



Systems Theory of Change for Lawyer Wellbeing Project

Results from the System Effects Survey

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waterways upon which our lives depend.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to ancestors of this country, Elders, knowledge holders and leaders – past and present. We extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



About us

At First Person Consulting (FPC) we partner with for-purpose organisations who seek to achieve real-world impact. We draw on our expertise in evaluation, applied systems thinking, and design to develop tailor-made solutions for complex environmental, health, and social justice challenges.

Suggested citation

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Introduction

- Background
- Reason for the System Effects process



Background

- Lawyers staying safe and well while delivering high-quality legal services is a shared goal across Victoria's legal system and a key priority for the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner (VLSB+C). However, research consistently shows that poor lawyer wellbeing persists, and this can lead to a range of flow-on effects and impacts.
- To effect genuine and lasting change, the focus needs to move beyond individual resilience to the system-wide factors that are producing negative impacts. This means framing the 'problem' in different ways. To support this, the VLSB+C has established the Lawyer Wellbeing Systems Theory of Change project ('the project').
- The project will undertake a series of activities that will see the Victorian legal system engage in conceptualising and designing a shared model for system-wide change in lawyer wellbeing through a Theory of Change process. The VLSB+C has appointed expert firm First Person Consulting (FPC) to lead the project.
- A central feature of the project is its starting point – it frames the 'problem' through a systems lens – hence why it is specifically referred to as a 'Systems' Theory of Change. This has been done through the application of the System Effects methodology.
- **This document reports on the results of the System Effects process.** The VLSB+C is making the results of the System Effects process public to contribute to the evidence base, while also showcasing how systems methodologies can help to reshape or reframe our understanding of complex problems.



Reason for taking a systems approach

Much research has been done into the causes of poor wellbeing amongst lawyers. These studies have identified* a range of factors such as:

- High levels of stress and pressure
- Work-life balance
- Long working hours
- Bullying and harassment
- Discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and elitism.

However, the reality is that for each individual the factors that drive wellbeing will vary based on the context within which they work, who they work with, and things that are unique to themselves. Recognising this diversity means we need to shift from thinking about this issue as linear (straight line from cause to effect) to systemic. This means that there are a range of factors that all influence each other, with the emergent result being poor wellbeing amongst lawyers,

To shift our thinking to a systems level, we need to consider how and the extent to which they are connected to each other. Through this lens, we can evolve our understanding of which areas are the most important to focus. In turn, that will contribute to bigger and more impactful shifts within the Victorian legal system.

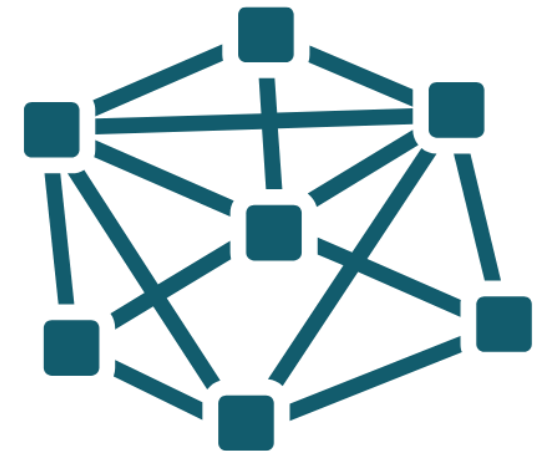
The results of this process will form the underpinnings to the Systems Theory of Change. In effect, this process will help reframe our understanding of what the 'real' problem or need is in relation to lawyer wellbeing.

From this...



Linear view

To this...



Systemic view

* For example: Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study, 2021, International Bar Association.



Methodology

- How System Effects works
- System Effects survey design
- System Effects data analysis approach



How System Effects works

System Effects draws on the methodological approaches of soft systems thinking, fuzzy cognitive mapping, and graph theoretical analysis. It is an approach quite distinct from traditional surveys, in that the goal is to intentionally generate an understanding of a problem or situation from a starting point that it is 'a part' of a system.

In short, System Effects identifies the range of factors* that lead to or influence a focus area, as well as each other. The other unique element is that respondents complete the System Effects survey from their own individual perspective. This allows their own individual experience to be accurately reflected, while contributing to our understanding of what the more common factors across the Victorian legal system look like.

The structure of questioning is twofold:

1. An initial prompt asking – from their experience – what factors 'drive' poor lawyer wellbeing?
2. A follow-up prompt asking – from their experience – what 'drives' or causes those factors?

By prompting for a deeper layer of understanding, we can understand the 'real' problems, which would subsequently have the most influence if addressed or mitigated.

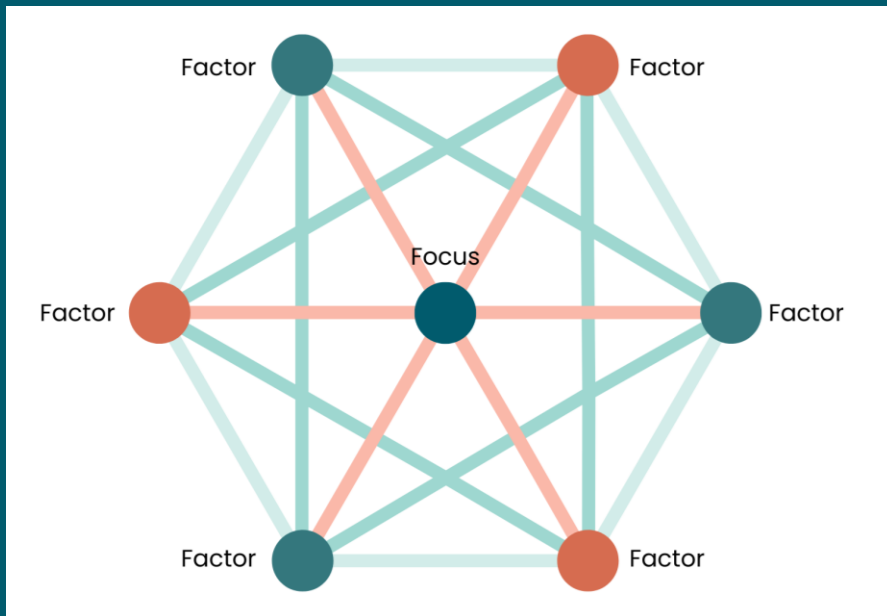
* Definition: A "factor" is something that leads to or influences something else. This could be other factors, or direct outcomes such as mental health.



How System Effects works

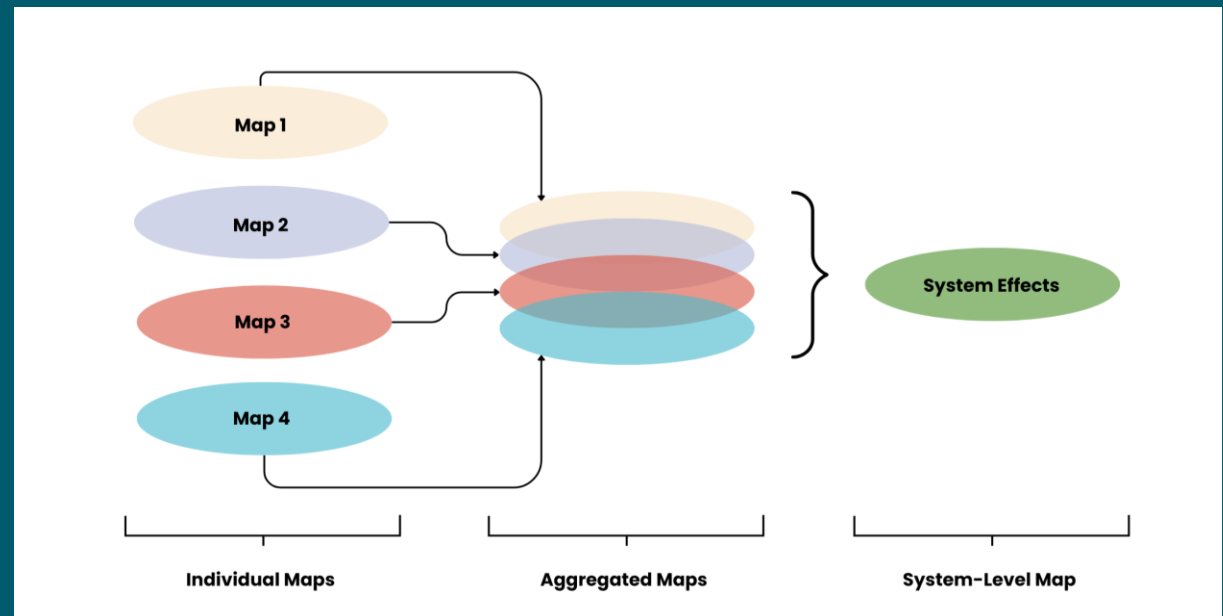
Through this prompting, each respondent will produce a unique 'map'. These maps have the focus (poor lawyer wellbeing) at the centre.

Surrounding the focus are the individual factors that they have identified. Drawn between the factors and the focus are the lines indicating a causal connection – that is, one leads to the other.



Each individual map can then be thematically analysed. This allows for the aggregation and quantification of the identified factors into a single set in the form of a final 'System-Level' map.

This map can then be analysed using Social Network Analysis (SNA). SNA allows for the identification of factors that are in positions of influence within a network – with influence defined by the specific SNA metric used.





System Effects survey design

The System Effects survey was developed and hosted in the System Effects platform (<https://systemeffects.com/>). The survey was distributed by the VLSB+C across social media channels, their website, and email updates.

The survey also incorporated questions prior to the System Effects survey prompts to help contextualise the responses. These questions are below, with the response options underneath.

1. What gender do you identify as?
 - Female | Male | Non-binary | I use a different term | Prefer not to say
2. Which of the below options best describes your relationship to the legal sector?
 - Lawyer | Law student | Legal educator | Lawyer wellbeing specialist | Judiciary | Legal regulator | Other
3. How many years have you worked in the legal sector?
 - 0-5 years | 6-10 years | 11-15 years | 16-20 years | More than 20 years | Not applicable
4. If you hold a practicing certificate, what type do you hold?
 - Law practice – Principal legal practitioner | Law practice – Employee legal practitioner | Barrister | Community Legal Service - Principal legal practitioner | Community Legal Service - Employee legal practitioner | Community Legal Service – Volunteer | Corporate – Legal practitioner | Government – Legal practitioner | Not applicable

5. What is the approximate size of your workplace (including lawyers and other staff)
 - 1-5 staff | 6-10 staff | 11-20 staff | 21-40 staff | More than 40 staff | I don't know
6. On balance, what impact does working in the legal sector have on your wellbeing?
 - 1 – Extremely negative | 2 – Negative | 3 – Neutral | 4 – Positive | 5 – Extremely positive | I don't know | Not applicable

The System Effects then commences with two-level prompt questions which are presented sequentially:

1. From your experience, what contributes towards the poor wellbeing of lawyers?
2. ... and what do you think causes these things to happen?

Respondents respond to the first prompt with a list of individual factors. There is no limit to the number of factors they can identify. The second part to the survey then feeds those factors back to the respondent, with the second prompt then asking them to consider what causes those things. Again, there is no limit to the number of causal factors they can identify.



System Effects data analysis approach

It was important that we recognise the existing knowledge base on the factors that drive poor lawyer wellbeing. As a starting point, we developed an initial coding framework based on a review of research provided by the VLSB+C.

Two members of the FPC team selected a random sample of 20 responses each and applied the initial coding framework. The resultant analyses were compared to help consolidate and refine the coding framework.

This was an iterative process, with additional codes added to the framework as the analysis was undertaken. This continued until all raw responses were coded, and the final network map produced.

The map was then analysed using Social Network Analysis (SNA)

Reference List used to develop the initial coding framework

1. Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study, 2021, International Bar Association.
2. Research report (final version): Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada. National Study on the Health and Wellness Determinants of Legal Professionals in Canada, Phase I (2020-2022), 2022, Cadieux, N., Gingues, M., Cadieux, J., Gouin, M.-M., Fournier, P.-L., Caya, O., Pomerleau, M.-L., Morin, E., Camille, A. B., Gahunzire, J., Université de Sherbrooke, Business School.
3. The Victorian Bar Quality of Working Life Survey Final report and analysis, 2018, Quality of Working Life Research Group University of Portsmouth.
4. VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project: Report on legal professionals' reflections on wellbeing in the legal profession and suggestions for future reforms, 2019, Dr Brady, M.
5. VLSB+C Workplace Culture and Sexual Harassment Survey 2021 Findings, 2021, Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner.
6. Workplace Culture Thematic Review, Solicitor's Regulation Authority (England and Wales), 8 February 2022



Social Network Analysis (SNA)

SNA is a way in which relationships between different components or factors in a system can be studied or understood. It does this through visualizing networks or systems and allows for quantitative analysis of the connections between components to identify which elements are more central or influential than others. SNA is underpinned by graph theory, which is a branch of mathematics that studies the structure of networks. In short, SNA applies graph theory of social structures or networks.

The network developed through the System Effects process was analysed using SNA. Whilst there are several metrics that are typically used, the primary metric was **betweenness centrality**.

High betweenness centrality identifies which factors sit at the interface or 'bridge' other factors more often. These are the most useful points for intervention as any change will have flow-on effects to the factors that they are directly connected to, with subsequent effects continuing to ripple further outwards across the system.

The visualization of the maps and the calculation of betweenness centrality were undertaken via the network mapping platform Kumu. It calculates betweenness centrality by measuring how many times each factor lies on the shortest path between two other elements. In networks such as this one, this can become extremely complex which is why specialist software is required. The analysis of betweenness centrality were also weighted by the number of respondents that identified that relationship in their individual maps.



Results

- Demographic characteristics of respondents from the intake questionnaire
- Identification of factors driving poor lawyer wellbeing
- Systems maps and results on the key factors driving poor lawyer wellbeing
- Conclusion

In total, 1,124 people participated in the survey, with more than 8,850 individual factors* identified by respondents.

* Definition: A “factor” is something that leads to or influences something else. This could be other factors, or direct outcomes such as mental health. The large number also reflects the different ways in which respondents frame a factor – which we rectify during the analysis process



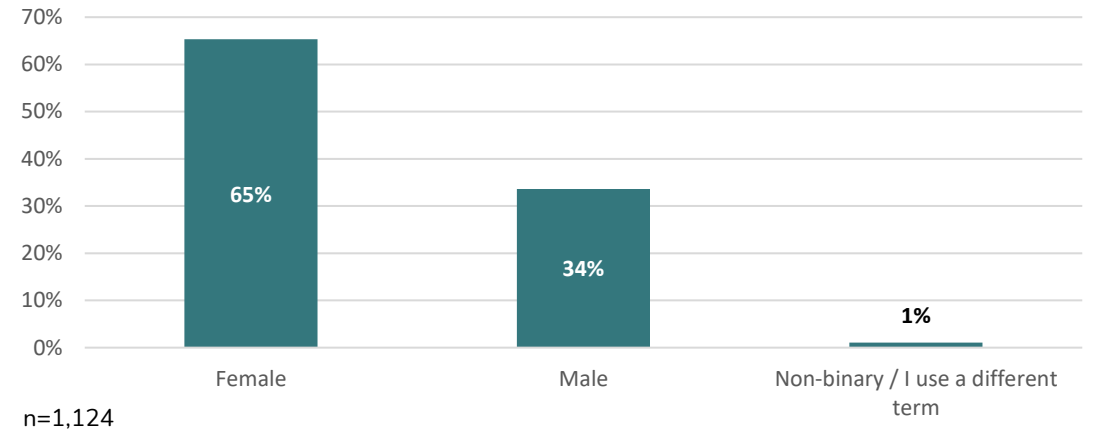
Intake Questionnaire

Demographic characteristics

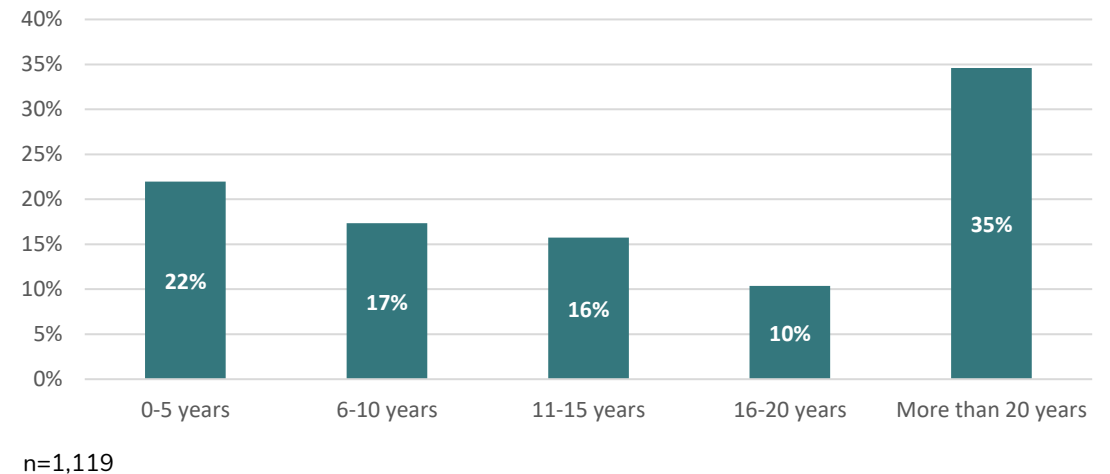
These results are provided to add context to the factors that are presented. We can also undertake sub-analysis of the System Effects data by these different characteristics.

- Just under 66% of respondents identified as female, and 34% identified as male.
- Slightly over 1% identified as non-binary, or indicated they used a different term to identify their gender.
- Approximately 35% of respondents had worked in the legal sector for more than 20 years, with those at the start of their career (0-5 years) the next highest (22%).
- The vast majority (94%, n=1,094) indicated they were a lawyer, with a handful of judiciary, law students, and legal educators among the remainder.

Identified gender of respondents



Number of years in the legal sector





Intake Questionnaire

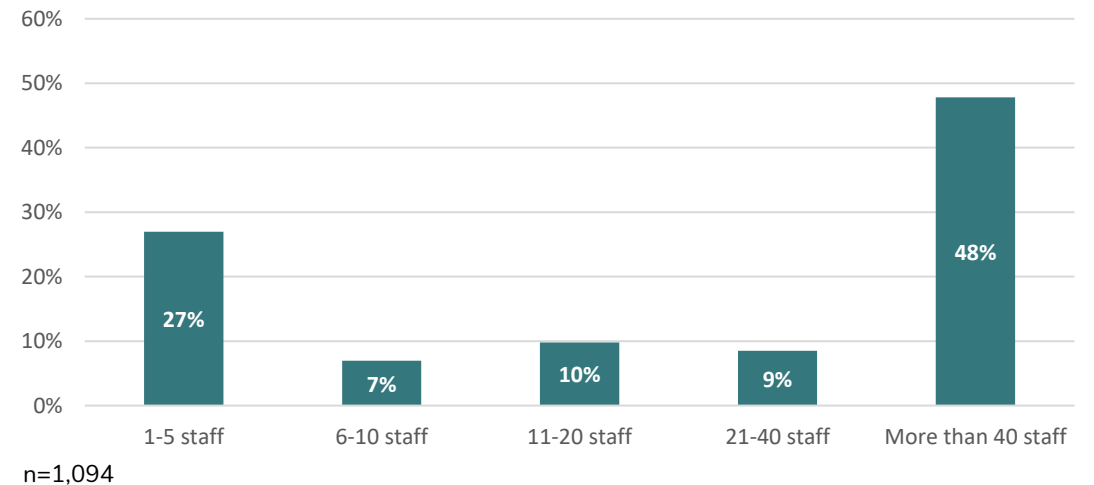
Demographic characteristics

- For those that indicated they held a practicing certificate, 32% were an employee legal practitioner, and 27% were a principal legal practitioner.
- The remainder were spread across corporate (15%), government (11%), or were barristers (9%).
- Nearly half of respondents (48%) came from organisations with more than 40 staff, or small practices with 1-5 staff (27%).

Type of legal practitioner



Estimated size of respondents' organisation



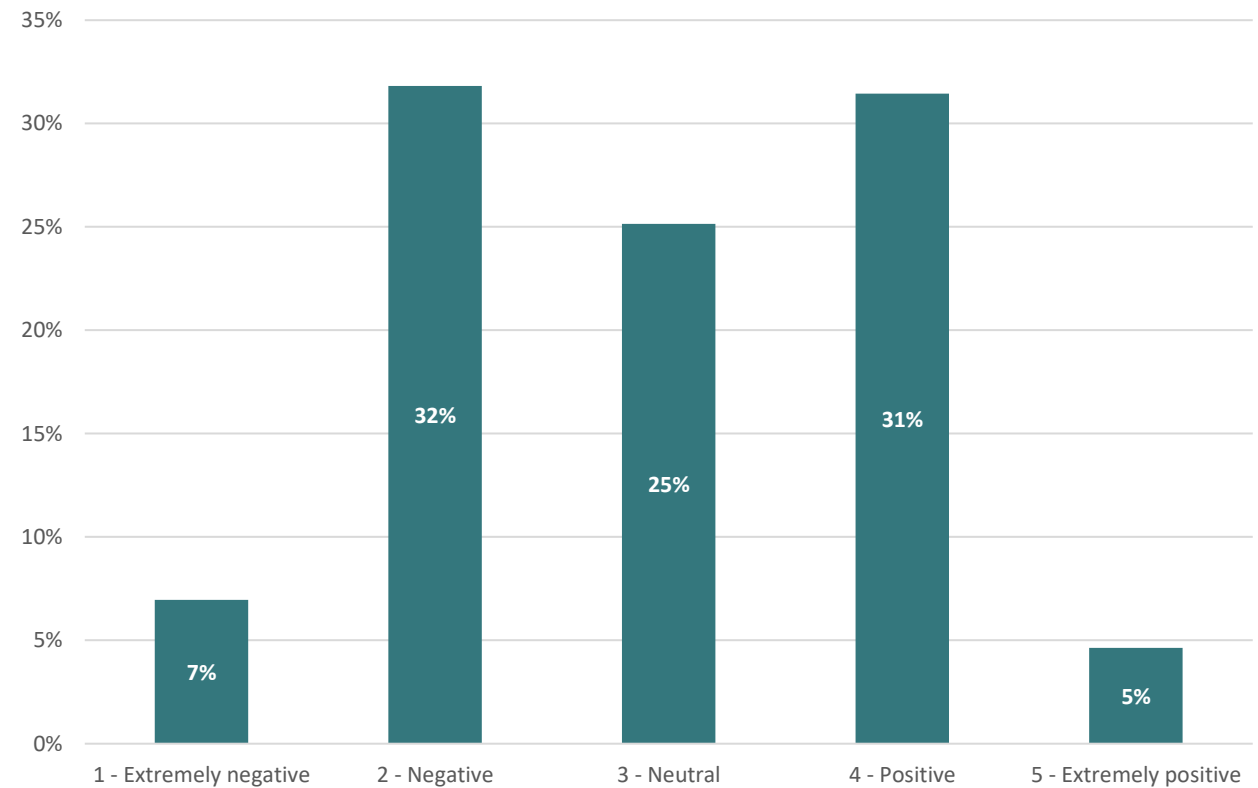


Intake Questionnaire

Impact of working in the legal sector

- Finally, respondents were asked to consider, on balance, the impact working in the legal sector has on their wellbeing.
- As can be seen in the figure to the right, 25% see the impact as 'neutral' with the remainder almost evenly split between positive and negative.
- About 39% indicated it was “negative” or “extremely negative”, whilst 36% indicated it was “positive” or “extremely positive”.

On balance, the perceived impact working in the legal sector has on respondents' wellbeing



n=1,078



Factors that drive poor lawyer wellbeing

From our thematic analysis of the raw data captured through the System Effects process, we identified 45 factors that drive or influence poor lawyer wellbeing.

Further consideration of the nature of these factors, suggests that they sit or manifest at four 'levels':

- **Individual (8 factors)** – those that are 'internal' facing or might be primarily 'felt' internally
- **Interpersonal (7 factors)** – those that manifest within person-to-person interactions
- **Organisational (15 factors)** – those that manifest or occur largely within an organisational context or setting
- **Sectoral (15 factors)** – those that appear to span multiple organisational contexts, or do not otherwise have a sole setting 'owner'.

These factors constitute the 'poor lawyer wellbeing' system – with a system defined as the network of factors that influence the overall focus area. By interpreting these factors in this way, we can approximate them to different levels of the system ('sub-systems').

The intent is to not treat these factors as absolutes. The factors are categorisations used to make sense of the wide range of responses and the context within which they manifest – being the four identified levels. There may be further refinement or changes to this conceptualization in future. That said, this does provide a novel way of understanding the 'problem' and considering the different parts of the system that need to be addressed – often concurrently.

The factors and their associated level are listed on the next page. Description of each factor are provided in the Appendix at the end of the report.



Factors that drive poor lawyer wellbeing

Individual	Interpersonal	Organisational	Sectoral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear and stigma associated with mental wellbeing / speaking out / taboo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adversarial / aggressive nature of law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age / early career status / juniors mistreated / juniors not supported / exploited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of mentoring / professional development for staff / training / modelling positive behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of helplessness / disillusionment / stagnation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients avoidance of fees / ability to pay fees / payment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying and harassment / culture of acceptance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courts are standoffish / see themselves as different / special
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of stress and pressure / high stakes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients with unrealistic expectations/ difficult clients / clients' own misinformation or lack of understanding of the law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges in retaining staff / staff retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture of perfectionism / unreasonable expectations / hyper-critical culture / fear of making mistakes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of appropriate boundaries / skills to set limits / individual resilience / burnout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contactability expectations (24/7 contact or being reachable) / phone always on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on billables / budget targets as the priority incentivises inefficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deadlines or timeframes (real / fake / client / judicial / court)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical symptoms / poor physical behaviours / pain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyper competitiveness / lack of collegiality / lack of professional network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchical culture / power imbalances between management and staff / roles in sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult / complex areas of work / matters / volume of material
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor work-life balance / self-care routines / inability to switch off 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of respect / value / recognition / appreciation by different people in the system towards lawyers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense workloads / long work hours / time demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discriminatory practices - racism / ageism / elitism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting high-needs clients / clients in crisis / lack of support available to support clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal / organisational accumulation of wealth and power / profit driven / greed / ego 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intersectional factors influencing clients / lawyers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack / absence of sectoral supports / accountability or enforcement (OHS, WorkSafe, LIV, or other mechanisms for supervision)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unhealthy coping mechanisms (alcohol / drugs) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of appropriate / supportive policies / training / processes / HR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less funding / resourcing for parts of the sector (e.g. community legal services / in-house government)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of lawyers / staff / resourcing for lawyers' time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low salary / cost of living / wages / wage structures / transparency
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resourcing for mental wellbeing support / stress support / lack of (or appropriate) mental wellbeing support (self or client) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough positions to meet demand for jobs / career pathways
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resourcing for supporting / administrative staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parts of the sector are overwhelmed / backlog (court backlog)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of supportive / capable managers / micromanagement / poor communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of the regulator / regulatory systems and processes / costs to practice
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-progressive / conservative / outdated sector / management or leadership approaches / lack of flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexism / gender discrimination / male favouritism / gender pay gap
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toxic workplace or sector / poor workplace culture or attitudes / low morale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of practice / regionality or location of practice
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vicarious or secondary trauma / vicarious stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use / overuse of technology

A description for each factor can be found in the Appendix at the end of the report.



The Drivers of Poor Lawyer Wellbeing as a System

The 'focus' of poor wellbeing sits in the centre of the network of factors. The 45 factors and the four levels have been arranged around it in groups:

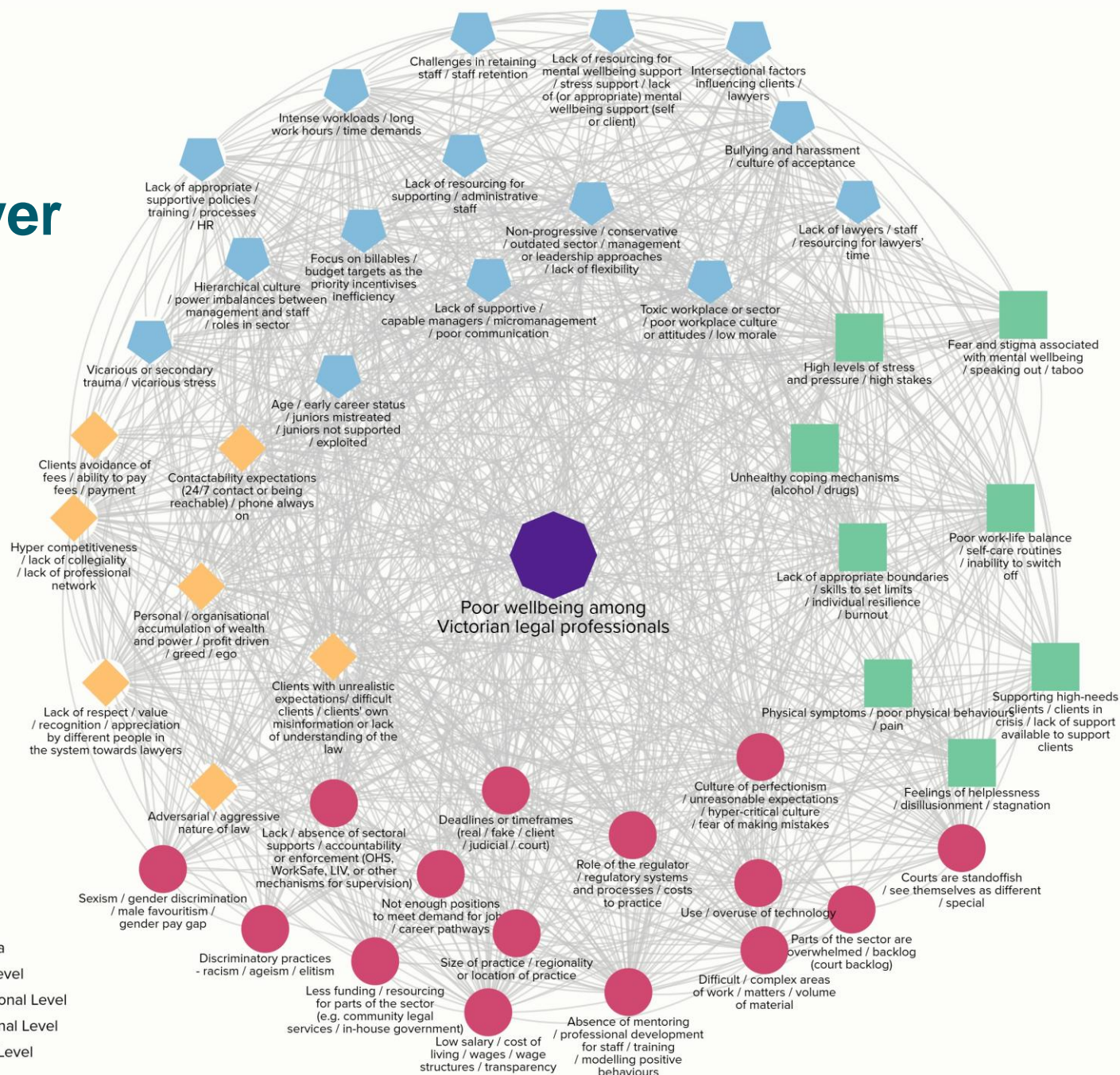
- **Individual** (8 factors, green square)
- **Interpersonal** (7 factors, orange diamond)
- **Organisational** (15 factors, blue pentagon)
- **Sectoral** (15 factors, dark pink circle)

In total, there are **1,017 different relationships between factors and the focus area across this network**. Each relationship is reflected in the grey connecting line.

The relationships are 'directed' in that one factor was identified by a respondent as causing another.

Legend

- Focus Area
- Sectoral Level
- Organisational Level
- ◆ Interpersonal Level
- Individual Level





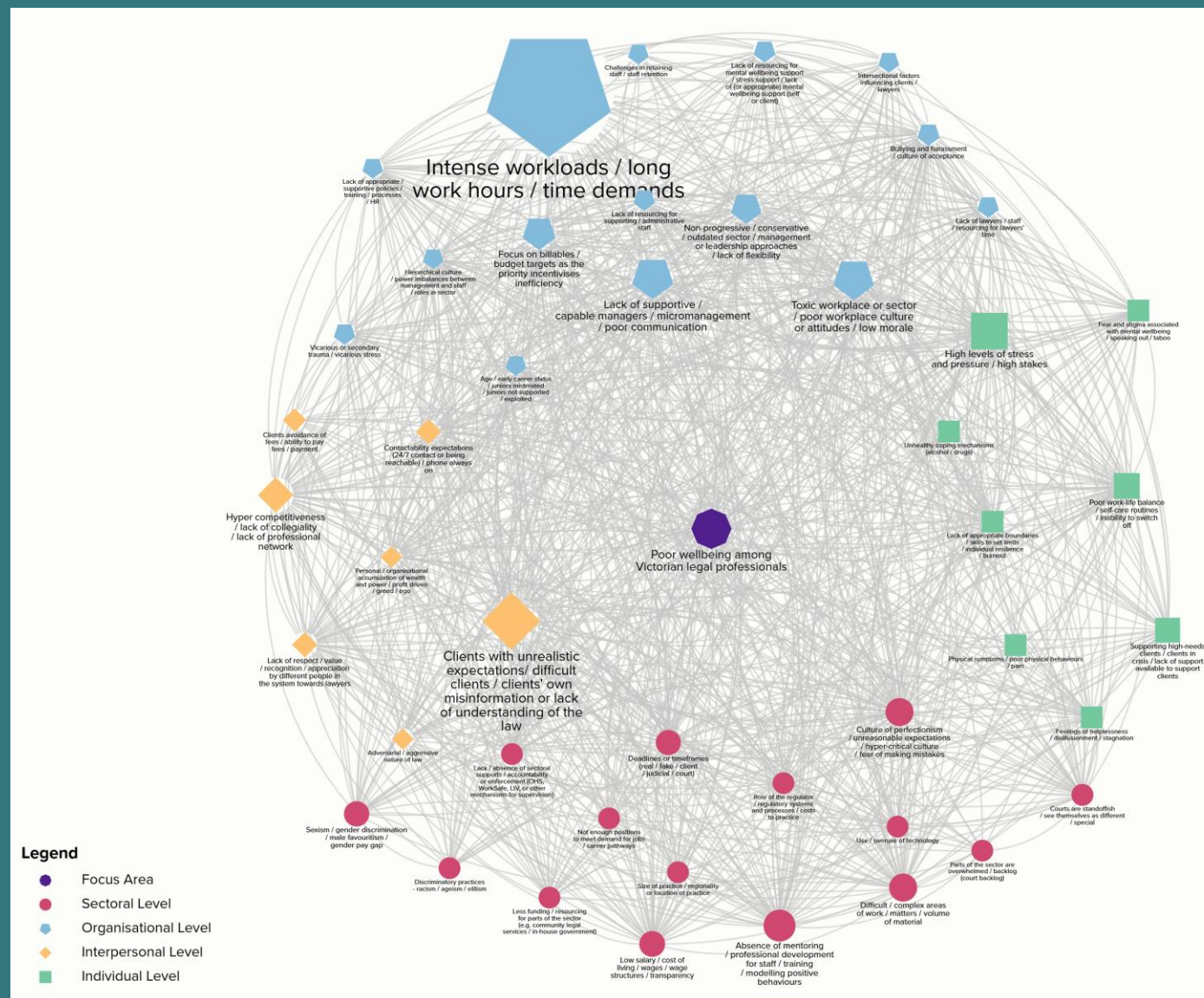
Most influential factors across the system

Based on our network analysis, we identified that the top five systemic factors* drive poor lawyer wellbeing are:

1. Intense workloads / long work hours / time demands – this was the most influential by a factor of 3
2. Clients with unrealistic expectations/ difficult clients / clients' own misinformation or lack of understanding of the law
3. Lack of supportive / capable managers / micromanagement / poor communication
4. Toxic workplace or sector / poor workplace culture or attitudes / low morale
5. High levels of stress and pressure / high stakes.

These factors are ranked the highest as they sit at the interface of other factors identified most frequently – including the focus area. The calculation factors into the calculation the number of respondents that identified that relationship, so all results are weighted.

* Definition: A "factor" is something that leads to or influences something else. This could be other factors, or direct outcomes such as mental health.



Note: the variation in element size is reflective of their betweenness centrality score.



Based on the experiences of more than 1,000 respondents ‘intense workloads / long work hours / time demands’ is undeniably the most influential factor by a significant proportion. With a result more than three times the next most influential, the flow-on effects to all other factors in the wider system is clear.

The subsequent sections explore specific segments of the systems map, but already we can say:

- The interconnections between factors also mean that there will be many other factors that are contributing to the ‘intense workloads / long work hours / time demands’ factor
- The ‘workloads’ factor will not only influence poor wellbeing but also inhibit action in other areas – for example, a staff member’s ability to access an Employee Assistance Program may be limited if they are under intense workloads.
- Consideration needs to be given to addressing multiple factors – rather than focusing on one – through concurrent action across different parts of the system.

The same form of analysis (betweenness centrality) applied to each ‘sub-system’ will identify which factors are most influential within each level. This provides a nuanced way of understanding the parts of the system to focus on.

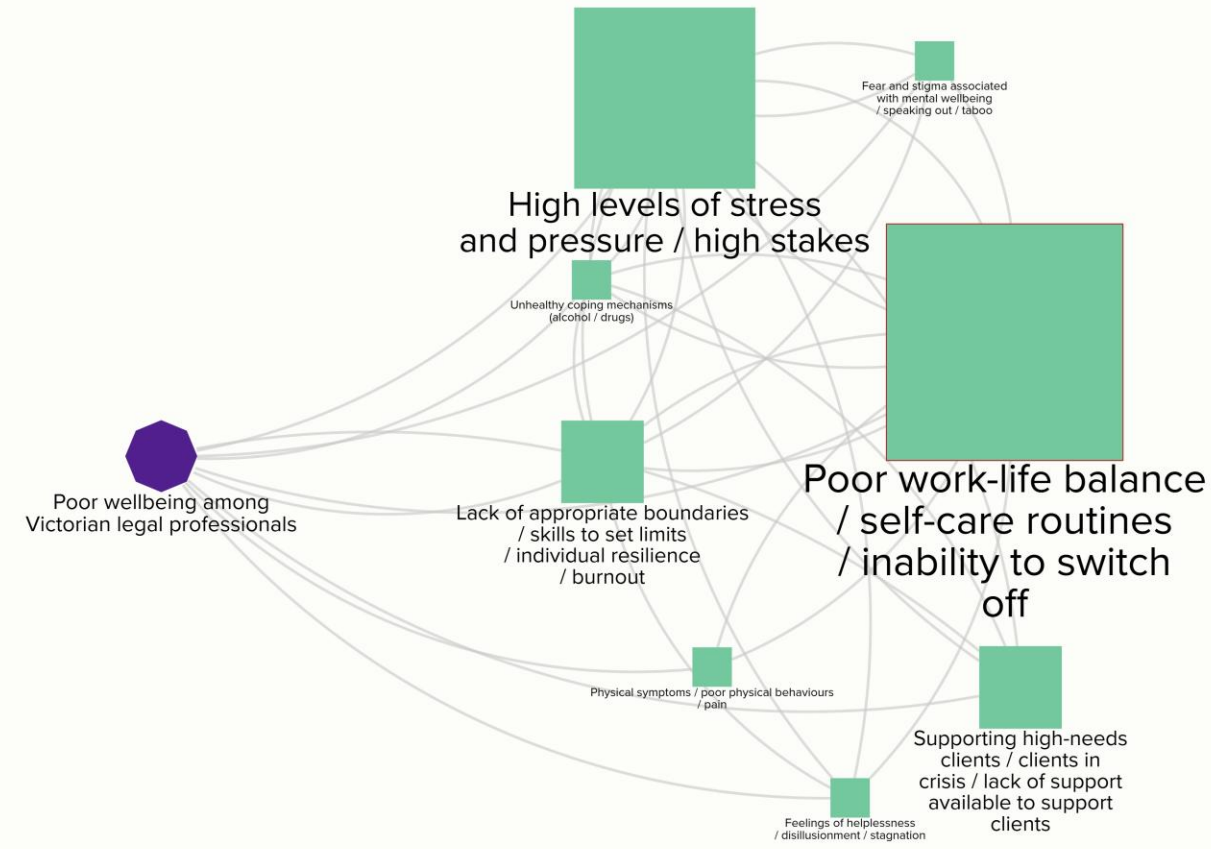


Drivers of lawyer wellbeing at the individual level

The betweenness centrality scores within the ‘individual-level’ sub-system suggest that there are four particularly important factors. In order, these are:

1. Poor work-life balance / self-care routines / inability to switch off
2. High levels of stress and pressure / high stakes
3. Supporting high-needs clients / clients in crisis / lack of support available to support clients *
4. Lack of appropriate boundaries / skills to set limits / individual resilience / burnout *

It may be apparent that the inability to exhibit ‘self-care’ is a factor here, but also – as will be apparent across other levels – these areas are not to be interpreted in isolation or seen as the ‘individual’ lawyer’s responsibility.



* These were tied for their level of influence

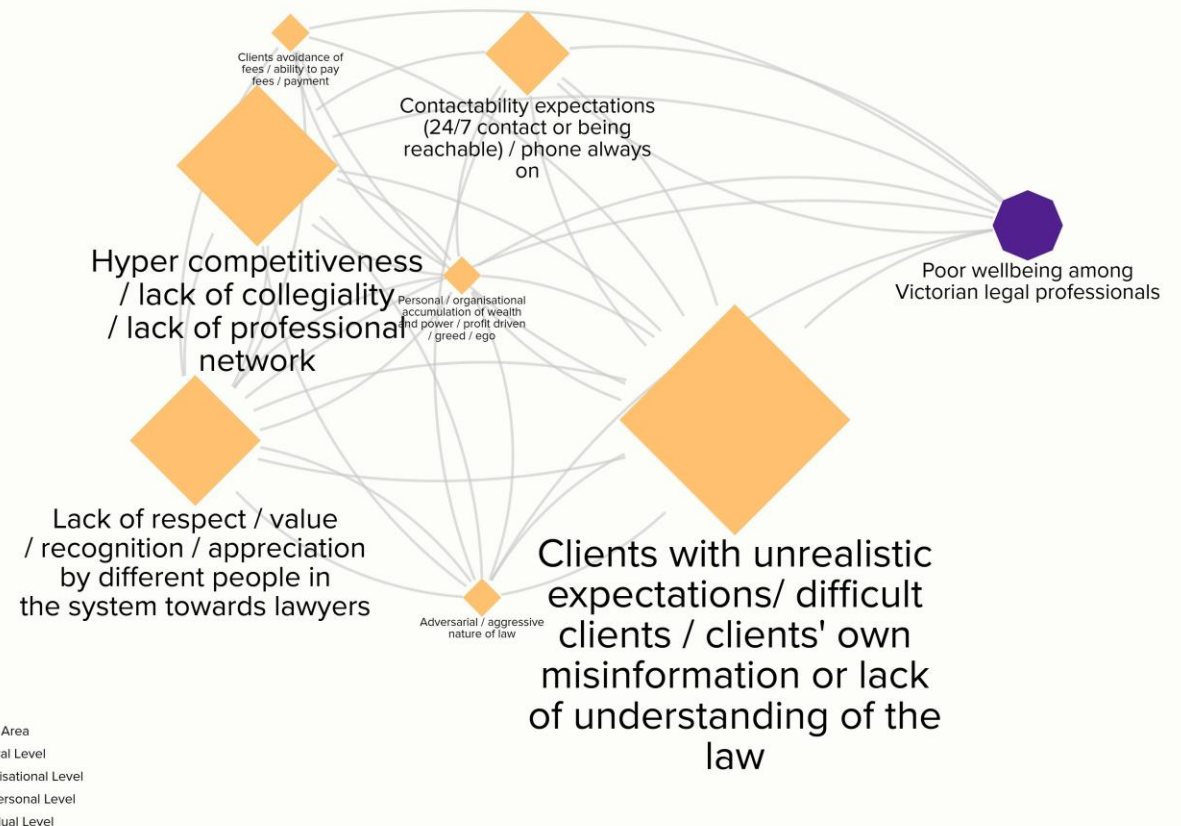


Drivers of lawyer wellbeing at the interpersonal level

The four factors at the 'interpersonal-level' that notably influence the focus area, or each other at this level, are:

1. Clients with unrealistic expectations/ difficult clients / clients' own misinformation or lack of understanding of the law
2. Hyper competitiveness / lack of collegiality / lack of professional network
3. Lack of respect / value / recognition / appreciation by different people in the system towards lawyers
4. Contactability expectations (24/7 contact or being reachable) / phone always on

This suggests that the underlying issue here is the lack of recognition of the person behind the 'lawyer'. This then translates into these different factors that were collectively identified through the System Effects process.





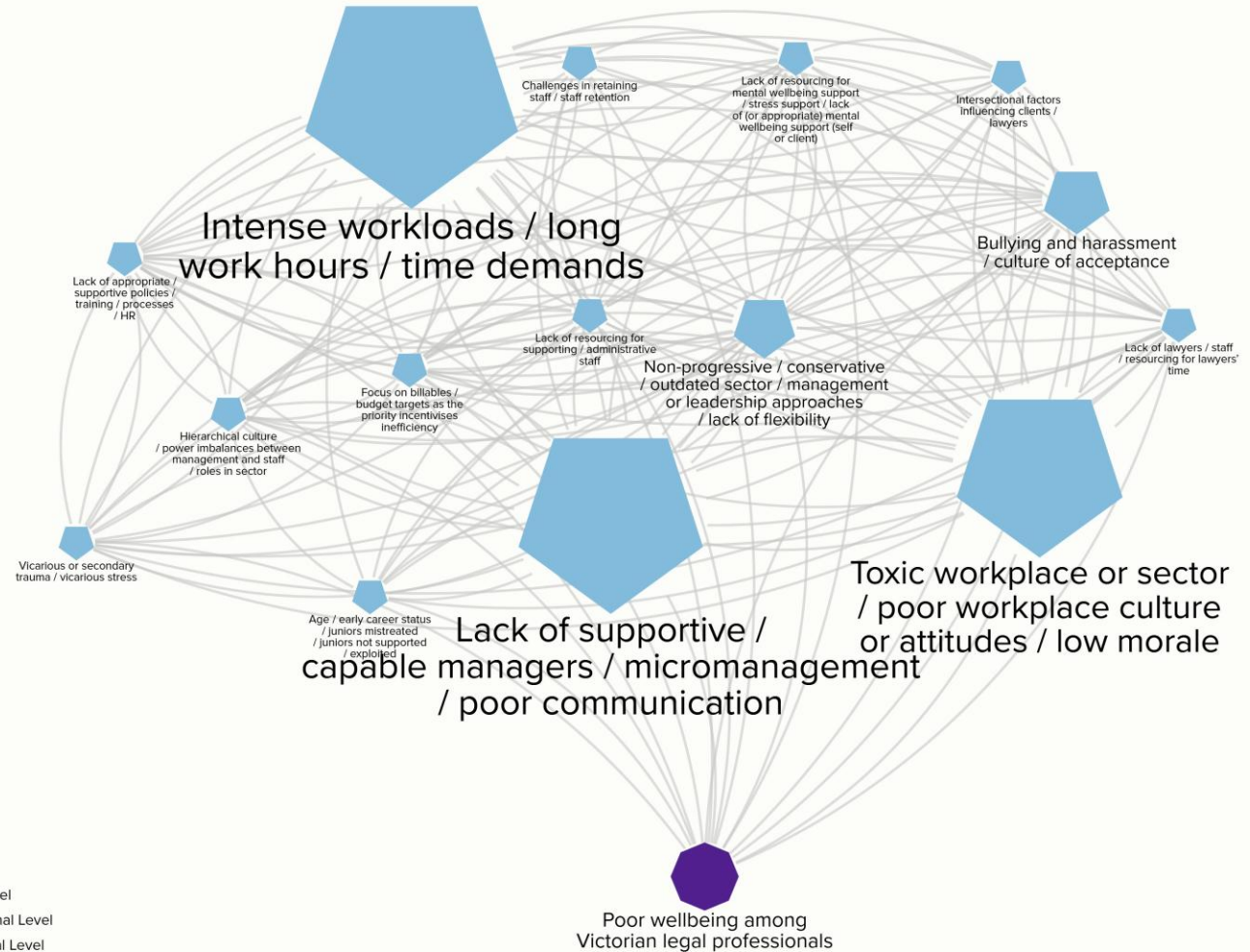
Drivers of lawyer wellbeing at the organisational level

The three clear factors at the 'organisational-level' that influence wellbeing directly or each other, in order, are:

1. Intense workloads / long work hours / time demands
2. Lack of supportive / capable managers / micromanagement / poor communication
3. Toxic workplace or sector / poor workplace culture or attitudes / low morale

One aspect that is notable here – which you can see by the closeness in size of the three factors – is that their betweenness scores are so close. This suggests that to some extent there is a feedback loop between these three factors.

This is the only set of connections across each sub-system that has this sort of relationship.



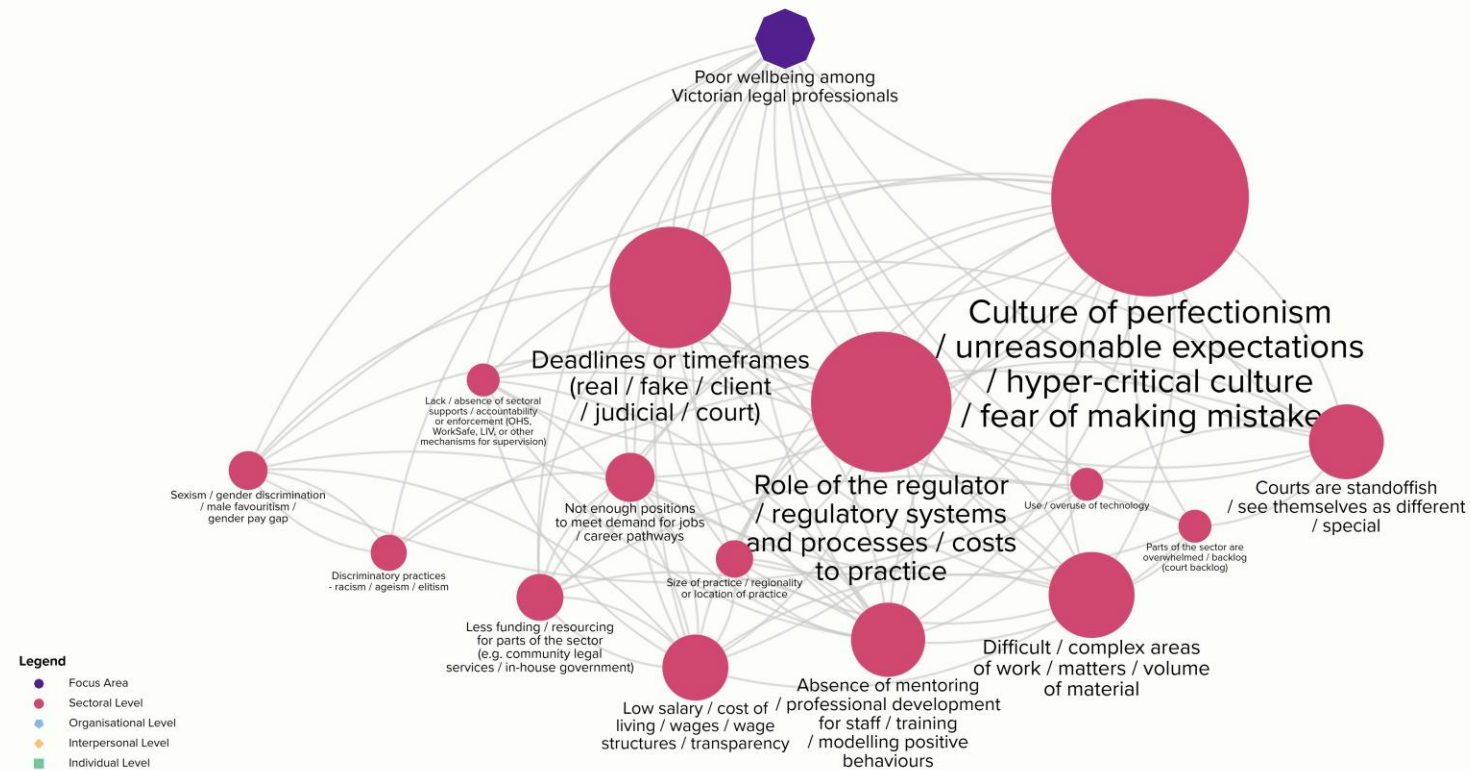


Drivers of lawyer wellbeing at the sectoral level

There were four factors within this level that influence wellbeing directly or indirectly the most. In order, these are:

1. Culture of perfectionism / unreasonable expectations / hyper-critical culture / fear of making mistakes
2. Role of the regulator / regulatory systems and processes / costs to practice
3. Deadlines or timeframes (real / fake / client / judicial / court)
4. Difficult / complex areas of work / matters / volume of material

By far the 'culture of perfectionism' factor is the most influential at this level.



The Drivers of Poor Lawyer Wellbeing as a System

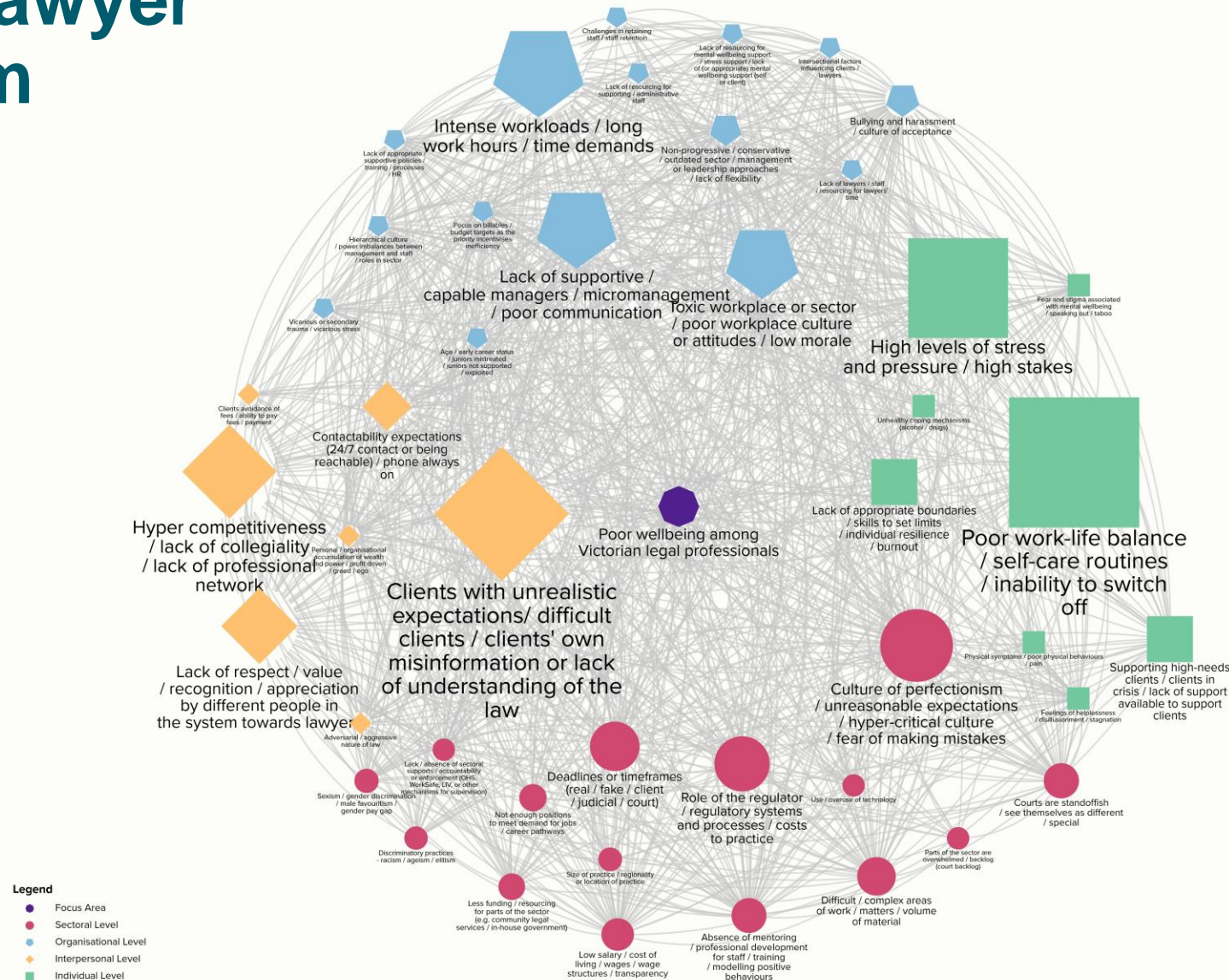
If we take the analyses of each sub-system and re-assemble them, we can see that there are factors across all levels that provide meaningful intervention points.

Knowing that the interconnections span all parts of the network, we can infer that positive action against one factor will have flow-on effects to many other factors in the system that span the levels we have created.

For example, we can reasonably assume that addressing 'contactability expectations' (interpersonal) will contribute to addressing 'high levels of stress' (individual-level).

Based on our analysis, what we can see here are factors to start with in each level:

- Individual: Poor work-life balance
- Interpersonal: Clients with unrealistic expectations
- Organisational: Workloads, manager capability, workplace culture
- Sectoral: Culture of perfectionism



Note: Element size is based on the betweenness scores calculated 'within' each level.



Conclusion

The System Effects process has been a valuable exercise in reframing our understanding of how to address the issue of poor lawyer wellbeing. It has produced a range of insights that will be beneficial in a variety of areas, both now and in the future.

To that end, these results are not the end of this project. Rather, these insights will form the foundations and basis for the Systems Theory of Change that FPC are developing on behalf of the VLSB+C. By taking the position that the ‘problem’ is a systemic one, we can reframe the task of addressing lawyer wellbeing as not ‘one’ thing – but rather many that occur at the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sectoral levels.

By working across all levels, with a variety of approaches, and sufficient engagement across the legal system, then real progress on lawyer wellbeing can be made.

For more information, please visit the [Lawyer Wellbeing section of the VLSB website](#) or contact:

- **Matt Healey** | Principal Consultant, First Person Consulting (matt@fpconsulting.com.au)
- **Lucy Fraser** | Manager, Lawyer Wellbeing Program, Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (LFraser@lsbc.vic.gov.au)



Appendix

Descriptions of the factors identified in the systems maps across each of the four levels are provided in the following pages. They are presented alphabetically. Sources for the factors are noted – either to the reference list to the right, or to the primary data collected through the System Effects Survey process.

There were a total of 45 factors identified:

- Individual-level (8 factors)
- Interpersonal-level (7 factors)
- Organisational-level (15 factors)
- Sector-level (15 factors)

Reference List

1. Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study, 2021, International Bar Association.
2. Research report (final version): Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada. National Study on the Health and Wellness Determinants of Legal Professionals in Canada, Phase I (2020-2022), 2022, Cadieux, N., Gingues, M., Cadieux, J., Gouin, M.-M., Fournier, P.-L., Caya, O., Pomerleau, M.-L., Morin, E., Camille, A. B., Gahunzire, J., Université de Sherbrooke, Business School.
3. The Victorian Bar Quality of Working Life Survey Final report and analysis, 2018, Quality of Working Life Research Group University of Portsmouth.
4. VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project: Report on legal professionals' reflections on wellbeing in the legal profession and suggestions for future reforms, 2019, Dr Brady, M.
5. VLSB+C Workplace Culture and Sexual Harassment Survey 2021 Findings, 2021, Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner.
6. Workplace Culture Thematic Review, Solicitor's Regulation Authority (England and Wales), 8 February 2022.



Individual-level Factors

Code	Description	Source/s
Fear and stigma associated with mental wellbeing / speaking out / taboo	Lawyers often fear that discussing mental health concerns could negatively impact their careers, workplace experience, or chances of progression due to judgement by others around them. This contributes to fearfulness that other experiences (e.g. bullying) may also be dismissed or met with negative reactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)• Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)• Workplace Culture Thematic Review (2022)
Feelings of helplessness / disillusionment / stagnation	A pervasive perception that systemic issues within the legal profession cannot be addressed leads to feelings of helplessness, disillusionment, and a sense of being stuck, which contributes to a lack of progress and motivation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
High levels of stress and pressure / high stakes	High-profile cases with demanding clients contribute to intense stress and pressure. Lawyers are often required to juggle multiple competing demands and deadlines, leading to high-stress environments where mistakes carry significant consequences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)• Wellbeing of Victorian Bar Report (2018)• Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)• Workplace Culture Thematic Review 2022
Lack of appropriate boundaries / skills to set limits / individual resilience / burnout	Many lawyers struggle with setting appropriate boundaries and limits, which are critical for managing personal well-being. Without these skills, they face an increased risk of burnout and decreased resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Physical symptoms / poor physical behaviours / pain	Lawyers may experience physical discomfort, pain, or injury, often related to the sedentary, desk-bound nature of their work, which contributes to their overall decline in physical well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Poor work-life balance / self-care routines / inability to switch off	Excessive work demands hinder lawyers' ability to engage in self-care and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Many find it difficult to 'switch off,' leading to deteriorating mental and physical health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)• Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)
Supporting high-needs clients / clients in crisis / lack of support available to support clients	Working with clients in crisis, such as those facing mental health issues or domestic violence, places additional stress on lawyers, who may feel unable to provide sufficient support beyond legal advice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Unhealthy coping mechanisms (alcohol / drugs)	Lawyers resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as alcohol and recreational drug use, to deal with the high stresses they are experiencing within their practice. These behaviours are also often normalised in social and networking contexts, for instance through availability or as a 'social lubricant'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)• Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)



Interpersonal-level Factors

Code	Description	Source/s
Adversarial / aggressive nature of law	The legal profession often fosters an adversarial culture between individuals, where opposing lawyers are seen as enemies, promoting competitiveness, hostility, and a 'win-at-all-costs' mentality rather than collaboration towards positive outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Clients' avoidance of fees / ability to pay fees / payment	Lawyers frequently encounter difficulties with clients avoiding or delaying fee payments, which creates financial strain and the need for constant follow-ups to ensure payment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Clients with unrealistic expectations / difficult clients / clients' own misinformation or lack of understanding of the law	Respondents identified that clients can be extremely demanding, be difficult to manage or engage with, and place unrealistic expectations on them. This often stems from a client's lack of understanding of legal processes, or of what is appropriate or feasible in different contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Contactability expectations (24/7 contact or being reachable) / phone always on	Lawyers face constant pressure to be available at all hours, with clients and colleagues expecting immediate responses, which undermines work-life balance and contributes to chronic stress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Hyper competitiveness / lack of collegiality / lack of professional network	A culture of intense competition within the legal profession discourages collegiality and mutual support, leading to isolation and the absence of strong professional networks, especially in larger firms where individualism is prized.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workplace Culture Thematic Review (2022)
Lack of respect / value / recognition / appreciation by different people in the system towards lawyers	Lawyers often feel undervalued and unappreciated by clients, colleagues, and the public, with high-quality work expected as the norm, but rarely recognised or celebrated, especially by senior lawyers and partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Personal / organisational accumulation of wealth and power / profit driven / greed / ego	In many legal settings, there is a strong emphasis on accumulating wealth and power, with a focus on maximising billable hours and profit margins, often at the expense of staff well-being and meaningful client outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FPC System Effects Survey (2024)



Organisational-level Factors

Code	Description	Source/s
Age / early career status / juniors mistreated / juniors not supported / exploited	Younger and early-career lawyers are often exploited, facing long hours, high demands, and a lack of support. They are frequently expected to simply endure poor working conditions as part of the profession.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021) • Wellbeing of Victorian Bar Report (2018)
Bullying and harassment / culture of acceptance	Bullying and harassment are pervasive in legal environments, particularly towards early-career professionals, with a culture that often accepts or ignores such behaviour, contributing to a toxic work environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021) • VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019) • Wellbeing of Victorian Bar Report (2018) • Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022) • FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Challenges in retaining staff / staff retention	The legal profession struggles with high staff turnover, as the intense work demands, poor work-life balance, and stressful conditions drive both lawyers and support staff to leave their positions frequently.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Focus on billables / budget targets as the priority incentivises inefficiency	The overwhelming focus on billable hours and meeting budget targets in law firms incentivises inefficiency, often forcing lawyers to work long hours, prioritising profit over quality of work and professional development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Hierarchical culture / power imbalances between management and staff / roles in sector	Many law firms are characterised by rigid hierarchies and power imbalances, with senior management exerting top-down control, leaving junior lawyers with little autonomy or say over their work, which impacts their well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Intense workloads / long work hours / time demands	Lawyers are frequently required to handle unmanageable workloads, with long work hours and overtime becoming the norm, leading to chronic stress and burnout as they struggle to meet high expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021) • VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019) • Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022) • Workplace Culture Thematic Review (2022)
Intersectional factors influencing clients / lawyers	Minority groups within the legal profession face additional challenges due to systemic disadvantages. Factors such as gender, race, disability, and caregiving responsibilities affect both clients and lawyers, leading to unequal opportunities and experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021) • VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019) • Wellbeing of Victorian Bar Report (2018) • Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)
Lack of appropriate / supportive policies / training / processes / HR	Many legal organisations lack appropriate policies, training, and processes to support mental well-being, with HR interventions often seen as a weakness, leaving lawyers without adequate resources for stress management or personal development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021) • VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019) • Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022) • Workplace Culture Thematic Review (2022)



Organisational-level Factors

Code	Description	Source/s
Lack of lawyers / staff / resourcing for lawyers' time	A shortage of staff in legal environments leads to increased workloads for lawyers, who often perform tasks outside billable hours to meet deadlines, further exacerbating stress and work pressure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Lack of resourcing for mental wellbeing support / stress support / lack of (or appropriate) mental wellbeing support (self or client)	Many legal firms lack the resources or commitment to provide mental health and stress support to their staff. There is often a reluctance to address mental health issues, which are seen as weaknesses rather than legitimate concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)
Lack of resourcing for supporting / administrative staff	Legal staff, particularly lawyers, are often burdened with administrative tasks due to a lack of adequate support staff, which contributes to increased workloads and less time for legal work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Lack of supportive / capable managers / micromanagement / poor communication	Poor managerial skills, combined with micromanagement and ineffective communication, result in a lack of guidance and support for lawyers. Promotions are often based on legal expertise rather than people management skills, leading to a disconnect between management and staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Non-progressive / conservative / outdated sector / management or leadership approaches / lack of flexibility	The legal sector often operates with outdated, conservative leadership approaches that resist change and flexibility, particularly regarding work-life balance and well-being. Generational differences and entrenched views about "how things are done" contribute to a lack of innovation in management practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Toxic workplace or sector / poor workplace culture or attitudes / low morale	Toxic workplace cultures in the legal sector are characterised by poor behaviour, lack of respect, and difficult interpersonal relationships. This environment fosters low morale, with systemic issues like bullying and intimidation perpetuating negative attitudes and dissatisfaction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Vicarious or secondary trauma / vicarious stress	Lawyers frequently experience vicarious trauma or stress as a result of dealing with emotionally difficult or traumatic cases, such as those involving crime, family breakdowns, or vulnerable clients, without receiving adequate support or preventive measures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">FPC System Effects Survey (2024)



Sectoral-level Factors

Code	Description	Source/s
Absence of mentoring / professional development for staff / training / modelling positive behaviours	Mentoring and professional development opportunities are often lacking in the legal profession, with senior lawyers failing to provide sufficient guidance to junior staff. The absence of time or willingness to model positive work-life balance behaviours exacerbates this issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Courts are standoffish / see themselves as different	Courts and judges can be standoffish and rude, diminishing lawyers with public embarrassment or ridicule. The courts may impose unrealistic deadlines, and there is a lack of oversight regarding the behaviour of judges, contributing to an adversarial and inflexible atmosphere.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Culture of perfectionism / unreasonable expectations / hyper-critical culture / fear of making mistakes	A culture of perfectionism dominates the legal profession, where lawyers face hyper-critical environments and fear making mistakes. This begins early in their careers and is reinforced by unreasonable expectations and workloads, increasing stress and self-criticism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019)
Deadlines or timeframes (real / fake / client / judicial / court)	Unrealistic deadlines and timeframes imposed by courts, clients, and senior lawyers create immense pressure for lawyers. These deadlines often ignore the complexity of tasks or external priorities, leading to stress and rushed work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Difficult / complex areas of work / matters / volume of material	The inherent complexity of legal work, combined with the sheer volume of material that lawyers must navigate, makes the profession particularly challenging. These complexities can stem from the content, cases, or client circumstances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Discriminatory practices - racism / ageism / elitism	Discriminatory practices, including racism, ageism, and elitism, are prevalent in the legal profession. These biases affect career progression and create barriers to inclusion, with issues such as nepotism and prejudice based on educational background further marginalising individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019)• Wellbeing of Victorian Bar Report (2018)• Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)
Lack / absence of sectoral supports / accountability or enforcement (OHS, WorkSafe, LIV, or other mechanisms for supervision)	There is often a lack of accountability and enforcement for poor workplace behaviours in the legal profession, with unions and WorkSafe practices not being adequately utilised. This leads to unchecked mistreatment by senior lawyers and partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Less funding / resourcing for parts of the sector (e.g. community legal services / in-house government)	Parts of the legal sector, particularly community legal services and in-house government roles, suffer from underfunding, resulting in inadequate staffing and resourcing. This limits the ability to deliver quality services and increases stress for those working in these areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)



Sectoral-level Factors

Code	Description	Source/s
Low salary / cost of living / wages / wage structures / transparency	Lawyers often face financial pressures due to salaries that do not reflect the long hours, high stress, and cost of living. Poor wage growth and a lack of transparency in wage structures contribute to dissatisfaction, especially for smaller firms or those in lower-paying roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Not enough positions to meet demand for jobs / career pathways	There is an oversupply of law graduates relative to the number of available positions, leading to intense competition and higher demands on lawyers to perform. Additionally, there is a lack of clear career pathways or guidance, contributing to uncertainty about long-term progression.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Parts of the sector are overwhelmed / backlog (court backlog)	Certain areas of the legal system, such as courts and tribunals, are overwhelmed by case backlogs, leading to delays in resolution and response times. This increases stress for lawyers who are waiting for progress on their cases and adds to their workload.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Role of the regulator / regulatory systems and processes / costs to practice	Regulatory systems and processes in the legal sector can be perceived as burdensome, adding unnecessary administrative work and stress. Compliance with these regulations, including high costs to practice, can feel like an additional obstacle rather than a support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)
Sexism / gender discrimination / male favouritism / gender pay gap	Sexism and gender discrimination are prevalent in the legal profession, with male favouritism often influencing career opportunities. Women frequently report workplace harassment, a gender pay gap, and a lack of accommodation for family or pregnancy-related needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)• VLSB+C Lawyer Wellbeing Project (2019)• Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Practice of Law in Canada Research Report (2020-2022)
Size of practice / regionality or location of practice	Lawyers working in smaller practices or regional areas may experience higher demands and limited support, as they are often disconnected from wider networks and resources available to those in larger, metro-based firms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study (2021)
Use / overuse of technology	The increasing use of technology in the legal profession has raised expectations for constant contact and immediate responses, which makes it difficult for lawyers to switch off from work. In some cases, there is a lack of proficiency with new technology, creating additional stress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC System Effects Survey (2024)