said. “The law industry seems to be taking it and moving forward.”

**How to Start Mental Health Initiatives at Law Firms**

Even if employee mental health and wellbeing is top of mind for law firms, it can be a challenge to get leadership on board. One way to stress the importance of mental health initiatives is to highlight the impact poor mental health can have on productivity.

“Either spend a certain amount of time addressing feelings and mental health, or we’re going to spend a lot of time [addressing] inefficiencies and lack of productivity,” Ms. Branson said, quoting author and researcher Brené Brown. “These things really do have bottom line impacts.”

Ignoring mental health issues impacts both client relationships and a law firm's finances. To deal with issues of decreased productivity, firms should focus on innovative ways to communicate with employees. Ms. Buchanan said firms who used GCC for holiday cards get input back from employees.

“Letting the firms be creative in the way that they want to portray who they are is the first thing,” Ms. Buchanan said. “It’s also a connection and letting their clients and people know ‘we see you.’ Just little touch points are really important.”

**What Can Law Firms Do to Focus on Mental Health Moving Forward?**

The coronavirus pandemic offered an [opportunity for law firms](#) to put an increased focus on mental health. Acknowledgement, education, acceptance, and understanding of mental health issues validates those who are struggling, and helps remove the stigma. By acknowledging mental health, firms will help improve their bottom line while also investing in their employees’ wellbeing.
“It starts at the top,” Ms. Buchanan said. “If you’ve got a leader in the firm that gets [mental health], you’ve got so many options.”

For law firms looking to prioritize their employees’ mental health, focusing on E-relationship building is a good place to start. With many firms still working remotely, Ms. Knupp emphasized that there hasn’t been a better time to reach out to employees and start an initiative.

“This is the time to let people know that you see them,” she said. “No matter what you do, be a kind human to humankind.”

Watch the full webinar here: GCC Presents Mental Health & E-Relationship Building

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