Bloomberg Law

State of Mind



The exclusive take on what lawyers have to say about stress and their well-being

SEPTEMBER 2026

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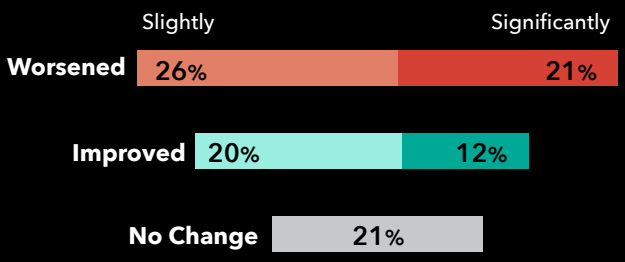
NOTE: This report has been revised on pages 4 and 13 to correct the percentage of legal professionals who feel isolated at work.

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Data at a Glance

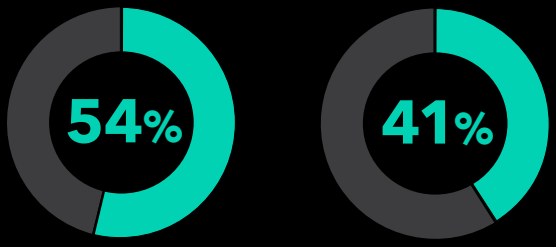
Overall Well-Being

Nearly half of all respondents report that their overall well-being has worsened since the start of 2025. In fact, 1 in 5 describe their **well-being as "significantly" worse**.



Emotional Challenges

54% struggled to disconnect from work. Even **41% of those whose well-being has significantly improved** report having this issue.



Among ALL RESPONDENTS

Among SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVED

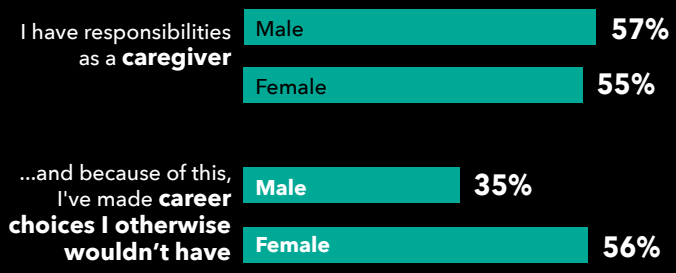
Available Resources

More than half say their workplaces offer a well-being program. One quarter responded that their organization **offers no well-being or mental health support** services.



Caregiving and Career

Data show an almost even split between women and men who are caregivers, though **many more women believe those responsibilities have impacted their careers**.



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Photo credit: Magnific.com

Attorney Well-Being Declines Since 2025 as Legal Industry Navigates Upheaval

By Mike Vilensky

Crowell & Moring counsel Valerie Ellis said law firms once felt like "The Good Wife," the CBS drama centered on a tight-knit, high-stakes legal practice.

"One of the things they do in that law firm is have a big catered table of breakfast bagels in the morning," she said. "Those things really happened. So you'd be working all day, but everybody was there with you. There was this culture of community. With the post-Covid work environment, there's just not the same camaraderie. It's soul-crushing."

Ellis is not alone in finding today's legal work environment weighing on her. Nearly half of the roughly 1,150 attorneys queried this summer said their well-being had worsened since the start of 2025, a Bloomberg Law survey shows. Nearly 50% of survey respondents said they felt more isolated at work than they used to.

That's a marked increase from the roughly one-quarter of attorneys who said in Bloomberg Law's 2024 survey that their well-being had worsened since the start of that year.

In interviews with over a dozen survey respondents from across the industry, they described perennial stressors of legal work—long hours, deadlines, occasional tedium—compounded by concerns about a changing legal industry that's more alienating and less familial.

Remote work, a profit-driven culture, a sense of constant combat, and feelings of job insecurity have made the legal workplace a lonelier place for many, interviews with respondents and attorney well-being professionals showed. With the decline of the so-called lockstep model and rise of lateral poaching, attorneys are also navigating new worries about moving up in the industry.

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What **stressors and challenges** have you faced since the beginning of 2025?

	Overall	Well-being is significantly Improved	Worsened
Job burnout	**54%**	**42%**	**79%**
Disconnecting from work	54	41	70
Trouble focusing on work tasks	48	32	68
Anxiety about world events	41	34	52
Imposter syndrome	37	30	45
Unmanageable workload	36	25	58
Feeling a lack of meaning in life	35	24	59

"Lawyers ask themselves, 'Will I ever get past this threshold?'" said Will Meyerhofer, a former Sullivan & Cromwell attorney who's now a psychotherapist with a large practice of lawyer–patients. "And if the answer is to bring some work into the firm, it's a bit of a mystery how that's going to happen. It used to be you would poach clients from another firm. Now what happens is the guy who's got the client just jumps firms."

Then there are broader social changes like the rise of AI and polarized national politics that are weighing down some attorneys. Some 52% of survey respondents whose well–being had worsened cited worry about world events as a cause.

"Literally our job as lawyers is to provide certainty and control, and clear, definitive answers for our clients," said Jordana Confino, a lawyer, consultant, and coach for firms on attorney well–being. "When everything is in flux, that's actually making our jobs harder. So we're dealing with it on both a personal and professional level."

Two Tracks

Of course, some attorneys are feeling great. Rather than a uniform picture of waning well–being across the board, a dichotomy is emerging between those in a vicious cycle of work–related struggle and those in a virtuous cycle of work–related satisfaction.

Respondents whose well–being had worsened were more likely to say they were feeling work–related anxiety, depression, physical problems, and disrupted sleep–and also unable to get work off their minds, find time to cope, or live richer lives outside the office. Those with improved well–being, by contrast, were less likely to report any of those psychological or physical problems and were more engaged with exercise, hobbies, meditation, and family.

John Wogan, an 84–year–old who is of counsel at Liskow & Lewis, said he's doing well, plays tennis, and spends time at his country house on weekends. He said he keeps working because he has good relationships with his clients. "I'm not one of these people that thinks, 'If I didn't have the job, what would I be doing?'" he said. "There's all kinds of things I'd be doing."

Seventy percent in the significantly worsened category said they couldn't disconnect from work, compared to 41% in the significantly improved category. Some 63% of those who aren't faring well said they didn't have the time to seek help compared to just 35% of those who said the same among the significantly improved group, even as firms are offering everything from executive coaching to yoga and meditation.

"There is not an obvious way to scale back in intensity," said a 37–year–old partner at a top 100 firm. He put himself in the worsened well–being category and was granted anonymity to speak candidly about the workplace. "If I see a calendar invite for a yoga session, I delete it. It just doesn't really seem responsive to the problem."

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Loneliness and Insecurity

Often younger or mid-career, struggling lawyers also felt more alone in the workplace, the survey shows. Some 54% of respondents with worsened well-being said they're afraid of admitting mistakes at work. About 58% said they couldn't rely on colleagues for emotional support.

By contrast, roughly 80% with improved well-being said they weren't afraid of admitting work mistakes, and 68% in this cohort said they could rely on colleagues.

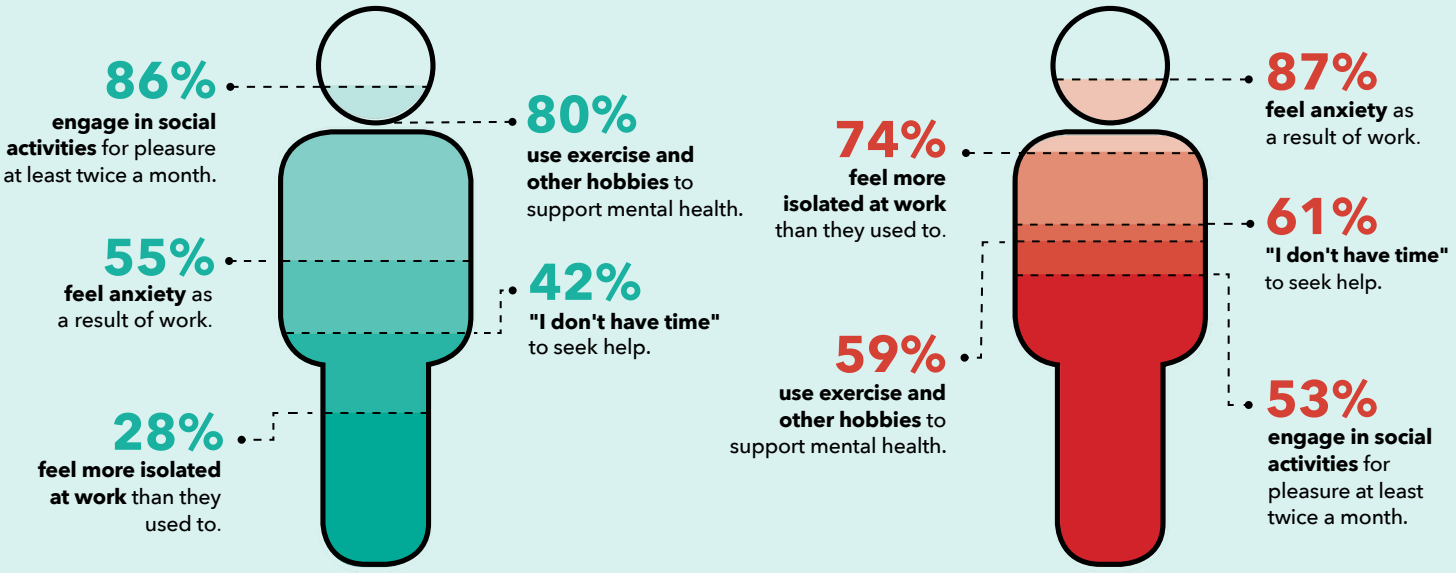
Karen Blake, a Florida-based attorney at Baker Donelson, said she's been in both camps throughout her decades-long career. She worries legal culture is becoming less compassionate and more combative overall: "At some point, you have to be somewhat understanding."

Older attorneys, she said, have "been around the block" and know where to turn for support, she added. But lawyers who started more recently—with their careers rattled by the pandemic—may not have gotten needed mentoring as they worked from home. In person, "someone could see when a colleague came into the office with bleary eyes and say, 'Hey, did you sleep all right last night?'" Blake said.

Still, creating camaraderie in the post-pandemic workplace isn't simple. "Bringing people back without systems in place to make sure they're actually engaging with other humans in meaningful ways can create frustration," Confino said. "Because people feel like, 'Well, I'm not getting the benefits of remote work, and I'm not getting the purported benefits of why I'm supposed to be here.'"

Navigating Highs and Lows

Attorneys with **significantly improved** well-being engage more socially and in hobbies.
In contrast, those with **significantly worsened** well-being feel more anxious and isolated at work.



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Photo credit: Magnific.com

AI Boom, Polarized Politics, Inflation Stoking Anxiety Across Big Law Workforce

By Mike Vilensky

For California–based litigator Mark Wasser, business is going fine–but his well–being has declined over the past two years regardless as he frets over political divisions and decreasing faith in institutions like law.

"The state of our society right now is so fractured, it affects me," he said. "It affects my concern sometimes for judges, and I worry about whether they can divorce themselves from political considerations." When a group of Big Law firms struck deals with the Trump administration to avoid punitive executive orders last year, Wasser felt as though his peers "had abandoned their role in upholding social stability," he said.

Nearly half of the roughly 1,150 attorneys surveyed by Bloomberg Law this summer said their well–being had worsened since the start of the 2025.

It's a large jump from the roughly one–quarter of attorneys who said in Bloomberg Law's 2024 survey that their well–being had worsened since the start of that year.

While many chalked up their worsening well–being to issues that are firmly within the workplace–hours, firm culture, bad bosses–others are looking beyond the office. Some 52% of survey respondents whose well–being had worsened cited concerns about world events as a cause, the data showed.

Social disruptions including AI's ascendance, political polarization, and economic inflation were top of mind in interviews with survey respondents and attorney well–being professionals. And while lawyers are, of course, people too–with worries beyond their jobs–many are finding it's not so easy to separate the changing world outside the office from the world within.

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For those whose well-being has significantly **improved** or **worsened**, **are you now more easily irritated by minor issues**?



"The rise and role of AI in legal practice is introducing some optimism, but for a lot of people, it's adding stress and uncertainty and anxiety, and it feels like one more thing that they have to keep up with and adapt to," said Patrick Krill, an attorney who helps law firms improve attorney well–being.

"The challenge is that if you're already burned out or almost burned out, and now we have a lot of change and uncertainty being thrust into the way we work, that can overwhelm people's systems."

For South Carolina–based solo practitioner Malissa Church, a mix of AI and polarized politics has made it "increasingly more difficult to manage clients" and added to the "overall macro–stress" of the job.

"Folks who are not deep red are more agitated, and the people who are deep red are distrustful," she said. "They're the folks going to ChatGPT to check everything I say."

AI Drives Anxiety

Will Meyerhofer, who is now a psychotherapist with a large practice of lawyer–patients, said he hears his patients worry about politics in the workplace, wherever they come down on it. "One guy told me he thinks his firm did the right thing settling with Trump," Meyerhofer said. "Another was telling me that it was the downfall of our country."

Meyerhofer also hears worries about AI: "There's this sense of, 'Am I going to get replaced?'"

Those in positions of power in the legal world are feeling anxiety, too. Avnel Coates, chief magistrate of Virginia's 16th Judicial District, said she's found herself facing a concern she never expected: the potential security risk to court officials around the country.

High–profile incidents like a politically motivated assassination attempt against Justice Brett Kavanaugh have amped up those concerns.

"You think the role protects you in a sense, but no," Coates said. "Security is part of our well–being."

Then there's the broader economic picture, buffeted by the war in Iran and stubborn inflation. Crowell & Moring's DC–based Valerie Ellis said she works as hard as she ever has, but now "the dollars I'm making just don't go as far."

To be sure, plenty of lawyers were optimistic about the future of the profession and still love their work. But even some in that cohort say it's change–or–die time.

"AI has the potential to take the boring and crummy tasks out of your life, and you can do the intellectual tasks that you became a lawyer for," said Las Vegas–based employment lawyer Gregory Kamer. "Embrace it or be left behind."

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Photo credit: Magnific.com

Female Lawyers Feel Strain of Caregiving Duties More Than Men With Same Tasks

By Mallory Culhane

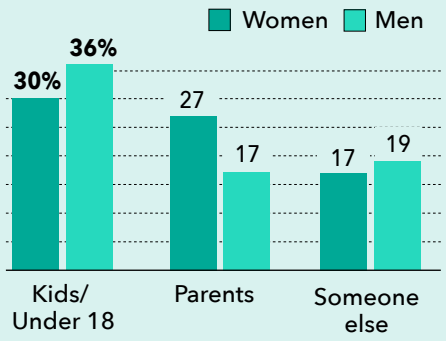
Alexis Rosenberg, a partner at the global law firm Ashurst Perkins Coie, spends long days at the firm's New York City office. Sometimes, she only sees her 2–year–old daughter for 15 minutes in the morning before she heads out the door.

Rosenberg said she's found a balance with her software engineer husband to juggle caregiving and work. Still, her professional and familial responsibilities mean she's constantly busy.

"It's either I'm spending the hours that I have on work, or when I'm with her, I'm fully present for her," Rosenberg said in an interview.

Female and male attorneys are equally likely to be responsible for someone else's care, according to Bloomberg Law's exclusive well–being survey, but women are more likely to be exhausted from juggling caregiving and work. Nearly half of female caregivers find it difficult to separate their work and those responsibilities, compared to 38% of men. And female caregivers are more likely to say they've made career choices they otherwise wouldn't have because they're caring for someone.

Caregivers, what groups of people are you responsible for?

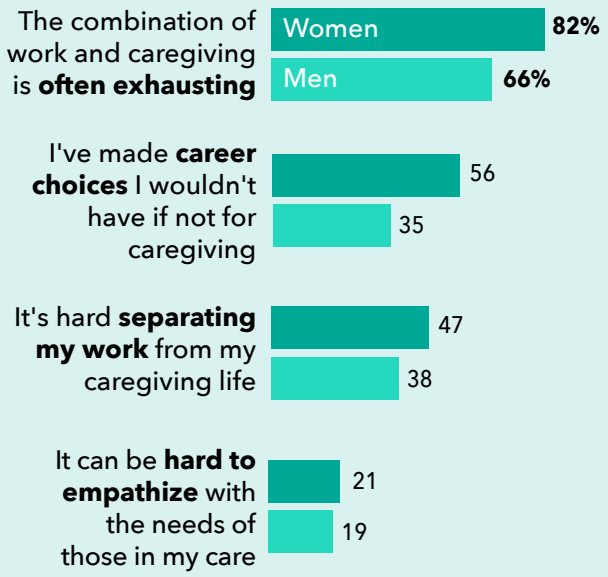


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"Women in many workspaces are probably doing things to be seen and recognized for leadership roles, like working long hours and having high caseloads, or trying to reach higher billable hours in order to excel in a male-dominated profession," said Tashiana Williams, associate counsel for the American Bar Association's Center for Professional Responsibility.

The survey of nearly 1,150 attorneys suggests lawyers are struggling to balance the demanding nature of the job with their wellness. Lawyers are feeling more isolated at work than last year, and most are struggling with anxiety, disrupted sleep, and worsened mood. Nearly half also said their well-being has worsened since the start of 2025.

Caregivers, do you agree with each of the following statements?



	Overall	Well-being has significantly Improved	Worsened
The combination is exhausting	**73%**	**69%**	**84%**
Career choices	46	45	50
Hard to separate work from home	42	32	57
Hard to empathize	20	16	27

Exhaustion

About half of all respondents said they care for children, parents, and other individuals. For example, roughly 3 in 10 overall said they have caregiving responsibilities for children under the age of 18.

As the US population ages, it's not surprising that respondents are caring for their parents. The gender gap among respondents is notable with 27% of women and 17% of men saying they had these caregiving duties.

Among caregivers, 82% of women said they're often exhausted from the combined responsibilities of their jobs and caregiving, compared to about two-thirds of men.

Opening up about the demands on their time is hard for attorneys who work in a fast-paced but sometimes isolating industry.

"There's kind of this innate competitiveness in the profession," Williams said. When people need help or are "talking to their employers about struggles around caregiving, I think that there is a culture of feeling like we're competing against our colleagues and the people that we're working with, and less of a culture of community."

Corey Shapiro, the legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky and parent to a 9- and 13-year-old, said the ability to balance caregiving with the job can come down to the culture and flexibility of the specific workplace. "Working at a large law firm, the expectations are higher and the expectation of your ability to put the work first over your children or your caregiving responsibilities certainly is there," Shapiro said.

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He switched to nonprofit work in 2018 after spending more than a decade as a litigator at large international law firms, including Dentons and Howrey LLP. He also worked at a smaller, local firm in Louisville when his family first moved to Kentucky.

Hidden Hours, Hidden Stress

While the pressure to prioritize work over attorneys' personal lives impacts legal professionals across the board, the survey shows women bear a disproportionate share of the career sacrifices.

Roughly 56% of female attorneys who are caregivers said they've made career choices they wouldn't have otherwise because of caregiving obligations—such as working reduced hours or declining promotions—compared with 35% of male attorneys with the same responsibilities.

Williams said that even though the survey found men and women equally reported having caregiving responsibilities, the female lawyers could be facing more obstacles to balance that with work and their well-being.

"The additional financial pressure that could come with caregiving, or the additional weight that it can put on your well-being, the loss of sleep that could come from caregiving, or the dynamics that it can bring to a family, those can be things that are layered on top of the additional things that continue to be stressors that are already in the profession," Williams said.

The survey also shows that caregivers whose well-being has declined since the start of 2025 are struggling more from exhaustion and find it harder to check out mentally than caregivers whose well-being has improved.

More than a quarter of caregivers who said their well-being had significantly worsened said they find it hard to empathize with those they take care of, while nearly 60% of those whose well-being significantly improved strongly disagreed with that sentiment.

Lawyers who come home from work and have to take care of others lose out on time that those who don't have those responsibilities are afforded, Shapiro said.

"If you're done with your work, you take a little break for dinner, and it's a true break if you don't have caregiving responsibilities," Shapiro said. "Those hidden hours where people are able to focus and get work done that caregivers can't, that is a hidden tax on their energy."

Scott Westfahl, a law professor and director of Harvard Law School's Executive Education program, said systemically improving the well-being of lawyers with caregiving duties will come down to a true "mental shift between priorities."

Westfahl said he often advises people, especially those returning from parental leave, to set a rule that "20% of your time is now assigned to a new client called 'Home and Family Inc.' and that's a client you need to prioritize, just as the others."

Rosenberg said her firm is very supportive and understanding "that we all have a life outside of work, whether that's caregiving responsibilities or going to the gym for your mental health." And many women hold leadership roles at her firm, "which I think makes a big difference," she said.

SUBSCRIBERS

For more resources and analysis, check out Bloomberg Law's **In Focus: Legal Professional Well-Being.**

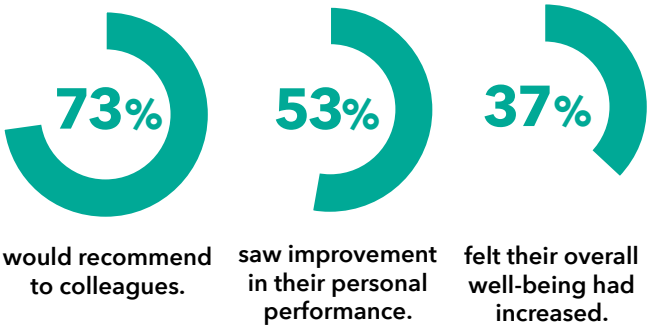
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Well-Being and Mental Health

Which services below does your organization offer? And of these, **which have you used**?

	This is offered	Offered, and I've used it
Well-being program	**53%**	40
Professional/executive **coaching program**	27	**42%**
Well-being professional on staff	12	13
Option to get mental health **first aid certification**	11	12
Professional/executive **coach on staff**	7	39

Among those who have worked with a **professional/executive coaching program or coach on staff...**



***50%** say they haven't used any of the well-being services offered by their organizations.*

Balance for workers in highly demanding jobs, such as lawyers, can sometimes depend on the availability of services such as coaches or well-being programs.

Over half of legal professionals in the survey said their organizations provide well-being programs, while another 27% said they offered coaching programs. Yet only half said they use these services even if they're available in their workplace.

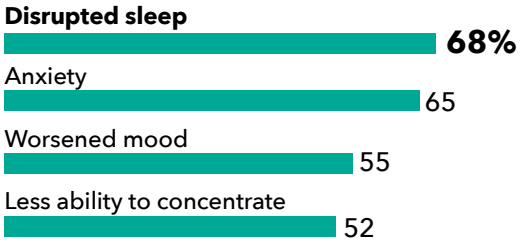
The value of these programs is clear: **Nearly 3 out of 4 attorneys who used coaching programs said they would recommend them to colleagues**, and 37% of respondents reported an increase in well-being due to coaching.

Legal professionals said they've had anxiety and other concerns because of work-related issues, but even more so than they did two years ago. For example, **around two-thirds reported disrupted sleep and anxiety in 2026** compared to half who said the same in 2024.

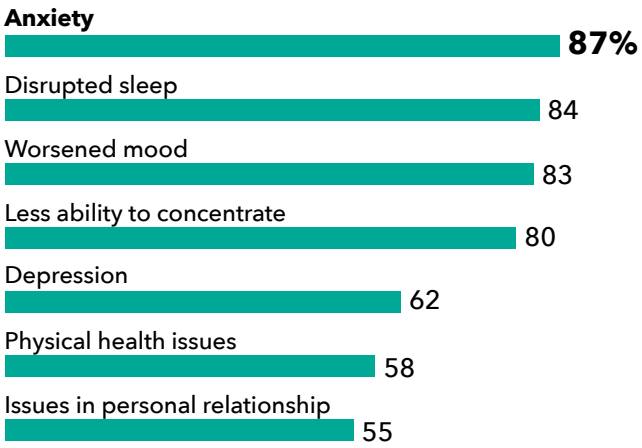
Among those who said that their well-being significantly worsened, the reported health concerns are particularly troublesome: **Over 8 in 10 of these respondents said they experienced anxiety** due to work, and 6 in 10 said they experienced depression.

– By Jessica R. Blaemire and Andie Hozik

As a result of work-related issues, **more than half of respondents** have experienced...



More than half of those **whose well-being was significantly worsened** experienced...



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Psychological Safety, Support, and Resiliency

Do you agree with each of the following statements?

		Among those whose well-being significantly:	
		Improved	Worsened
I feel safe admitting I don't know something at work	**70% agree**	**87% agree**	42
My self-worth is deeply intertwined with my performance at work	69	69	69
I feel safe admitting mistakes at work	59	81	33
I feel more professionally isolated than I used to	47	28	**74% agree**
I can rely on my colleagues for emotional support	46	68	27
I feel safe discussing mental health concerns with my colleagues	29	47	14
I can rely on my supervisor for emotional support	27	49	11

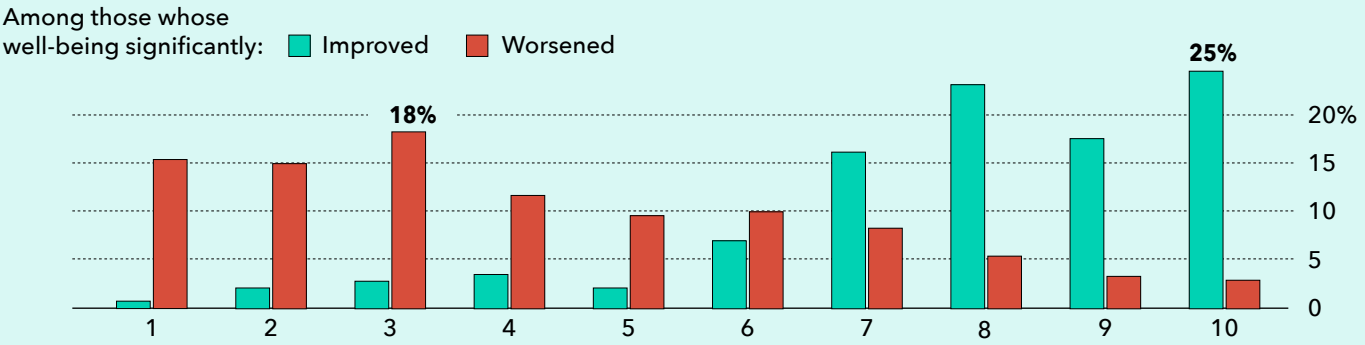
The ability to speak out without fear of being shamed is what's known as psychological safety. **More than half of legal professionals said they felt safe making mistakes** and admitting when they didn't know something. Still, 3 out of 10 legal professionals said they didn't feel safe doing so. Additionally, 69% of respondents agreed their self–worth is deeply intertwined with their work performance.

Among those whose well–being significantly worsened, **almost three–fourths feel more isolated** in the workplace.

By contrast, only one–fourth whose well–being significantly improved feel the same. **Legal professionals whose well–being significantly worsened felt strongly that they don't have a sense of belonging at work**. Respondents whose well–being significantly improved are on the other end of the spectrum. These legal professionals do feel a strong sense of belonging.

By Jessica R. Blaemire and Andie Hozik

On a scale of 1-10 (none to very much), how much do you feel a sense of belonging at work?



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Substance Use and Effects of Impairment

How often do you use the following? *Do not include if prescribed by a medical professional.*

	Daily	Weekly (4 to 6 times)	Weekly (2 to 3 times)	Monthly (2 to 4 times)	Monthly (once or less)	Never
Alcohol	**5%**	**8%**	**21%**	**26%**	**24%**	16
Cannabis	3	2	3	4	9	80
Stimulants (e.g. Adderall or Ritalin)	5	1	1	1	1	91
Depressants (e.g. Xanax or Valium)	1	0	1	2	4	92
Psychedelics (e.g. psilocybin or mushrooms)	0	0	0	0	2	**97%**

76%* *say most or all* *of the professional events they've attended this year have served alcohol.

Legal professionals are turning to alcohol, more than any other substance, to get relief from workplace pressures. **Four in 10 said they drink for stress relief and relaxation**. This suggests drinking as a coping strategy or self-medication.

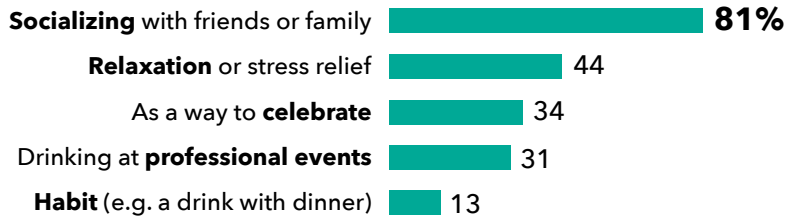
Overall, there is a high rate of alcohol use in the industry: **84% said they drink compared with 87% two years ago**. For legal professionals who drink alcohol, about one-third said they do so at a professional event where it's frequently served.

While alcohol use is prevalent, other substances are used by legal professionals. Cannabis is used by 20% and less than 10% said they use stimulants such as Adderall or Ritalin and depressants such as Xanax or Valium without a prescription.

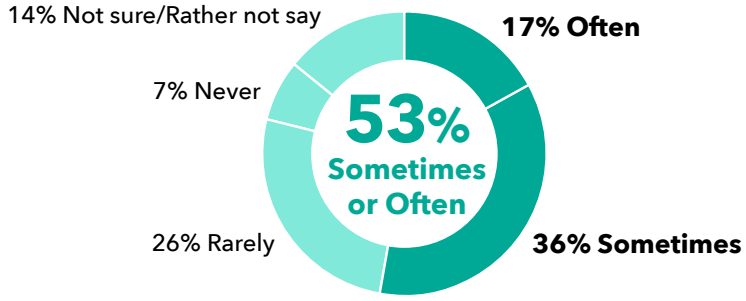
Legal professionals who are impaired by substances or mental health challenges may be unable to do their jobs. **More than half said they sometimes or often encountered other legal professionals who were impaired**.

– By Jessica R. Blaemire and Andie Hozik

Top reasons given for **alcohol consumption:**



How often do you encounter legal professionals with well-being, substance abuse, and/or mental health issues that **could potentially interfere their work**?



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PRACTITIONER INSIGHT

Trial Teams Can Adopt Wellness Habits That Yield Life Balance and Court Victory



By Shayna Cook

Goldman Ismail

When I went to my first trials 20 years ago, I left my good habits at home. Despite being away for months at a time, I stopped exercising, slept only a few hours a night, and drank too much at team dinners.

I felt miserable. My muscles ached from long stints at my computer without moving, and my brain was foggy from too little sleep and too much sugar.

In the decades since, I have studied the science showing how healthy habits can enhance performance. I've found simple ways to implement those habits at trial even when swamped.

Not only does it make me feel better, but I also try cases more effectively. I've learned that these habits aren't one size fits all. My colleagues have inspired me by finding their own ways to maintain well-being at trial.

What I've Learned

The most effective wellness habit is the one you want to do because it feels good or you see immediate benefits.

For me, it's important to move my body or my muscles ache. This means I exercise whenever I can at trial.

Of course, I might have to skip workouts on the mornings of important cross-examinations, but then I fit in longer workouts on the weekends.

I sign up for short-term memberships at nearby gyms with fun vibes or find a local trainer to work with on Saturday mornings. My trial teams have also attended (optional!) exercise classes together. Not only does exercise feel good, but research shows it lowers anxiety, improves cognition, and builds resilience.

I also pack my bags with well-being in mind. Because trial meals can be unpredictable, I bring my favorite protein powder to make overnight oats. I also tuck a yoga mat and foam roller into my baggage.

Unlike the younger me, I prioritize getting as much sleep as possible. Studies show sufficient sleep leads to better performance, while sleep deprivation leads to mental and physical health issues.

Although sleep is a rare commodity at trial, when I can get at least seven hours of sleep, I do—even if I am the first person to leave team dinners. Alcohol moderation also promotes quality sleep, which I have found makes me sharper and more enthusiastic about my Saturday morning workouts.

Finally, I encourage moments of fun. Trial is inherently stressful, but there's always time for a short dance party (collaborative trial playlists are a must for our teams) or a belly laugh at the team quote board. And fun lowers stress hormones such as cortisol and serves as a mental reset.

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Associates' Wellness Wisdom

I've learned a lot from our associates about wellness at trial. My experience with different trial teams has taught me that healthy habits are truly individualized.

One associate, Kurt Holtzman, is a former Air Force pilot. He encouraged our trial team to participate in a few minutes of calisthenics at 3:05 p.m. every day. He also came up with a whimsical "Question of the Day" on his office white board for the team to answer, which helped build camaraderie. "I was focused on the social wellness of the team and quickly building cohesion, which is a proven force multiplier," Holtzman says.

Bridget Wholey emphasizes going for a walk outside, no matter how brief. At a recent trial, she found classes at a nearby CorePower, where she knew what to expect from a workout. She also makes a fun new purchase before trial: "Splurge on nice skincare products to give you something to look forward to when you get back to your sad hotel room," Wholey recommends.

Caroline Cordell Briggs focuses on making time to stay connected to loved ones. When possible, she takes a short break in the afternoon to call a family member rather than waiting until the end of the night. She also finds time to attend a religious service each week. "If you give up everything that's important to you for a month, you won't be as productive and will bring a negative energy to the trial team," she says.

Science supports the benefits of these daily breaks. Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, happiness researcher and author of "The Myths of Happiness", found that employees who took 20–minute breaks at points of the day where energy dips were not only more satisfied but more productive.

Staff Leadership Matters

Our trial paralegals have also shown valuable leadership in wellness. At our last trial, Alejandra Chavez instituted mandatory, rotating hourlong breaks from email for the staff team on weekends. She also designated staff to be on the "night shift" or "morning shift," where some stay up late and others rise early. And she urged staff to pay attention to their sleep needs. "It's important to realize that taking care of yourself is not neglecting the team," Chavez says.

Madeleine Lyons prioritizes setting a boundary between the trial office and her hotel room. When she gets back to her room at night, she does a yoga video before going to sleep. If she doesn't have time for yoga, she reads a novel and meditates. "Prioritizing boundaries helps me lower cortisol levels and reconnect with my body and mind after a busy day," Lyons says.

The Bottom Line

Trial is stressful and can feel all–consuming, but saving moments for well–being is still possible. What I've learned from my colleagues' and my own experience–as well as scientific research – is that focusing on well–being increases team morale. And just as importantly, it increases productivity, too.

Author Information

Shayna Cook is a partner at Goldman Ismail Tomaselli Brennan & Baum in Chicago. She is a first–chair trial lawyer who is passionate about encouraging well–being among legal professionals and mentoring junior lawyers.

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PRACTITIONER INSIGHT

Compassion Fatigue Takes Toll on Lawyers' Empathy If Ignored



By Michelle Gomez

Littler Mendelson



By Gwen Mellor Romans

Herald Talent

Attorneys are called upon when something important is at risk. By the time a client seeks advice, the legal question may only be one part of what a client brings into the room. We spend our careers absorbing not only clients' legal problems, but also the uncertainty, urgency, and conflict surrounding them. As we become leaders, we take on an additional layer of emotional responsibility for colleagues and teams.

Over time, this accumulated exposure can erode empathy, patience, judgment, and curiosity. Understanding compassion fatigue as a professional and leadership risk, in addition to a wellness issue, helps us preserve the capabilities that make us effective trusted advisers and leaders.

Compassion fatigue describes the emotional cost of sustained exposure to other people's distress and the cumulative effect of repeatedly engaging with conflict.

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky has argued that people repeatedly exposed to others' suffering should pay attention to how that exposure changes them. Applied carefully to legal practice, the insight cautions us to notice how cumulative exposure manifests: cynicism, irritability, emotional detachment, impatience, reduced curiosity, a desire to fix problems quickly rather than listen, and a sense that everyone wants something from us. These behaviors may look like diminished empathy, but they can reflect the opposite—the cumulative cost of having exercised empathy intensely and repeatedly over many years.

While the legal profession doesn't always describe its work as emotional labor, lawyers routinely absorb the human stakes surrounding legal problems. A litigator feels the weight of a verdict that could fundamentally alter a client's future. A defense attorney handles a life-or-death case. A corporate lawyer may guide a general counsel through a transaction that could determine the company's future, while absorbing the general counsel's anxiety about public scrutiny and the consequences of failure.

Clients come to us when the range of solutions is narrow, uncertainty is high, and consequences are significant. Trusted-adviser work requires more than just technical analysis. It requires us to address urgency without becoming urgent, tolerate emotion without becoming reactive, and stay clear when a client has lost perspective.

Leaders, in addition to client work, handle the problems in a legal practice that couldn't be resolved elsewhere: compensation disappointments, strained relationships, ethical questions, career anxiety, succession concerns, and personal circumstances affecting professional performance. By the time colleagues reach out to us, they have often run out of bandwidth and are grappling with anger, frustration, or embarrassment. These problems rarely have purely technical answers, and more experienced attorneys may have few places to discuss them candidly.

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Why does this matter? Depleted leaders are less patient, less emotionally available, and less open to difficult conversations. They oversimplify complicated problems, make assumptions, move to solutions before fully listening, and lose tolerance for nuance. Awareness alone doesn't fix compassion fatigue, but it does make the pattern more recognizable, and offers us an opportunity to combat its effects.

First, distinguish caring from carrying. Effective representation and leadership require empathy and expertise. But they don't require experiencing another's distress as one's own, assuming responsibility for another's emotional state, or carrying unresolved problems indefinitely. The distinction has physiological support. Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki's neuroimaging work found that training people to feel another person's pain increased negative affect and activated the brain's pain–related networks.

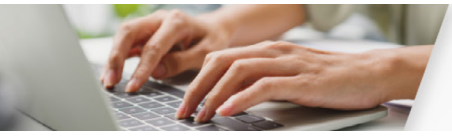
Training in compassion, meaning a warm concern oriented toward helping, activated different networks and increased positive affect and willingness to act. Both groups cared; only one absorbed the cost.

The practical instruction is to move from "I feel what you are feeling" to "I want to help you with this," which is also the posture that produces better counsel.

Second, keep decisions with the people whose lives are being impacted. Much of what accumulates in compassion fatigue is the residue of choices that were never ours. When a client is frightened, the pull is to reassure or to make the call for them. When a colleague is struggling, the pull is to solve the issue. Both moves may relieve the other person's discomfort in the moment, but both transfer weight to us–weight that we can't put down because we don't control the outcome.

MIT professor emeritus Edgar Schein's work on helping relationships underscores this point. The helper's task is to return agency to the person being helped rather than absorb it. In practice, this means naming decisions as theirs, laying out the real options and their consequences, saying plainly what you would do, and letting them choose. Clients and colleagues who own their decisions carry them better. So do we.

Third, recognize your own patterns of exposure. Which conversations are weighing on me at the end of the day? Which clients or colleagues disproportionately drain me? When am I most likely to become impatient? When is my sleep most likely to be interrupted? Once you identify the patterns, you'll be in a better position to address them head on.



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Fourth, treat recovery as a practice rather than a "nice to have." Lawyers need trusted places to process the emotional side of the work, whether peers, therapists, coaches, or leadership advisory groups. Sabine Sonnentag's detachment model finds that physiological detachment during non–work hours, meaning genuine mental disengagement not simply a physical absence from the office, is what predicts recovery from job stress.

Short, reliable periods of detachment matter more than the occasional long break, whose effects tend to fade within weeks of return. A deliberate transition between the last difficult conversation of the day and the rest of the evening is a smaller, but more durable, intervention than a long vacation.

Finally, manage exposure at the matter level and not only at the person level. Rotation off of sustained high–distress work is a staffing decision, and these choices are available to firm leaders in a way that individual resilience is not. Firm leaders should treat support and recovery as part of sustaining professional capacity and should make clear that seniority doesn't mean that difficult experiences must be processed alone.

Compassion can help us be excellent lawyers, but it isn't an inexhaustible resource. The challenge isn't to care less. It's to understand what we absorb by caring about our clients and our colleagues, and to preserve our capacity to remain present, thoughtful, clear–eyed, and useful to the people who depend on us.

Author Information

Michelle Gomez is shareholder and the executive director of wellness, engagement, and development at Littler Mendelson, where she oversees onboarding, training, coaching engagements, leadership development, and wellness and engagement initiatives.

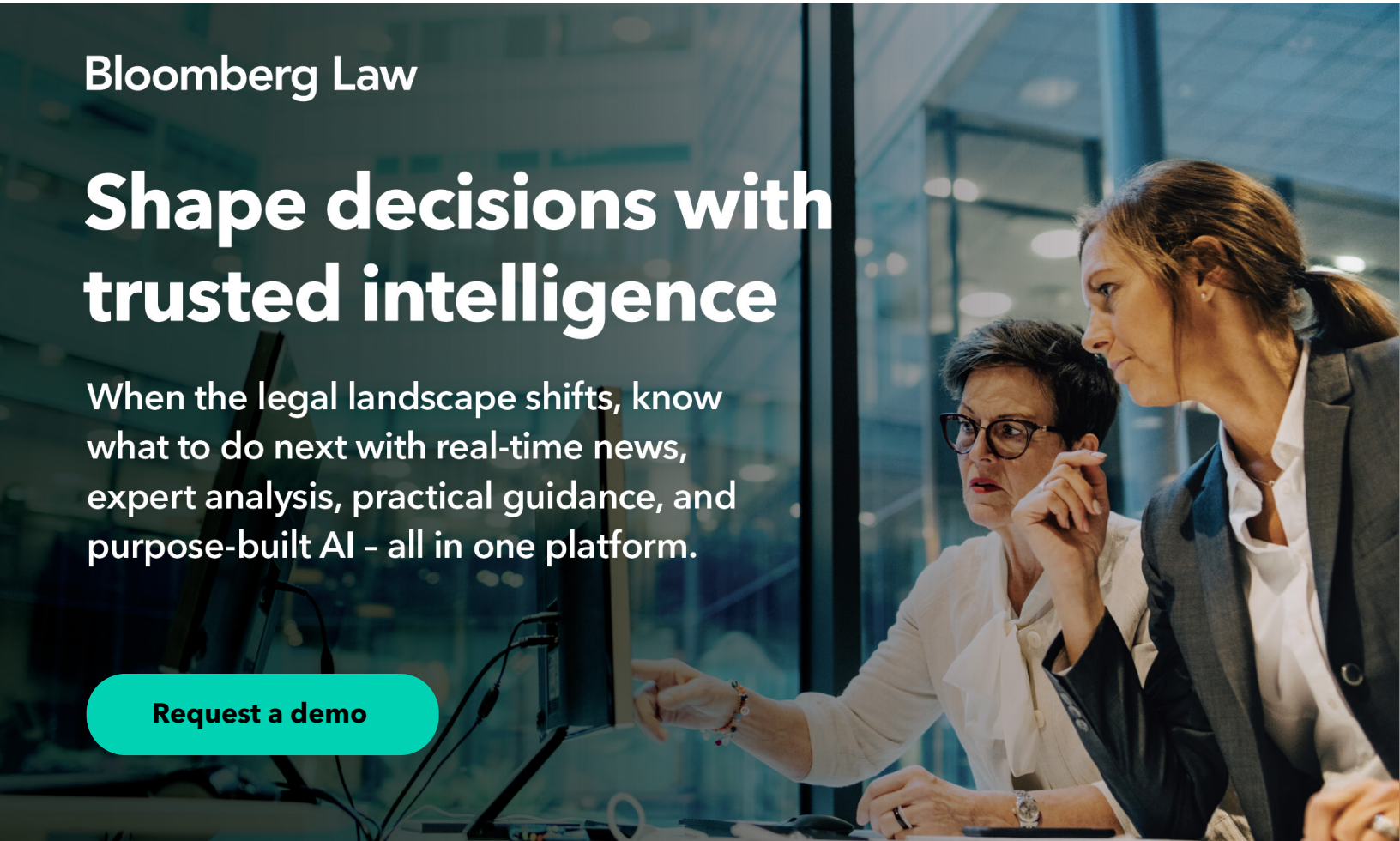
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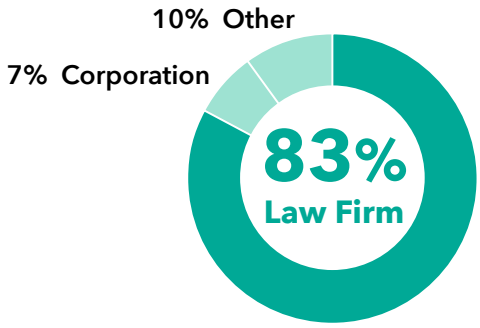
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Respondent Demographics

WORK ORGANIZATION



PROFESSIONAL TITLE

Associate	**36.5%**
Partner	35.0
Counsel	18.0
Other (judge, professor, etc.)	7.0
General Attorney	3.5

GENDER

Male	**50.3%**
Female	47.3
Prefer not to say	2.0
Nonbinary/third gender	0.5

AGE

Average Age: 46.9

29 or younger	10.6
30 to 34	15.6
35 to 39	10.6
40 to 44	11.1
45 to 49	10.5
50 to 54	9.5
55 to 59	11.7
60 to 64	7.5
65+ years	**13.0%**

YEARS IN PRACTICE

Average Years: 18.7

Less than 5	20.1
5 to 9	16.1
10 to 14	9.7
15 to 19	10.5
20 to 24	10.0
25 to 29	8.7
30+ years	**25.0%**

METHODOLOGY

This survey was drafted with help from subject–matter analysts and journalists at Bloomberg Law. Responses were received from 1,143 attorneys and legal professionals from July 29–Aug. 11, 2026. Among the respondents, 99% were practicing lawyers and 1% were paralegals, librarians, or in legal operations. All respondents hold J.D.s. Data are reported and aggregated by category with no personal information retained, except for report distribution upon request. Respondents answered questions based on their occupation and provided some demographic information. Responses such as "don't know" or "prefer not to say" may not be reflected in graphics.

NOTE: Percentages do not always total 100 due to rounding or for questions where respondents were instructed to select all that apply.

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