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**CORPORATE  
WELLNESS  
IN THE LEGAL  
PROFESSION,  
NOW OR NEVER?**



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# CORPORATE WELLNESS IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION, NOW OR NEVER?

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*“There, there Mrs. Macklin – don’t cry on billable time.”* (Source: Shanahan, Danny)

Is “Corporate Wellness” lofty, idealistic and unnecessary as a concept in the legal profession where time is money?

Believe it or not, Corporate Wellness or Employee Wellness is not an oxymoron. It is impossible to consider the way in which a law firm can have a competitive advantage or execute any form of competitive strategy in the absence of skilled, well rounded and productive Counsel. Over the past few years, the importance of Corporate Wellness has gained traction within the legal space, and law firms have now begun to acknowledge the importance of the wellness of Counsel as paramount to a successful firm.

The shift in corporate culture generally can be illustrated in the way in which individuals view basic firm perks as subpar to the wider goal that is full-scale Corporate Wellness. Elizabeth Murray stated; *“Moving towards a culture that encourages wellness, on a mental and physical level, is so much more than sponsoring a few yoga classes or a corporate retreat...it’s about shifting the very mindset we have clung to so earnestly in the legal profession. By encouraging wellness initiatives for all lawyers - from junior associates to name partners – we are simultaneously encouraging a culture of acceptance and inclusion.* (Elizabeth Murray - The Rise of Corporate Wellness in Law Firms, June 2018)

The requirement for law firms to consider Employee Wellness as crucial in 21<sup>st</sup>-century legal practice for the growth and longevity of a firm is undoubtable. Counsel are the most vital group behind the firm’s name and make up the most important link in the chain. The critical narrative on organisational success being hinged on the strength and weaknesses of a firm’s employees cannot be overemphasised. Some law firms consider billable hours as second to none and pronounce that working hours are for work and work alone. Firms of this nature share a sense of

disdain with respect to Corporate Wellness due to their sole goal of “chasing the money” and “making the money”.

In order for individuals to grasp Corporate Wellness/ Employee Wellness as critical to their career success and professional progression generally, it is important to examine cognitive self-awareness in the context of personal growth to achieve Wellness in totality. It must be considered that we are individuals before we are our professionals. Individuals may read books, articles, attend seminars or visit a therapist or take a simple personality test using various personality tests available online in order to reveal one’s common traits, flaws and capabilities in general.

It is certain that Personal Wellness is at the foundation of good leadership acumen, especially as a lawyer since we rely on our physical, mental and emotional health because the entire nature of the business model depends on working at our most productive/ efficient capacity. The pretext for a highly charged staff strength that is not only aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses but is also valued by its firm with the introduction of comprehensive wellness programmes that allow for a positive working environment for Counsel who aim to personally succeed and also desire success for their firm as a conglomerate. It is my considered opinion that Nigerian law firms ought to follow the likes of Google and Facebook who view Corporate Wellness as key to a sustainable business.

In certain firms (both in Nigeria and in the global legal space) the general perception is that a lawyer’s value to a firm is the number of billable hours it racks up for the purpose of treating Client’s needs/assignments as paramount in the absence of anything else and places the employee’s wellbeing as secondary. This premise is falsified. This view is however shifting; many cutting-edge firms are now well aware of the value of strategic planning towards cooperate wellness. Andy Clark, an author/lawyer on Legal Wellness discusses stated that “wellness is not only at the foundation of being a good lawyer, but a good leader as well.” (Andy Clark, an author/lawyer on Legal Wellness)

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## “...The sections relating to the terms and conditions of employment as stated in Sections 13 to 20 of the Act are vaguely worded and do not specifically cater to the wellness of workers in Nigeria....”

The provisions of the Labour Act are largely inadequate with respect to upholding good standards of Corporate Wellness. The sections relating to the terms and conditions of employment as stated in Sections 13 to 20 of the Act are vaguely worded and do not specifically cater to the wellness of workers in Nigeria. The Labour Act makes the terms and conditions of employment subject to the agreement of the parties, this is a rather curious situation in a country where there is an unfair bargaining power for the employees in employment contracts and workers do not have the opportunity to negotiate the terms of the employment.

With respect to international best practices, the International Labour Organisation recognises corporate wellness under the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Policy which is an integral aspect of the ILO's decent work agenda. Through its various Recommendations, the ILO stipulates that the following are the three core values of the Decent Work Agenda:

- Work should take place in a safe and healthy working environment;
- Conditions of work should be consistent with workers' wellbeing and human dignity; and
- Work should offer real possibilities for personal achievement, self-fulfilment and service of society.

(Improving Health in the Workplace: ILO's Framework for Action, ILO.org)

Ossi Samuel stated in his article 'How to Start a Corporate Wellness Program Business in Nigeria' that: *“In order to cut cost, it's economical for employers to patronise the corporate wellness program business. Secondly, top companies and organisation are keying into the employee fitness and general wellness packages because they have come to realise that when their employees are in perfect health and fitness state, they can be guaranteed high productivity.”*

Winning the race – conceptually your body/mind is your million-dollar racehorse, if you had a million-dollar racehorse, how would you treat it? Would you not treat your horse with the utmost care to produce the best possible outcome?

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