Stepping off the Hamster Wheel:

Retention, Wellbeing and Culture in the Social Welfare Advice Sector

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Contents

1. Executive Summary

Issues of retention, wellbeing and culture are complex and densely interrelated.

It is impossible and undesirable to separate questions of retention from the necessity of achieving a sustainable advice sector that is capable of thriving rather than merely surviving. Many thousands of people, including those intimately involved in the Advising Londoners Project, are devoting considerable amounts of time and effort to this aim. I have sought to think about wellbeing and culture from the same perspective. I am aware that significant projects are ongoing to build capacity, and to develop a London-wide advice strategy. The hope is that this report will complement those efforts.

The sector has historically tended to approach 'wellbeing' as referring to a range of discrete considerations and activities that are separate from more strategic considerations. Wellbeing interventions have tended to be targeted at increasing individuals' capacity to manage work-related demands (self-care workshops, for example, and resilience training). This was also an assumption that underpinned the way this project was conceived: in particular that wellbeing problems could be effectively addressed through the provision of workshops and facilitated discussions with staff.

However what has become increasingly clear is that making a meaningful difference to levels of wellbeing in the advice sector will require systemic interventions focused on the ultimate *drivers* of workplace wellbeing.

> *"…you can't yoga your way out of more structural challenges to workplace wellbeing."*[1]

There are no quick fixes. What is required of us is to think differently about how work in the sector is led, managed and organised. Though this will require time and effort there is a growing body of evidence for interventions that have been proven to improve wellbeing and workplace cultures. This should, in turn, impact positively on the nature of jobs in the advice sector and make it easier to retain talent.

We would benefit from greater precision when talking about wellbeing. There are small but meaningful changes we can make to the data we collect which, along with agreements to share anonymised data, will help us build a more robust picture of workplace wellbeing in the sector as a whole, and in specific organisations and teams. It will also help us to evaluate the true impact of change initiatives going forward.

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[1] Workplace Wellbeing Matters. De Neve at Ward 2025. Chapter 6: Understanding What Drives Workplace Wellbeing (Page 115).

In terms of substantive recommendations the immediate imperative is to make more space. A description that I heard repeatedly used in my conversations for this project, by people in different organisations and across a range of roles was a feeling of “being on a hamster wheel”: a shared sense of repetition and unrewarding, unrelenting busy-ness. We keep adding new actions and initiatives to our collective to-do lists without taking things off them. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We need to do less to enable ourselves to achieve more.

Then we can choose a finite number of actions intended to improve the drivers of workplace wellbeing and to ensure the sector offers good jobs and hold ourselves accountable for a) delivering those actions in a timely way and b) measuring their impact and effect.

Organisational cultures and partnerships need to be psychologically safe both to ensure wellbeing and to create the conditions in which genuine learning, creativity and innovation can occur. I hypothesize that the sector has particular cultural qualities, traits and tendencies that create challenges for effective leadership and that naturally militate against widespread psychological safety. If that hypothesis is correct, then engagement to explore, understand and influence those cultural tendencies could help unlock significantly more progress in future.

So there are a deliberately limited number of sector-wide actions that I would recommend as being essential:

(1) Standardise and share the way we measure and conceptualise wellbeing
(2) Set unequivocal performance goals to a) improve wellbeing and b) deliver better jobs; and
(3) Take action to reduce the sense of oppressive overwhelm and create more time for intentional, important, non-urgent activity.

There is evidence to believe that simply taking these steps will have a significant positive impact.

At the system wide level I would then invest in leadership development and learning, at all levels of the sector. Prioritising action in these areas would be consistent with observations and recommendations made in past reports.

However there is not one straightforward right answer. There is not going to be a one-size fits-all “solution”. Each organisation will have a unique set of circumstances, its own localised culture, challenges and opportunities. Interventions and actions prioritised at the organisational and individual levels will need to be tailored to those circumstances. If different organisations/parts of the sector take different approaches this will create rich insight, over time, into what works, particularly if leaders are open to sharing data relating to both successes and failures.

There is no question that things would be easier if the external funding landscape were less uncertain and more generous. The reality is that it isn’t.

The overriding point is that without anything changing in the external environment, and without any more resources than we currently have, we can still create organisations and partnerships that feel calmer, have higher levels of reported wellbeing, and that are more creative learning environments from which new ideas and solutions are more likely to emerge. The evidence reassures us that this will probably improve productivity and efficiency too.

2. Introduction

The Advising Londoners Partnership (ALP) is a collaboration between the Greater London Authority, London Legal Support Trust and London Citizens Advice. It funds 41 local Citizens Advice, Law Centres and other advice agencies. It has run for three years, originally under the project name Cost of Living Crisis Prevention Project and achieved significant social impact in that time.[2]

This work was commissioned to offer the ALP, in particular, and the advice sector more broadly, recommendations on staff retention with a particular focus on questions of wellbeing and organisational culture. It came about further to recognition that recent work on pay and on contractual conditions, though important, was only one part of a wider picture.

The issue of fair (enough) pay, and of the type of contractual benefits necessary to ensure that pay is not an active barrier are addressed in detail in the Pay & Condition reports[3]. Those reports make a number of recommendations including for the type of system-wide improvements that might materially improve wellbeing. They represent thoughtful and thorough work to which I made only a very modest contribution.

Ben Hickman at Myriad Research offered helpful feedback on this report and also prevented me from committing the most flagrant crimes against data and footnoting. Any that remain are entirely my own work.

2.1. Current Context

In addition to the Pay & Conditions work, I build upon the findings, observations and recommendations set out in Advising Londoners (2020) and Addressing the Skills Gap Within Advice Services (2022).

Retention of staff has long been perceived as a systemic problem in the advice sector. See Advising Londoners:

> *"Advice providers and stakeholders consistently told the research team about the difficulties they face with recruiting and retaining staff, volunteers, leaders and trustees with sufficient skills and experience. There is a shortage of new social welfare advisers and lawyers coming through, and a skills deficit at management and governance level."*[4]

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[2] See first and second year evaluation and learning reports at: https://londoncitizensadvice.org.uk/uploads/Advising_Londoners_Partnership_Year_2_and_1_Learning_Report_Combined_%281%29.pdf

[3] Hickman, B et al (2025)

[4] Advice Services Alliance (2020), para 5.41

And ‘Mind the Gap’:

> *“Retention issues have been identified through desk-based review of existing reports and this work also points to what has been called ‘a failed eco system.’”*
>
> *“High stress of advice work and resulting staff burnout was the other key issue highlighted as impacting negatively on staff retention.”*
>
> *‘…a related issue raised consistently was the lack of time and sometimes skillsets of managers, which is hampering their ability to support and develop staff effectively...”*[5]

The Advice Workforce Development Fund is reporting some successes with “grow your own” approaches to recruitment[6], but retention remains a challenge. The minutes of the ALP partners meeting on 17 December 2024 suggest that it remains an issue across the board within the project, with particular challenges in the context of housing:

> *“Retention remains a significant challenge due to low pay and high stress in the sector…*
>
> *While junior candidates can be recruited, retention is difficult as they often leave once they gain experience and qualify, due to the comparatively low pay in the advice sector, which hasn’t kept up with inflation or rising living costs in London…*
>
> *[Partner] described the challenges of keeping staff due to the disillusionment over the ongoing housing crisis, lack of positive outcomes, low pay and stress. Staff get competing offers from other organisations with higher salaries, some paying £8,000 to £9,000 more.”*

2.2. Objectives & Activities

The primary objective of this work was to develop understanding of how changes in organisational culture, along with practical interventions, might improve retention in the advice sector.

I was contracted to:

- gather data to inform recommendations for interventions on staff retention, with a focus on organisational culture and wellbeing;

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[5] Rathbone et al (2022), p3 & p38

[6] Advice Workforce Development Fund report “Learning from the first year” July 2024 https://adviceworkforcedevelopmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/AWDF-Programme-Learning-Progress-Paper-July-2024_v1.pdf

- offer facilitated workshops with advice agency staff (leadership and frontline) of the Advising Londoners Partnership;
- conduct interviews with and/or provide coaching sessions with advice agency leadership involved in the Advising Londoners Project;
- produce a short report or discussion paper drawing not only on desk research, interviews workshops and research but on work as coach and consultant in the wider sector; and
- present research findings as well as practical recommendations at the Helping Hands Conference on 25 June 2025; and

The commissioning hope was that this report would make a helpful contribution to the conversation about improving wellbeing in the advice sector, as well as offering practical recommendations for appropriate next steps.

2.3. Methodology

This project was envisaged as a piece of action-based research arising from leadership coaching and related activities. It was loosely defined from the outset both because of time constraints and to allow for ongoing iteration. The work was completed between May and June 2025.

The commissioning intent was that the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of affected individuals be considered together with academic research. Accordingly I have attempted to deliver a report that makes space for that subjectivity and uncertainty with a reasonably robust empirical framework.

I looked primarily at research from the last five years, with a focus on publications returned by searches on ‘organisational culture’ ‘wellbeing’ and ‘retention’. The majority of the analysis on retention relies on analyses contained in the Wiley Blackwell Handbook of The Psychology of Recruitment, Selection and Employee Selection edited by Goldstein, Pulakos, Passmore and Semedo (second edition 2020). My analysis on wellbeing draws heavily on the recent publication ‘Why Workplace Wellbeing Matters' by De Neve and Ward (first edition 2025).

Where possible, I focused on systemic reviews, and on sources that appeared to credibly pull together reliable summaries of the evidence. I sought to avoid overreliance on single studies or poorer quality research though I have been influenced by my own wider reading in places. For that reason I have also included a list of specific titles in the appendices.

Under this project I held one-off meetings with fifteen individuals involved with the ALP. Organisational partners were notified of the project during a quarterly meeting on 29 April and then by email. The individuals who opted to take up the offer of a 1-1 meeting were self-selecting, but turned out to be employed across a range of organisations and to hold roles of materially differing levels of seniority and responsibility. I have not provided further potentially identifying information as

these meetings were confidential in nature. Demand was slightly higher than anticipated, thus I held more 1-1 meetings under this project than originally envisaged.

By contrast, I also designed an in person workshop to discuss and explore workforce perceptions of the drivers of wellbeing for which interest and uptake was low. In light of this, the various indications from partners that they felt oppressed by competing calls on their time, and my growing understanding of the evidence base on wellbeing interventions I did not seek to offer further workshops. I did attend and observe some meetings in the Advising Londoners Partnership and in the London advice sector more broadly.

As detailed above, the intention was that this report be generally informed by my wider work as a coach as well as by activities funded under this project. A critical feature of the coaching relationship is that it is experienced as a safe, confidential, and non-judgmental space. Every client with whom I work has a unique set of personal and organisational circumstances. There are risks in attempting to extrapolate and generalise. I will have drawn inevitably imperfect conclusions from the facts as they appear to me from the limitations of my vantage point. They will not all be right, or right in every context. However where points of disagreement and dissent arise I hope they may at least trigger useful conversations.

2.4. Author's Background

I have spent my working life in the advice sector. I was an immigration paralegal/caseworker between 1999-2004 (during which time I also did my Legal Practice Course part time) and then a trainee solicitor in what was at the time a legal aid firm (2004-2005). I qualified as a solicitor specialising in administrative law and focusing on public interest litigation (2005-2015). In 2009 I moved to the Public Law Project where I increasingly took on organisational and managerial responsibilities alongside my casework. I was appointed Director (CEO) of PLP in 2015, and held that role until December 2022.

I have served on boards and committees including Legal Aid Practitioners Group, the Law Society Access to Justice Committee and the Civil Justice Council. I have undertaken management and leadership training with the Directory of Social Change, Bayes Centre for Charity Effectiveness, and the LSE. I have contributed to the LAPG Management and Leadership Programme. In my time at PLP I developed a keen interest in the dynamics of leadership, especially in the particular context of the advice sector.

In 2022 I trained as a coach and credentialed with the International Coaching Federation in 2024. Since leaving PLP I have worked as a leadership coach with a range of people in the social justice sector, including individuals employed by LLST Centres of Excellence who have taken up the offer of coaching as part of their 'Funder Plus' support, and Justice First Fellows with the support of

funding from TLEF. My most recent CPD was an intensive course run by the Eco-Leadership Institute[7] on depth and systemic approaches to leadership coaching. Insights from that course have also informed my approach to this work.

2.5. Structure of Report

The remainder of this report is divided into four chapters:

Chapter three explores possible ways to understand and think about workforce retention, the factors that tend to define 'good jobs' and how that relates to workforce wellbeing.

Chapter four discusses workforce wellbeing, including how it is understood and measured in the workplace. It discusses the existing focus on individualised wellbeing interventions and examines one of the key drivers of workforce wellbeing in the advice sector: stress.

Chapter five examines the role of culture in the advice sector. It considers how culture relates to concepts including leadership, psychological safety, and learning agility.

Chapter six draws conclusions about retention, wellbeing and culture in the advice sector, makes a limited set of recommendations for immediate action, and flags some useful resources.

[7] https://www.ecoleadershipinstitute.org

3. Retention

There are over 9,000 books on retention and at least six influential turnover models in the academic literature. These emphasise that turnover is a complex phenomenon with a range of factors and influences.[8] It is beyond the scope of this report to analyse the research in detail or to make comprehensive claims for its implications. However, greater engagement with some aspects of the more technical literature on retention may aid sector thinking on this important issue.

Turnover is costly and disruptive, even if sometimes beneficial. The dominant view in the sector is therefore that we need to be better able to retain staff for longer periods, and over the longer term. This may well be correct, although it is an assumption we might want to hold lightly. We will want to ensure that any actions we take to improve retention do not inadvertently undermine the potential emergence of a vibrant, thriving advice sector in which retention/turnover patterns nonetheless looked different those we currently assume to be necessary.

The first major academic work on turnover was published in 1958 and framed turnover as resulting from an individual's rational decision (a straightforward weighing of the factors prompting a desire to move and the availability of better alternatives).[9] Thinking has moved on but the fundamental idea that dissatisfied or unhappy employees are more likely to leave jobs remains sound.

Empirical work demonstrates predictable links (for example that positive perceptions of jobs and of the work environment are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and organisational commitment.)[10]

Models continued to view turnover as a rational process that followed a linear path until the 1990s when a different approach emerged. This conceptualised turnover as a dynamic, non-linear process that unfolds over time in response to 'shocks', defined as events that '*initiate the psychological decision processes involved in quitting a job.*' [11]

Shocks can come in many different forms including work-related shocks (such as organisational restructures, personnel changes or a failure to secure a hoped-for promotion) and non-work related shocks such as childbirth, bereavement or divorce. The emotional value of a shock depends on how it is perceived by the employee experiencing it. Understanding 'shocks' as having this potential may help leaders and managers identify when key staff might be at particular risk of formulating an

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[8] Grotto et al (2020) Employee Turnover and Strategies for Retention. Chapter 21 Wiley Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Recruitment, Selection and Employee Retention.

[9] March & Simon (1958).

[10] Grotto et al (2020) Chapter 21, page 448

[11] Lee & Mitchell (1994), p.6

intention to leave. There may also be some useful distinction to be explored between 'hindrance stressors' (which negatively impact job satisfaction and turnover) and 'challenge stressors' (which promote personal growth and tend to positively impact job satisfaction). As noted below, increased support to manage shocks is advised as a potential retention strategy.

More recently, researchers started paying more attention to the reasons people choose to *stay* in a job even if they are experiencing some dissatisfaction or "shocks". Mitchell identified three particular components of what was termed "job embeddedness": links, fit and sacrifice.[12]

'Links' include relational ties within an organisation or community. Relational ties that may lead to lower turnover intentions include mentoring relationships, social network ties, co-worker friendships. This connects to the popular notion that a factor closely connected to wellbeing is whether one has a 'best friend' at work.

'Fit' incorporates an employee/s perception of compatibility within an organisation, belief that their jobs aligns with their skills and goals, and comfort within a culture.

'Sacrifice' represents everything an employee would have to give up on leaving, the perceived costs of losing both the tangible and intangible benefits of employment. More recent writing suggests that sacrifice is a key concept, particularly for younger generations.[13] These concepts correlate to the importance of 'belonging' as a driver of workplace wellbeing which is explored further below.[14]

In addition to job embeddedness, motivational forces can be expected to shape an individual's preference to stay or leave. Researchers have identified six motivational forces that can impact on turnover[15]. To aid readability, these are summarised for those interested in Annex 2.

Turnover reflects the ultimate decisions of individual employees to stay or to go. Retention research has paid increasing attention to people's preferences and intentions in advance of their staying or leaving. A 2012 analysis[16] categorised both stayers and leavers into four groups which struck me as of some potentially practical interest/application:

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[12] Mitchell et al (2001)

[13] Fuchs (2021)

[14] Mitchell et al (2001)

[15] Hom et al (2012).

[16] ibid.

Figure 1: Motivational states of employees

Enthusiastic Leavers Prefer to leave and have high control over the decision so they want to and can leave.	**Enthusiastic Stayers** Prefer to stay and have control over the decision; they remain because they want to stay and do not feel pressure to stay or leave.
Reluctant Leavers Prefer to stay but have little control over the decision; they leave because they must.	**Reluctant Stayers** Prefer to leave but have little control over the decision; they stay because they feel they can't leave even though they would prefer to do so.

So one constructive aim for a sector with an interest both in improving retention and in doing so ethically might be to seek to create conditions in which an increased and increasing number of its employees could be properly categorised as 'enthusiastic stayers'.

Employees in this category have a high degree of individual agency. They are freely choosing the sector over other positive and realistic alternatives. This contrasts with a workforce who feel that there is unwelcome pressure on them to stay, or who would like to leave but feel that there is no better option for them.

There will always be a small number of employees who must leave a job when they would prefer not to, either because of distal circumstances beyond the control of either employer or employee, or because they are not able to meet the (reasonable) demands of the job.

Targeted retention efforts might effectively focus on the reduction of the numbers of 'reluctant leavers'; those who are effectively forced to leave because of contractual uncertainty, in-work poverty, unsustainable levels of stress and overwork and burnout. This links to a number of the recommendations made in the Pay & Conditions report about ensuring a living wage, ensuring internal fairness, and seeking to minimise short term contracts wherever possible. Potentially relevant examples shared with me in the course of this project included women who had felt it practically impossible to return to their specialist advisor jobs after maternity leave, and staff members (who were paid less to work on the ALP than colleagues on comparable projects) opting to leave to better paid advice jobs.

However a good employer would also be seeking to create work conditions that support 'reluctant stayers' into a greater sense of their own agency and potential. This could result either in an active

choice to stay, with renewed enthusiasm for the possibilities and benefits inherent in doing so, or an increased sense of control over their ability to take a positive and progressive decision to leave (whether organisation or sector).

It may be that some leaders, founders and other senior staff members might currently identify as "reluctant stayers". Relevant conditions might include a deep sense of personal responsibility for an organisation or its staff, a personal identity that has become deeply entwined with an organisational one, and governance and supervision structures that have neglected the personal and career development of senior staff too. As explored further in the section on leaders, the evidence we have suggested they are the group least likely to feel supported at work.

The authors of an article 'Employee Turnover and Strategies for Retention'[17] summarise their analysis of the current research on retention as indicating four organisational responses to increase employee retention.

1. Cultivate a positive work environment. High retention organisations tend to have a strong and engaging organisational cultures.[18]
2. Promote fit: according to 'job embeddedness' literature integrating employees into various organisational systems (social, career development, performance) can help increase retention.[19]
3. Encourage leaders to behave in supportive ways. "*It has been said that employees do not leave jobs, they leave managers*."[20] In one study employee perceptions of supervisor support was found to be an important predictor of turnover behaviour.[21] Research also suggests that managerial responsiveness to employee feedback is a critical determinant of turnover.[22]
4. Help employees manage "shocks". Research suggests organisations can help employees manage threatening change, and thereby prevent them leaving, if they provide appropriate opportunities and support.[23] When growth opportunities such as coaching, mentoring,

[17] Grotto et al (2020), Chapter 21

[18] Ramsey (2006); Vance (2006); Holton, Mitchell, Lee and Eberly (2008)

[19] Mitchell et al (2001)

[20] Unattributed quote used by Grotto et al (2020)

[21] Maertz et al (2007)

[22] McClean, Burris and Detert (2013)

[23] Allen et al (2010), Griffeth & Hom (2001), Heneman & Judge (2006)

training and career development are provided throughout, employees are more likely to stay through challenging times.[24]

A realistic approach to retention must acknowledge that it would be ethically dubious to seek to retain any part of the advice workforce if it were actively contrary to their best interests. A KPI to increase retention would risk driving wrong behaviours. We would have 'succeeded' if employees felt unable to leave despite wanting to.

This suggests the task could be to create conditions such that the best interests of staff, employing organisations, clients and wider society are, so far as possible, in alignment. It may be helpful to stop thinking exclusively in terms of a 'retention' imperative and start thinking more about ensuring the sector offers good jobs.

3.1. What is a 'Good Job'?

We are so used to thinking of work in the advice sector as posing a risk to wellbeing it may be constructive to start with acknowledging the evidence, from a range of disciplines, that consistently confirms that work (and employment in particular) has a significant positive correlation to wellbeing[25]. People who are in work are considerably more satisfied with their lives than people who are unemployed. Being in work is one of the most fundamental determinants of quality of life.[26]

In September 2017 the What Works Centre for Wellbeing published a short briefing paper on the criteria relevant to characterisation of a job as a 'good' one.[27] Drawing on analysis of the British 2012 Skills and Employment Survey their key message is that:

> *Workers with better wellbeing, better work-life balance and more positive attitudes to work are in jobs characterised by high work involvement, skill use, training and development opportunities, team working, information sharing, regular performance appraisals and job security.*
>
> *Although workers with such jobs appear to experience more demands at work than other workers, it appears the positive features of their work offset higher work demands. It does not seem to matter whether workers receive performance-related pay or not…*
>
> *High quality jobs are characterised not just by how work and tasks are designed (through for example involvement in decisions and using skills), high quality jobs are also*

[24] Allen et al (2010)

[25] De Neve & Ward (2025)

[26] De Neve & Ward (2025) citing Clark (2010) amongst others.

[27] What Works Wellbeing (2017)

characterised by supporting employment practices such as secure employment contracts, training and development opportunities and good performance management.

Therefore those seeking to develop high quality jobs need to look at a range of work and employment practices together." (Emphasis is added).

The What Works cluster analysis suggested five categories of jobs, which may provide a useful framework for the sector. In summary, lower-quality jobs are associated with lower well-being. They tend to be characterised by little input into decisions that affect work, low skill use, few training and development opportunities, low job security, low information sharing and tend not to have much in the way of performance management. There will be some jobs in the advice sector that currently meet at least some of these descriptors.

Two categories of jobs were identified as being of higher quality ("good jobs") and associated with higher wellbeing. Both categories were characterised by High work involvement, high job demands, and high performance management. In one of those categories pay was the key extrinsic motivator. (termed HIIPs[28]). In the other motivation comes primarily from the job – the work itself is intrinsically motivating. These were termed HIIMs[29].

From a wellbeing perspective there was found to be no statistically significant difference between HIIPs (in which pay is the primary motivator) and HIIMs (in which motivation is primarily intrinsic). These two 'clusters' represented the highest quality jobs in terms of wellbeing.

This analysis helps demonstrate that pay does not determine wellbeing. It speaks to the critical importance of employee involvement in decision-making, learning and development, which will be addressed in more detail below. Also (and perhaps counterintuitively) it suggests that effective performance management and appraisal also correlate to increased wellbeing.

It has long been a shared point of agreement that pretty much everyone in the advice sector is underpaid. Leaders/managers tend to sympathise with perspectives that they are underpaying staff. There is very limited prospect at present of the advice sector being able to pay considerably increased salaries, however much it might like to. The recent work on pay in the sector identified some realistic improvements that need to be made in the area of pay including more transparent pay policies, commitment towards inflationary increments and paying a living wage.

Beyond these improvements, it may be useful to consider the extent to which this narrative (of a systemically underpaid workforce) serves the sector, its people, and its clients/ and beneficiaries and the extent to which it may serve to limit positive change notwithstanding funding constraints.

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[28] High Involvement, Demands and Performance Related Pay

[29] High Involvement, Demands and Motivations through the work itself.

Might it keep live an organisational sense of dissatisfaction and unfairness (which may even sometimes verge towards martyrdom) and impact negatively on the enthusiastic stayers? The evidence tells us that perceptions of inequity like these can increase turnover intentions.[30]

This is not advocating for toxic positivity or passive acceptance of the status quo. This is about saying we have a choice about how we frame and view jobs in the sector. We can say we cannot offer good jobs until the sector is better funded. (Noting that there is not at present any realistic strategy to deliver better funding). Or we can commit to offering good jobs notwithstanding, hold ourselves accountable for delivering on that commitment, and then make more of that fact.

It will always be a question for individual employees to decide whether their pay meets their aspirations or their particular needs. We may need to accept there will be people who want or need to earn more than the sector is, for the foreseeable future, likely to be able to pay. Going back to the idea of enthusiastic stayers/leavers, it is legitimate and reasonable that some people may need or prefer a job that would be categorised as an 'HIIP' (i.e. in which pay is a more explicit motivator).

In particular, lower wages and higher property prices have a particular impact on younger generations and those whose housing tenure is insecure. Over the last 30 years the cost of housing as a proportion of household income has doubled. Housing cost-to-income ratios are significantly higher for lower earners including those earlier in their careers. Relatedly the proportion of net income spent on housing costs is significantly higher for those renting than for those who own property.[31] A wage that is a comfortable living wage when one is a homeowner (even with considerable borrowing) may cease to be so when one is renting.

So a creative sector-wide strategy to ensure the advice sector offers good jobs as a good employer might also include exploration of ideas through which the social and generational impact of wealth inequality and housing costs might be mitigated in some way for the advice workforce notwithstanding limitations on salaries. These might include, for example, revisiting conversations about keyworker status and exploring any potential for centralised or sector-wide schemes to support the advice workforce with home purchases, and/or improved access to high quality rental accommodation. There will be no easy answers but there might well be more that could be done to make a long-term career in the advice sector a more attractive option for younger people (and one in which they were more 'embedded'/leaving would represent more of a sacrifice than currently) notwithstanding the modest salary levels that are, on current projections, likely to endure.

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[30] Chin & Huang (2013)

[31] Resolution Foundation & Centre for Economic Performance (2023)

In any case, the advice sector needs to try and ensure that wherever possible all jobs it offers, and particularly those at the more junior end, would be properly categorizable as HIIMs. The 'good job' briefing makes the following recommendation to managers:

> *"… develop high quality jobs through enhancing workers' involvement and decision making on their tasks and their work environment, use of skills, working with others in teams, access to training and development opportunities, job security and feedback on their work through good performance management systems."*

Improving the quality of jobs in the sector will help to improve workforce wellbeing, for which there is an obvious human case (see the discussion about 'job crafting' as an evidence-based intervention to address stress below). The sector has a well-documented problem with stress and burnout: there is plainly a pressing ethical case for decisive action. There is a legal case, with duties on employers to assess the risks of stress on the workforce and act on their findings.[32]

There is also a straightforward business case. Improved workforce wellbeing correlates with improvements in performance & productivity[33]. Authors of a recent text on workplace wellbeing De Neve and Ward describe the available evidence as 'strongly suggesting' this link to be causal (i.e. that wellbeing *improves* performance)[34]. Their hypotheses for this include 1) improved health, 2) improved social relationships, and 3) improved creativity (the production of novel and useful ideas). This flags the dynamic relationship between wellbeing and organisational learning and adaptivity.

Theoretic accounts of positive emotions suggest that happier people have greater mental flexibility and broader awareness, thereby enabling them to make sparse connections and generate original ideas.[35] A recent meta-analysis found positive affect significantly affects creative performance.[36] In short, if the advice workforce feels better, it will also be better equipped to come up with new solutions. The following section will now explore the idea of wellbeing.

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[32] See e.g. Health & Safety Executive pages on work-related stress at hse.gov.uk

[33] De Neve & Ward (2025)

[34] ibid.

[35] Fredrikson (2001)

[36] Davis (2009)

4. Workplace Wellbeing

‘Wellbeing’ as term is frequently used but rarely specifically defined. It can mean different things to different people and in different contexts. Some discussions I have heard suggest ‘wellbeing’ may sometimes be used as an umbrella term to include ideas of ‘safety’ or ‘safeguarding’.

One recently published work suggests defining workplace wellbeing as: ‘How we feel at work and about our work’.[37] Following classifications within academic research on wellbeing more generally, this broad definition has three main dimensions made up of ‘evaluative’, ‘affective’ and ‘eudaimonic’ components. Evaluative wellbeing is used to mean job satisfaction, affective wellbeing to refer to the emotional experience of being at work including both positive and negative affect (notably feelings of happiness and stress) and eudaimonia which is used to refer to a deeper sense of purpose and meaning.

From what we know of the advice workforce we might hypothesise that levels of job satisfaction vary, eudaimonic components are generally high, but that (for significant numbers of the advice workforce) affective wellbeing is poor. Though the data we have is patchy, concerns focus most intensely on questions of stress and burnout.

Past reports assert a serious and consistent problem with wellbeing in the sector. Recent work on Pay and Conditions[38] included questions around general satisfaction, work-related stresses and how it feels to work in the sector. Notably, the majority (89%) of advice workers reported being either quite happy or very happy with their overall job. Fewer advice workers were happy with their pay and benefits (49%), work-life balance (63%) and training and career progression (53%). However around a quarter (24%) of advice workers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My work is negatively affecting my mental health and wellbeing”.

Advice staff were also asked to provide three words to best describe how they feel at work. This was intended as a way of taking the cultural temperature, though perhaps inadvertently conflated the different components of wellbeing. The most popular words advice workers used to describe how they feel at work were supported (37), busy (36), happy (33), stressed (31), tired (19), valued (18), satisfied (17), frustrated (16), overworked (14), overwhelmed (12) and underpaid (12). Manager/Supervisors were more likely to use negative sentiment words and less likely to indicate that they felt supported (this is explored further below).

[37] De Neve & Ward (2025)

[38] Hickman et al (2025)

The World Health Organisation defines burnout as an ‘occupational phenomenon ‘resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed’. In my broader coaching practice the sense of a real and encroaching risk of burnout, either for individuals themselves or for friends, colleagues and direct reports is one of the most common themes.

Recent research by Young Legal Aid Lawyers and Public Law Project (‘Overstretched and Unsustainable’) described young practitioners working in the immigration sector, by way of one example only as, “fac[ing] a barrage of overwork, financial unsustainability and serious emotional and wellbeing concerns”[39] .

Challenges are not limited to those at the junior end. Though not limited to the advice sector, February 2025, ‘Breaking Point: The Mental Health Crisis in Small Organisational Leadership’ (commissioned by NCVO with Fair Collective) a report published is illustrative nonetheless. It describes the mental health and wellbeing of small charity leaders as being “at an all-time low.”[40] It found that 85% of small charity leaders have experienced poor mental health due to their role, with 20% describing the impact as severe (including hospitalisation, suicidal ideation and burnout).

In general, leadership concern for and about wellbeing is high. In some cases leaders and managers may even be assuming a disproportionate amount of responsibility for individual staff members’ personal issues or their generalised wellbeing distinct from workplace drivers. Our issue may be more about ensuring that efforts are boundaried, targeted and effective than needing to persuade anyone of the case for effort.

Pragmatically, employee expectations about wellbeing at work have increased and are likely to continue to grow, particularly among younger people. That the workforce is increasingly less willing to sacrifice itself to unhealthy and unsustainable work pressures creates a good challenge to which the sector must rise if it is serious about addressing its long-term ambitions as a sector.

We need to build new working models that are humane and sustainable. This means we also need to ensure that we do not over-adjust, and build organisations that are subservient to the short-term comfort or preferences of current personnel.

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[39] Hynes (2023), p. 3

[40] Wilson & Hancock Fell (2023), p. 7

4.1. Individualised Wellbeing Interventions

Wellbeing interventions in the sector to date have tended towards an individualised approach. As the Learning report for 2024 notes:

> *"Partners have also included greater emphasis on workforce wellbeing. LLST have continued to fund an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and partners have run staff training sessions including two 'Self-care Power Hour' sessions and 'Building Positive Resilience' training for project staff."*[41]

As recorded above, this project originally anticipated offering workshops to workforce staff too, although we pivoted that approach when it became apparent that current demand was low.

The pay and conditions survey found more than half of organisations (55%) reported they provided staff with access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), but that only 6% of workers considered this an important benefit.

One very recent study[42] concluded that workplace wellbeing interventions aimed at the individual level only are ineffective, producing no reliable difference in mental wellbeing:

> "The results in this article pose a challenge to the popularity and legitimacy of individual-level mental well-being interventions like mindfulness, resilience and stress management, relaxation classes and well-being apps. I find little evidence in support of any benefits from these interventions with even some small indication of harm…"[43]

The author concludes it is better to spend time and resources on:

> *"…organisational interventions such as changes to scheduling, management practices, staff resources, performance review or job design appear more beneficial for improving well-being."*[44]

This list has notable similarities to the What Works summary of defining characteristics of a 'good job'.

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[41] Advising Londoners Partnership Learning & Evaluation Year Two Report, December 2024

[42] Fleming (2024) , pp 162-182

[43] Fleming (2024) Page 179

[44] Fleming (2024) Page 179

This contrasts with research suggesting that learning and development aimed at the development of personal resources for wellbeing and/or resilience is largely effective.[45] The resolution to this apparent inconsistency appears to be in ensuring individualised interventions take place *alongside* and organisational level actions aimed at improving systemic workplace stressors, not in place of them.[46]

It should be noted there is evidence to suggest that interventions such as resilience training may be actively harmful to people experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder[47]. Given that one small but troubling study conducted in 2020[48] suggests that 34.3% of asylum lawyers met PTSD criteria and 51.4% (over half!) had scores that suggest partial PTSD, this is an intervention that should be treated with some caution in those contexts, or wherever there is otherwise a heightened risk of inadvertent harm. Organisations employing asylum lawyers may wish to consider whether there is a heightened occupational duty to offer clinical supervision.

The evidence also suggests that convenors and facilitators of community activities in the sector may wish to be more aware of the risk of co-rumination[49]. This occurs where group conversations about problems entrench shared assumptions and go round in circles without participants supporting each other to new insights or actions. Certain well-intended activities may reinforce social bonds (helpful for wellbeing) whilst also amounting to co-rumination (which is not).[50]

4.2. Measuring Workplace Wellbeing

De Neve and Ward recommend standardising data collection on wellbeing to the following survey questions.

Survey questions (answer on a scale of 0-10 where 0 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is ‘completely’)

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your job? (evaluative)
- Overall, how purposeful and meaningful do you find your work? (eudaimonic)
- How happy did you feel at work during the past week? (affect)

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[45] Government Skills ‘A rapid review of review on the nature of the relationship between learning and development and employee engagement, wellbeing, attraction and retention’. Published January 2025.

[46] Cunningham et al (2024)

[47] Brassington & Lomas (2021)

[48] Ronning et al (2021) cited in chapter 4 Fleck & Francis (2021)

[49] Defined as ‘Excessive dwelling on negative aspects of problems” Rose (2002)

[50] See eg: https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/navigating-mental-health-through-a-communication-lens/202308/venting-at-work-a-double-edged

- How stressed did you feel at work during the past week? (affect)

These questions are articulated as being straightforward to understand, to capture the most important dimensions of workplace wellbeing, and to be quick and cheap to implement. Distinguishing more clearly between evaluative and affective wellbeing will be useful precisely because they are not always aligned. People can (and often do) report low levels of emotional wellbeing at work and high levels of job satisfaction.

If the sector started systematically measuring wellbeing in the specific terms proposed, this would help us distinguish more effectively between the different components of wellbeing. It would also provide an immediate comparator with other sectors and industries. The average working adult reports workplace wellbeing of between 2.9 and 3.4 on a scale of 1 to 5. It would give us a robust benchmark now, centralise wellbeing as a strategic concern for the sector, and allow us to improve our systematic measurement and evaluation of the efficacy of interventions and initiatives from now on. It also distinguishes between *how* people are feeling and the subsequent consideration of *why* they are feeling that way.

4.3. Drivers of Workplace Wellbeing

People's workplace wellbeing is determined by a mix of largely fixed personal factors, (including genes and character traits), variable personal factors (such as relationships, housing security, habits etc) and organisational factors.

De Neve and Ward analysed the organisational factors relevant to wellbeing and grouped the drivers into loose clusters (that also just happen to make one of the neat acronyms of which management texts are so fond):

- Development & Security
- Relationships
- Independence & Flexibility
- Variety and Fulfillment
- Earnings and Benefits
- Risk, Health and Safety

They report that while there are almost no examples in the data where the combined presence of all six drivers does not predict high levels of wellbeing at work, serious deficiencies in any one can make the difference between a happy job and an unhappy job.

Notably, they also report that some drivers are more important than others. In particular, worldwide data patterns suggest that wages are important, but that they are much less important than social factors such as the relationships we have at work.

This may be particularly salient for our purposes. When surveyed on what they *believe* is driving wellbeing at work, people (both workforce and leaders/managers) tend overwhelmingly to respond that compensation, and to a lesser extent, time and location flexibility are the two most important factors. This perception was evidenced in the recent survey of advice workers which found levels of pay to be the most frequently (58%) identified cause of stress at work[51].

However the De Neve and Ward analysis of the available data suggests that what actually accounts for workplace wellbeing is rather different. A sense of belonging is by far the most important correlate to wellbeing, followed by achieving goals, and then trust in others at work. Compensation (pay) is fourth on the list.

One particularly salient tool for organisations and employers wishing to understand and address particular drivers is the "Work Wellbeing Playbook: A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Interventions to Improve Employee Wellbeing"[52]

The 'Playbook' has been written to be an accessible and practical resource with clear links to the underpinning research. The authors claim to have analysed 3,000 academic studies of workplace wellbeing to identify evidence-based strategies to increase wellbeing. It does occasionally read a little like improved wellbeing is something that benevolent business leaders can bestow upon their workforce, but this is likely to be a stylistic side-effect of writing to maximise audiences.

The Playbook authors (who include De Neve and Ward and Fleming, all cited above) expand the six broad drivers into 12 specific factors relevant to workplace wellbeing. For each they then set out a range of evidence-based recommendations for targeted interventions, together with links to the relevant research and detailed evidence base. These 12 drivers they identify are:

- Achievement
- Appreciation
- Compensation
- Energy
- Flexibility
- Inclusion & Belonging
- Learning
- Management
- Purpose
- Stress

[51] Hickman, B et al (2025) at para 4.2

[52] Cunningham et al (2024)

- Support; and
- Trust.

The drivers are closely linked and in some cases interdependent. In other cases relationships will inevitably involve fine balances (interventions that maximized individual flexibility might have a detrimental impact on a sense of communal belonging, for example). The authors record that positive change is likely when multiple interventions at the organisational, group and individual level) are targeted across selected drivers. To the levels at which intervention is necessary we might add the wider advice sector, recognising that our systems and organisations are connected and interdependent. We might also note that organisational level interventions in organisations that have a wider/umbrella remit are more likely to have wider systemic consequences, as are individual level interventions to support leaders and managers.

De Neve and Ward recommend the following approach

1. Measure wellbeing (how are people feeling);
2. Understand the drivers of workplace wellbeing (why are they feeling that way);
3. Act on the evidence.

My sense is that we already have sufficient ('good enough') understanding and evidence of the systemic 'why' to act at the sector level. We know that stress and overwhelm are critical issues. This section will therefore conclude by briefly discussing stress as a driver in more detail.

I will then move on to examine organisational culture, its relationship with workplace wellbeing and with retention, and its relationship with concepts such as leadership and psychological safety.

4.4. Stress

Over the last two decades employee stress has risen dramatically worldwide. Whilst a small amount of stress correlates to improved wellbeing (respondents who report no stress at all being bored/insufficiently challenged) feelings of stress are almost always detrimental to wellbeing.

We tend to talk about stress as an emotion, or a subjective phenomenon. The dominant academic approaches to wellbeing tend to think of stress as a model, resulting from an imbalance between the demands placed on us and the resources we have to cope with those demands[53]. Our feeling of stress is the subjective response to that imbalance.

In the context of work, job demands can take various forms including physical, social, psychological, organisational effort; and resources can include our own knowledge and expertise, time, colleagues,

[53] See e.g.: Bakker & Demerouti (2007)

management etc. As discussed above, the most common wellbeing response is an individualised approach to increase a worker's resources to cope with workplace demands (which remain unchanged). However the most effective response is a systemic response aimed at rebalancing both demands and resources.

The first step is to identify key stressors in organisations from first principles. Leaders should avoid assuming they already know the causes of workplace stress. There will often be felt demands arising from processes and practices of which leaders may well be unaware.

The playbook then sets out seven evidence-based recommendations for interventions to tackle workplace stress, the headline detail, and references/sources for the claims made.

I have not reproduced all seven in this report but two examples, which I include for illustrative purposes are:

Customise Jobs Through Crafting[54]

The notion of job crafting is about giving employees more autonomy to proactively shape their work tasks and relationships to better align with their personal needs, goals and skills. Leaning on coaching approaches it supports workforce themselves to identify the conditions that are hindering their work and come up with their own solutions. Several studies suggest job crafting is effective in supporting better work-life balance, and correlates to a workforce that is more engaged and has a lower risk of burnout. It is intrinsically motivating (and thus liable to support retention). Again, this links back to the notion of a 'good job'.

This type of approach is also consistent with a dispersed/social leadership model for organisations who want to move away from managerial and control-focused practices. Other interventions recommended in the playbook note similarly that participation in workplace decision-making and meaningful influence on organisational direction can reduce stress and improve wellbeing.[55]

Take Care of Leaders [56]

Employee wellbeing is dynamically influenced by leadership. The wellbeing and behaviour of leaders and managers are linked to employee stress levels, absenteeism and job satisfaction. In a systemic review of leadership studies, workplaces with leaders perceived to be considerate and supportive had higher wellbeing scores.

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[54] Devotto & Wechsler (2019)

[55] Astvik et al (2021)

[56] Kuoppala et al (2008); Shakon et al (2010)

Overall, the Playbook sets out over 50 evidence-based recommendations for engaging with specific drivers of workplace wellbeing. Rather than repeat and list them here, I signpost it as a relevant and useful resource.

5. Organisational Culture[57]

The concept of organisational culture (and the related concept of organisational climate) refers to the meaning people derive from cues in their work environment as well as the salience of those cues.

A technical definition of culture is that it is '*a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by [an organisation] as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems*.' [58]

There is a distinction in the literature between those who study culture as something organisations *are* versus those who study culture as something organisations *have.* However both approaches share the general idea that cultures have levels or layers, with the fundamental level being the shared assumptions and beliefs that are unconscious, subconscious, and/or implicit.

A simplified (but not simplistic) description of culture is "...*the way things feel around here*."[59]

Climate, meanwhile, refers to the: '*shared meaning organisational members attach to the events, policies, practices they experience and the behaviours they see being rewarded, supported and expected*.'[60]

One of the reasons climate might be a helpful concept to consider alongside culture is the reality that the frontline workforce (for example) will attribute meanings to the things they see happen in their day to day work, and the senior leadership will also attribute meanings to the things that they see happen in theirs. (Humans are inherently meaning-making). Meanings that are assumed and attributed will differ depending on one's perspective. Thus there can sometimes continue to be a felt disconnect or a perceived 'communication problem' in organisations or collaborations even where there have been concerted efforts to message clearly and transparently about the factual content of (e.g.) decisions.

Research suggests rates of voluntary turnover are lower in cultures that value interpersonal relationships when compared to cultures that value tasks.[61] In one quantitative study[62] a turnover

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[57] Western (2019), Ehrhart & Kuenzi (2017)

[58] Schein (2010)

[59] Western (2019) page 110.

[60] Ehrhart, Schneider & Macey (2014)

[61] Sheridan (1992)

[62] Iverson & Deery (1997)

culture was found to be positively associated with role ambiguity, work overload, resource inadequacy and role conflict. It was negatively associated with supervisor support, distributive justice, and career development. A 2006 study[63] found a constructive culture was positively related to work attitudes (job satisfaction and organisational commitment) and a defensive culture was negatively related. Other studies have failed to find support for a direct relationship between organisational culture and actual turnover.[64]

The general literature on retention doesn't appear to differentiate between the range of reasons that people leave some jobs and seek others. The cultural predictors of turnover – the assumptions one might draw about an organisation's culture from numbers of staff leaving - are likely to be different where the majority leave for positive career advancement (say) rather than because they are burnt-out or actively unhappy. There is also evidence to suggest that the relationship to wellbeing is dynamic: positive changes to wellbeing also positively change the workplace culture.[65]

There is a trend in certain types of leadership literature suggesting that a key role of leaders is to decide upon the organisational culture they wish to create and then make it so. A more realistic approach might be to recognise that organisations exist in their wider cultural contexts, and leaders are shaped by their sectoral and organisational cultures as much they shape them.

Advice sectors organisations are not machines in which cultures can be programmed and controlled regardless of the external context. The organisations that make up the Advising Londoners Partnership and those in the wider advice sector are operating within an extraordinarily challenging external context. Individuals and organisations will be personally and collectively affected by national and international issues, including the climate crisis, geopolitical instability, wealth inequality, social polarisation and a rapidly changing technological landscape.

Until recently writers on leadership tended to use a 1970's acronym 'VUCA' (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) as a shorthand for the operating context. In 2020 the futurist Jamais Cascio coined the term BANI as more aptly capturing the new, disruptive, norm.

BANI describes a reality that is Brittle, Anxious, Non-Linear and Incomprehensible. In Cascio's words[66]:

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[63] Aarons & Sawitzky (2006)

[64] Ehrhart & Kuenzi (2017)

[65] What Works Wellbeing (2017)

[66] https://www.impactinternational.com/insights/bani-what-it-and-how-can-it-help-us

> *We are in an age of chaos, an era that intensely, almost violently, rejects structure. It isn't simple instability, it's a reality that seems to actively resist efforts to understand what the hell is going on.*

Alternative analyses suggest that we are in, or entering, the 'Precarious-Interdependent' Age[67] or the age of the 'polycrisis'[68] . Whatever we call it, the point here is to acknowledge the contextual reality in which individuals, leaders, organisations and the sector are operating. If brittleness and anxiety are increasingly acknowledged as defining features of the wider world, it would be unsurprising if we saw those qualities replicated in the individuals, cultures and systems that make up the advice sector.

5.1. Cultures in the advice sector

The advice sector has many strengths. It also has weaknesses and blind spots, often linked to, or another manifestation of, precisely those qualities that shape our strengths. There are huge benefits to organisations and cultures in which the majority of people are motivated to help others and to change the world for the better: prosocial traits such as generosity, compassion, altruism, morality. There are also related risks. We might fail to recognise when we are prioritising our own preference to fix or rescue other people (who may not always want fixing or rescuing), we might struggle with boundaries, or we may be prone to believe that our personal perspective on a situation is always 'right', as a matter of objective fact, and that alternative perspectives are by definition 'wrong'.[69]

There is some evidence to suggest the legal advice sector as a group may be culturally disposed to dissatisfaction. Pessimism is considered a detriment in many professional contexts but "*There is one glaring exception: pessimists do better at law*."[70] Organisational psychologist Daniel Pink (best known for his work on motivation in the workplace) summarises that an attitude that makes someone less happy as a human makes her more effective as a lawyer. He theorises that many enterprises are positive-sum: they assume a model that looks, at least in theory, for outcomes in which both/all parties will be better off. Law/advice work is often (importantly not always) zero-sum. There is a winner and a loser. A right and a wrong. This assumption may frame more interaction in the sector that we realise. If our mental model of conflict is that it is zero-sum and there can only be

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[67] This is the term used by the Eco-Leadership Institute and adopted by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy.

[68] See for example https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/are-we-in-the-age-of-the-polycrisis/

[69] People with high IQs are more likely to be susceptible to the cognitive bias termed 'Naïve Realism'. See e.g. Edmonson (2019).

[70] Seligman (1991), p. 93

one person who is right, or one 'winner', then it stands to reason that we might sometimes seek to avoid conflict when working with our colleagues, partners, grantees, managers and direct reports.

It also stands to reason in such a climate that we might feel defensive if people disagree with us and/or we feel personally criticised by them.

Some of the conversations I had for this project articulated a sense that a well-meaning desire not to make things worse for people who are overworked contributes to a tentative engagement that can sometimes skirt round issues or problems rather than communicate about them directly. We might do more to develop our cultural ability to have direct and honest conversations, and constructive disagreements that could generate new understandings or broker different compromises.

The advice sector has produced and nurtured many close and enduring friendships and committed and supportive teams. However there are also a small handful of organisations in which the reported dynamics suggest high levels of emotional insecurity, manifesting most commonly in a lack of trust within the organisational hierarchy. This sounds demotivating for all concerned. Those in leadership and management are doing their best, whilst feeling defensive and misunderstood, and those in the workforce are doing their best, whilst also feeling defensive and misunderstood.

> *"There was consistency in the view that advice work involves working with people with worsening and more entrenched problems and that staff were increasingly impacted by vicarious trauma and feelings of being unable to cope with demand. This was consistently highlighted by stakeholders we consulted from across the advice sector continuum as a factor in staff looking to leave the sector…*
>
> *A related issue raised consistently was the lack of time and sometimes skills set of some managers, which is hampering their ability to support and develop staff effectively. This may be further exacerbated by a market seen as increasingly focused on delivering a large number of cases (and output driven contracts) which is impacting on management capacity and therefore quality."* [71]

I heard a number of variants repeating these observations in the meetings I had to inform this report. Advice work is in some important respects *sadder* than it used to be. It is now possible to give the correct advice, ensure that a client is properly in receipt of all the state and charitable help to which they are entitled…and yet they remain nonetheless in a precarious and unhappy situation. The social safety net isn't working as it used to. Our models may have been built, at least in part, on the unconscious assumption that there would be sufficient eudaimonic purpose in the work itself.

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[71] Rathbone et al (2022), p. 38

We might want to think more about how future delivery models might seek to ensure advice work remains intrinsically motivating and purposeful whilst such demoralising external conditions persist.

A few people described their organisations as ones in which decisions that affect them are often taken without consultation. I heard from a few people that 'higher ups' (which I note is a term I have heard used more in the course of this project work than at any point previously) were prone to take last-minute decisions resulting in considerable additional work for more junior staff without reprioritisation or reallocation of existing responsibilities and workloads. Sometimes this additional work was accrued to others by inference or implication rather than direct communication. Some of the accounts I heard and behaviours I witnessed suggested that in some cases at there is a real felt disconnect between decision-taking (which is still generally happening at executive level) and the action-taking/service delivery which is generally happening at the frontline. There is likely to be more that could be done to ensure our strategies are participatory.

Overall there appears to be a very genuine commitment to partnership working and collaboration, but much work still to be done to increase levels of trust to enable people to say what they actually mean, and feel safe enough to talk constructively about real areas of disagreement or tension, and to explore a diversity of perspectives. Even just in the course of these projects I both witnessed and been told about individuals who voice, even tentatively, a point of view perceived to be 'wrong' being swiftly and effectively dismissed by the majority view.

There are also important differences in perspective between specialist and generalist advice providers, and inequalities of arms between bigger, better resourced organisations and those much smaller. Some people described a sense that collaboration is too often used as a shorthand for a sense of needing to agree about everything. This may mean that issues about which there is or may be important disagreement are not openly discussed, that actions are watered down or decision-making is delayed. One of the realities that we may be afraid to talk about is that reality of ongoing competition in landscape of scarcity. How do we collaborate well when our friends and partners are *also* our competitors for scarce resources?

5.2. Hamster Wheels

The description of feeling oneself to be on a 'hamster wheel' was used by so many of the people I spoke to that it became something of a defining image. I thought this shared repetition was communicating something important to acknowledge in the collective climate. It appears to express a feeling that we are going round in circles. That we are indulging in endless, relentless, exhausting effort for little or no real return. And that we currently feel helpless to stop it.

Other, related phrases that also came up frequently were ‘fire-fighting’ and having ‘no time to think’ or no time to breathe’ but the idea of the hamster wheel was the most commonly deployed and may speak to something about a depleted sense of our own agency: the sector *feels* stuck.

I wondered if we’re trying to get out from being stuck by doing more and more, layering on new initiatives, actions and projects. This may be contributing to the sense of overwhelm. There is too much happening and we are attempting to process an impossible amount of information. People almost invariably reported feeling oppressed by back to back meetings, notifications and emails. One sector leader recently returned from one week’s annual leave to 3000 emails. Some people talked about feeling like they are bouncing from one meeting to another, with so many competing priorities it feels impossible to do a good enough job on any of them. Even some of the meetings I had were punctuated by the incessant ‘ping’ of notifications in the background.

Behaviourally, multitasking is widely demonstrated and tolerated. It is normative for people to attend online meetings with cameras off. At any one time during the in-person meetings I observed a significant proportion of attendees were reading devices or writing emails. A minority of attendees were clearly focusing on other work for the bulk of the meeting. It is well-documented that such practices, though likely to be rooted in an attempt to manage stress, tend to contribute to overwhelm. We may want to think more intentionally about the behaviours we culturally endorse.

Busyness has become how we are. It might be valuable to reflect on some of the more paradoxical benefits of busy-ness which might be contributing to individual, organisational and/or sector stuckness. In our wider culture being busy can tend to code towards higher social status. It can help us feel we are making a difference. Doing *something.* It can also act to protect us from hard or challenging feelings or the tasks that daunt us.

One person spoke about their initial assumption that joining the workforce during the pandemic meant that their workplace was in an atypical state of urgency and reactivity, and it dawning upon them over time that this state was simply how things were. A few people spoke about the pandemic having tripped a switch into working patterns and practices that feel increasingly unhealthy and unsustainable.

Overcommitment can become an efficiency blocker in itself. In some cases at least insufficient time is allocated to enable good project and people management. Deadlines drag. Outputs are skim-read, recommendations are made and ignored, work dates rapidly or needs to be repeated. Avoidable conditions of urgency replicate the generalised sense of not having enough time.

We are waiting to get things under control from which point we will do things differently. We may need to start doing things differently without having things under control.

There is research to support the efficacy of initiatives to increase a sense of time affluence in the workplace.[72] I return to this broad idea in my conclusions and recommendations.

5.3. Leadership

The Skills Gap report highlights that (three years ago):

> *"There was a consensus in our consultation that there is an urgent need to re-energise advice sector leadership, particularly in the not-for-profit sector..."*[73] *(Emphasis added).*

There is a tendency for the word 'leadership' to be used as though it means one settled thing on which we all agree. However in the words of one commentator, even writing fifty years ago: *'There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept'*[74]

In the dominant Western culture, ideas and theories of leadership are individualistic, allied to managerial models of control, and planning and process heavy. These ideas and theories are likely to be shaping the fundamental culture of our organisations (the unconscious assumptions). They are likely to be shaping culture alongside and in relationship with the more conscious and espoused values and beliefs of the advice sector, such as equality and justice.

Dr Simon Western, in a textbook on leadership that draws on critical theory[75], writes about the relevance of our internalised assumptions about power and authority to the way we take up leadership responsibilities and the way we relate to others in positions of leadership. He reflects that where equitable and democratic leadership approaches are aspired to but not fully achieved this can result in decision-making that is obstructed and ineffective. Western observes that such organisations can become '*engrossed in their own internal processes*' and underpinned by emotional insecurity.[76] My sense is there is thinking here that may be useful to at least some parts of the sector. It is my experience that many individuals in advice organisations are uncomfortable, often on quite a deep level, holding positional and personal power over others. It can create quite a paradoxical sense of vulnerability.

Western's definition of leadership is as an influencing dynamic that is fluid and moves between people irrespective of positional authority. Conceptualising, or talking about leadership in this way

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[72] Kasser & Sheldon (2009)

[73] Rathbone et al (2022), para. 2.6

[74] Stogdill (1974)

[75] Western (2019)

[76] Western (2019), p198

may help us have better conversations about where power currently exists in our organisations and partnerships, and help us to unlock skills and potential at all levels of an organisation.

Previous reports have recognised not only that there is an urgent need to reenergise leadership but that managerial approaches to leadership itself need updating:

> *"Any leadership development courses should give full consideration to the particular skillsets that will be required for providing advice in the future, which may be different to previous managerial approaches..."*[77]

Leaders and managers in the sector tend to have specialised in law and/or advice work themselves before promotion or progression. Historically then, our professional success was achieved through knowing the answer and persuading other people that we are right. By contrast modern leadership is increasingly viewed as having the skills to support teams to operate and self-manage despite uncertainty, and to navigate through the type of complex and evolving problems to which there is no right answer. The sector's mental models of leadership haven't caught up, not least because having time to think about what we really understand by leadership, or how we might define the *real* success of our leadership roles feels like yet another indulgence for which we don't have time.

This is not just about the skills required in the future, but the skills, behaviours and mindsets required for effective leadership now. Further analysis of the Pay & Conditions survey data (see Annex 3) tells us those in senior leadership roles were more than twice as likely to say they were stressed than the other groups. They were also more likely to use tired, satisfied and frustrated. No one in a leadership role used the word 'supported' to describe how they feel. No one in a leadership *or* a middle management role described themselves as feeling 'valued'. Middle managers were the workforce group most likely to use negative words. Our leaders and managers are holding a heavy burden at a challenging time in a challenging sector. They need more support, understanding and empathy to shoulder it more effectively, acknowledge the things they could do better, and to face the problems for which they don't have solutions.

Voluntary boards, usually made up of people who have demanding day-jobs of their own, are a difficult vehicle through which to ensure really effective governance. My experience of working with sector leaders is that, more often than not, the most senior member of an organisation is not having regular supervision, does not have meaningful or up-to-date work objectives, and does not have a personal development plan to support them in role, play to their strengths and help mitigate their human weaknesses. This then sets the bar for the rest of the organisation.

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[77] Rathbone et al (2022), para. 5.76

In practice, most of our individual leaders are left to get on with it. Leadership accountability, in its most constructive and necessary sense, is quite poor. This may be a particularly tricky nettle to grasp for a sector for whom "holding to account" is something we do to other people. *Other* people are making poor decisions, failing to act or are simply wrong. As we are confident of our own good intentions, best efforts and rightness, the idea of 'accountability' as it relates to us can feel unnecessary, even threatening.

Leaders are often in the difficult position of needing to be advocates for their organisational position and interests whilst also ostensibly acting in the collective interest in formal group settings. How are we supporting those collective forums to operate as high-performing and accountable 'teams' in their own right? How are we ensuring they are psychologically safe environments for constructive dissent and mutual learning?

Another definition of leadership articulates a potentially instructive idea, that:

> *"Leadership is the capacity of a human community to shape its future."*[78]

We would increase our shared capacity to shape the future of the advice sector if we were able to support ourselves and each other to have braver conversations about accountability without blame. This links to the important idea of psychological safety.

5.4. Psychological Safety[79]

People are social animals. Any group of people will be constantly managing interpersonal risk, both consciously and unconsciously. This process will naturally inhibit the open sharing of ideas, questions and concerns. We all censor ourselves sometimes for fear of offending, exposing our ignorance, damaging an important relationship. A heightened sense of interpersonal fear, as is more likely to occur in cultures in which people are particularly afraid of making mistakes or making a decision that may turn out to be wrong, inhibits learning. It impairs analytic thinking, creative insight and problem-solving (all of which the advice sector needs more of).

Psychological safety describes a culture/climate in which people feel safe enough to take interpersonal risks by speaking up and sharing thoughts and ideas more openly.

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[78] This definition appears in "The Dance of Change" (Senge et al, 1999) p16. The Dance of Change was the third book in The Fifth Discipline series on Learning Organisations.

[79] This section is generally sourced from The Fearless Organisation. Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth. Edmondson. 2019. Other detailed sources for assertions are set out in that text.

Higher performing teams *report* more mistakes than lower performing teams (critically it's not that they make more mistakes, but that they identify and report them more often, and are thus more able to take corrective action and learn from them). They are less conformist.

A growing body of research finds that high levels of psychological safety benefit organisational learning, engagement and performance. Low psychological safety in environments with high performance standards (such as the advice sector) tend to result in anxiety. Levels of psychological safety need to be high for teams, organisations and collaborations to be capable of optimising both performance and learning.

Another phrase that was used surprisingly often and in a range of contexts in the conversations I had was a feeling of '*walking on eggshells*.' Also interesting was that those articulating this sense were often, though not always, a party with overt positional power.

Leaders and managers are not always equipped to engage with the more challenging interpersonal dynamics playing out within their organisations. One 1-1 participant described professionally experienced volunteers at their organisation as routinely behaving disparagingly to younger paid staff, behaving in ways such as rolling their eyes and physically walking away while the junior staff are still talking. Managers were described as sympathetic but ultimately passive in response: '*that's just what they're like*.'

Some sector leaders are perceived by certain members of their staff team as defensive and resistant to feedback. Some are perceived as unwilling to have direct and candid conversations, particularly about challenges or where there is or may be a problem. These perceptions may not always be fair, or the whole story, but if they exist at all we need to support leaders to engage with them constructively.

I was told in one 1-1 meeting of a significant incident (which we might reasonably term a 'failure') from which much might have been learned from open and curious enquiry about exactly what had happened, in order to ensure that learning usefully informed and directed future actions. Rather, the way it was described to me suggested that the incident may have been brushed under the carpet. Individuals involved described fearing that whilst individual blame was denied on the surface, blame that was not being voiced to them directly was playing out in ostensibly unrelated procedural decisions/behaviours.

In a recent episode of a podcast on organisational culture[80] organisational psychologist Amy Edmondson (best known for developing the concept of psychological safety) describes a belief that

[80] Eat Sleep Work Repeat: episode dated 29 September 2023 "Psychological Safety: Setting the Record Straight"

we already know the answer as being the one trait most fatal to learning cultures. And of course, our sector tends to define itself by knowing the answer.

5.5. Learning & Development

A striking finding of the Pay & Conditions research[81] which I repeat here for emphasis was that more than half of organisations (61%) reported providing an individualised training and development plan yet less than one fifth (14%) of workers reported receiving it as a benefit.

There was also a clear and interesting disconnect between the quarter of organisations (28%) who reported providing a clear progression pathway and the proportion of workers (only 6%) who reported receiving it as a benefit.

The evidence we have suggests that this is an important gap. On our most recent measures nearly half of the workforce report being indifferent or unhappy with their training and career progression. Just under one quarter (23%) of respondents reported being quite or very unhappy with their training and career progression. (Pay & Conditions 4.1). That report also noted:

> *"There was a significant relationship between happiness with overall job and both happiness with work-life balance and happiness with training and career progression… 100% of respondents who were happy with their training and career progression were also happy in their overall job compared with 69% of those unhappy with their training and career progression."*[82] *(emphasis added).*

This finding aligns with the wider research: that there is a clear link between learning and development, retention and wellbeing.[83] This allies too to what we know about theories of intrinsic motivation[84]. There is robust evidence that, in general, learning is good for wellbeing. Linking to the idea of "job crafting" introduced above, training that helps employees learn how to make their own job better may have positive effects on wellbeing and may also provide cost-effective performance improvements.[85]

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[81] Hickman et al (2025)

[82] Ibid. p. 22

[83] A rapid review of reviews on the nature of the relationship between learning and development and employee engagement, wellbeing, attraction and retention. Published 30 January 2025.

[84] Intrinsic motivation has three essential elements (1) autonomy – the desire to direct our own lives (2) mastery – the urge to continually improve at something that matters and (3) purpose – the yearning to do what we do in service of something greater than us. Pink (2009)

[85] Daniels et al (2017)

In 2002, Rathbone et al identified the development of visible, well-presented and structured pathways for career progression as being “vital” to retention.

The AWDF learning report (July 2024)[86] records that there has been a *‘Deficit of action to make existing…workforce aware of opportunities to develop and progress…’* and reflects again that *‘…a space where options for development and progression were set out may help to keep people within the sector…’*

The authors hypothesised that the risk of attrition from the sector is particularly acute in mid-career, when staff “…*have reached a point where they are at the top of their grade and are looking for higher pay, new challenges, and more responsibility*.”

One response to this observation would be to seek to ensure sufficient challenge, agency and responsibility at every job level, where desired. It may represent significant underutilised potential if we are assuming that less senior jobs will inevitably lack sufficient challenge and responsibility to motivate.

And one reflection on a defining feature of a structured pathway is that it inevitably goes to a particular place. The sense that we ought to be able to clearly define that place now may be contributing, in part, to the action deficit recorded. We don’t know what the future advice sector will need. To attempt to prescribe it now may risk baking in limiting assumptions and presumptions based on our current knowledge and understanding (some of which will undoubtedly be wrong).

What we could do, now, is offer semi-structured progression plans aimed at developing an adaptive workforce that is more comfortable navigating uncertainty, more resilient and has greater learning agility. This will include those who are motivated to take up formal leadership roles in future, and will support situational leadership across all parts of the sector. Looking through a retention lens, such an initiative might also help motivation, transforming ‘reluctant’ staff into ‘enthusiastic’ staff.

This is also a more generative approach to the succession planning we also know to be necessary. Arguably it is not for the older generations or extant leadership to seek to prescribe and plan for what should come next, but to create the conditions that will best enable and support our emerging leaders to shape that future.

The key thing though is to ensure that people actually have time to engage with their own learning and development. It needs to be allocated sufficient time in the working calendar and accorded sufficient organisational priority.

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[86] Advice Workforce Development Fund Programme paper “Learning from the First Year” July 2024

The following are three concepts that I introduce in summary, and which to my mind are crucial when considering learning and development needs in a sector that urgently needs to be better able to shape its own future.

5.5.1. Learning Agility

Adam Grant, a well-known organisational psychologist, writes persuasively that re-thinking and un-learning are essential skills.[87] He proposes approaches that centre mental flexibility, humility and curiosity. His top tips for creating learning environments include establishing psychological safety (as discussed above) but also, perhaps provocatively for the legal advice sector, abandoning 'best practice' (because it suggests we already know the ideal).

> *"…if we want people to keep rethinking the way they work, we might be better off adopting process accountability and continually striving for better practices."*

Learning agility has been defined as "*the willingness and ability to learn from experience, and to subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions*"[88]

It has been described as a "meta-competency" which "predicts workplace performance" and which is therefore:

> *"…critical to leader success in the current dynamic and disruptive business climate."*[89] *(Emphasis added).*

High learning agility scores are linked with reduced employee intention to leave an organisation. [90] The same study suggests that sustained learning and development opportunities are associated with decreased intention to leave a current job, change job, or retire early, and that there is some evidence that learning and development may be even more important for younger employees.

Learning agility should not be seen just an individual trait but one that improves with better organisational learning cultures.[91]

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[87] Grant (2021)

[88] De Meuse, Dai and Hallenbeck (2010).

[89] Lawlor-Morrison (2023)

[90] Lawlor-Morrison (2023)

[91] Milani et al (2021)

5.5.2. Vertical Development

Linked to learning agility is the idea of "vertical development" .This idea draws on work of researchers such as Bill Torbert, Susanne Cook Greuter and/or Robert Kegan. It derives from theories of developmental psychology: 'ego-development' theories 'constructive-developmental theory' and is commonly used to refer to shifts in mindsets, or ways of thinking.

> *"When we are learning skills or knowledge, we are developing horizontally. By contrast, vertical development is growing what we call our inner operating system: the mindsets, emotions and habits that guide how we make sense of situations, prioritise what matters, react emotionally, and act…This greater perspective and self-awareness then bring us more flexibility and choice over how we manage the complexity. It's no surprise, therefore, that there is a positive correlation between the level of vertical development and leadership effectiveness, especially in more complex roles."*[92]

This may be a useful concept for the advice sector, which has tended to conceptualise its skills gap in predominantly horizontal terms. It is this greater awareness that will allow leaders to have deeper, more critical, more nuanced awareness of how they influence their organisational cultures and climates, and how they conceptualise and measure the success of their leadership.

5.5.3. Coaching and Coaching Cultures

Coaching is one way in which vertical development may be supported and encouraged. The evidence base for coaching as making a meaningful contribution to workplace and wellbeing outcomes is growing[93]. This evidence, particularly taken together with individuals' positive experiences of coaching as intervention[94], has contributed to a growing interest in the deliberate development of 'coaching cultures'.

Passmore & Crabbe define a coaching culture as: '*…one where an organisation's people have a coaching mindset and use a coaching approach, both with each other throughout all levels of the organisation and beyond into relationships with external stakeholders, to protect each other's wellbeing, maximise each and every individuals' potential and create organisational value*.'

A central and defining feature of coaching as an approach is that it is *non* advisory: a coach supports an individual to think, decide and act. The advice sector naturally defaults towards advisory

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[92] Dietzel & Watkins (2021)

[93] Athanasopoulou & Dopson (2018); Grover & Furnham (2016); Jones et al (2016); Wang et al (2021)

[94] Speaking personally, and though I took a great deal from instructional leadership training, coaching was the single most valuable leadership intervention I experienced during my tenure as Director of PLP.

approaches (there is, perhaps, a clue in the name). Yet there is a persuasive view that coaching cultures are essential if organisations are to successfully navigate a brittle and unpredictable operating context.[95]

Drawing on systemic approaches to coaching[96] Passmore & Crabbe have developed a practical and actionable framework to aid thinking about the development of coaching cultures.[97]

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusions

The evidence indicates that the highest performing teams are those that are psychologically safe and therefore capable of more constructive conflict. I would hypothesise that levels of psychological safety in much of the sector could stand to be improved. It is hard (if not physiologically impossible) to hear things without defensiveness when you feel like you are always firefighting. This may be an issue in many sectors, but it may be particularly acute where our natural cultural tendencies, drawn from the legal and social contexts of our work, tend towards judgment, critique and definitive assessments of right and wrong. These are generally directed externally (towards central government, public authorities or political/ideological opponents) but they can shape our internal landscapes too.

Pulling together recurrent themes of competing priorities, unmet need, stress, overwhelm and multitasking, and noting the lack of tangible progress we have made on at least some of the recurrent issues identified, I recommend that the first thing the sector does is seek to slow down the hamster wheel with a view to stepping off it.

There is such a lot of activity, so many recommendations and imperatives that it is hard to know what to do next. This may also be contributing to the sense of an accountability deficit: everyone is working so hard it would feel unfair and demotivating to suggest we might be able to do better.

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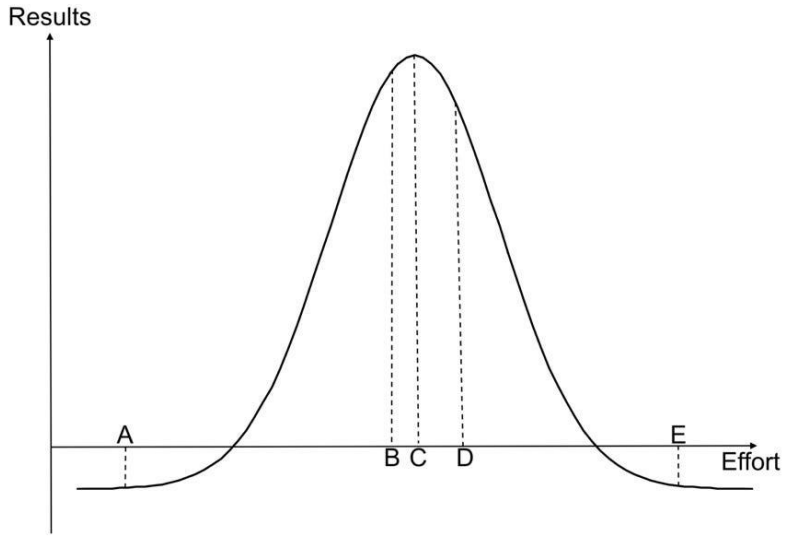
[95] Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh (2014)

[96] Hawkins & Turner (2019); Lawrence (2021)

[97] Passmore & Crabbe (2023)

However there is evidence to suggest that working too hard can make things worse. The following is a graph I have borrowed from Adam Sandell[98] who uses it to illustrate the generalised findings of an Illinois Institute of Technology study by Van Zelst and Kerr.

Figure 2: Bell-curve of effort vs results



The graph makes visual the idea that there is an optimum amount of effort. Work harder and it will result in greater outcomes only when we're to the left of the optimum, *before* the peak of the curve (C). We will generally assume we are at 'B'. However if we continue to work past the peak, Sandell cautions:

> *"This is beyond the land of diminishing returns: we're in the quicksands of negative returns."*[99]

Sandell distils and summarises current writing and thinking on productivity and knowledge work (key examples of which being Rest by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang and Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment without Burnout by Cal Newport) to make this case. It offers one potential explanation for the shared and recurrent sense of being on a hamster wheel.

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[98] Sandell is a doctor, ex-social justice lawyer (he practiced as a barrister at Matrix Chambers), who now has a website and podcast focused on doing socially important work both sustainably and well. Great Work is at https://letter.adamsandell.com

[99] "Get more done, and do better work, by working less hard" published 10 August 2024 at https://letter.adamsandell.com/p/get-more-done-and-do-better-work

The evidence from trials of four-day working weeks[100] is that business revenues increase. Staff turnover decreases. Wellbeing increases. Productivity overall increases. Not relative productivity per day but productivity *overall*.[101]

I am not advocating for a four-day week per se, but I do recommend that the sector draw on its principles and findings to give us the confidence to trial working materially differently.

80% of organisational time – the four-day week - could continue to be spent in business as usual (albeit working smarter subject to a cull of the most egregious and least productive time drains, see further below). And for 20% of time (one complete day in a full-time week) a clear rule could be that no routine meetings. No client facing work. No casework. No business as usual. One day a week, for every employee across the sector, could be spent on any number of the activities that the evidence tells us would materially enhance both individual wellbeing and the collective capacity of the sector to positively and creatively influence its future.[102]

These could include reading, research, physically exercising, undertaking 1-1 or group coaching, strategic brainstorming, implementing initiatives from the wellbeing playbook, futures visioning, choosing between priorities, engaging in solitary or group reflective practice, job crafting, engaging in clinical supervision, listening to podcasts, problem-solving, participating in action learning sets[103], attending sector book clubs, designing or attending training courses, participating in wellbeing workshops, attending lectures, undertaking online or self-directed study.

In short, it could be spent doing all the "essential but not urgent" things that the sector knows it needs to do to get unstuck, but never seems to have time to prioritise. As Sandell puts it:

> *"We will get more done only if we take it easier."*

I appreciate for some individuals, particularly those in specialist services with active caseloads, many of whom are currently working considerable overtime, this may be an aspiration that does not

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[100] https://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-results-are-in-The-UKs-four-day-week-pilot.pdf

[101] Get More Done and Do Better Work by Working Less Hard (Sandell, 2024): https://letter.adamsandell.com/p/get-more-done-and-do-better-work. See also UKRI 'Making the Case for a Four Day Week'

[102] A similar idea can be found in Daniel Pink's recommendations for organisations wanting to increase intrinsic motivation (see Drive page 162).

[103] Action Learning and Group Coaching are learning activities, drawing on the theories and work of Reg Revans and Otto Scharmer respectively. Both consist of a peer group who commit to coming together regularly as a group for structured discussion of current opportunities and challenges experienced by members. Issues raised are explored together through an agreed process of questioning, reflecting, and collaborative learning

feel immediately achievable. However it is something defined and tangible towards which to aim. It is an invitation for leaders to ask their staff what they would need to make this aspiration a reality and start trying to put that into place.

Leaders could negotiate with funders and commissioners for some temporary flexibility around project outcomes. This is, after all, an experiment that the evidence tells us should increase productivity and efficacy not decrease it. It should ultimately improve outcomes.

Similarly organisations who have, over time, developed laborious and time-intensive governance and reporting procedures could ask Boards to try more agile/verbal reporting even if only for a quarter or two. (This might prompt much more generative and enlightening conversations between boards and staff than may tend to occur on standard paperwork).

Creating more thinking time in a week would also give headspace to start reflecting on what we might need to *stop* doing. That is a learning question that may have been underexplored to date. We tend to focus on what else, what *more* we need to do, and not so much on what we are going to stop doing to make room for new ideas.

The “Pareto Principle” suggests that, as a generalisation, roughly 80% of consequences flow from 20% of our effort. It articulates an important idea. No one would argue that every hour spent working is equal. Some are more valuable, productive and important than others. If we divorce effort from outcomes we could identify at least some drains on collective and individual time.

Organisations, teams and individuals could, with kindness, without blame, and with gratitude for all the care and effort at every level and part of the sector, ask ourselves and each other: where there is, or where may there be, waste, ineffectual busy-ness, diminishing or negative returns? What are we doing that we know or suspect isn’t currently, *really,* making anything better? Then we can agree to trial stopping doing as many of those things as possible.

The evidence suggests efforts to increase individual resources are effective if there is time to engage with them and it is part of a systemic effort to make work better. There is no appetite for individualised wellbeing activities as another item on a relentless to-do list. Similarly most leaders feel at present that their primary leadership task is merely to keep their organisation going: the focus is on survival. There is little energy left to actively shape a better future, to reimagine how our organisations might run, or support each other to learn from our mistakes.

We have been waiting for external things to be different before this changes. Perhaps the biggest difference we could make to how things *feel* in the advice sector is to change it ourselves, now.

It is simply not possible to do good thinking in a state of reactivity and overwhelm.

"There needs to be "big thinking" and external funding to adequately support the sector."[104]

The big thinking is within our direct control even if the external funding is not.

[104] From minutes of ALP Partners Meeting 17 December 2024.

6.2. Recommendations

Immediately

1. Standardise organisational data collection on wellbeing to align with the survey questions proposed by De Neve and Ward as detailed in section 4.2.

   Each sector organization should aim to collect this data on a regular basis to enable both baseline assessment and to build a more reliable picture, over time, of what works.

2. Organisations agree to share anonymised wellbeing data with umbrella bodies to enable sector-wide insight and learning.

3. Cross sector teams, organisations and leaders adopt high levels of workplace wellbeing as a performance goal against which individual and collective performance will be measured.

4. Cross sector teams, organisations and leaders adopt offering 'good jobs' at all levels of the organisation as a performance goal against which individual and collective performance will be measured.

5. Sector wide (or at least a pilot group): Initiate *Operation Hamster!*

   Draw on psychology of overwhelm and evidence from four-day week studies and theories of intrinsic motivation to trial a move to reduce the business-as-usual work week to 80%. Ringfence a full 20% of organisational time for strategic and developmental activities (for all staff at every level).

6. From a place of temporary calm do an intuitive audit. Focus initial conversations, explorations and learning on what we need to stop doing, or do less of, or do differently. What is sucking up organisational time and energy for minimal return?

FROM A PLACE OF HAVING (MORE) TIME FOR STRATEGIC PRIORITISATION…

Choose a limited number of further activities to deliver the goals articulated at 3 and 4 above. These might include:

6 Use the Work Wellbeing Playbook and related tools to survey and discuss with workforce the key blockers to wellbeing in their particular contexts and consider the changes that could be made to how work is led, managed and organised.

Implement a selected number of the recommended and evidence-led interventions for a trail period and monitor the results.

7 Use the 'Leaders Toolkit' set out in 'A Fearless Organisation' to work on raising levels of Psychological Safety in their organisations.

Work through the toolkit and monitor the results.

9 Increase levels of support and accountability for existing leaders, to support vertical development and increase organisational learning agility. This could include

Increased access to:

Coaching[105]

Action Learning[106]

Leadership Development Workshops [See Annex 4 for potentially interesting, useful and relevant topics of discussion]

10 Roll out iterative trial development pathways, open to anyone in advice sector, to support emergent leadership.

A trial development pathway could consist of (e.g.):

Coaching meetings to help draw out strengths, ambitions, goals and areas for improvement, and support employees to produce an individualised plan for their own development in role/onward career progression.

Junior staff and emerging leaders could be offered opt-in access to leadership development workshops, support to engage with existing free learning resources (such as those available through Coursera, The Open University etc) and to identify relevant reading and learning actions based on their individuals goals. They could also be allocated to a small peer cohort.

These plans could be predominantly self-directed but centrally supported, with review points tied to their organisational appraisal process and central recognition and acknowledgement (by certification/accreditation and recognition) after successful completion of (say) a two-year plan.

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[105] The resource linked above has useful suggestions for building and evaluating a more systemic approach to coaching.

11 Offer opt-in workshops to increase individual resources for wellbeing and stress management (which the evidence tells us will be effective *within* a context of systemic improvement to jobs).

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Annex 2 Motivational forces that can impact turnover[107]

Affective forces are positive or negative emotional responses to the organisation, giving rise to psychological comfort or discomfort respectively. Put simply, psychological comfort motivates someone to stay in a job. Discomfort will motivate them to leave.

Calculative forces are the rational calculation of the probability of attaining important values and goals in the future through continued employment. A favourable future state influences an individual to stay whereas an unfavourable future state will motivate quitting.

Alternative forces include the magnitude and strength of self-efficacy beliefs about getting another job, and the desirability and likelihood of alternative jobs. Lower self-efficacy beliefs motivate staying whilst higher self-efficacy motivate leaving.

Moral/ethical forces reflect individuals desire to behave consistently with internal values. The examples offered are between people who hold a personal belief along the lines of 'quitting is wrong/persistence is a virtue' vs someone who believes 'staying too long results in stagnation.' In the advice sector context moral/ethical forces are likely to encompass beliefs about the social importance of the ultimate work, and the function of one's own role to it.

Constituent forces refer to motivations to remain or quit arising from employee's attachment to others and/or to the work community. Positive attachments motivate staying. A lack of attachment or unhealthy relationship/s will motivate leaving.

Embedding Human Resource Management (HRM) practices motivate staying whilst poor HRM practices will motivate leaving.

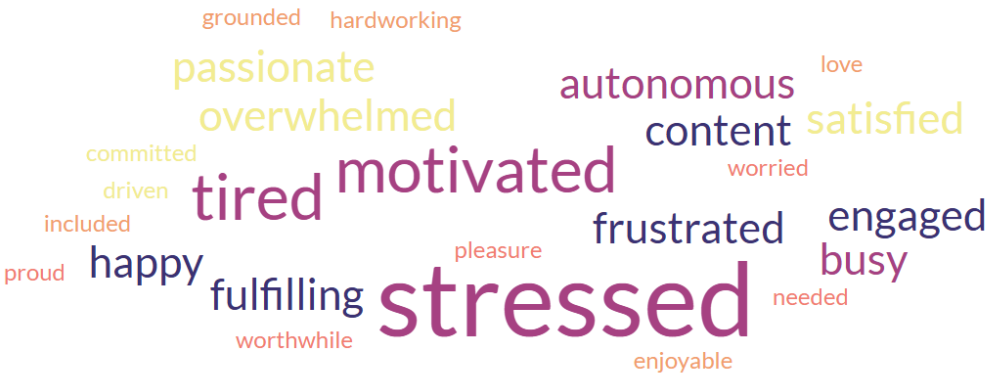
[107] Hom et al (2012).

Annex 3 Analysis of how leaders and managers feel at work

In the survey of advice workers for the AWDF Pay & Conditions reports we asked all respondents for three words to describe how they feel at work. The main report distinguished between the four groups of staff including a broad group for manager/supervisors. For the purposes of this further analysis we have split those responses again, to look at responses from CEO or Director level staff (hereafter referred to as 'leadership') (16) and those from Supervisors/Team Leaders ('middle management') (34).

Error! Reference source not found. displays the words used by used by those in leadership roles to describe how they feel at work. The most popular words were stressed (5), tired (3), and motivated (3).

Figure 3: Word cloud of three words describing how leadership feel at work



Error! Reference source not found. displays the words used by used by those in middle management roles to describe how they feel at work. The most popular words were busy (6), stressed (5), fulfilled (4), happy (4), overworked (4) and undervalued (4).

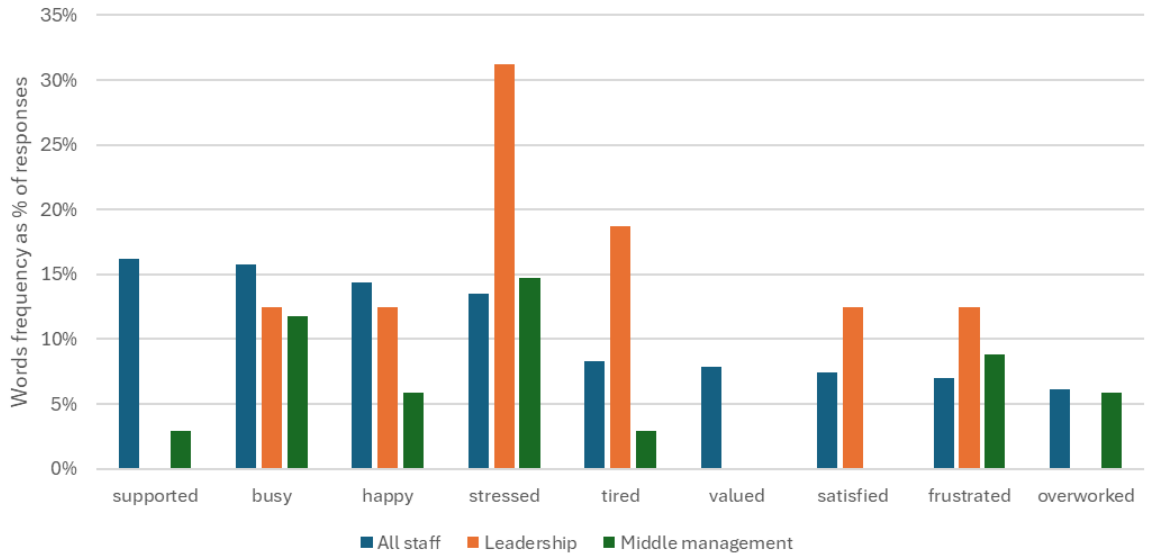
Figure 4: Word cloud of three words describing how middle management feel at work

Figure 3 shows the ten most common words used by all staff and how many times they were used by leaders, middle managers and all staff (as % of the total responses from each group.)

Those in leadership roles were more than twice as likely to say they were stressed than the other two groups. They were also more likely to use tired, satisfied and frustrated.

No one in a leadership role used the word 'supported'. No one in a leadership *or* a middle management role described themselves as feeling 'valued'.

Figure 3: Ten most common words for all staff as % of responses



Having coded each word to a positive, negative or neutral sentiment, we can then compare the ways in which those in different job roles describe feeling at work. Despite the high reported stress levels, those in senior leadership roles were more likely than all staff to use positive words to describe how they feel at work (56% compared to 51%). Recall that more leadership jobs are more likely to be 'good jobs' Middle managers were most likely to use negative words.

Annex 4 Development Workshop/Discussion Topics

LEADERSHIP: USEFUL SKILLS, IDEAS AND CONCEPTS	
Leadership Theories Intro	
Social Change Model of Leadership	
Eco-Leadership	
Psychological Safety	
Active Listening	
Cynicism	
Systems Thinking Intro	
Self Awareness	
Emotional Regulation	
Cognitive biases & the role of emotion in decision making	
Organisational cultures	
Coaching cultures	
Control	
Prioritisation	
Attention	
Imposter Syndrome	
Learning Agility	
Learning Organisations	
Thinking Environments	

Constructive Conflict	
Intrinsic Motivation	
Status	
Group Dynamics	
Seeking Feedback	
Uncertainty	
High Performing Teams	
Communication	
Presence	
Leadership as Influence	