

Word from afar

Young lawyers around the country



There has been a recent spate of domestic and international surveys which consistently show that a significant percentage of lawyers, and in particular young lawyers, are unhappy with their jobs and often the profession in general.

In Australia, for example, Mahlab's *Survey 2007* showed that more than half of lawyers in private practice are considering leaving their current position.

In 2005, the Law Institute of Victoria's (LIV) survey of articled clerks found that although most said their training either met or exceeded expectations, many indicated they experienced some form of harassment, bullying or intimidation.

As for the UK, *The Times* reported on a survey which revealed that almost a quarter of our colleagues want to leave the profession due to stress and long working hours.¹

Surveys and related forms of statistics are, of course, intrinsically fraught. Even Homer Simpson pointed out that "people can come up with statistics to prove anything ... 40 per cent of all people know that".

While that may be so, one cannot ignore the cries of discontent ringing in the ears of the legal profession.

Ultimately, the profession will remain stubbornly fixed to its ancient foundations. While it may need to install a revolving door at its gates to deal with the hastened movement in and out of itself, it will remain steadfast.

However, this is no reason to accept all its prevailing characteristics. If there are problems with the profession and enough of its constituents wish to fix them, then so they should and will. If such problems are rectified, common sense dictates that lawyer satisfaction will increase and the pronounced turnover in the profession will decrease.

So, who are some of those constituents, and what are they doing to rectify the problem of dissatisfaction? The key constituents are the primary representative bodies of each state and territory, such as the Law Institute of Victoria (LIV), and of relevance to us, the LIV Young Lawyers' Section (YLS).

These representative bodies, while distinct, are members of the Law Council of Australia (LCA). And, in turn, the YLS is a member of the LCA Australian Young Lawyers Committee (AYLC).

As summarised by Will Hammond in his President's Update on page three, the YLS has adopted goals to combat attrition, directed to both employees and employers.

These include increasing communication and dialogue among young lawyers and developing initiatives aimed not at

preventing young lawyers from broadening their horizons but at supplying law firms with the tools necessary to attract them back after a period of time.

Barrister and New Barristers' Standing Committee (NSBC) chair Simon Pitt represents the interests of younger members of the Victorian Bar. In response to issues confronting younger members, such as creating and maintaining relationships with instructing solicitors, the NSBC has recently published the *New Barristers' Guide to the Bar*.

The NSBC is also working on a so-called "exit interview" for when younger members leave the Bar. It is envisaged that information from the exit interview can be used in conjunction with similar forms of information around Australia to better understand why young lawyers change employment.

The Tasmanian Law Society (TLS), in conjunction with the LCA, has also been considering issues facing young lawyers.

The TLS has adopted many initiatives including: promoting communication with the young lawyer representative bodies around Australia; creating a "mentor list" for young lawyers, creating an avenue for young lawyers to discuss problems with established practitioners; encouraging young lawyers to take a greater involvement in existing organisations of the legal profession; and supporting a publication aimed as a guide for newly admitted lawyers.

AYLC chair Elizabeth Lee has stated that the AYLC is planning on rolling out a national online survey. It is envisaged it will identify the core issues affecting young lawyers on a national scale, and will affirm those issues already raised (mental health, workplace "bullying" etc.) as well as shed further light on issues such as unrealistic expectations in the workplace, dealing with difficult people and the seduction of working abroad.

The ACT Law Society has undertaken the following steps to assist young lawyers: a mentor list; a free, confidential counselling service for its members; a series of seminars for newly admitted lawyers which incorporate issues of dealing with support staff and workplace bullying; and social events designed to close the perceived gap between lawyers in private practice and those in government, aiming to create an inclusive environment for all young lawyers.

If you have any thoughts on young lawyer satisfaction, we would love to hear from you. If you want to find out more about the LCA and what its members are up to, please visit www.lawcouncil.asn.au. ■

1. Frances Gibb, 'One in four lawyers wants to change jobs', *The Times*, 2 July 2007.