

**Thriving workplaces: How to balance wellbeing and high performance.** Three leaders shared their insights at Think., *Qantas* magazine's thought leadership series that combines smart conversation with great food and wine. The panel discussion, at Lillian Brasserie at Society in the heart of Melbourne, was moderated by Kirsten Galliot, Head of Content, Travel and Business.

**Renaë Lattey**

As chief executive partner Australia of King & Wood Mallesons (KWM), Renaë Lattey is delivering her vision of the practice being both a top-tier international law firm and an inclusive and respectful workplace where people can maximise their performance and wellbeing. She is also on the board of the Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA), which is dedicated to making mentally healthy workplaces for everyone.

**Jono Nicholas**

In 2018, after eight years as CEO of ReachOut Australia, Jono Nicholas founded Wellbeing Outfit, where he is managing director. The company helps organisations provide mental-health programs that will lead to thriving cultures. Nicholas is also chief mental health advisor for EY Oceania and serves on several boards, including ASX-listed Future Generation Global. He has a BA in psychology and a Masters in public health.

**Georgie Harman**

CEO of Beyond Blue since 2014, Georgie Harman is one of Australia's most influential leaders in the mental health sector, with extensive experience in policy development and program delivery. She was deputy CEO of the National Mental Health Commission and while working with the federal Department of Health, she led the strategy and legislative development for the introduction of plain packaging on tobacco products, a world first.



**Think.**

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**KIRSTEN GALLIOTT:** **Georgie, in terms of mental health in the workplace, where are we at?**

**GEORGIE HARMAN:** As a country, we've been through a series of traumatic, distressing events since the 2019-2020 summer bushfires. The interplay of those events – COVID, global conflict, food security, housing affordability, the cost-of-living crisis, extreme weather events and the pace of change – has a really detrimental effect on our mental health, especially when they're layered on top of each other.

And whether you work in a supermarket or you're the CEO of a multinational business, we've completely renegotiated our relationship to work. Now people are saying, "Get back into the office – productivity, productivity, productivity." We leaned into the wellbeing of individuals and our teams during COVID but now we're not exhibiting that. Many people are saying, "Why don't you love me anymore?" We're all feeling a bit untethered and a lot of people are running near empty.



**Renae, you lead about 1700 people – does that resonate?**

**RENAE LATTEY:** It sure does. In the legal industry and the professional services sector, mental health issues are prominent. I'm not up here because we've nailed it or to tell you I've got all the answers because it's a work in progress.

**You're on the board of the CMHAA and hear from CEOs around the country. How are they dealing with it?**

**RL:** Everyone is struggling with this – it's hard. In professional services, retail, banks, et cetera, we're all dealing with different issues that result in anxiety and distress in the workplace. We need to talk about it more so that people understand the impacts it's having on workplaces and people as individuals.

Our firm ran a panel with senior, successful, well-respected people who talked openly about their mental health. That's very hard to do in front of your peers but it shows you can be high-performing and have struggles. It was very raw and very powerful. It has to be carefully done but the impact has been immediate in terms of trust.



**Jono, you're the founder of The Wellbeing Outfit but you're also chief mental health advisor at EY. Why are we starting to see that role emerge? And why is it important?**

**JONO NICHOLAS:** We're seeing a change in the relationship people have with work. How do I define work? What does work mean to me? At the same time, many businesses are in the game of monetising people's brains, which will accelerate over the next two to three years with AI. Whether you're in a law practice, a professional services firm or a not-for-profit like Beyond Blue, you create ideas and services. Organisations have worked out that people's brains are the value of the company.

With The Wellbeing Outfit and EY, the work we do is to help leaders, teams and individuals understand how those brains work. And that's the big thing companies are starting to shift around: "If the value of our organisation is the collective cognitive output of our people, do we have anyone at our leadership table who understands how those brains work – and where do we get our advice from?"

**So the CEO has to focus on mental health as much as on legal issues or other business priorities?**

**JN:** Leaders are responsible for the performance of their business so the fundamental question that we work on with them is: "Do you believe the performance of your organisation is driven by the wellbeing of your people?" If the answer is yes then you want to maximise the wellbeing of your people. Many leaders have what I describe as "the welfare approach":

we care about our people, therefore we should do stuff for them. When you have that mindset you tend to delegate wellbeing issues to your head of talent or HR because it's not a strategy performance issue, it's a wellbeing issue. As soon as you say the wellbeing of our people is the performance of our business, it becomes the executive leadership team's responsibility and that's where you see big shifts in the investment case.

EY did research with Oxford University on what makes a successful transformation and they found that when you invest in wellbeing, psychological safety and great leadership, the likely ROI goes from 30 per cent to 70 per cent. So investing in people's wellbeing is the best pathway to commercial return. When you say that to CEOs and boards, it gets super-interesting.

**Georgie, what's best practice to create a mentally healthy work environment?**

**GH:** The moment you create a separate mental health at work strategy and you give it to HR, I give you a fail. HR is about risk management and if you're taking that lens to it, you're missing out on the opportunity to create a workplace where people thrive, where they want to be and where they do good work.

Job design is my number one. Are you designing jobs so the person knows this is their job, these are their accountabilities, this is their locus of control, these are their outputs, these are the outcomes the business wants from them? And also that they can do it in reasonable work hours, knowing there'll be high-demand periods and times when they're not going to be working around the clock? Also, don't harm people, stamp out bullying, don't put up with harassment, don't discriminate



against people. The next thing is to promote practices that contribute to wellbeing. Good work is great for our mental health. It's not just about paying the bills; it's also about being part of a community, making friends, building good stuff together, making people happy, selling a lot – whatever your business does.

Finally, be a business that understands what to look out for when someone's starting to struggle and have the right range of supports. Not just an EAP [employment assistance program] but the culture and managers who are equipped and confident to have often quite difficult conversations.

**What are your thoughts on meditation sessions, yoga classes and mental health apps?**

**GH:** They're nice – we love a good stretch, don't we? You'll feel good as a boss investing in Friday Pilates or buying everyone a new pair of running shoes but it's not going to affect the wellbeing of a person who's in a badly designed job, expected to work unrelenting hours and has a really bad manager. Those are the things that cause mental harm.

**Renae, how do you manage the demands of clients and look after your people, while still making sure that you're doing all the work you need to do?**

**RL:** I agree job design is really important. As a CEO, it's essential to listen to the business and understand what's going on – not just because you're ticking a box – but sitting down and running things past people, getting their feedback. You're always going to have periods of high demand but we're putting a lot of effort into making it so that our people aren't doing

### Make a smart investment

**"The business case for investing to support mental wellbeing is indisputable. If that's the way your decision-maker ticks, show them the economics and build a business case. Show them the numbers around the return on investment, which, on average, is about \$2.30 for every \$1 that you invest in mental health support."**

– GEORGIE HARMAN





Think. Event



**Think long-term**

**“Humans are hard – they never behave like you want them to and they have this strange thing called free will! The problem with the philosophy of a lot of organisations investing in mental health has been that they’ve seen it as, ‘Aren’t we through this bit yet?’, as opposed to, ‘Let’s invest in our people to help them stay well and be high-performing.’”**

– JONO NICHOLAS

stupid hours all of the time. Is it going to be perfect? You bet there are still going to be people who struggle. That’s why we have systems and processes to catch things.

Sometimes pulling somebody off work, even when they’re struggling or doing too many hours, can add to the harm. I have to consider this, almost on a daily basis, when these systems tell me somebody is working too hard and we go and have the person-to-person conversation and they say, “Leave me exactly where I am.” It can also happen at a partner level. It’s really challenging and hard to manage on a personal level. Processes can only do so much – at the end of the day, it’s about the humans.

**Jono, any words of wisdom here? Renae’s put processes in place and I know you have a strong opinion that a lot of organisations don’t even have a plan.**

JN: Research shows that a lot of businesses in Australia don’t have a plan around mental health and psychosocial risks and that’s really odd, just from an insurable risk point of view. To understand the problem, you have to investigate: “Where do we have issues and what’s our organisational strategy against those issues? What’s our plan and our measurement to see if it’s getting better?”

The biggest thing that came out of Google’s Project Aristotle study into high-performing teams and psychological safety is that the base unit of business isn’t the individual, it’s the team. Why doesn’t an individual want to be pulled off their work? Because they care deeply about their colleagues and about the client. Ripping that person away – in their mind –

from their family unit of work is really hard. You have to better equip leaders with the tools, investment and strategies to address issues as they go.

We’re working with organisations on understanding the systemic issues that might be addressed through strategies and things you can do organisationally. Where does the variability sit? The variability sits within teams so that team might need better support for its leader or better interpersonal communication or something else. As leaders, you’re then doing more specific intervention, which is more likely to have an ROI benefit than from the wholesale dose effect of giving everyone the same mental health first-aid training or an EAP.

**Georgie, what are the costs if you don’t do it?**

GH: They’re massive. There’s been a 37 per cent increase in compensation claims for psychological injuries in the workplace since 2018. The average cost of a psychological claim is \$60,000, much higher than a physical injury claim. Lost work days due to a psychological injury in the workplace are four times higher than lost work days for a physical injury at work. That’s all Safe Work Australia data.

Be the employer with a reputation for having confident middle managers who know how to have those conversations, where it’s not considered “woke” to talk about psychological safety but rather seen as a smart business strategy. A workplace where you know that if you disclose that you’re having a mental health challenge, you won’t be overlooked for the next promotion or the next stressful job and that you’ll be supported to figure out what reasonable adjustments you might need.

We don’t look at other chronic diseases or life-threatening illnesses in the way we look at mental illnesses. That’s strange to me because these are chronic diseases that will affect two in five of us in our lifetime and they kill people – that’s the bottom line.

**We talk about “leaders eat last” but when it comes to looking after themselves, leaders have a responsibility to prioritise their mental health, don’t they?**

JN: If you’re a senior executive, your brain is more valuable to the company than other brains – literally, because you’re paid more. It’d be like if you said to a professional athlete, the more high-performing the sport, the less you should invest in your physical health. It doesn’t make sense. You have a responsibility to look after your brain. One of the foundations of high wellbeing and cognitive performance is good sleep but about 80 per cent of Australians say they sleep badly. But they don’t say it as in “I can fix that problem.” It’s almost an identity thing to say, “I’m a bad sleeper” but I say, “Fix your sleep!”

The other thing is the impact of loneliness – spend the right amount of time with people who love you for you. It doesn’t mean spending all your time with them but the right amount of time. I have teenagers and there’s only a limited amount of time in any week they want to spend with me! As a father, I’ve got to be available and invest the right amount of time to maximise the relationship with my kids and my wife.

The other thing that’s really fascinating for executives is the best predictor of a long life – curiosity. The question I ask is, “Are you interesting and are you interested?”





## Never assume

**“To the idea that mental health is being used by people as an excuse not to do their job, I say you should never make assumptions. You can’t tell how much somebody is dealing with in their personal lives – many mask it in an organisation like mine. Not everyone is comfortable speaking up because they worry it might affect a promotion or that it means they’re not good enough. Check yourself on any assumptions that you or a team member is making about an individual because you just don’t know.”**

— RENAE LATTEY

RL: That’s excellent advice and I think it’s a lot harder than Jono makes it sound. Years ago, before I came into management, I went to an intensive development course and at the end, they said, “We’ve heard everything you do for your clients, your team and your family.” It had been confronting but I was starting to feel like, “Maybe I’m doing alright.” Then they said, “What are you doing for you?” I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, everyone’s happy, everything’s fine.” I was adamant that I was doing what I needed to do for me.

By then I’d been a partner in the firm for a number of years and I’m disappointed that learning you need to do something for you came so late in my career. Doing something where you’re not thinking about how you’re delivering for everyone else looks after your wellbeing. I had reasons why I couldn’t leave an hour early on a Friday and have a massage on the way home – I was too busy setting work for my team or I had to get home to the kids. But doing that once a month was a huge shift in my wellbeing. It’s why, at our firm, we’re focusing not just on wellbeing and mental health but also on leadership around that.

### **What’s one thing you want us all to take away from tonight?**

GH: Be a good human. Think about your kids entering the workplace and wanting the best for your young person as they

start their life and career. Think about that in the broader sense when you turn up to work. How would your workplace treat your young person, or your sister, who’s lived with bipolar but held down a job for her entire career, or you, who’s lived with depression episodically and ended up being a CEO? How would your workplace treat the people you care about?

RL: Talk to your people. There’s a fear that if I talk to my people, they’re going to ask me for things and I’m not going to be able to deliver or it’s just going on my list of things to do. That’s not always the case and even if it is, you can say, “I can’t give you everything but don’t be afraid to have this conversation.” Giving them confidence to have those conversations is important.

JN: As leaders, where are you getting advice about mental health and wellbeing from? Once you see it as a continuous, smart investment, rather than a problem to be solved, you’ll get a large-scale ROI. When you don’t do it well, you end up spending your money on the wrong things at the wrong time. 🦋

☛ If you or someone you know needs help, you can talk to a counsellor at Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636 or at [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au).