

Pursuing Wellness: Steps Toward A Supportive Firm Culture

By **Casey Ryan**

One year after the American Bar Association launched its seven-step pledge to improve mental health and well-being in the legal industry, this Expert Analysis series features updates from leaders at some of the law firms that were among the first to commit to the campaign. These articles explain how firms came up with ideas to implement elements of the initiative, how those ideas were put into action and the impact their efforts have had to date.

In early September 2018, when Reed Smith LLP joined more than a dozen of the largest law firms in the world by signing the American Bar Association's well-being pledge to address attorney mental health issues, the firm was already heavily invested in and fully committed to implementing all components of the ABA's seven-point plan.

Some nine months earlier, Reed Smith's long-standing concern for the mental and physical well-being of its employees had culminated in the firmwide launch of Wellness Works, an integrated, strategic initiative providing a wide range of services, resources and workplace activities to promote stress management, work-life balance, healthy habits and health mindfulness.

Anticipating the sixth principle of the ABA's well-being pledge, Reed Smith's innovative Wellness Works included an intentional focus on addressing mental health and substance use issues as well as creating and sustaining a supportive workplace culture to help employees recognize and prioritize their personal well-being.

In announcing Wellness Works to the global firm's 3,500-plus personnel in January 2018, Reed Smith's global managing partner Sandy Thomas aptly summarized the firm's motivation and aspirations for this far-reaching and creative approach:

This firm's most valuable resource is its people, which makes their health and well-being critical to our firm, our clients and our success. The legal profession is inherently high pressure, and there can be a tendency for personnel in all roles to minimize or ignore their own well-being to focus on the demands of work. I have high hopes that Wellness Works will help all of us achieve the level of work-life balance we each desire and so richly deserve.

Within a month of its launch, Wellness Works was well underway rolling out the first of its monthly themed activities — a videoconference titled "A Stress Resilience Toolkit: Moving from Surviving to Thriving," which broadcast to employees in offices around the globe.

Not long after, in June and July 2018, Wellness Works engaged some 900 Reed Smith lawyers and staff in the firm's inaugural Get Moving Challenge — a six week-long event that incorporated creative local activities, training sessions, friendly competitions and technology supports to promote employee engagement in physical activities that included walking, jogging, running, yoga, biking, swimming, gardening and any activity that got Reed Smithers moving.



Casey Ryan

In rolling out Wellness Works, Reed Smith also began to implement policies and procedures aligned with the conclusions of the 2017 report that prompted the creation of the ABA working group, including office-sponsored events around arts for wellness, providing "mocktails" at firm events in lieu of alcohol and providing additional mental health resources for its employees.

The Sixth Principle

When the ABA working group's well-being pledge was ratified by the profession's leading law firms, its sixth principle underscored the importance of broad initiatives such as Wellness Works in raising awareness throughout the legal profession and providing education and assistance to employees throughout the industry on wellness and substance use:

Show that the firm's core values include taking care of yourself and getting help when needed by regularly and actively supporting programs to improve physical, mental and emotional well-being.

As an early supporter and inaugural signatory, Reed Smith readily acknowledged the well-being pledge as a strong, complementary framework for changing the conversation about these important issues as well as an opportunity to continue developing Wellness Works as an effective vehicle for addressing them.

Beyond The Pledge

Implementing its commitment to the sixth principle, Reed Smith celebrated November 2018 as a month of good deeds as part Wellness Works. Throughout the month, all offices engaged in a variety of creative activities to benefit local individuals, families and nonprofit organizations, noting that recent research on personal happiness and overall well-being shows that gratitude and giving are key elements of a balanced and productive life.

Experiences throughout the month were designed to provide employees with meaningful opportunities to perform good deeds that helped others, affirmed their relationships with and appreciation for others, and promoted generosity and personal engagement in community life.

Among those who were the focus of employees' good deeds were the victims of the domestic terrorist attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, disabled veterans, active duty military personnel, female victims of violence, senior citizens, hospitalized children, and individuals and families who were food insecure or economically at risk during the 2018 holiday season

As 2019 began, the firm had developed a broad range of new monthly Wellness Works programming to provide opportunities for Reed Smithers to improve their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Wellness Works' Arts for Wellness initiative kicked off in February, with a firmwide focus on creating and viewing art as a means to boost personal wellness. Its activities — which are scheduled for annual replication — included in-office art exhibits, art classes, pop-up art studios and a virtual art gallery online where employees shared their artistic creations with one another around the globe.

Other Arts for Wellness activities included the firmwide broadcast of a presentation by an award-winning researcher, author, educator and president of the board of the American Art Therapy Association, Donna Betts, Ph.D., associate professor and research director in the graduate art therapy program at George Washington University.

Her presentation focused on how the arts can be harnessed to improve employee health and well-being by tapping into individuals' inner resources, especially through engagement in the creative process. She invited Reed Smith personnel to reconnect with their inherent creativity, highlighted the importance of integrating the arts into their lives and described how to achieve this successfully.

An additional focus of Arts for Wellness was on arts engagement as a means of promoting positive physiological and psychological changes; reducing anxiety and depression; reducing substance dependency and use; and improving cognitive functions such as memory, concentration and creative problem-solving.

A month later, Wellness Works' Substance Use Awareness initiative was implemented, focusing on raising awareness, eradicating stigma and ensuring that all employees have access to adequate, appropriate support when faced with substance use issues. The firm welcomed Patrick Krill, lead author of the initial ABA study calling attention to the profession's mental health and substance use issues and a leader on the ABA task force on attorney well-being.

Via videoconference, Krill presented a session focused on mental health and substance use, with an emphasis on how employees can focus on their personal well-being, including the relevance and importance of behavioral health literacy in employee supervision. He also provided practical tips for preventing substance misuse and improving the mental health of individuals in the workplace struggling with or at risk of becoming addicted.

The substance use awareness component also included a session with Tracy Smith, founder of Speakers for Change, who shared experiences with her daughter's substance use and provided valuable addiction awareness and prevention strategies for employees who are parenting teenagers or have an adolescent in their lives.

Wellness Work's Power of Positivity initiative was implemented in April. Its month-long emphasis was on positive psychology, the scientific study of optimal human functioning, which promotes the factors that allow individuals to thrive. The initiative was grounded in recent studies that show that individuals who increase their positivity can achieve gains in the workplace and in their private lives. This initiative featured presentations to the firm's employees by Reed Smith's senior human resources manager Kristen Snyderman.

The Mental Health Wellness Beyond was the fifth offering of 2019 under the Wellness Works umbrella. It was launched in recognition of the fact that the legal profession is among the occupations with the highest incidence of depression. The need for the initiative was underscored when Reed Smith's Mark Goldstein, a counsel in the New York office, penned an article in *The American Lawyer* about his personal struggle with mental health issues. The article received hundreds of comments from in-house and law firm lawyers expressing thanks and solidarity with Goldstein.

The initiative included attorney and staff sessions delivered by Goldstein, along with a panel webinar titled "Compassionate Compliance: Supporting Lawyers With Mental Health Issues," which provided practical advice for lawyers and clients seeking to support employees with mental health issues.

Wellness Works' Health Advocate 2.0 initiative was successfully launched in May as an enhancement to the firm's long-standing comprehensive employee assistance program offerings. Health Advocate 2.0 provides free access to confidential health, mental health and wellness resources 24/7 via a new, enhanced member platform where employees can reach care managers online or by smartphone to:

- Meet with licensed care providers anywhere by telephone, secure video or in person;
- Receive six free sessions of care with a licensed clinician and be referred to an in-network provider if additional care is needed;
- Chat live online with care managers;
- Get immediate help with stress, anxiety, depression, substance use, grief and loss, family issues, and other stressors; and
- Get help for family members, including spouses, dependent children, parents and parents-in-law.

Results to Date

Wellness Works is too new to have significant empirical data available on its impact on key employee health and well-being metrics; however, there are numerous anecdotal accounts and accumulating evidence that it is moving the needle on these important outcomes. For example:

- More than 1,000 employees participated in the June 2019 Get Moving Challenge firmwide — some 100 more employees than participated in the 2018 event;
- In the firm's New York City office, six employees organized a "biggest loser" competition — and lost a combined total of 1,000 pounds;
- Many Arts for Wellness activities have gained momentum, garnered additional employee participants and are continuing in offices year-round;
- Planning is underway for expanding the 2019 month of good deeds in many offices; and
- Employees are spontaneously making healthier choices of foods and beverages for in-office events across the firm's global platform.

The consensus at Reed Smith is that Wellness Works works — and is one embodiment of the firm's commitment to promoting employees' self-care and help-seeking to improve their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Casey Ryan is a partner and global head of legal personnel at Reed Smith LLP. She serves on the ABA's National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.