

# Home (but not) alone

Elizabeth Rimmer on why implementing an effective supervision process in remote working could have a positive impact in a legal workplace



Over the past year one of the most cited concerns by lawyers has been a lack of supervision (Life in the Law 2020/21, [bit.ly/3v7CW8J](https://bit.ly/3v7CW8J)). Managing staff remotely can be difficult and many lawyers have expressed feeling disconnected from work, their teams and their manager. This has been a real issue for junior lawyers and those in training, who have felt particularly isolated and often unable to ask for help on a work or personal issue. The good news is that implementing an effective supervision process is fairly straightforward and can have a hugely positive impact on the culture in a legal workplace.

## What do we mean by supervision?

There are two areas of supervision that are essential. One is an effective line management process, with lawyers having someone to talk to formally and informally, about their workload and any concerns but also about how they are personally. It's an opportunity for managers to see how someone really is, to offer feedback and praise where warranted, advice on a tricky issue and it also provides a space for lawyers to flag any problems. It's not about being told what to do or being told what you're doing badly, it's an opportunity to share, normalise feelings, strengthen a working relationship and build trust.

In our Life in the Law research into legal workplaces wellbeing we discovered that of a wide range of workplace measures available to support mental wellbeing, from private health insurance to mental health training, regular catch-ups or appraisals were reported to be the most commonly available and also the most helpful. A recurring theme was also simply the desire to be 'heard' and listened to. Having these in place helped to bolster confidence in personal development and reduce anxiety. It also helps to create psychological safety, an environment where

someone can raise a concern, admit a mistake, ask a question, or ask for help, without the fear of negative repercussions.

The effectiveness of regular catch-ups between workers and those that manage them may be improved by ensuring that supervisors and line managers have the skills to effectively undertake their supervisory/managerial roles. This can be achieved through adequate management training. Our Life in the Law research (Life in the Law 2020/21, [bit.ly/3v7CW8J](https://bit.ly/3v7CW8J)) found that less than half of participants who indicated they worked in a position of management or supervisory capacity said they had received leadership, management, or supervisory training. Where training had been provided, 89.4% said it was helpful or very helpful.

The second type of supervision that is needed, is with a trained supervisor, counsellor or psychotherapist, not as a short-term intervention to help with a mental health issue but as a regular opportunity to offload some of the emotional baggage that comes with the law. Allowing some space and time within the working week or month to reflect on their own practice, to share experiences and to learn techniques to cope with the emotional impact of the work.

All professionals who are regularly in contact with a vulnerable or emotive client group need a chance to process how those emotions impact on them. The lawyer-client relationship can be complex as lawyers are often working with people at an emotionally difficult and stressful time in their lives—facing a loss of liberty, employment, relationship or reputation, managing a death in the family, selling or buying a house, completing a significant deal. All practice areas of law are emotional in some way and as lawyers you absorb that emotion, and this can affect you. As lawyers we are not trained to recognise and understand our emotions and

the impact they can have on us.

Supervision in this context is about someone taking care of you so you can do your job to the best of your ability and meet the expectations of your clients and colleagues. You can talk to someone who is really listening, about what is going on with your work and help you get a handle on things. Talking can reflect back to you what is going on and help you identify the different options available to you. Sometimes in the law we can have an invisible armour that we wear, and an image that we have to portray. Supervision is about letting that go and having a safe space to be you.

## Invest in the process

It is vital that legal workplaces start to take supervision seriously and invest in it appropriately. Organisations may need additional support or training in order to provide adequate supervision or may need to engage the services of a third party such as a counsellor for staff working in emotionally difficult areas of law. There should be adequate time built-in for managers to supervise effectively, so it is not overlooked. One law firm who has adopted a supervision model is Family Law in Partnership (FLIP) ([bit.ly/3p6DVSR](https://bit.ly/3p6DVSR) / [bit.ly/3sWU7XX](https://bit.ly/3sWU7XX)) where partners and associates can receive individual psychological supervision to help manage the emotional impact of family work. Founding partner, Gillian Bishop said 'I wish it had been available for me when I started as a family lawyer.' (*Legal Futures*, 22 May 2018, [bit.ly/33FVmSE](https://bit.ly/33FVmSE)).

In any law firm your people are your greatest asset, and to protect those people from burnout, to create a healthy culture, to ensure retention and success, investing in supervision is key.

NLJ

Elizabeth Rimmer, Chief Executive, LawCare ([www.lawcare.org.uk](https://www.lawcare.org.uk)).