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IT'S GOOD TO TALK



Nuno Castelão, Rita Rendeiro, Martim Krupenski, and Raquel Sampaio are the founders of Direito Mental, the first and only association focused on promoting mental health in the Portuguese legal community

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NUNO CASTELÃO, RITA RENDEIRO, MARTIM KRUPENSKI, RAQUEL SAMPAIO

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by michael heron

The irony wasn't lost on the four founders of Direito Mental. The only time we could find to schedule this interview was very late on a Wednesday evening.

The work of a lawyer never stops. **Nuno Castelão**, a consultant at Allen & Overy and a former senior associate at VdA, was inspired to start Direito Mental. This was due to his own personal journey. He soon realised that he wasn't alone. The other three founders were quick to join him, share their experiences and create a project to provide mental wellbeing and support. While the profession isn't the only sector exposed to challenges related to emotional, psychological, and social well-being, lawyers are clearly at risk. This interview showcases the importance of open communication, transparency, empathy and respect in our legal community. If you are a private practice/in-house lawyer, work at a law firm in Portugal and are concerned about your mental health, you are no longer alone.

What inspired you to create Direito Mental?

Nuno Castelão (NC): It was from my own personal experience with mental health challenges. I've always struggled with anxiety and had trouble with sleeping since I was a child. Three years ago, I suffered from a burnout, which was a very humbling and difficult experience. The immediate impact was chronic insomnia and anxiety. I was off work for around eight months. When things got better, it was very clear to me that I had to do something to try and change the state of things in Portugal. I have a lot of experience working in the London legal market, and it was quite ridiculous to see things were a million times worse in Portugal, compared to the UK, with regards to awareness surrounding mental health. In Portugal we are a long way behind. By way of example, LawCare, a mental wellbeing charity for the legal community in the UK, is 25 years old. Direito Mental is just four weeks old.

Was LawCare involved at all in your project?

NC: I first started speaking with LawCare a couple of years ago and asked them if they could do the same kind of work in Portugal. They were not able to accommodate this request but were very helpful in sharing their knowledge and experience which inspired me to implement the idea for this project. The first person I approached was Martim Krupenski, and both he and ML were very interested and supportive of the project. Soon afterwards Rita Rendeiro and Raquel Sampaio came on board, and brought an amazing amount of energy and motivation.

EVERYONE AT SOME POINT NEEDS
SOMEONE TO TALK TO

NUNO CASTELÃO





WE ARE MOTIVATED TO SHOW LAW FIRMS THAT THERE IS AN ECONOMIC UPSIDE TO THIS APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH

MARTIM KRUPENSKI



Why are lawyers so vulnerable and susceptible to mental health issues?

Martim Krupenski (MK): I don't think that lawyers are more vulnerable to mental health issues compared to other professions in the professional services arena. Everyone who works with their brains for a long time and under stressful conditions is at risk. But, we certainly are working in a stressful sector with long and demanding hours. One of my younger colleagues was struggling recently and asked for help. We provided them with support through coaching sessions, and

one of the consequences of this was the realisation that they loved their work, but simply wanted to find a way to enjoy it more and not feel as stressed. This vocation requires long hours, especially if you want to go all the way to the top, despite alternative career paths at some law firms emerging, which is positive. My main factor of stress is that we are always working under pressure.

What can law firms and companies do differently to support their lawyers?

Rita Rendeiro (RR): I think it's about giving options and flexibility. This is a business of people and the human side of it has value. The next generation of young lawyers will be attracted to organisations that can demonstrate a culture of respect and empathy. Human capital is everything. If you own a factory, you perform maintenance on your machinery. Lawyers that are tired are more prone to committing errors, which is a big problem in the legal profession. If a lawyer has to take a leave of absence due to burnout, this is a huge economic cost to the business. This whole issue has to be viewed as a business management tool. This will result

ABOUT DIREITO MENTAL

Direito Mental is an initiative for the Portuguese legal community for mental health committed to:

- Awareness and Literacy, normalising the conversation and exchange of ideas about Mental Health;
- Support to the legal community and its specific people who are likely to face challenges related to mental health, through empathy and active listening;
- Collecting and disseminating knowledge on mental health and promoting its study through an evaluation of the current state of mental health in the Portuguese legal community, fostering good practices, training and research on its causes, effects and treatments.

Direito Mental began in 2020 with a great desire to do something for the mental health of lawyers in Portugal, inspired by LawCare. The idea was born from the four founders, Nuno Castelão (consultant at Allen & Overy), Martim Krupenski (chief operating officer at Morais Leitão), Rita Rendeiro (operating partner at Maingreen and former head of legal at Abanca) and Raquel Sampaio (managing associate at SRS). They got together one afternoon and shared their values and vision for the mental health of the Portuguese legal community. They are an active part of the Portuguese legal community and are committed to improving its mental health. 

in higher profitability, better client relationships and will attract younger generations.

Imagine the most stressful day of your career so far. Knowing what you do now, how do you manage these situations differently?

Raquel Sampaio (RS): Now that I am more informed and go to regular therapy, I can share with you how I manage these situations today more effectively. I am more self-aware about my limits, with regards to my body and my mind. I always try to pre-warn my bosses to be on the look-out. If I am having a difficult week, I try to communicate this as openly and effectively as possible. I also go back to basics if I feel my mental health being threatened. I try to get more sleep, at least seven to eight hours, I try to eat properly. If it is an anxiety issue, I know that a ten minute walk every three hours will really help me. What is interesting is that the four of us, (myself, Rita, Martim and Nuno), all have different approaches towards our own mental health. I am more on

the clinical side, which is what works for me. At Direito Mental our philosophy is, whatever works. We want to be the enablers of this and implement cultural change in organisations that want it and need it.

What is the most important thing you learned from LawCare when researching their work in the UK?

NC: That it is really important to give emotional support to people. That is

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RITA RENDEIRO

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something we have been discussing internally, in terms of the right balance and methodology. Everyone at some point needs someone to talk to. It really makes a difference if people are interested in you and your well-being. I cannot stress enough how much I think our industry lacks humanity. There is not enough compassion and empathy. LawCare is available for people and we are too.

RR: In-house legal teams, in my experience, have a slightly different culture. I noticed that by starting a culture of sharing, others start to share too, and it all adds to improve the environment. It could be something as simple as, *"sorry I'm late but my child was ill this morning."* This generates empathy and everyone is more committed to each other.

MK: This is so important. The mere existence of this organisation has enabled so many people to start sharing their experiences, we are already seeing the positive impact of our work in a short space of time.

RS: In fact, the first time we were all together it was a great sharing experience. It all starts with people sharing. This is one of our main goals, for people to talk and share without barriers. There is no stigma attached to any problem.

What does Direito Mental's work look like in practical terms?

NC: Both emotional support and raising awareness. We have two roles. We should be advocates for mental health and the need for law firms and companies to promote positive mental health and ensure workplaces are environments of psychological safety. We really need to do our best to make people conscious of this. Some entities already have some sort of internal well-being programmes, but I have a strong view that it should not be window dressing. We hope to be able to support a change in this area, because we feel that there is momentum to do so.

RR: We want to make this profession more human but also engage with law firms and lawyers through a lens of objectivity and science. In this first

THIS IS ONE OF OUR MAIN GOALS, FOR PEOPLE TO TALK AND SHARE WITHOUT BARRIERS

RAQUEL SAMPAIO



year we are implementing a study with ProChild CoLAB who will be conducting analysis, interviews and gathering data to have an accurate image of the state of the mental health of the legal community in Portugal. We will then be able to implement more useful and targeted strategies.

MK: This is perhaps a more cynical approach, but at a conference in 2016, Antonio Ramalho, then CEO of Infraestruturas de Portugal, made a presentation where he took an economical view on the issue of diversity. I believe companies do not have ethics. People do of course, but not companies. A company is not a person. Antonio proved that by balancing gender diversity at board level and in management positions, it had a positive impact on profitability and growth. By the same token, we are motivated to show law firms that there is an economic upside to this approach to mental health. If we can prove this to the sector, it will become the norm, because of economics.

RS: As well as the economic motivation, the sector will not be able to attract and retain young talent if they are unable to show a commitment to ethics and wellbeing.

What is your message to any lawyer that may be struggling and worrying about their mental health. How can you help them?

RS: We are still structuring the emotional support part of the organisation but we are working on this, such as a help-line on our website. But they can contact us, we have tools and all the means to help. 