

Five things we can le



SURPRISINGLY, THE PROFESSION BEST KNOWN FOR FIRING AND RE-HIRING (THEM

Typically, we lawyers would rather distinguish ourselves from consultants than try to be more like them. But there may be an exception, although one of the things that clearly sets us apart isn't something we'd like to hear. It turns out that consultants are far less likely to suffer depression and mental illness than we are. In fact, consultants have some of the lowest rates of mental illness among all professionals. How do I know this? Consultants told me so.

In 2007, Beaton Research & Consulting, in association with beyondblue, published a study into the prevalence of mental health issues among Australian professionals. The study included an analysis of depression scores by industry type. Most notably, it found that lawyers were most likely to have experienced moderate to severe symptoms of depression (almost 16% of lawyers had done so) while consultants were least likely to have experienced such symptoms (around 7% of consultants had done so). The updated study, *2011 Annual Business and Professions Study* by Beaton Research and Consulting (<http://bit.ly/IYQnKG>), shows that almost half a decade on the gap persists (although consultants had been relegated to the category of "other").

This raises the question: why? And unfortunately the traditional explanations

– working environment, personality, lifestyle factors – don't provide satisfactory answers. Both consultants and lawyers often work long hours in high pressure and competitive environments, managing large workloads and high levels of responsibility. We are all typically ambitious, hard-working high-achievers. And the notion that consultants simply get more sleep than we do, spend more hours on the treadmill or enrol in more meditation sessions is hardly convincing.

So I started thinking about the way consultants and lawyers work, since we spend so much time working. And it appears there are key differences that may go part of the way to explaining the gap. Below are my top five differences between the work of consultants and lawyers, and the simple but important lessons they teach us about improving our mental health.

1. See yourself as a problem-solver, not a risk-manager

Lawyers excel at finding problems. How else can we negotiate a comprehensive contract, develop a strong defence or prepare a rigorous advice? We diligently spot risks, identify flaws, analyse weaknesses, evaluate gaps and imagine worst case scenarios on a daily basis. We then build this critical

analysis into our contract/defence/advice and sigh with relief because we have judiciously "managed risk".

Consultants also excel at finding problems. Like us, they have to. How else can they cut costs, improve process flow and increase productivity? The big difference, however, is how they describe what they're doing. You will not find consultants explaining that they've "addressed risks". Rather, they exclaim that they've "fixed problems" and "found solutions". As a consequence, consultants triumphantly see themselves as problem-solvers, which is far more uplifting than seeing yourself as a risk-manager.

Lesson: Frame your work in a positive light.

2. Get talking

Consultants must love to talk. Ask any consultant and you'll find that much of their work involves meetings, presentations and workshops. Not to mention seminars, interviews, brainstorming/feedback/reporting sessions, conferences, consultations and reviews. As a consequence, consultants spend a lot of time engaging with others.

Legal work is much more solitary in nature. Yes, there are all-parties conference calls and meetings with clients or counsel. And

Learn from consultants



CONSULTANTS (AND MANAGERS) HAS A FEW THINGS TO TEACH LAWYERS ABOUT GOOD MENTAL HEALTH.

yes, we often sit in groups and work as part of teams. But mostly we draft agreements, read cases, write letters, prepare memos and craft claims or counterclaims, alone. And this means we are less likely to be getting our recommended daily dose of social interaction, which is key to good mental health.

Lesson: Spend time with others. Break up your day with conversations in the kitchen, drop by a colleague's office and go out for group coffees and lunches.

3. Show why you're valuable

Fortunately or unfortunately, few people consider consultants a necessity. Consultants may crossly retort that business needs them to make the tough calls, cut unnecessary expenditure and make a business run altogether more efficiently (and they may be right), but most executives have a trusty one-liner they can always rely on to justify not hiring consultants: "they're too expensive".

Most people use the same line about lawyers, but they do so as they're paying their legal bills. Few people would go to court, sign a deal, conduct a business or end a marriage without legal advice. Although it may sound good for the profession, it means we're at risk of advising people

who wish they didn't need us. And this can leave lawyers feeling undervalued, unappreciated and faced with unreasonable demands and expectations, which can cause significant stress and damage to self-esteem. Consultants are less likely to be in this position – if they're hired it's because someone wants their help.

Lesson: Work on showing your clients the value you provide and not taking criticism (especially unfair criticism) personally.

4. Spot the difference (you make)

Lawyers tend to finish a deal, issue an advice, end a case or agree a property settlement and close the file. Sometimes there might first be a closing lunch, a quick "thanks" from the client or a sense that a just outcome was achieved. But usually we're unlikely to hear whether the deal was a success, the advice acted on or the outcome effective.

It isn't like this for consultants. At the end of an implementation they return to the client and (assuming they've done their job well) report that there's been a 25% reduction in overhead costs, a 33% improvement in retention rates and a 48% increase in employee satisfaction. And they stand by as their clients shake hands

and smile, and they are very aware of the difference their work has made.

Lesson: Take the time to identify, and be proud of, the positive impact of your work.

5. Be creative

Have you ever seen a consultant's slide pack? It is usually more colourful than Joseph's technicolour dreamcoat and includes more graphs, charts and tables than a year 8 maths book. Consultants are very good at presenting their work in interesting ways. They often dress brightly, speak passionately and pride themselves on engaging the client.

Lawyers are not so good at this. Admittedly, it is hard to make a memorandum of legal advice, a 100-page facility agreement or an affidavit with 27 attachments look exciting. But finding ways to be creative is just as important for good mental health as sleep and exercise. And it makes work much more enjoyable and satisfying.

Lesson: Inject some creativity into your practice of law – be it through how you dress, set up your office, think about legal issues or present legal material – and enjoy it. ●

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