



The Law
Society

Creating a Healthy Alcohol Culture in the Legal Profession

Guidance for Firms and
Individuals

Junior Lawyers Division
January 2020

Foreword

Since 2017 the Junior Lawyers Division (JLD) of the Law Society of England and Wales has run a survey that examines the mental health and wellbeing of junior lawyers. The most recent survey provides some stark statistics:

- over 93% of respondents reported feeling stressed in their role, the month before completing the survey
- almost a quarter of those 93% reported being severely/extremely stressed
- over 77% of respondents said that their firm could do more to support stress at work.

Importantly, the survey also highlighted that in the legal profession alcohol is:

- a contributing factor to mental ill-health; and
- being used as a coping mechanism for those dealing with work pressures.

On behalf of the JLD, Kayleigh Leonie has produced a guide for firms on mental health and wellbeing and a link can be found in the Resources section of this guidance. This guidance on creating a healthy alcohol culture in the legal profession, however, is designed to specifically address how to create a healthy culture around alcohol in the legal profession and equip organisations to foster mindful drinking attitudes.

It should be stressed that the intention is not to stop individuals drinking alcohol altogether – that is a choice for individuals. Instead, it is promoting insight and the opportunity to create a healthier, more inclusive approach to work-related activities.

Changing drinking habits and the responsibility for not getting drunk is left to the individual. However, as a profession there is a collective responsibility to make positive change and choice easier for our members, clients and intermediaries. By adopting some or all of the recommendations in this guidance, we can all contribute to a healthier culture.

As part of Dry January and to celebrate the launch of this guidance, the JLD will not be offering alcohol at any of its events during January 2020.

I am grateful to everyone who assisted in producing this guidance and must extend my gratitude in particular to Laura Willoughby MBE, Kayleigh Leonie, Amy Clowrey, Charlotte Parkinson, Manda Banerji, James Kitching, Jonathan Hodge and Matthew Uberoi.

Laura Uberoi, Council Member, Law Society of England and Wales

Why is a healthy alcohol culture important?

There are many areas where unhealthy approaches to alcohol consumption can have a negative impact, including on health, bullying and harassment, diversity and inclusion and productivity.

Mental and physical health

A government review in 2016, [The Public Health Burden of Alcohol: Evidence Review](#), highlighted that harmful drinking is the biggest risk factor for death, ill health and disability among 15 to 49-year-olds in the UK.

Moreover, figures from the [Office for National Statistics](#) show that professionals are much more likely to consume alcohol than others: in 2017, 69.5% of professionals surveyed had consumed alcohol in the previous week, compared with 51.2% of those in manual occupations.

Bullying and harassment

A recent study from the [International Bar Association](#) shows that many incidents of bullying and harassment at work involve alcohol. This is particularly concerning in light of the statistic that one in three female lawyers reports being subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace.

It is often reported that juniors or those at recruitment events particularly feel pressure to consume alcohol to show that they can fit in with the team, socialise well and secure their future career progression. Any pressure from a more senior figure could be construed as workplace bullying, which organisations will want to make clear is unacceptable in accordance with their anti-bullying policies.

Diversity and inclusion

Many people may feel that they are excluded from alcohol related events for a variety of reasons including health, religion, disabilities (visible and invisible), driving, veganism (some wines and beers are not vegan), pregnancy, personal preference or previous traumatic experience.

The mindful drinking movement [Club Soda](#) reports that at any event, one in seven attendees will not consume alcohol.

It is detrimental to the career progression of lawyers, development of teams and relationships with clients, if those who opt not to drink are excluded from events (or leave early) that would otherwise allow them to build business relationship and strengthen bonds with their teams.

It is also worth considering the age of guests – there may be those under 18 years old invited to an event (solicitor apprentices, for example) who should not be drinking and may not be permitted entry into certain venues.

Productivity

It is estimated that [3% to 5% of all absences](#) – up to 17 million working days – are lost each year due to alcohol, costing the economy more than £7.3 billion.

[Statistics from Club Soda](#) show that one in four of its members are trying to reduce their alcohol intake, but struggle at work or networking events to ‘fit in’.

This mirrors a recent [JLD poll](#) where many respondents reported feeling pressured to drink at work and anecdotally recounted that they drank more than they otherwise would have due to workplace pressures.

What can individuals and organisations do to create a healthy alcohol culture?

1. What's in a name?

Many organisations are labelling events as “socialising”, “networking”, “refreshments”, “gathering” or “catching up with...” rather than “drinks”, “champagne reception” or “wine and nibbles”. This helps divert the initial perception, if not expectation, away from alcohol consumption.

Alternatively, if your event is called “drinks”, then you can include a line in the invitation to flag that a variety of non-alcoholic options will be available.

2. Try other activities and pick venues that cater for everyone

There are lots of alternative events and activities you can try which step away from the standard drinks reception or gathering in a bar. There are many listed on the next page that you can try and upload to the intranet to encourage other teams within your organisation to consider.

Club Soda also has a guide on low and no alcohol venues that is listed in the Resources section of this guidance.

As with any event, it is also important to be mindful of possible visible and invisible disabilities that individuals may not be comfortable disclosing.

3. Offer interesting alternatives and work with your caterers

There should be an interesting, adult and healthy selection of non-alcoholic drinks at events, not just a warm jug of orange juice or cans of something fizzy. Venues and caterers are increasingly accustomed to accommodating non-alcoholic requests, so be sure to negotiate with caterers to ensure that any offering includes a variety of interesting non-alcoholic drinks.

The profession and our clients are increasingly health conscious, so caterers should be going further to ensure that some of the alternatives they provide have, for example, low levels of sugar.

These requirements can also be included in tender criteria when any in-house catering contracts are up for renewal.

These alternatives should be offered alongside their alcoholic counterparts and, ideally, served in the same style of glass. This avoids drawing attention to those who want to choose a non-alcoholic option.

4. Timing

It seems to have been the norm that an evening event would be accompanied with a glass of wine or beer. Therefore, consider whether an event is better suited to a breakfast, lunch or afternoon gathering.

This has added benefits as events at different times are likely to ensure better inclusion of those who are at risk of being excluded – such as those with young families, carer responsibilities or disabilities – thereby increasing diversity in the profession.

5. Ask about dietary requirements

When catering for big events it is common to ask guests for their dietary requirements. It is easy to add another question to this: “What non-alcoholic drinks would you like to be offered?” This flags early that alternatives will be available, means that you can cater for those who are not drinking alcohol at all, and also gives those who are drinking alcohol something interesting to alternate with when they have decided to stop.

6. No more explanations

It is fundamental that individuals do not feel the need to justify why they are not drinking on a given occasion. This means making sure that everyone in the profession is aware that it is not appropriate to ask why another person is not drinking.

The question will nearly always make the person uncomfortable and, if nothing else, usually lead to an awkward exchange. Teams should be encouraged to intervene if they do hear such a question and move the conversation on to different ground, so that peers do not feel the need to find an “excuse”.

7. Prizes and rewards

If you are running a competition, giving a thank you gift or providing a reward, think about the recipient and whether alcohol is appropriate.

Lawyers may historically have been the providers and recipients of a “boozy” gift, however restaurant vouchers, activity days and hampers (to name but a few) can be equally well received.

8. Ambassadors

There are lots of resources at the end of this guidance for anyone who is struggling with alcohol. However, organisations can be more proactive than simply relying on employees to find help alone. Offer training to managers on how to identify and signpost those who may need support, and consider recruiting ambassadors within the firm to promote the recommendations set out in this guidance.

9. A firm policy

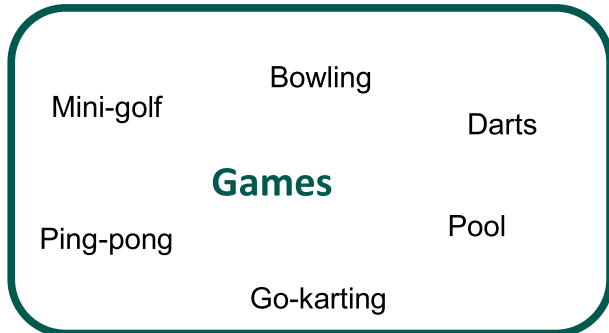
Increasing numbers of law firms and other professional organisations are adopting alcohol policies. Most recognise that a culture change needs to come from the top of any organisation and it is important that leaders embrace a healthy workplace and explain to workforces (and clients) why a serious approach to alcohol is required.

Training for everyone on the issues associated with alcohol is a great way to communicate the organisation's message.

In a world where we are familiar with books full of policies, a brief handout on the firm's approach to alcohol, which includes the above strategies, is a great start.

Suggestions for alternatives to “drinks”

Please also be mindful of those with visible and invisible disabilities when organising events.



Quizzes



Seminars

Volunteering

Tea ceremonies



Magic trick masterclass



Coffee tasting

Escape rooms

Suggestions for launching an alcohol policy

There are lots of initiatives throughout the year when flagship 'healthy alcohol culture' events can be run – Dry January, Sober October and Mental Health Week, to name a few.

Below are some ideas of what can be organised for these occasions and/or a firm launching its own alcohol policy, which can be tested internally and rolled out with external clients and intermediaries.

Workshops

Workshops or roundtable discussions are a great way to start your organisation talking about healthy attitudes to alcohol. Try using such events to discuss the benefits of change, rather than the potential harms of alcohol (often the latter leads to individuals consuming more!)

Tasting events

To make sure everyone enjoys the variety of new drinks on offer, try a tasting event for all members of the firm to test various low and no-alcohol options and vote for their favourites for the next year's events.

Swap in low and no-alcohol alternatives

If there is a flagship firm event that would usually feature alcohol, such as a firm-wide conference, notify guests in advance and only offer low and no-alcohol alternatives.

As part of Dry January and to celebrate the launch of this guidance, the JLD will not be offering alcohol at any of its events during January 2020.

Fundraising

Twin a healthier approach to alcohol with a charitable cause, such as sponsoring individuals or teams who have given up alcohol for a period of time.

Resources

Alcohol Change UK: www.alcoholchange.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Club Soda (for a guide on low and no-alcohol venues): www.joinclubsoda.com

DrinkAware: www.drinkaware.co.uk

Junior Lawyers Division Booze Culture Campaign:

<https://communities.lawsociety.org.uk/junior-lawyers/advice-and-features/booze-culture-campaign>

LawCare: www.lawcare.org.uk

Mind: www.mind.org.uk

Solicitors Benevolent Association: www.sba.org.uk