

# Spirit of a bygone era may be the secret to office efficiency

**F**ORGET THE LATEST in human resource management theory, the key to a happy workplace could lie in a little old-fashioned courtesy and a work ethic forged in the Depression and World War II.

That's the conclusion Speed and Stracey Lawyers came to after employing 82-year-old Walter Pendleton as office manager. Mr P, as he is known, has just retired and the firm is wondering how it will cope without him.

When he walked in the door 20 years ago, Speed and Stracey had a chronic problem with staff turnover.

"It was really annoying me," partner Robin Speed told *LSJ*. "I thought perhaps I could get a retired person, who really enjoys work ... and see whether or not he or she can make a difference in the office."

He contacted a retired bank officers' organisation which sent him Mr P.

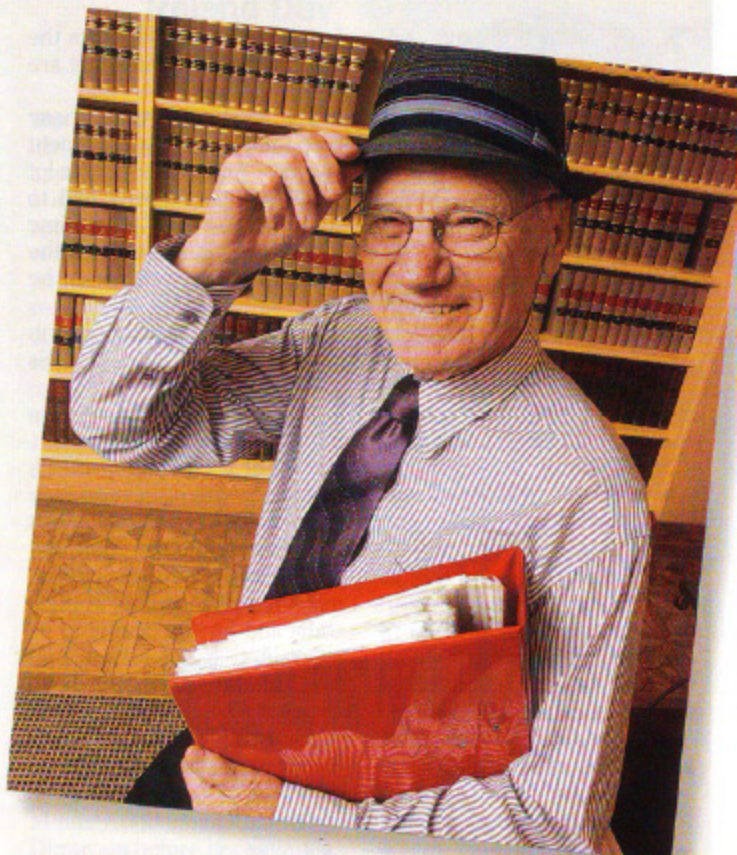
Today the firm's turnover is low. ("We've got 11 lawyers and their average employment with us is 13 years.") Solicitors spend just 20 per cent of their time on non-billable activities. (FMRC Legal's Law Firm Performance Benchmarks Survey says the industry average is around 40 per cent.)

Speed puts it all down to Mr P's efforts in making the office run smoothly and his approach to work, which harks back to an era where there was time for the personal touch.

"Walt got in at 7:30 every morning - every morning," Speed said. "And when everybody came in to the office he greeted them all."

Mr P explained the ritual: "I thanked them for coming in and I put a smile on their face. It was a good start to the day."

Mr P had a network of suppliers, tradespeople and shop assistants on whom he could call at the touch of a speed-dial button to top up the stationery supplies, keep the



**Speed and Stracey credits Walter Pendleton with cutting staff turnover and improving productivity.** PHOTO: PATRICK BYRNE

photocopier working, maintain the air-conditioning or to obtain those last-minute theatre tickets. "Imagine how efficient you would be if a lot of those irritating things you have got to do, get done," Speed said.

That Mr P had worked into his 80s had been an inspiration, Speed said. "It made everyone feel work is enjoyable; it is not just this great chore."

Mr P's job at Speed and Stracey was his second career. He spent 43 years in the ANZ Bank, becoming a bank manager before retiring in 1983. After a three-year break, he realised he wanted to get back to work. "I've always worked hard," he said.

A child of the depression (his father struggled to support three children on two days' work as a bookfinisher), he joined the RAAF in World War II and saw war service in New Guinea as a telegraphist.

The work was intense ("Virtually, we never stopped") as was the humidity: "When I came back I had ulcers all down both legs."

During 43 years of service for ANZ, he took only six weeks sick leave, four of which were for malaria contracted in New Guinea. In 20 years at Speed and Stracey, he took only three weeks sick leave.

Rudyard Kipling's poem "If", which a fellow airman had pinned to his tent wall in New Guinea and gave to him when he was sent home, has sustained him in times of stress. "You've got to be a man and not let it get on top of you," he said, summarising the poem's message and his own philosophy.

He decided to retire again so he and his wife could travel around Australia. Is there a third career ahead? "I don't think so," he said. □

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