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A Practitioner's Plan for Time Off

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The impact of burn out and stress on practitioners can be substantial. Time constraints and deadlines, the expectations of expertise, the pressures to put in long hours coupled with the adversarial nature of law practice can take their toll.

Holidays or time off are essential for practitioner well-being, reducing stress and re-charging of batteries.

If you wait to take time off, whether it's just for a break or planned holiday, until work pressures ease you might never go.

A plan for time off will improve the quality of a practitioner's professional life. Committing to time off in advance will also hopefully allow ample preparations to be made ahead to reduce the risk of a claim.

You may wish to consider the following suggestions when planning for time off (common sense prevails but it is perhaps useful to state the obvious):

- Schedule time off as far in advance as possible. Jealously guard the time blocked off in your diary and perhaps treat it as you would if you were listing a trial.

- Notify your clients of the dates that you will be away. Inform clients as to who will be minding their file whilst you are on leave and that you will be available in an emergency. The key is to give your clients plenty of advance notice so that if they have any questions or concerns about their case, this can be discussed before you leave.
- Notify other parties including Counsel and opposing practitioners.
- Prioritise your work. Often important things that you know should be worked on are ignored in favour of the urgent matters that scream for your attention. If you procrastinate on other matters they can become increasingly urgent. Accordingly, by planning ahead and keeping to your schedule hopefully you will be able to take appropriate action and prevent minor problems from turning into major ones. A file review of your matters several weeks before your planned time off can be useful in determining which tasks can be done before or after your leave.
- Delegate tasks to others in the office wherever possible.
- Train your staff – make sure your support staff know how to screen client calls when you are away. Your staff should also be able to make contact with you in real, life or death emergency.
- Ensure your file is well organised and left with a written summary of the status of the matter prior to your taking time off so that the status of each matter is easily ascertainable.
- Control the number of cases you agree to handle particularly as your holiday/planned time off approaches. Reduce the number of new cases you take on. Also, block out time to do the work you need to complete before leaving. If possible, try to avoid scheduling appointments the week before you leave so that you have time to deal with last minute issues that inevitably arise.
- Do you stay in touch whilst on leave? The first question is do you really need to stay in touch? The answer is often no. Establish a system with a trusted member of your staff in the event of an emergency. Define what constitutes an emergency and develop alternatives in the event that contact is not possible.
- Avoid post vacation overload by resisting the temptation to catch up on all matters during the first week back in the office. Try to schedule as few appointments as possible during your return week to allow time to sort through email, correspondence and deal with unanticipated issues.

The time and energy you devote to taking time off is an investment in itself. Everyone benefits including the firm, the practitioner and the clients. Time off should enable the practitioner to return refreshed and with a renewed commitment.

For any queries about this or other Risk Management Services offered by Law Claims, please contact the PII Risk Manager, Gianna Di Stefano on 8410 7677.