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Burnout and Psychological Safety in Law: National Survey Findings and a Practical Path Forward

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Survey Overview & Demographic Information

This report summarizes the findings from a survey created in partnership between Paula Davis, Founder & CEO of the Stress & Resilience Institute and ALM about psychological safety and burnout in the legal profession. Persistent uncertainty, the implementation and scaling of AI technology, and a shifting legal landscape continue to drive high stress in the legal profession. Many legal leaders, lawyers, and legal professionals are exhausted and overwhelmed, and there is a lack of clear guidance on how to reduce burnout and build strong teams and thriving cultures in law.

Our mission with this survey was twofold: First, we wanted to understand how frequently lawyers and legal professionals experienced the three dimensions of burnout – exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (also called professional efficacy). That was of interest to us because high frequency in any of these dimensions might indicate that a lawyer or legal professional might be at an increased risk of experiencing burnout compared to those who experienced these dimensions less frequently. This knowledge might help legal organizations more quickly and effectively address employee burnout concerns. Second, we also wanted to gather some initial perspectives from respondents about their levels of psychological safety. There isn't a lot of data about psychological safety in the legal profession (if any), so we hope that this is the first step of many exploring this topic.

We collected data from lawyers and legal professionals via a survey that was sent to ALM's database of law firms of all sizes located in the United States. Eight hundred eighty-seven (887) people responded, with eight hundred seventy-nine (879) saying they worked at a law firm and eight (8) saying they did not. When asked to give their title, eight hundred seventy-nine (879) people responded with seven hundred eighty-eight (788) people identifying as a lawyer and ninety-one (91) identifying as a legal professional with a variety of titles, including but not limited to, paralegal, marketing/communications, business development, human resources/diversity/recruiting, finance/pricing, and operations.

We also invited respondents to answer the following question: "What about your workplace negatively impacts your mental well-being? Please select all that apply." We provided some choices, but respondents could add their own comments as well.

Not everyone responded to all the demographic questions, but most did, with results as follows:

How do you identify?

(total answered = 876)

Female	500 (51.7%)
Male	362 (41.3%)
Non-binary	5 (0.6%)
Gender not disclosed	6 (0.7%)
Other (please specify) – non-binary transgender and transgender female	3 (0.3%)

What is your age?

(total answered = 873)

18-24 years old	2 (0.2%)
25-34 years old	328 (37.6%)
35-44 years old	276 (31.6%)
45-54 years old	146 (16.7%)
55-64 years old	91 (10.4%)
65+ years old	30 (3.4%)

Which of the following best describes the size of your law firm by number of lawyers?

(total answered = 879)

1-50	14 (1.6%)
51-200	139 (15.8%)
201-500	175 (19.9%)
501-1000	223 (25.4%)
1001+	328 (37.3%)

Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity?

(total answered = 878)

White or Caucasian	685 (78%)
Asian (origins in Far East, South, or Southeast Asia)	63 (7.2%)
Hispanic or Latina/o	38 (4.3%)
Multiracial	34 (3.9%)
Ethnicity Not Disclosed	25 (2.8%)
Black or African-American	19 (2.2%)
Middle Eastern or North African	7 (0.8%)
Indigenous People of the Americas and Pacific Islands	2 (0.2%)
Other	5 (0.6%)

Additional Question

The additional question we asked was: “What about your workplace negatively impacts your mental well-being? Please select all that apply.” We simply wanted to know more about these factors, and respondents could select multiple items.

What about Your Workplace Negatively Impacts Your Mental Well-Being?	% of Respondents Who Chose This Item
Billable hour pressures	73.9%
Always on call/can't disconnect	72.6%
Client demands	58.0%
Lack of sleep	55.5%
Lean teams/understaffed teams	53.0%
Lack of support for personal well-being/work-life balance	45.5%
Lack of clear expectations	34.8%
Pressure to be on screen all day	33.7%
Lack of sponsorship/mentorship	33.2%
Lack of respect for my position	32.1%
Dysfunctional firm culture	30.8%
Business development responsibilities	30.1%
Pressure to be in office or remote	28.5%
Compensation plan	24.0%
Fear of asking for project help	23.3%
Competitiveness within the firm	21.6%
Lack of civility in the firm	11.4%
Disparity between hybrid and remote	9.7%
Other	8.0%

Psychological Safety Methods & Results

We used the seven-item questionnaire for measuring psychological safety created by Dr. Amy Edmondson.¹ We used this questionnaire with permission from Dr. Edmondson and her team. I modified the statements slightly to be applicable to work more generally, rather than to teams. We asked respondents, “Which of the following statements describe how you feel at work? Please select all that apply.” The responses that you see below are people who marked “yes” to the statements. For example, 515 respondents (59.0%) marked yes to the statement, “My work efforts are not deliberately undermined.”



We then further categorized the responses in red and bold as the “psychologically unsafe” group. We discovered that this group is almost 70% associates and female, and more than one-third are 25-34 years old. We also compared the top five responses from the additional question section for the psychologically unsafe group vs the total for the entire group.

Total Group: Top 5 Mental Health Impacts	Psychologically Unsafe Group: Top 5 Mental Health Impacts
Billable hours pressure	Billable hours pressure
Always on call/can’t disconnect	Always on call/can’t disconnect
Client demands	Lack of support for personal well-being/work-life balance
Lack of sleep	Lack of sponsorship/mentorship
Lean teams/understaffed teams	Dysfunctional firm culture

While everyone is impacted by billable hours pressure and feeling like they are always on call and can’t disconnect, the psychologically unsafe group cited other mental health and well-being challenges. The psychologically unsafe group listed lack of support for personal well-being/work-life balance, lack of sponsorship/mentorship, and dysfunctional firm culture more frequently than the general group.

It is also worth noting that among the general sample, 23.3% of respondents cited fear of asking for project help as an aspect of their workplace that negatively impacted their mental well-being. Among the psychologically unsafe group, 63% cited fear of asking for project help as an aspect of their workplace that negatively impacted their mental well-being.

Burnout Methods & Results

Burnout is chronic workplace stress that is left unmanaged,² and it has three important dimensions: chronic exhaustion, chronic cynicism, and inefficacy (also called professional efficacy).³ Rather than measure rates of burnout, we wanted to more clearly understand how frequently lawyers and legal professionals experienced different aspects of the three burnout dimensions. This was of interest because experiencing one or more of these dimensions frequently might mean that a lawyer or legal professional might be at an increased risk of experiencing burnout compared to those who experienced one or more of these dimensions less frequently. This knowledge might help legal organizations more quickly and effectively address employee burnout concerns. I created 17 statements to more fully explore the three burnout dimensions, and then we asked respondents to rate how frequently the statements applied to them.

Here are the 17 statements:

E = Exhaustion dimension of burnout

C = Cynicism dimension of burnout

PE = Professional Efficacy (or inefficacy) dimension of burnout

I feel emotionally drained on a regular basis from my work. (modified from the MBI)⁴ (E)

I don't think about my work much at the end of each day. (modified from the AWLS)⁵ (E)

I have so much work to do that it takes away from time with family and friends. (E)

I have so much work to do that it takes away from hobbies and personal interests. (E)

I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have. (E)

I feel productive at getting things done at work. (E)

I have become less interested in my work. (modified from the MBI) (C)

I have become more cynical about my work. (C)

I feel like a cog in the wheel at work. (C)

I have a hard time concentrating at work. (C)

I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work. (C)

I am recognized by my colleagues for my work contributions. (PE)

I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions. (PE)

I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work. (PE)

I feel appreciated at work. (PE)

I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution. (PE)

I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work. (PE)

The frequency designations the respondents could select from are:

Never

A few times a year or less

Once a month

A few times a month

Once a week

A few times a week

Every day

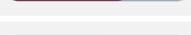
NOTE: The research in each of the burnout data tables throughout this report reflects the percentage of respondents who answered each statement, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.” We selected that range because we wanted to know the percentage of people who most frequently felt aspects of one or more of the burnout dimensions.

The Burnout Data – Overall Results & Discussion

Here are the overall results separated by burnout dimension.

Responses to the Exhaustion Statements (Overall)

Here are the overall responses to the exhaustion statements. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.” For example, 72.8% of respondents said they have so much work to do that it takes away from family and friends once a week, a few times a week, or every day.

Statement	Response
I have so much work to do that it takes away from family and friends.	 72.8%
I have so much work to do that it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.	 76.7%
I don't think about my work much at the end of the day.	 19.8%
I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.	 63.3%
I feel emotionally drained on a regular basis from my work.	 68.7%
I feel productive at getting things done at work.	 58.6%

Responses to the Cynicism Statements (Overall)

Here are the overall responses to the cynicism statements. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.” For example, 64.9% of respondents said they have a hard time concentrating at work once a week, a few times a week, or every day.

Statement	Response
I have a hard time concentrating at work.	 64.9%
I have become less interested in my work.	 63.4%
I have become more cynical about my work.	 68.0%
I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work.	 38.0%
I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.	 51.4% (23.1% said every day)

Responses to the Professional Efficacy Statements (Overall)

Here are the overall responses to the professional efficacy statements. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.” For example, 38.9% of respondents said they feel appreciated at work once a week, a few times a week, or every day.

Statement	Response
I am recognized by colleagues for my work contributions.	 35.6%
I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.	 27.0%
I feel appreciated at work.	 38.9%
I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution.	 39.3%
I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.	 43.4%
I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.	 68.1%

The Burnout Data by Specific Category

These are the same statements as shown above, but further categorized by title, gender, firm size, and age. The percentages shown are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

NOTE: Law firms use a variety of titles to capture different groups of professionals. We chose “non-equity partner” to recognize a senior lawyer recognized as a partner but without an ownership share of the firm; and “legal professional” to capture the breadth of professional titles who support lawyers on the business side of law firm operations.

Title

A. Partners & Counsel

Responses to the Exhaustion Statements (Partners/Counsel)

Here are the results by title for partners and counsel. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Equity Partner	Non-Equity Partner	Counsel
I have so much work to do that it takes away from family and friends.	71.2%	81.4%	60.5%
I have so much work to do that it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.	76.5%	81.5%	69.7%
I don't think about my work much at the end of the day.	16.1%	20.4%	25.3%
I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.	55.4%	65.4%	52.0%
I feel emotionally drained by my work on a regular basis.	61.4%	72.3%	65.0%
I feel productive at getting things done at work.	67.2%	51.4%	55.9%

Responses to the Cynicism Statements (Partners/Counsel)

Here are the results by title for partners and counsel. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Equity Partner	Non-Equity Partner	Counsel
I have a hard time concentrating at work.	51.5%	63.9%	61.3%
I have become less interested in my work.	51.5%	65.8%	65.7%
I have become more cynical about my work.	55.8%	64.8%	65.7%
I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work.	26.7%	30.6%	37.7%
I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.	32.0% (13.3% said every day)	43.5% (24.1% said every day)	54.6% (33.8% said every day)

Responses to the Professional Efficacy Statements (Partners/Counsel)

Here are the results by title for partners and counsel. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Equity Partner	Non-Equity Partner	Counsel
I am recognized by colleagues for my work contributions.	42.3%	28.4%	30.7%
I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.	42.8%	37.0%	23.7%
I feel appreciated at work.	43.2%	30.8%	31.2%
I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution.	49.3%	38.3%	39.0%
I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.	52.4%	37.3%	35.1%
I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.	66.4%	55.6%	53.3%

QUICK TAKE: Addressing partner stress and burnout needs to be prioritized in law. These data show that non-equity partners and counsel may be doing worse in some areas when compared to equity partners (who are also feeling the effects of stress way too frequently). The combination of chronic stress, work overload, and loneliness, all known issues in the legal profession, is a particularly toxic trio for lawyer mental health and well-being.⁶ It's notable that 13.3% of equity partners, 24.1% of non-equity partners, and 33.8% of counsel reported feeling like a cog in the wheel at work *every day*.

In addition, this a complex time in which to lead at work, and burnout rates remain high, especially among leaders. Across industries, managers are more likely than non-managers to be disengaged at work, burned out, looking for a new job, and feeling like their organization doesn't care about their well-being.⁷ Outside of law, more than one-quarter of leaders feel burned out often or always, and two-thirds feel it at least sometimes.⁸

B. Associates & Legal Professionals

Responses to the Exhaustion Statements (Associates/Legal Professionals)

Here are the results by title for associates and legal professionals. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Associates	Legal Professionals
I have so much work to do that it takes away from family and friends.	78.5%	47.6%
I have so much work to do that it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.	82.7%	46.3%
I don't think about my work much at the end of the day.	17.1%	34.1%
I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.	69.9%	50.0%
I feel emotionally drained by my work on a regular basis.	74.6%	50.0%
I feel productive at getting things done at work.	57.1%	64.2%

Responses to the Cynicism Statements (Associates/Legal Professionals)

Here are the results by title for associates and legal professionals. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Associates	Legal Professionals
I have a hard time concentrating at work.	71.4%	58.8%
I have become less interested in my work.	68.3%	52.5%
I have become more cynical about my work.	75.1%	58.5%
I have a more difficult time making decisions about my work.	45.7%	28.1%
I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.	60.4% (24.8% said every day)	44.0% (18.3 said every day)

Responses to the Professional Efficacy Statements (Associates/Legal Professionals)

Here are the results by title for associates and legal professionals. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Associates	Legal Professionals
I am recognized by colleagues for my work contributions.	<p>36.4%</p>	<p>35.8%</p>
I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.	<p>21.5%</p>	<p>18.4%</p>
I feel appreciated at work.	<p>39.9%</p>	<p>45.2%</p>
I know that what I do makes a significant contribution.	<p>33.9%</p>	<p>51.3%</p>
I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.	<p>40.8%</p>	<p>57.4%</p>
I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.	<p>57.0%</p>	<p>68.3%</p>

Gender

Here are the results by gender. Please note that the underrepresentation of those identifying as non-binary, gender not disclosed, or other (please specify) limited our ability to further analyze responses beyond those who identified as either male and female.

Responses to the Exhaustion Statements (By Gender)

Here are the results by gender. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Male	Female
I have so much work to do that it takes away from family and friends.	73.3%	72.4%
I have so much work to do that it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.	79.2%	74.8%
I don't think about my work much at the end of the day.	20.7%	19.1%
I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.	58.8%	66.1%
I feel emotionally drained by my work on a regular basis.	67.5%	69.9%
I feel productive at getting things done at work.	60.5%	56.9%

Responses to the Cynicism Statements (By Gender)

Here are the results by gender. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Male	Female
I have a hard time concentrating at work.	59.4%	68.7%
I have become less interested in my work.	62.9%	63.7%
I have become more cynical about my work.	67.8%	68.2%
I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work.	34.8%	40.1%
I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.	51.2% (25.1% said every day)	51.3% (21.8% said every day)

Responses to the Professional Efficacy Statements (By Gender)

Here are the results by gender. The percentages are those who responded by answering “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	Male	Female
I am recognized by my colleagues for my work contributions.	37.5%	34.5%
I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.	31.6%	23.3%
I feel appreciated at work.	39.6%	38.0%
I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution.	42.6%	37.1%
I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.	38.7%	46.4%
I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.	57.3%	60.5%

Firm Size

Responses to the Exhaustion Statements (By Firm Size)

Here are the results by firm size. The percentages are those who responded by answering, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day:”

Statement	1-200	201-500	501-1000	1001+
I have so much work to do it takes away from family and friends.	68.6%	61.9%	75.8%	78.8%
I have so much work to do it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.	71.4%	66.9%	78.7%	82.9%
I don't think about my work much at the end of the day.	30.8%	19.5%	16.5%	17.1%
I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.	62.3%	58.7%	63.7%	65.8%
I feel emotionally drained by my work on a regular basis.	68.1%	61.6%	69.0%	72.5%
I feel productive at getting things done at work.	53.9%	62.9%	57.5%	59.3%

Responses to the Cynicism Statements (By Firm Size)

Here are the results by firm size. The percentages are those who responded by answering, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day:”

Statement	1-200	201-500	501-1000	1001+
I have a hard time concentrating at work.	64.6%	62.5%	67.0%	64.9%
I have become less interested in my work.	65.1%	54.1%	67.1%	64.9%
I have become more cynical about my work.	67.2%	57.8%	70.5%	72.3%
I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work.	42.4%	31.9%	40.3%	37.7%
I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.	52.1% (22.9% said every day)	44.5% (21.9% said every day)	53.9% (22.8% said every day)	53.0% (24.0% said every day)

Responses to the Professional Efficacy Statements (By Firm Size)

Here are the results by firm size. The percentages are those who responded by answering, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day:”

Statement	1-200	201-500	501-1000	1001+
I am recognized by colleagues for my work contributions.	28.9%	33.4%	36.3%	39.6%
I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.	23.3%	20.7%	30.2%	30.0%
I feel appreciated at work.	35.7%	44.0%	38.8%	37.8%
I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution.	32.6%	44.0%	40.6%	38.9%
I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.	39.9%	50.0%	41.0%	43.0%
I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.	61.1%	59.4%	57.3%	59.3%

QUICK TAKE: The data show a consistent “sweet spot” for firms that are 201-500 lawyers. We have opined that this might be the case because firms of this size are large enough to have great, high-level work yet small enough to have a small company feel to their culture.

Age

Responses to the Exhaustion Statements (By Age)

Here are the results by age. The percentages are those who responded by answering, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day:”

Statement	18-34 yrs old	35-54	55-64	65+
I have so much work to do it takes away from family and friends.	78.2%	73.2%	61.8%	46.2%
I have so much work to do it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.	82.3%	74.3%	65.4%	53.8%
I don't think about my work much at the end of the day.	14.2%	21.9%	28.3%	34.5%
I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.	67.1%	64.5%	50.0%	44.4%
I feel emotionally drained by my work on a regular basis.	74.8%	68.3%	58.0%	33.3%
I feel productive at getting things done at work.	61.3%	54.3%	56.7%	85.1%

Responses to the Cynicism Statements (By Age)

Here are the results by age. The percentages are those who responded by answering, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	18-34 yrs old	35-54	55-64	65+
I have a hard time concentrating at work.	70.7%	64.4%	53.1%	40.7%
I have become less interested in my work.	67.1%	63.7%	56.8%	38.4%
I have become more cynical about my work.	72.3%	67.7%	58.1%	50.0%
I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work.	47.0%	35.4%	23.4%	18.5%
I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.	59.2% (23.7% said every day)	49.6% (24.4% said every day)	37.6% (16.3% said every day)	33.3% (22.2% said every day)

Responses to the Professional Efficacy Statements (By Age)

Here are the results by age. The percentages are those who responded by answering, “once a week, a few times a week, or every day.”

Statement	18-34 yrs old	35-54	55-64	65+
I am recognized by colleagues for my work contributions.	37.7%	33.9%	30.7%	48.1%
I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.	20.6%	27.2%	37.6%	59.2%
I feel appreciated at work.	41.2%	38.1%	30.0%	44.4%
I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution.	35.5%	37.4%	56.8%	48.1%
I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.	45.8%	39.2%	50.1%	51.8%
I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.	61.8%	56.4%	60.5%	66.6%

QUICK TAKE: Aspects of the stress associated with the practice of law/work in law firms appear to ease with age. Lawyers and legal professionals report more time with friends, families, and hobbies, feeling appreciated by clients, and less overall cynicism about their work in their later practice and work years. Lawyers may feel more capable of managing their work and client demands with age and may be able to delegate the work to associates and legal professionals with more regularity, thus freeing up their time to focus on business and client development and other pursuits. It should also be noted that survivorship bias may also be a factor in these survey results. Survivorship bias is a type of cognitive or selection bias that occurs when you focus only on successful outcomes or "survivors" of a particular process, while ignoring the failures or those that did not make it through the same process. This leads to a skewed and overly optimistic perception of reality, as the experiences of the unsuccessful group are not considered.

Discussion

While I have been studying burnout for more than 15 years, my interest in the intersection of burnout and psychological safety began more recently. I was asked to speak at a healthcare conference, and the speaker after me was Dr. Amy Edmondson, widely considered to be the foremost researcher and expert on the scientific study of psychological safety. After her program, I asked her if she knew of any research at the intersection of psychological safety and burnout, and she said, “No, you should do that study.” This survey represents a first step in that direction.

Given the pervasiveness of burnout in the workplace, not much is known specifically about burnout in the legal profession. Even less has been studied about psychological safety, but it is the foundational element of resilient teaming.⁹ As such, we wanted to understand how frequently lawyers and legal professionals experienced the three dimensions of burnout – exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (also called professional efficacy). In addition, we also wanted to gather some initial perspectives from respondents about their levels of psychological safety within the profession.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the belief that you can be yourself, take good risks, ask questions, share partially formed ideas, raise problems, and respectfully disagree within your work teams without the worry of being embarrassed, singled out, or penalized.¹⁰ When lawyers and legal professionals feel psychologically safe, they feel comfortable speaking up and are far more likely to identify serious errors or problems earlier, which has direct malpractice implications. They are also more likely to think creatively, share innovative ideas, and share their expertise, all of which drive optimal client service.

We discovered that approximately half of the respondents felt like their work efforts were not deliberately undermined, their unique skills and talents were valued at work, and they were able to bring up problems and tough issues at work. Far fewer felt that it is safe to take a risk as part of their work, but that may be consistent with the nature of the work in law generally, which is inherently a risk averse profession. More than 40% of respondents found it difficult to ask for help, almost one-third reported that mistakes are often held against them, and nearly 20% said they felt rejected for being different.

The “psychologically unsafe” group responded “yes” to these statements:

- ** It is difficult to ask others for help;
- ** If I make a mistake, it is often held against me; and
- ** I am sometimes rejected for being different.

We discovered that this “psychologically unsafe” group is almost 70% female and associates, and more than one-third are 25-34 years old. Interestingly, a similar finding emerged in a study about burnout and psychological safety in medical school. This study found that female medical students

perceived medical school as less psychologically safe than their male counterparts.¹¹ The psychologically unsafe group reported lack of support for personal well-being/work-life balance, lack of sponsorship/mentorship, and dysfunctional firm culture more regularly compared to the general group in the additional question section. Our findings suggest that there is an area of opportunity to increase the mentoring and sponsorship of lawyers and legal professionals who are in the earlier stages of their career, and to especially focus on providing flexibility as professionals ascend in their careers. More thought should be given to this foundational time and the need to help new lawyers and legal professionals feel psychologically safe much earlier in their careers.

Burnout

Burnout has become an overused word to mean all forms of stress, but it is a very specific type of chronic stress that is associated with work and consists of these three dimensions:¹²

1. Chronic exhaustion (feeling consistently physically and emotionally drained, tired, overwhelmed, and overloaded); and
2. Chronic cynicism (feeling annoyed and frustrated with people, particularly your clients; you may start to distance yourself from your colleagues and clients, ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging, and the result is less empathy); and
3. Inefficacy (feeling disengaged; it's the "why bother, who cares" mentality that appears as you struggle to identify important work resources and begin to feel ineffective and detached from your work). It is sometimes called professional efficacy in the research literature.

While most research focuses on trying to quantify rates of burnout, we wanted to explore how frequently lawyers and legal professionals experienced each of these three burnout dimensions. A high frequency in any of these dimensions might indicate that a lawyer or legal professional might be at an increased risk of experiencing burnout compared to those who experienced these dimensions less frequently. An increase in even one of these dimensions warrants consideration.

The exhaustion dimension

These are the survey statements associated with the exhaustion dimension of burnout:

- I feel emotionally drained on a regular basis from my work.
- I don't think about my work much at the end of each day.
- I have so much work to do that it takes away from time with family and friends.
- I have so much work to do that it takes away from hobbies and personal interests.
- I am overwhelmed by the amount of work I have.
- I feel productive at getting things done at work.

Nearly 75% of the respondents said that they have so much work to do that it takes away from family, friends, hobbies, and personal interests at least once a week, a few times a week, or every day. Family, friends, hobbies, and personal interests are all potential sources of relief from stress. The biggest predictor of healthy aging has been found to be the quality of your relationships – more so than genetics.¹³ In addition, only 20% of respondents reported being able to detach from their

work on a regular basis. Regular psychological detachment from work is a critical component of recovery from stress.¹⁴

Our survey revealed that 63.3% of respondents said they are overwhelmed by the amount of work they have once a week, a few times a week, or every day. Notably, 58.6% of respondents said that they felt productive at getting things done at least once a week, a few times a week, or every day. While that's good, that means that approximately 40% feel productive only a few times a month, once a month, a few times a year or less, or never (these were the other frequency designations respondents could choose). That lack of productivity may show up as missed deadlines, fewer hours billed, procrastination, and other undesirable performance consequences, all of which impact the bottom line. It has been found that the combination of stress, work overcommitment, and loneliness dramatically increases negative well-being consequences for lawyers.¹⁵

In addition, more than 80% of non-equity partners report having so much work that it takes away from family, friends, hobbies, and personal interests at least once a week, a few times a week, or every day, which is higher than the overall findings. While the exhaustion findings by firm size tend to track closely with the overall findings, you will notice a positive departure in most of these items for firms with 201-500 lawyers. This was noted for the other two burnout dimensions as well. There may be something at least partially protective happening at firms this size. While we can't make firm conclusions from these data, we could opine that perhaps at firms of this size, there is complex meaningful work to be had in combination with a more positive culture that continues to prioritize community, connection, and support. Also notable are the findings by age. Exhaustion tends to lessen with age, which may be attributable to either survivorship bias and/or the fact that more senior lawyers and legal professionals consistently delegate the actual doing of the work to others, freeing up their time in other ways.

The cynicism dimension

These are the survey statements associated with the cynicism dimension of burnout:

- I have become less interested in my work. (modified from the MBI)
- I have become more cynical about my work.
- I feel like a cog in the wheel at work.
- I have a hard time concentrating at work.
- I have a more difficult time making important decisions about my work.

According to the survey results, almost two-thirds of respondents reported having a hard time concentrating at work, 68% report feeling cynical about their work, and more than half feel like a cog in the wheel at work, once a week, a few times a week, or every day. Of that latter group, 23.1% said every day – that every day they felt like a cog in the wheel at work. In addition, more than one-third of respondents said that they have a difficult time making important decisions about their work once a week, a few times a week, or every day. Lawyers and legal professionals handle some of the most sensitive, complex, and urgent matters in society and business. The stakes are high and the pressure is intense, and lawyers especially need to remain sharp about critical decisions associated with a legal argument, aspects of a big deal, or a person's freedom or livelihood.

Cynicism is the emotional detachment you might feel toward your work and the people who you feel called to serve and help. The loud sighs, internal eye rolls, and forced smiles only get worse and may eventually interfere with your work performance, relationships, and health. Cynicism acts as a barrier to work engagement, can increase isolation, reduce empathy, and fuel negativity, all of which can be felt and passed along within a team.¹⁶ Cynicism is more than simple frustration. It can become pervasive distrust and disinterest, which erodes meaning and purpose and makes recovery harder.

Cynicism may also interfere with your health and well-being, and has been associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, dementia, and increased mortality. Individuals with high levels of cynicism have been found to experience increased stress, social isolation, hopelessness, and a reduced likelihood of using mental health care services.¹⁷ Research from healthcare showed that both the emotional exhaustion and cynicism dimensions of burnout were strongly associated with a recent malpractice suit.¹⁸ In addition, individuals with cynicism are more likely to ruminate after work about the problems they have with customers, clients, colleagues, and their leaders, thus reinforcing their feelings of frustration.¹⁹

The professional efficacy dimension

These are the survey statements associated with the professional efficacy dimension of burnout:

- I am recognized by my colleagues for my work contributions.
- I am recognized by my clients for my work contributions.
- I have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about my work.
- I feel appreciated at work.
- I know that the work I do makes a significant contribution.
- I feel motivated when I accomplish something at work.

In the survey, 39.3% of respondents said that the work they do makes a significant contribution, 43.4% have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about their work, and 68.1% feel motivated when they accomplish something at work, again, all with the frequency of once a week, a few times a week, or every day. This last finding, about feeling motivated when something gets accomplished at work, is quite positive.

Many of the studies that measure burnout tend to focus on the exhaustion/cynicism combination of the three dimensions, and I think that's a miss. High professional efficacy means that you see the meaning and impact of your work, can identify important work resources, and you generally feel effective in your work. High professional efficacy may also act as a burnout protective shield against the exhaustion and cynicism dimensions. Given how protective the professional efficacy dimension of burnout can be, one goal might be to target some of these areas for improvement or to continue the positive trend.

Interestingly, lawyers and legal professionals who have high exhaustion, high cynicism, but high professional efficacy are in a category researchers call "engaged-exhausted." It's a combination that

I frequently see in my work, and it's not the same as burnout. Burnout is the combination of high exhaustion, high cynicism, and low professional efficacy.²⁰ In one study, more than 1,000 workers were surveyed, and the results showed that 35.5% of the sample were moderately engaged-exhausted while 18.8% of the sample were highly engaged-exhausted. The engaged-exhausted group was still passionate about their work, but they had strong mixed feelings about it – high levels of interest and still feeling connected to it (the high professional efficacy dimension revealing itself), but also high levels of stress that had become wearing. Notably, the engaged-exhausted group showed the highest rate of turnover intention in the study, even higher than the study participants who were most burned out.²¹

Recommendations

This is a challenging time to lead and work in the practice of law. Persistent uncertainty, the implementation and scaling of AI technology, and a shifting legal landscape continue to drive high stress in the legal profession. Burnout is a business risk that impacts the entire legal organization, yet most attempts to help focus on quick-fix strategies aimed at individuals. Something is missing.

As it turns out, addressing issues related to burnout and psychological safety, and building strong legal teams is a shared responsibility. Leadership behaviors, team dynamics, and individual experiences interconnect to create the conditions for sustainable human performance. Moving forward, legal organizations must take a systemic approach to burnout prevention and good teaming that focuses *both* on how individuals can continue to help themselves manage stress and uncertainty *and* what leaders and teams can do to create a better environment in which to make psychological safety more likely, and burnout less likely, to happen.

The recommendations that follow reflect this both/and reality. They are designed to support individuals *and* to address the upstream systems, norms, and leadership behaviors that shape daily work experiences. Moving from a “fix the person” narrative to a “fix the work” approach is not about lowering standards or reducing performance—it is about creating conditions where people can sustain high performance without sacrificing their health, engagement, or willingness to speak up.

The strategies and recommendations below should not be considered exhaustive; rather, they are tangible starting points for legal teams, leaders, and individuals that are supported by evidence and experience.²²

1. Address the dimensions and drivers of burnout.

Burnout prevention is systemic, which means that it involves both work design and individual parts. Most legal organizations only focus on the individual parts and never address the dimensions and drivers of burnout. Burnout happens when there is mismatch between workers and aspects of their work.²³ Research has identified six big drivers of burnout – I call them the Core 6:²⁴

1. Unmanageable workload - You consistently have too much to do, and you feel like you're treading water and at any moment you might sink. Unmanageable workload leads to more unhealthy forms of stress than does high workload. High workload, while stressful, acts as a motivational booster. Unmanageable workload does the opposite.
2. Lack of recognition – You don't hear a lot of positive feedback, and you're not often thanked for your efforts. You may feel excluded from important meetings, projects, deals, visible work and other important events when you perceive that has been earned. You may get frustrated when you are working at a certain level and your title doesn't match.

3. Unfairness – You notice favoritism – it’s not about what you do, it’s who you know – that dictates how you advance in your career. You must consistently navigate organizational politics and red tape. There is little clarity or transparency as to the direction and decisions that will impact your work.
4. Lack of community - You don’t feel part of a cohesive team, you don’t feel like your leader has your back or otherwise supports your work, and you don’t have supportive colleagues.
5. Values misalignment - Your personal values about work and what you want from your work experience don’t match your organization’s values. This is an increasing area of stress on work teams as different cohorts of workers approach work with different values.
6. Lack of control/flexibility/autonomy – You want the freedom to be able to do your work free from micromanagement, poor leadership, and ineffective teaming practices. You want a say in how you achieve your goals and the route you take to accomplish tasks and projects and build strong relationships.

One of the biggest causes or drivers of burnout is having an unmanageable workload.²⁵ One study found that among physicians, longer hours worked (60+ hours per week) and burnout were the independent risk factors for medical mistakes.²⁶ Importantly, there is a distinction to be made between having a high workload and an unmanageable one. Not all stressors act the same way or are promotive of burnout. Having a high workload is stressful but may also be viewed as a potential opportunity for personal growth and achievement, which can boost your motivation despite increasing fatigue. It’s an example of a challenge demand. Conversely, unmanageable workload is a hindrance demand – an aspect of work that is viewed as an obstacle that frustrates personal growth, potentially leading to higher burnout.²⁷ In a large survey of surgeons, the likelihood of a recent malpractice suit was strongly related to burnout, and burnout was also independently associated with a recent malpractice suit after statistically controlling for all other personal and professional characteristics.²⁸

There is a great deal of subjectivity and interconnectivity within the Core 6 list. What was a manageable workload at age 25 may look very different at age 45. Unmanageable workloads may also make it more difficult for you to see the impact others are your team make, thus limiting the appreciation or recognition you give to people. Every person in a legal organization needs to be aware of these burnout driver categories. Leaders are often better positioned to do something about these mismatches, yet having this framework allows everyone to put a language to how work is uniquely stressful for them. Workload management, consistent feedback, knowing your impact, supportive colleagues, meaningful work, flexibility, and gaining new skills while progressing toward goals that matter to you are all powerful leader-driven resources that can prevent burnout.²⁹

I have asked multiple groups of lawyers what type of practices would be most helpful to reduce burnout both at their firm and generally within the profession, and these are their top answers: re-evaluate how you measure value, create infrastructure that supports rest, prioritize culture over efficiency, provide feedback and communication, make space for people to be people, name and address burnout directly (also one of the recommendations below), and give context, not just tasks.

It's also important to know the frequency with which lawyers and legal professionals experience each of the burnout dimensions (exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy). For example, Microsoft

added questions into its semi-annual engagement survey about burnout, using the same three dimensions used in this survey (exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy). What they found is that people experiencing all three dimensions of burnout were four times more likely to leave the company compared to those employees experiencing none of the burnout dimensions.³⁰ While the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is an empirically validated tool that assesses each of these dimensions, it requires a license to use.³¹ If you prefer, you may use some or all of the statements I created for this survey.

Microsoft's focus on the burnout dimensions and causes helped it more effectively address employee burnout concerns. Microsoft found that when people felt like their jobs were making good use of their skills and abilities and that their career goals were being met, employees' professional efficacy increased and cynicism decreased. In addition, having time for learning, a supportive team environment, and support for flexible work were top ways to reduce exhaustion. They also uncovered patterns as employees ascended in their careers. People experienced more exhaustion as they moved up the leadership ranks but less cynicism because they could more clearly see how their work related to company strategy.³²

MARKETING NOTE: There are many ways to talk about burnout and its causes. You may want to consider marketing burnout prevention as a team-facing topic because it reinforces the systemic nature of burnout prevention (with work design and individual parts). It's a signal that truly preventing burnout involves everyone. In addition, you can flip the Core 6 to read in the affirmative and suggest ways for lawyers and legal professionals to create sustainable workloads, provide recognition, create strong communities, align values, provide flexibility and control, and create fairness and transparency.

2. Focus on these areas for individuals: While the workplace causes above need to be addressed, lawyers and legal professionals should feel empowered to prevent burnout too. Some factors that might increase burnout risk are counterproductive thinking patterns, too few supportive relationships, ineffective (or no) coping strategies, and too few (or no) recovery strategies both at work and outside of work.³³

Another important burnout prevention tool is to detect your icebergs – the core values and beliefs you have about the way you think the world should operate.³⁴ These beliefs can be a source of your success, but over time, can burn you out, especially as your work and life demands increase. Saying yes to everything, working at a relentless pace, never wanting to let anyone down, feeling like you need to be perfect, and measuring your self-worth based on your career success are common icebergs I hear from lawyers and legal professionals.

In addition, high performers often miss the early signs that they're headed toward burnout. While leaders need to know generally some early signals of burnout, this work is largely for individuals because it's so personal. Everyone needs to ask and answer two questions:

- What are my early burnout warning signs?
- What helps me recover?

My early burnout warning signs are getting frustrated, snappy, and reactionary more easily, working more weekends to get ahead, and procrastination. What helps me recover is spending more time with my friends, going for a run outside or some form of exercise, and volunteering or otherwise leaning into acts of kindness, which is a core value of mine.

Australian leadership researcher Nick Petrie and his team have spent the past few years interviewing thousands of professionals about their burnout experiences. They discovered that a small percentage of people who they interviewed performed at a very high level, worked intense jobs with long hours, but didn't burnout. In reviewing their research notes, they discovered that this low burnout group displayed certain behaviors that seemed to protect them from burning out. Here are the behaviors they found that were so burnout protective:

1. Having an optimal level of boundary separation between work and home. There are different types of approaches to boundary setting between work and life. Integrators blend their work and their personal lives, often switching between the two areas with ease. Segmentors maintain clear boundaries, keeping work and life areas separate. Boundary separation is different for each person based on these three factors:
 - Preference. Some people like to compartmentalize their work/home domains, while others "blend" - they are fine going for a lunch time workout and catching up on work during off hours.
 - Type of role. Many roles in law require that lawyers and legal professionals take a blended approach between work and home. Our survey results show that lawyers and legal professionals have a hard time detaching from their work.
 - Stage of life. You may begin your legal career as an integrator and find that you need more segmentation as your work and life obligations become more complex.
2. Having clear rituals for switching between work and home.
3. Developing other outside of work roles and identities (who are you and what do you love to do when you're not lawyering; running the IT department; or leading marketing efforts?)
4. Having a clear understanding of your work habits and what works for you each day in terms of how you get your work done.
5. Having an "opposite" world. One of the best strategies they discovered was that this low burnout group had an "opposite" world. Your opposite world is a hobby or activity that puts you into a different state from the mindset you have at work. Are you an avid reader? A master gardener? A competition level baker? Having an "opposite" world to visit with regularity acts as a powerful burnout buffer and importantly, contributes to the work detachment and recovery that is necessary to manage high levels of stress.³⁵

Review the above list – where do you need to improve? This can be a valuable conversation to do with trusted work colleagues or a coach.

Lastly, acknowledging the producer-manager dilemma can be critically important to the burnout prevention conversation in law, especially as lawyers ascend in their careers. One area of struggle for senior lawyers is managing their dual roles. As you ascend in your career, you take on more leadership responsibility like managing teams, delegating, and giving feedback, but you must also continue to produce work and bill hours. Added to that, the expectation for developing business

comes fully into form and you are balancing two very heavy loads in two very different worlds. When the producer-manager roles come into tension with each other, lawyers often favor the producer role as it feels more comfortable. How to manage teams effectively, how to create psychological safety within teams, delegation, feedback delivery and best leadership practices typically aren't taught soon enough or with enough frequency in law.

3. Incorporate leaders. Leaders within a legal organization hold the keys to the health of the work environment and can have an outsized impact on employee burnout. Leaders are so central to the conversation about burnout prevention and building psychological safety because research shows that leaders can account for at least 70% of the variance in team engagement.³⁶ What that means is that leaders have a huge influence in how well their teams function. A survey of 3,400 people across 10 countries by The Workforce Institute at UKG revealed that a person's manager (69%) impacted their mental health more than their doctors (51%) or therapists (40%), and at the same level as their spouse or partner (69%). The survey also found that work stress negatively impacted employees' home life (71%), well-being (64%), and relationships (62%). Employees experiencing burnout rate the support they receive from managers 33 points lower than employees experiencing none of the burnout dimensions.³⁷

Lawyers are typically rewarded and promoted based on billable hours achievements and their legal expertise or reputation, rather than on the qualities necessary to be an effective leader. And, lawyer training typically includes little to no formal leadership development, particularly in the areas of team formation, establishing good workflows and work design, and the psychology underpinning motivation, engagement, resilience, stress awareness, and well-being. These skills are not innate; leaders require development and ongoing support to develop and enhance these skills. As a result, understanding the causes of burnout and how to design for teams that create the opposite of that environment can present a significant leadership challenge for lawyers. Perceptions of managerial effectiveness and leadership style have been associated with burnout, job satisfaction, and retention. Specifically, leadership behaviors that provide clarity and reduce ambiguity, encourage ongoing professional development, provide guidance, and nurture social support have been shown to reduce work stressors.³⁸

There are lessons the legal profession can take from the rigorous studies that healthcare researchers have done at the intersection of burnout, leadership, and professional fulfillment. In one multi-site study, physicians who rated their supervisor's performance in the topmost tertile reported 48% lower risk of burnout, 66% lower intent to leave their organization within two years, and a nearly 6 times greater odds of having high professional fulfillment.³⁹ Mayo Clinic regularly asks its health care employees to rate their immediate supervisor. Researchers at Mayo analyzed almost 40,000 employee surveys and discovered that the prevalence of burnout was much higher among responders who rated their immediate supervisor unfavorably on each leadership dimension.⁴⁰ Notably, for each 1-point increase in composite leadership score, the odds of burnout decreased by 7%, and the odds of satisfaction with the organization increased by 11%.⁴¹ These are the leadership qualities employees were asked to rate for their immediate supervisor.⁴²

My immediate supervisor:

1. Treats me with dignity and respect
2. Encourages me to develop my talents and skills
3. Recognizes me for a job well done
4. Provides helpful feedback and coaching on my performance
5. Encourages me to suggest ideas for improvement
6. Holds career development conversations with me
7. Empowers me to do my job
8. Keeps me informed about changes taking place

The immediate supervisor leadership score was strongly associated with both job satisfaction and burnout even after researchers adjusted for gender, age, length of employment, and job category. Researchers concluded that of all the qualities of the organization, the single biggest driver of professional satisfaction was the behavior of each person's immediate supervisor – nothing else (e.g., culture, salaries, benefits, organizational strategy) even came close.⁴³

4. Know the burnout business case. The business case associated with addressing burnout in the legal profession is multifaceted and includes costs associated with turnover, lost revenue associated with decreased productivity, malpractice costs (increased errors), and decreased client satisfaction. According to the latest NALP Foundation findings, 74% of associates leave within four years of hire, and there was a turnover rate of 20% among associates in 2024. Data from legal researchers Pirical Legal Professionals showed that average partner attrition across the AmLaw100 rose to 8% in 2025 (up from 6% in 2024). High turnover rates are driven, in part, by burnout (42% of attorneys cited it as a reason for leaving), with 48% of lateral hires leaving their new firm within five years.

The burnout business case has been extensively studied in healthcare, and the findings there provide a roadmap for the legal profession.

Lawyers leave for lots of reasons, but burnout is a big factor. Here is a way that you can estimate the cost of lawyer turnover per year *due to burnout*.⁴⁴

To estimate the cost of lawyer turnover per year due to burnout, you'll need the following pieces of data:

- A. The number of lawyers at your firm (N);
- B. the burnout rate at your firm (this will likely need to be an estimate unless you have measured it) (BR);
- C. current turnover rate per year (TO); and
- D. cost of turnover per lawyer, which is frequently estimated to be 1.5 to 2x salary (C).

Here is a sample calculation using the following assumptions:

- Firm with 750 lawyers (N);
- A burnout rate of 25% (BR) (which is the lowest I've found when I've had a chance to measure rates of burnout with groups of lawyers);
- An estimated attrition rate of 15% (TO) (given that rates of attrition vary widely across practice level and firm, I picked an approximate mid-point between current associate attrition rates and partner attrition rates based on the available data); and
- Cost to replace a departed lawyer at \$500,000 (C).

Step 1: Calculate turnover “without” burnout. Most of the turnover rate is attributable to reasons other than burnout. TO without burnout = $TO / (1 + BR)$ or $.15 / (1 + .25) = .12$ or 12%. So 80% of the TO rate is attributable to reasons other than burnout, leaving 20% of the turnover rate (3%) attributable to burnout.

Step 2: The number of lawyers turning over due to burnout per year = $(TO - TO \text{ without burnout}) \times N$ or $(.15 - .12) \times 750 = 22.5$ (rounding up to 23). You can project that 23 out of 750 lawyers will leave due to burnout.

Step 3: Estimate the cost of turnover due to burnout using $C \times$ number of lawyers turning over due to burnout from Step 2; or $\$500,000 \times 23 = \$11,500,000$.

Keeping everything else constant and just changing the number of lawyers (N), here is the estimated cost of turnover due to burnout for firms of various sizes:

250 lawyers = \$4,000,000
500 lawyers = \$7,500,000
1,000 lawyers = \$15,000,000
1,500 lawyers = \$22,500,000
2,000 lawyers = \$30,000,000

Burnout is preventable. Think of the cost savings if you reduced burnout by just 10%. And these numbers are conservative. They also don't account for the costs associated with rising malpractice insurance rates or an increase in errors made due to burnout, the loss of billable time and productivity generally, and the increase in health care costs due to downstream mental health and well-being issues.

5. Acknowledge & assess the problem – formally and informally. Acknowledging the problem and demonstrating that the legal organization cares about creating strong teams, building an environment of learning and trust, and protecting the well-being and engagement of its lawyers and legal professionals is an important step toward making progress. There are several empirically validated assessment tools to measure burnout rates, the Core 6 drivers, other aspects of burnout, and psychological safety. The National Academy of Medicine provides a wonderful summary of valid and reliable survey instruments to measure burnout, well-being, and other work-related dimensions.⁴⁵ The data can help inform starting points for targeted help both firmwide and by

practice area. The assessment measure we used in this survey to measure psychological safety is considered the gold standard measurement tool. You can also measure burnout and psychological safety informally by adding some or all of the statements I created to your engagement surveys. Assessment, whether formal or informal, is also important because there can be great variability as to the drivers of stress between practice groups and practice areas, with one feeling challenged by inefficient workflows while another struggles with flexibility and appreciation.

6. Cultivate community at work. Cultivating strong teams and communities in legal organizations is important for both burnout prevention (recall that one of the Core 6 drivers is lack of community and support) and increasing psychological safety. Psychological safety is the belief that you can be yourself, ask the dumb question, respectfully disagree, take good risks, and raise issues and concerns within your team without the fear that you will be penalized, embarrassed, singled out, or thought less of for doing so.⁴⁶ It is interpersonal risk taking. Having a strong community, work culture, and team makes it more likely that a person will feel safe speaking up, and that's important. Psychological safety helps legal teams be better equipped to identify serious issues or errors sooner, before they become malpractice risks, it promotes innovative ideas (I can share partially formed ideas that can be discussed and learned from), it promotes knowledge sharing and learning (when work is this uncertain and complex, teams need to know what you know), and it helps you say the things that need to be said.⁴⁷ Importantly, psychological safety is not the same thing as a "culture of nice." Psychologically safe teams feel comfortable giving feedback to each other, even when it's tough to hear.

The practice of law and work in legal organizations can be a source of isolation and loneliness for many. Siloed work, long working hours, increasing productivity (billable hours) expectations, a competitive environment, established higher than average rates of loneliness in the profession,⁴⁸ and the yet-to-be-determined impact of AI on relationships are all reasons why building community and connection are so important in the profession. Our findings showed that nearly 75% of lawyers and legal professionals reported having so much work that it takes away from family, friends, hobbies, and personal interests.

That pace often limits the ability to dedicate sufficient time to social connection, both at work and outside of work. This has implications for a person's cumulative social advantage (CSA).⁴⁹ Cumulative social advantage means that a person has sustained access to social resources across many domains in their lives (work, home, community, and general emotional support). Researchers recently discovered that individuals with higher CSA had measurable health benefits, finding that they aged more slowly and were less likely to experience the physical consequences of chronic stress – they lived better and longer.⁵⁰

When you have no time or energy left for your friends, families, hobbies, and communities, you lose the very connections that can protect you from burnout. In one study, higher (unfavorable) social isolation scores were associated with higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism (two of the burnout dimensions) and with symptoms of overall burnout. In the study, 65.7% of the group in the highest-quartile (unfavorable) social isolation group experienced burnout, compared to 15.3% with the strongest social connections. For each one-point increase (unfavorable) in social isolation score, the odds of overall burnout were 10% higher.⁵¹

Importantly, law firms must also ask some tough questions to honestly assess how law firm culture enhances or erodes connection:⁵²

1. Do we shelter toxic leaders?
2. Do we have the right people in the right places?
3. Are people checking in on each other regularly?
4. Is the work environment transactional?
5. Can we provide the career paths and development opportunities that people want?

7. Create cultures of mattering & significance. Mattering is defined as your sense of the difference you make in the world, and it's composed of two parts.⁵³ The first part is feeling valued (appreciation & recognition) and the second part is knowing you add value (achievement) to your workplace, your family, and to your community.⁵⁴ You feel important, noticed, and affirmed.⁵⁵ Practicing the skills associated with mattering can elevate leaders, transform teams, and boost well-being in ways specific to and important within the legal profession.

High perfectionism is associated with chronic stress, a tendency toward workaholism, difficulty managing workload, and anxiety about receiving feedback.⁵⁶ Achievement culture comes with a set of unwritten rules that high-achieving professionals know they must follow. What's critical, though, is that research reveals that the most resilient healthy strivers, those who do emotionally well despite the pressures of high-achieving cultures (and perfectionism), have a keen sense of mattering. Mattering – not for what they achieved, but for simply who they were – acted as a protective shield against the stress and setbacks.⁵⁷

One study specific to law found the same thing. It asked a simple question to nearly 2,000 lawyers:⁵⁸ “What do you feel your employer values most about you?” Their responses were categorized into three different groups as follows:

Group 1: Those who answered the question with statements like, “My overall talent and skill as a lawyer” and “My inherent worth as a human being.”

Group 2: Those who answered the question with statements like, “My productivity” and “The number of hours that I bill.”

Group 3: Those who answered the question with statements like, “I don't know – I get very little feedback” and “Not much – my employer does not make me feel valued.”

Each lawyer was then asked to answer questions about their levels of perceived stress, mental and physical health, and work overcommitment. The results showed a clear health hierarchy. The lawyers in Group 1 reported much better mental health, followed by Group 2, and then Group 3. In addition, lawyers in Groups 2 and 3 were much more likely to answer “yes” to the question, “Are you considering leaving, or have you left the profession due to mental health, burnout, or stress?” with 26.7% of Group 2 and 37.4% of Group 3 saying yes, compared to 15.4% of the people in Group

1. The perception of being valued for one's skill or worth as a human being acted as a protective shield against mental health issues, burnout, and stress.

Mattering unlocks a potent mix of psychological and motivational fuel. When lawyers and legal professionals feel like they matter to their organization, they are more satisfied with their jobs and life, are more likely to seek out leadership positions, are less likely to quit, and have lower rates of burnout, depression, and anxiety.⁵⁹ In addition, they report higher relationship satisfaction, more self-compassion, and they have a greater belief in their ability to achieve their goals.⁶⁰ There are strong correlations between feelings of not mattering and loneliness, another issue the legal profession struggles with at higher rates than other professions.⁶¹

Mattering is also an indicator of organizational health and employee success. Mattering at work is significantly associated with work meaning, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization.⁶² Feeling valued at work is also related to lower absenteeism, better employee-manager relationships, greater resilience, less job stress, and increased well-being.⁶³

Lawyers and legal professionals are often exposed to emotionally intense and draining interactions with clients. Conflict, unsuccessful outcomes, or emotionally taxing interactions can live in your head and make stress and burnout intensify over time. One thing that helps is prosocial impact (PSI). Prosocial impact is the recognition that your efforts have meaningful effects.⁶⁴ Having the perception of PSI helps lower stress and burnout in the following ways:⁶⁵

- It triggers self-efficacy, accomplishment, and self-approval, which help sustain motivation and positively influence resilience;
- It increases your feelings of competence, making it more likely that you will view job stressors as a challenge rather than as an insurmountable obstacle;
- It deepens employee connection to the organization and to the communities and clients you serve; and
- PSI perceptions help replace the energy you spend dealing with difficult and emotionally taxing work.

Our survey results showed that 38.9% of respondents said they felt appreciated at work once a week, a few times a week, or every day; 39.3% reported that they knew the work that they did made a significant contribution; 43.4% had a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment about their work; and 68.1% felt motivated when they accomplished something at work. Professional efficacy acts as a burnout protective shield and increases the likelihood of psychological safety. While people probably don't need to hear "great job" every day, are you doing enough on a regular basis to communicate the impact people are having with their work? Is your firm's culture one that values care and how is that value lived? Clarity about what is expected at work and feeling cared about as a person showed the largest declines in Gallup's latest engagement report. Most U.S. workers reported that supportive relationships, communication, and respect would help them feel more cared about.⁶⁶ Owning mistakes, living organizational values, keeping promises, and being transparent about change also signal care.

8. Re-think your approach to resilience. Resilience is a person's, team's, and organization's capacity to navigate uncertainty, change, and stressors and grow and thrive from those challenges. It's the capacity for stress-related growth. Resilience can refer to the way you respond to adverse events in the moment, how your team prepares for events it anticipates will happen, and how your legal organization manages challenges after they have occurred. Research from Better Up's lab shows that individuals and organizations with higher levels of resilience are happier, healthier, and more successful in uncertain and changing environments, and companies with higher workforce resilience see 320% more year-over-year growth than those with lower levels.⁶⁷

Burnout is a systemic issue (with work design and individual parts), and so is resilience. Resilience is not only a personal trait that needs to be cultivated, but is also a system that needs to be constructed. Resilience is built in different ways depending on whether you're focused on individual capacity, team capacity, or organizational capacity. One of the most important aspects of team resilience is psychological safety. Microsoft found that when employees are burned out, they scored the statement "I feel safe to speak up" 37 points lower than employees experiencing no burnout dimensions.⁶⁸ Similarly, our results showed that 63% of the psychologically unsafe group cited fear of asking for project help compared to 23.3% of respondents generally.

Here are some ideas to help leaders, lawyers, and legal professionals build resilience in a systemic way:⁶⁹

- Build recovery into the workflow. It's common to go from one matter to the next, but schedule recovery time before the next sprint.
- Cross-train roles and responsibilities. I interviewed an AmLaw 100 partner who told me how important it is for his practice that his clients know his team. He explained that as a leader, internal and external clients may call him first or see him as the go-to person, but clients also need to feel comfortable with others on the team. It gives clients another attachment point and creates opportunities for team members to gain valuable experience interacting with clients.
- Recognize lawyers and legal professionals who are preventative, not just reactive. Who spots problems early, manages risk quietly, and improves workflows so that breakdowns don't happen?
- Make sure lawyers and legal professionals have decision-making discretion if appropriate. Employee empowerment is a resilience tool.
- Protect small buffers. Add in a little extra time for a deadline; bake in some extra budget. You're designing for recovery, so you don't have to be as reactive if something doesn't go as planned.

Incorporating resilience into your work systems help prevent people from burning out in the first place, and psychological safety is the foundation of resilient teaming.

9. Monitor how AI impacts burnout & psychological safety. New research continues to explore how AI impacts good teaming, psychological safety, workplace connection, and burnout. As organizations rapidly integrate AI at work, leaders are uncovering the impact of AI tools on team dynamics; specifically, team performance appears to be declining.⁷⁰ The challenges AI brings aren't

just technical – they’re also team dynamics issues. One of the reasons why teaming challenges arise is trust – AI can change the dynamic within a team and introduce trust ambiguity. When the humans on teams make a mistake, other humans can ask questions to understand what happened, give context, and then figure out ways to prevent the mistake from happening again. This process of mutual learning, which strengthens teams, isn’t there with AI tools. Humans can’t challenge AI in the same way, which makes it hard for team members to understand what caused the error or how to prevent it from happening again. From a general teaming perspective, AI doesn’t pick up on contextual cues, adjust its communication style to match people on the team, or engage in informal relationship building with other team members. As a result, there can be a cost to team dynamics when an AI team member operates according to fundamentally different team rules.

One way to help is to apply psychological safety principles to AI integration. It’s important to treat AI integration as a team learning challenge, not just a technology implementation one. Dr. Amy Edmondson and her colleagues recommend these steps:⁷¹

1. Reframe AI as a learning process, not just an execution process. This means that it’s important to position AI deployment as ongoing experimentation with hands-on learning.
2. Model fallibility and curiosity. One of the biggest ways leaders create psychological safety is by acknowledging their own mistakes. Leaders can share their own mistakes with AI and what they learned.
3. Create intelligent failure protocols. There are different types of failures. Did your team experience an “intelligent failure” or a “basic failure?” Intelligent failures happen when you’re testing new AI tools in new ways where the risks are low, and mistakes should be celebrated as learning opportunities. Conversely, basic failures are mistakes that occur where limitations are already known and a basic process was missed.
4. Emphasize human connection. I’ve already established the importance of human connection above, but as AI handles more routine tasks, what’s left is the more complex and interdependent work for teams. Leaders need to create space to discuss AI integration challenges.

Psychological safety principles can help you minimize trust ambiguity and other challenges that may occur as you integrate AI within your team. Many of the principles that work for human-only teams can also work for human-AI teams.

From a burnout perspective, one study found that the most productive AI users are also 88% more likely to be burned out, disengaged, and twice as likely to quit.⁷² That same study found that 90% of workers see AI as a co-worker, 67% trust AI more than their colleagues, 64% say they have a better relationship with AI than with their human teammates, and 54% say AI is more empathetic. In another study, researchers looked at how AI tools changed work habits over an eight-month period in a tech company.⁷³ This company did not mandate AI use, and they discovered that employees worked at a faster pace, worked longer hours, and took on a broader scope of tasks. That seemed like a win until they also discovered scope creep, work slop (AI generated output that fails to move a project forward and adds extra cognitive and emotional load onto colleagues who must fix or redo it), constant pressure to produce more, and loss of recovery time and deep thinking. The researchers point out that over time, this overwork can impair judgment, increase the likelihood of errors, and make it harder for leaders to tell the difference between genuine productivity and

unsustainable intensity. What's needed are clear AI practices – clear norms and routines that add structure to how AI is used.

As AI use increases, legal leaders, lawyers, and legal professionals should ask these questions:

- How do AI-fueled workflow changes impact burnout risk?
- What are the psychological safety implications of hybrid human + AI teams?
- How can leaders redesign roles to protect well-being as automation increases?
- What are the team communication norms that prevent overload in AI-heavy environments?
- How will roles need to be re-designed or re-clarified?

Here is a summary of the potential new burnout risks created by AI:

AI Fatigue & Cognitive Overload	Constant new tools and updates
Increased Workload	More review/correction tasks and expectations
Job Insecurity	Fear of replacement by automation
Role Ambiguity	Unclear performance standards
Work-Life Blurring	Always-on tools and alerts
Social Isolation	Reduced human interaction
Skill pressure	Upskilling demands without support
Productivity Expectations	Higher output expectations

Recommendations Summary & TNTs®

There is a lot to say about burnout and psychological safety, and while the topics are complex, the action steps you can take to help move in a positive direction are not. Below please find a short summary of the recommendations, along with a simple framework I often use, which includes specific TNTs – tiny noticeable things. TNTs are research-based practices that leaders, teams, and individuals can use to build trust, clarity, psychological safety, and sustainable performance. They help lawyers and legal professionals communicate more effectively under pressure, handle uncertainty, mistakes, and workload more effectively, and recognize positive impact.

Here is a quick summary:

- Burnout is systemic (it has both work design and individual parts).
- Preventing burnout requires that you address the dimensions & the causes; measure what you can either formally or informally.
- Have a rough estimate of what burnout costs your organization each year due to turnover
- Leaders play an outsize role in the burnout prevention conversation.
- Tailor interventions to groups based on data results and career stage. The psychological safety results show that there is likely an open opportunity to help professionals at earlier stages of their career. In addition, burnout may increase as lawyers and legal professionals ascend in their careers, especially around the time they make partner. Lawyers and legal professionals newer to their careers may also experience burnout, in part because they have not yet curated enough protective resources (like autonomy and community).

I created the 4 C's framework to help you remember the different pathways that promote burnout prevention and psychological safety. The 4 C's are communication, community, capacity, and contribution.

Communication

- Be transparent about change, especially as it relates to AI.
- Clarify job roles and expectations.
- Provide clear resources to new hires to help them answer questions.
- Provide context for assignments, rules, and policy change.
- Normalize conversations about stress.

Community

- Hold onboarding and training events.
- Design work not only for new tech and workflows, but also for the broader interpersonal work experience like holiday parties, lunch and learns, retreats, eating meals together, volunteering, zoom coffees, and happy hours.
- Revive a dormant connection.
- Hold periodic 1:1 meetings without a business outcome associated with the meeting.

Capacity

- Use debriefs strategically to talk about the end of a project or matter or pivotal moments within.
- Conduct meetings audits to streamline and eliminate unnecessary meetings.
- Make information and knowledge easy to find and understand.
- Cross-train team members so clients have more than one point of contact and can develop a rapport with others handling their matters.

Contribution⁷⁴

- Share your belief in someone and their capabilities.
- Discuss growth potential and give people stretch assignments.
- Tell people how you rely on them.
- Say a thank you “plus” – specify the behavior you saw that led to the good outcome (e.g., the way that you organized those summaries helped me see the key take aways clearly).
- Capture and talk about small wins (your own and the team's).
- Provide greater responsibility to more junior lawyers and legal professionals for tasks that are both visible and important to the firm; give them opportunities to lead or develop new programs or training, and to speak or write on behalf of the legal organization.
- Help enable a balance between a person's perform and grow modes. Lawyers and legal professionals at every level need to both perform tasks at which they already excel *and* get new opportunities that allow them to build new forms of mastery.⁷⁵ These new opportunities often are source of energy and motivation.

Limitations, Future Directions, & the Case for Ongoing Research

This exploratory survey provides valuable insights into both psychological safety and burnout in the legal profession, but several limitations warrant consideration. While the measure we used for psychological safety was a validated scale, the statements that we used for the burnout portion were not. I felt comfortable creating the burnout statements given the length of time I have studied this topic, my review of the breadth of the burnout research, my hundreds of interviews, coaching conversations with people who have experienced burnout, and programs I have taught globally about burnout; however, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive.

The response rate represents a more significant limitation. Despite reaching a large pool of potential participants, only a small fraction completed a survey, raising questions about representativeness. However, I have discussed different aspects of these data with thousands of lawyers and legal professionals since we collected it, and the resulting qualitative feedback is strikingly similar. Many of the lawyers and legal professionals with whom I've worked express little surprise with the overall findings; in fact, some are surprised it's not worse.

While broadly reflective of the profession in some respects, the racial and ethnic makeup of this sample skews more heavily white than the U.S. legal population overall. This racial and ethnic underrepresentation limited our ability to analyze subgroup patterns by race.

Here are several avenues for future research:

Establishing causality or a more formal link between psychological safety and burnout.

While we were able to make some interesting findings in both categories, we did not look at the intersection of these two topics. Do legal teams that have higher psychological safety also have lower rates of burnout? Do teams with higher rates of burnout have lower psychological safety?

Continuing to examine the association (positive or negative) between AI and burnout. Might there be more opportunities to leverage AI tools to help legal leaders and teams prevent burnout? If so, what does that specifically look like? Or, will AI continue as a burnout accelerator?

Measuring the prevalence of psychological safety and burnout. While other surveys suggest that burnout is pervasive in the legal profession, and my own research suggests certain rates based on the very limited number of legal teams I have formally assessed with empirically validated tools, future research is necessary to accurately measure the prevalence of burnout among lawyers and legal professionals using empirically validated tools.

Identifying organizational factors contributing to psychological safety and burnout. The Core 6 are well-researched, but how do they impact the legal profession specifically? Are there other potential causes of burnout that need to be highlighted, measured, and prioritized specific to law? Investigating how firm culture, billable hour requirements, and leadership styles impact psychological safety and burnout could reveal additional systemic factors that exacerbate or mitigate burnout.

Create intervention and assessment validation. There are several validated burnout assessments that exist generally and for other specific groups (e.g., there is a version of the MBI for healthcare). To my knowledge, there is not yet a validated assessment tool to measure burnout or psychological safety specific to the legal profession. In addition, developing validated scalable interventions tailored to lawyer and legal professionals' unique challenges would be valuable.

Increase demographic representation. Future research as to both psychological safety and burnout prevention with more racially diverse samples will be essential to exploring how the impacts of psychological safety and burnout may differ across racial and ethnic groups. Future research should also explore more about the impact of psychological safety and burnout for legal professionals.

Contact Information

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- ⁷⁵ Brian Elliott (September 29, 2025). *The Burnout Age: Real Pain Requires Real Solutions*. MIT Sloan Management Review at, <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-burnout-age-real-pain-requires-real-solutions/>.