

Legal Unlimited: The low down on learning for law firms

Our 2021 report and key findings



Foreword

The world of work has transformed in the last year. We have been challenged to do our jobs under very different and difficult circumstances. As I spoke to clients during the first national lockdown, I discovered that the impact of the COVID pandemic was extremely tough for law firms. They were being asked to do more with less, to maintain their usual rigorous standards whilst allowing for the flexibility that clients and teams needed, and to protect their businesses whilst facing an uncertain future. Certainly, our survey respondents emphasised that they were still just trying to 'survive', 'stay safe' and 'stay healthy' both physically and mentally - all priorities I can relate to.

And yet, the longer we live with this pandemic the more we have found ways of working which are beginning to feel like the 'new normal'. Many have brought unexpected benefits and some we will be pleased to say goodbye to. Only time will tell how many of these new ways stay with us but, at the least, the change has allowed us to learn different skills and reflect on what we do and why.

This includes learning and we launched our Access Legal Learning Survey to take a look at how the COVID pandemic has impacted legal training and some of the current and future trends. I have worked within legal training for almost 13 years now, creating a range of learning from law degrees to PSC to CPD programmes and have been lucky enough to work with some of the leading law firms and subject matter experts in the field. Whilst I know this sector well, I always relish the chance to understand the latest developments and conducting this survey has given me a golden opportunity to do that.

I hope you enjoy reading our report. I hope it allows you to reflect on the challenges and changes you have seen and appreciate the potential future of legal learning.

We look forward to navigating 2021 with you.

Sarah Mian

Access Legal Learning Product Owner



Contents

Foreword **2**

Contents **3**

Executive summary **4**

Methodology and survey respondents **5**

Top challenges in legal learning **7**

Top priority learning topics **9**

Learning formats and functionality **11**

Impact of the COVID pandemic **13**

Providing and promoting learning **15**

Access Legal Learning's view **17**

Where to go for more **18**

Executive summary – key findings

Who we surveyed?

Those responsible for learning in law firms come from **many different areas of a firm**, from managing partners and solicitors, to practice managers and compliance teams.

What are the top learning challenges?

Time restraints was by far the headline challenge with 74% choosing this as the main issue. Ensuring **training was completed** (48%) and ensuring **content was engaging** (38%) were next in line.

With 26% reporting that they have **no time to complete training** each week it indicates that staff are completing training in their own time or not completing training at all.

What are the priority topics?

Risk and compliance (77%) was most important, closely followed by **learning specific to the practice area** (73%) and **learning specific to the role** (71%).

96% of firms **preferred law firm specific training**, with 51% preferring all topics to be law firm specific.

What is the preferred learning format?

The most popular learning formats were **webinars** (69%), **eLearning** (65%) and **on-the-job training** (51%).

Engaging content is the top requirement with 73% of respondents stating they cared about this the most.

66% stated they care (a little or a lot) about **mobile delivery**.

How has the COVID pandemic impacted learning?

46% of law firms said **learning needs had changed** as a result of the pandemic with 64% of these respondents stating they had **moved to online, virtual or remote training**.

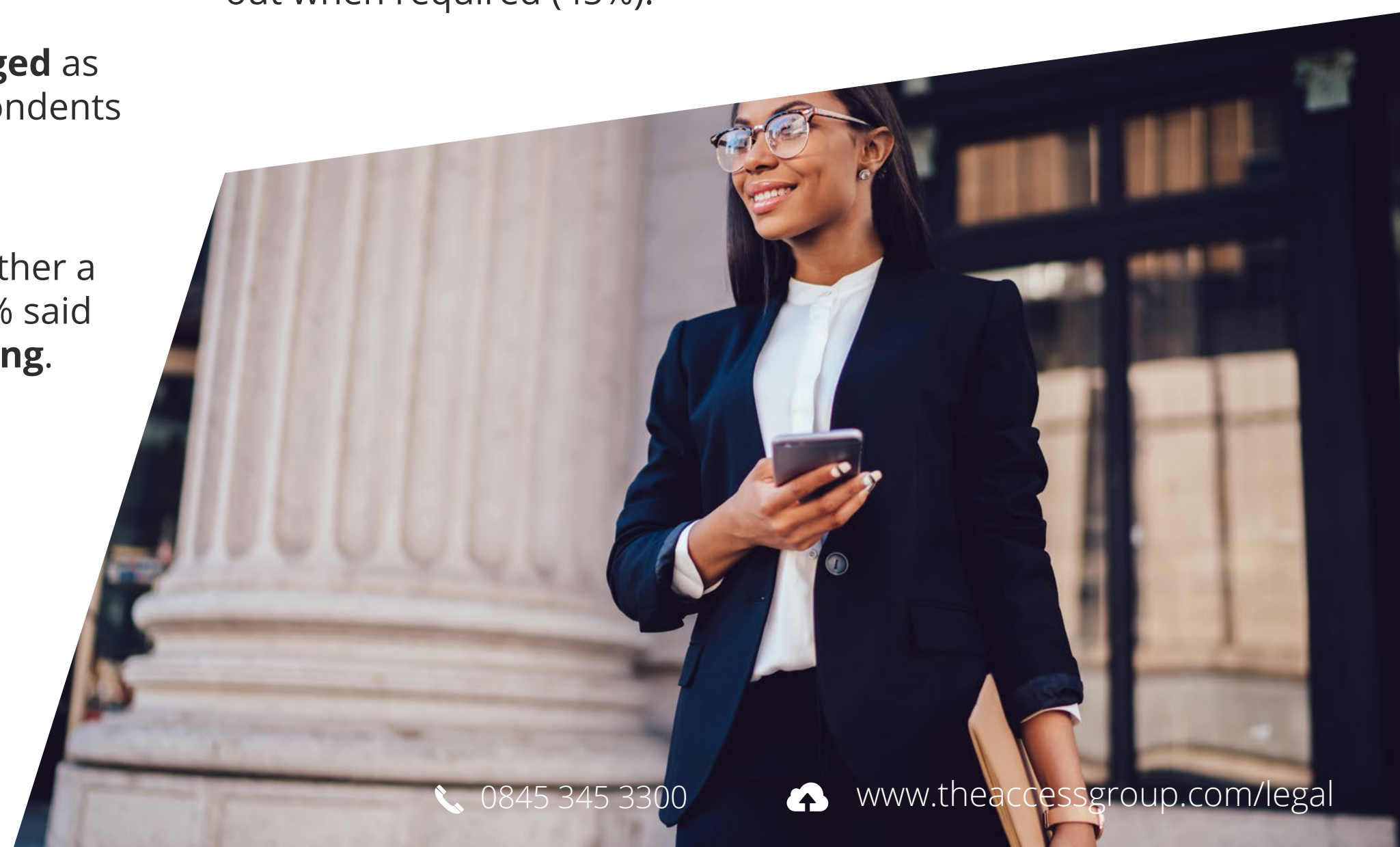
73% said **digital learning use had increased** (either a lot or a little) as a result of the pandemic and 67% said they would **continue to use more digital learning**.

What are the firms' views on the learning culture?

There were four **top reasons why firms provided training**: to help employees do their jobs (80%); to enhance performance (78%); to fulfil competency (CPD) requirements (77%); and to fulfil compliance requirements (72%).

The **top methods used to promote learning** were: reminder emails to complete training (74%); making learning mandatory (58%); and partner and manager encouragement to complete learning (51%).

Learning was provided by a combination of: third party providers (62%); in-house (44%); and contracted out when required (45%).



Methodology and survey respondents

Those responsible for learning

We had responses from a wide range of people responsible for learning within their firm. 46% of responses were from solicitors, managing partners (including CEOs and directors) and partners, reflecting that fee earning solicitors are often also responsible for learning within a firm.

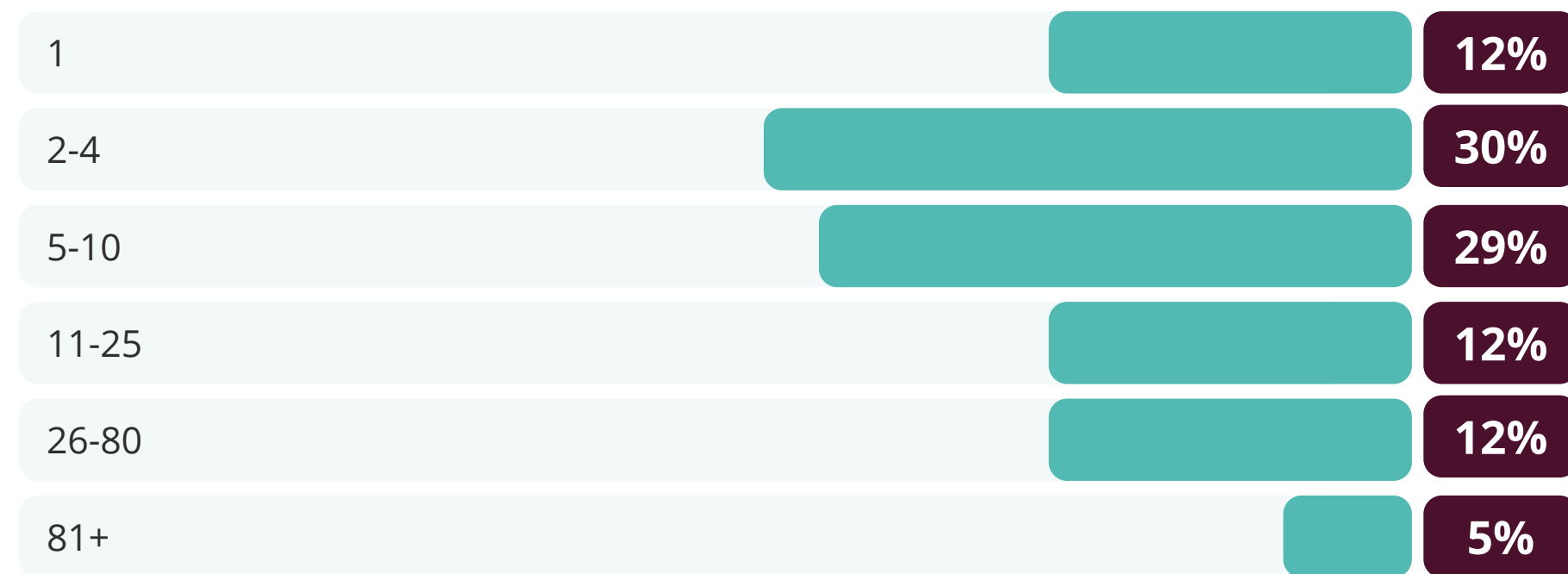


Methodology and survey respondents

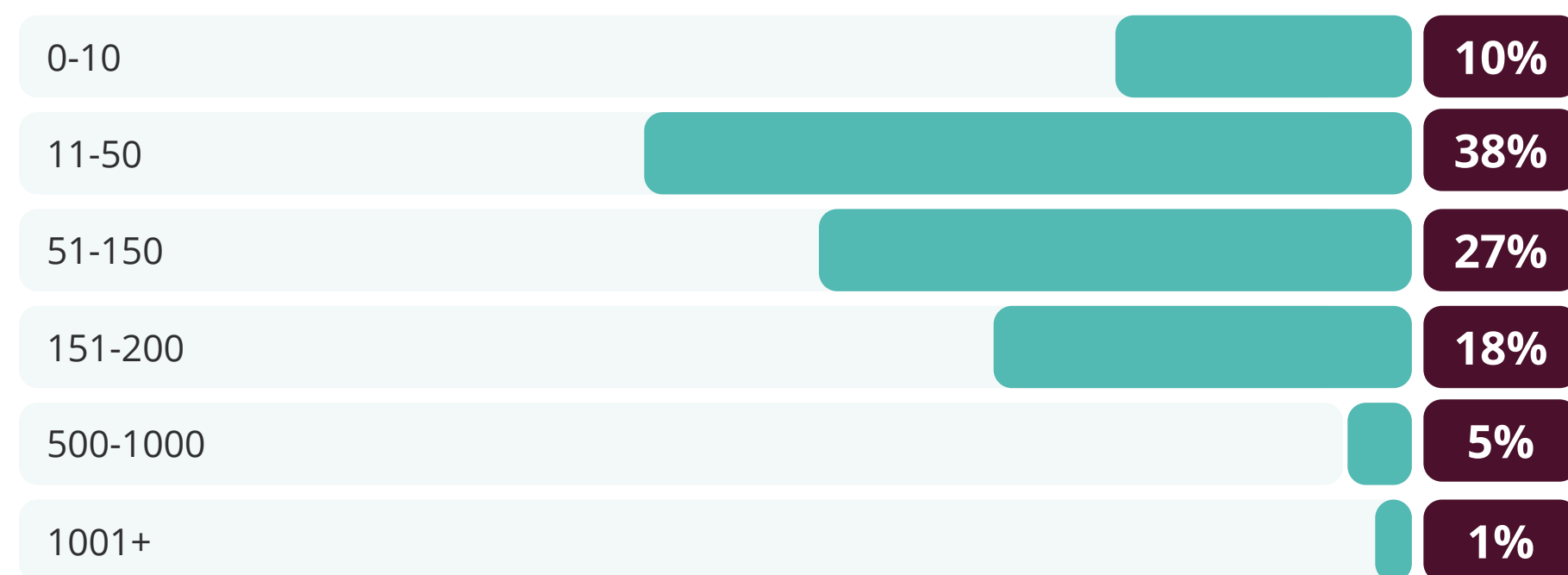
Our respondents by size of firm

Our respondents ranged from top 100 law firms to sole practitioners. They also included in-house legal teams. Our highest response rate (in terms of number of partners) was from firms with 2-4 partners (30%) and 5-10 partners (29%). In terms of employee numbers, our highest response rate was from firms with 11-50 employees (38%) and 51-100 employees (27%).

Size of firms by partner

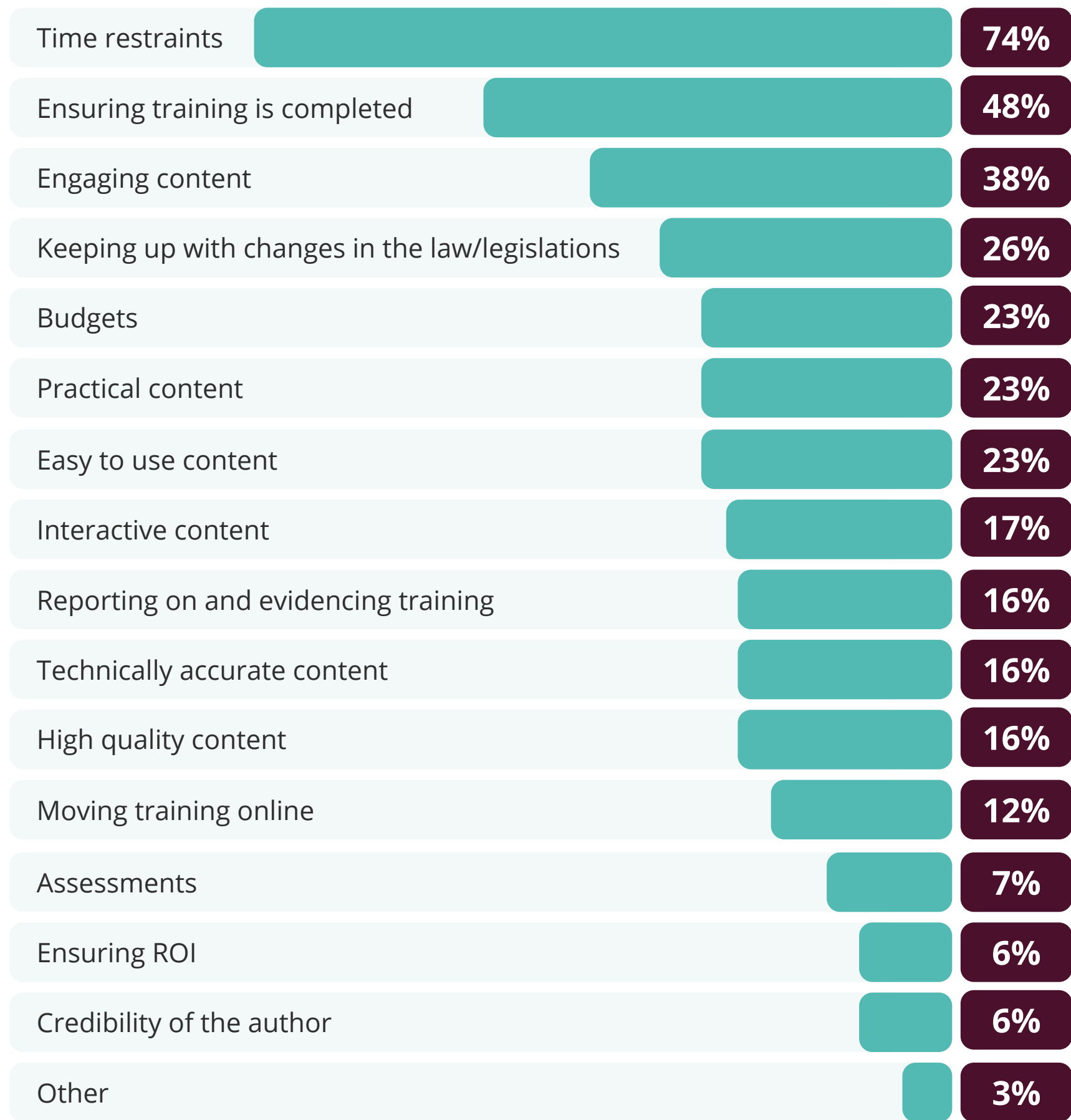


Size of firm by employee numbers



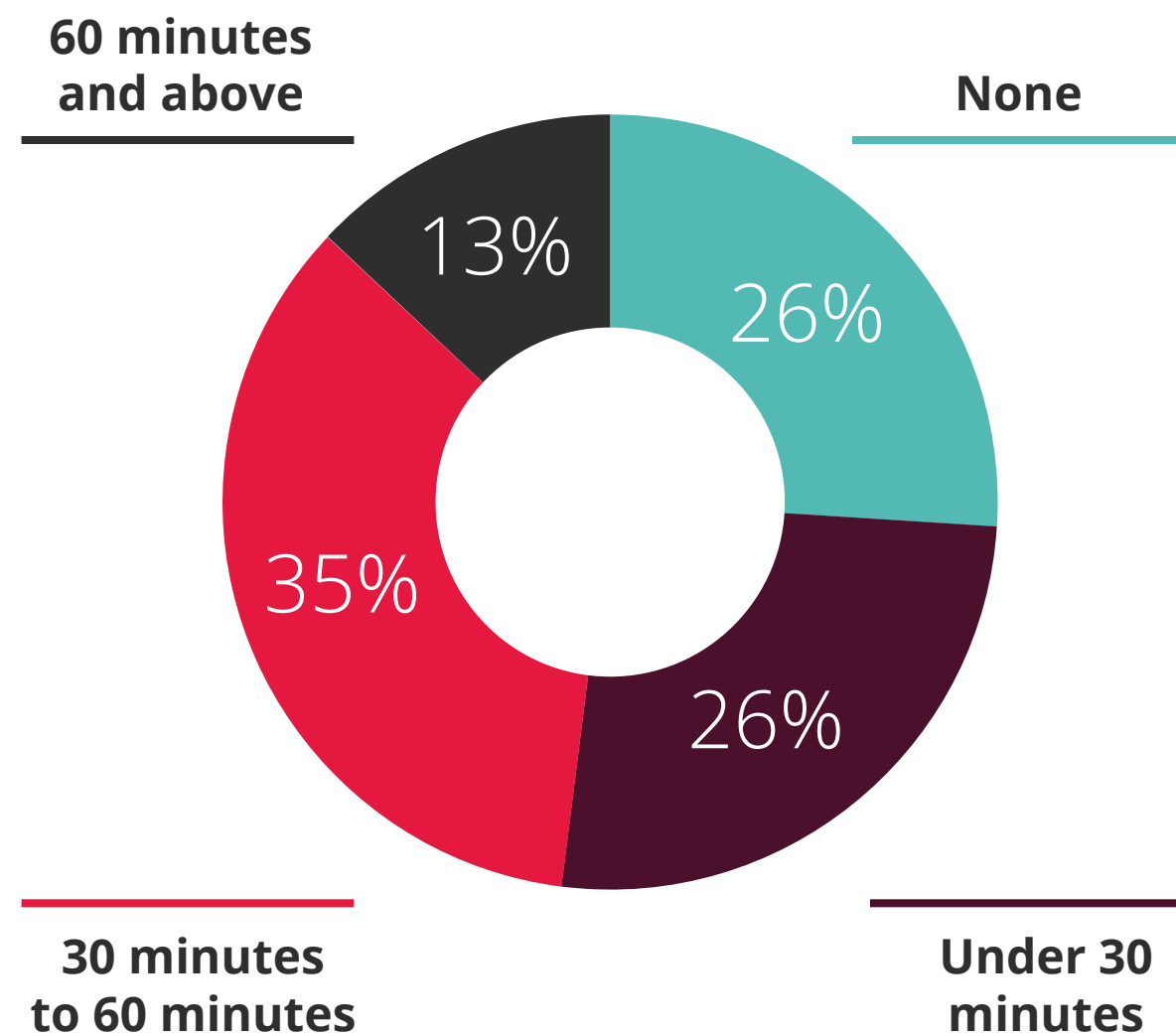
Our survey was open to anyone who self-declared themselves responsible for learning within a law firm or legal practice. We had 142 people respond from 137 law firms and in-house legal teams. We asked 16 questions regarding preferences to learning topics, content, format and functionality, the impact of the COVID pandemic and the purpose and promotion of learning within the organisation.

Top challenges in legal learning



74%
said time restraints
was their biggest
challenge

How much time do learners have to complete training per week?



Time restraints was by far the top challenge facing law firms when it comes to training. 74% of firms cited this as a challenge. This was the top challenge regardless of the size of firm.

26% of firms reported having no time per week to complete training. This suggests that learners are either completing training outside working hours or are not completing training at all.

Top challenges in legal learning

The second biggest challenge was ensuring that training was completed (48%), followed by ensuring training was engaging (38%). The top three challenges were similar across all sizes of firm (although 1-10 employee firms did not have as much of a challenge with getting training completed).

All teams cited time restraints as their top challenge, except for compliance teams who cited ensuring training was completed. Learning teams were slightly less worried about ensuring training was completed but wanted high quality learning whilst finance teams, perhaps unsurprisingly, cited budgets as a challenge.

Learning challenges

48% Ensuring training was completed

38% Ensuring training was engaging



"The demands of the job make it very hard to set aside time (...) during the working day. Most staff end up completing the training in their own time."

Partner

Top priority learning topics

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a highly regulated industry, **risk and compliance** is the most required learning topic (77%). This was closely followed by **learning related to a specific practice area** (73%) and **learning related to a specific role** (71%). These three remained the top three priority topics regardless of the size of firm.

These results were echoed in the responses to 'top three learning topics for you in 2021', where most requests were for risk and compliance topics (including AML, SRA Standards and Regulations guidance and equality and diversity) (30%) followed by practice area topics (26%).

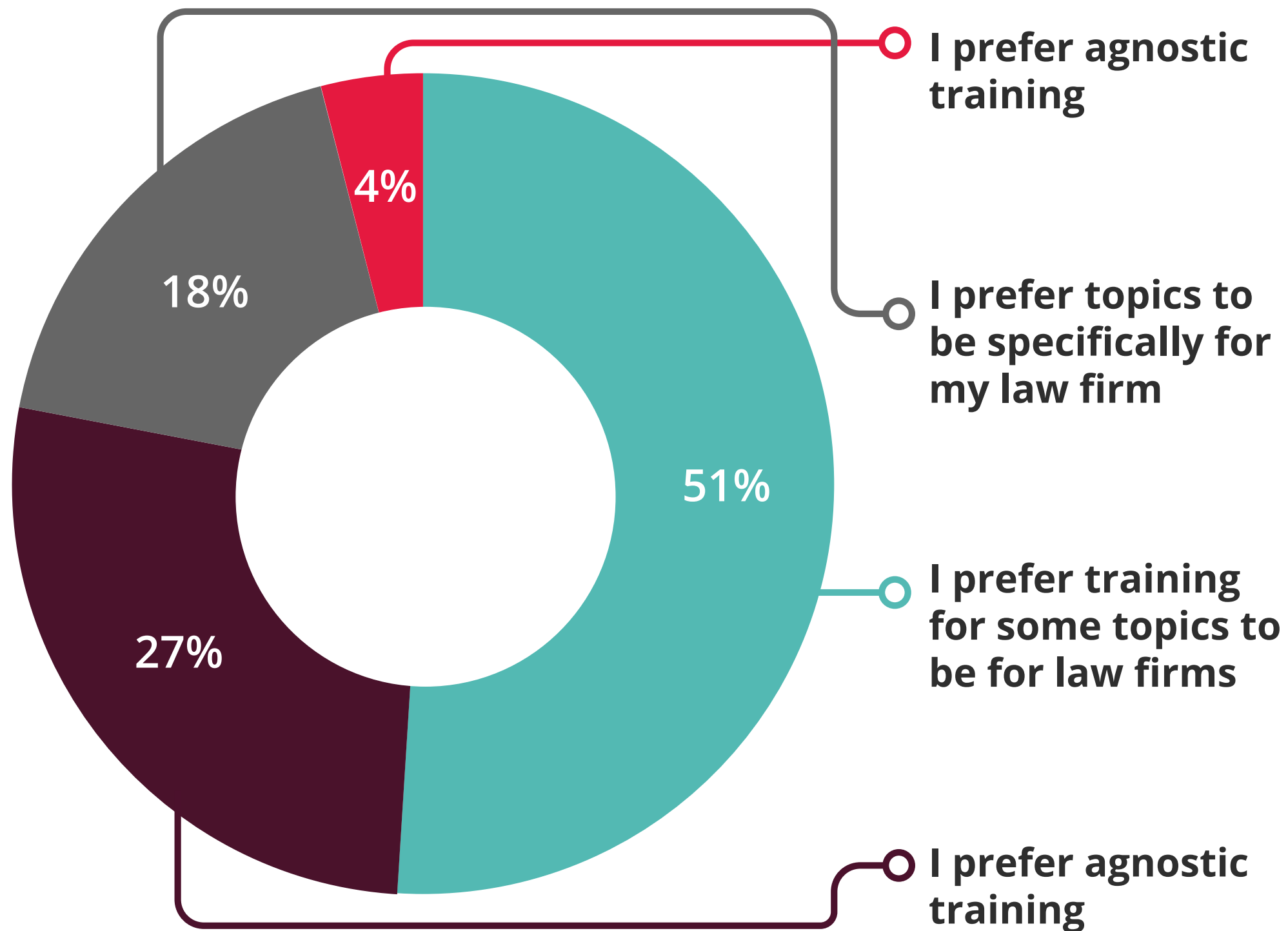
However, depending on the team's focus, different job roles selected different top priority topics. Managing partners, partners and solicitors prioritised learning related to their practice area, whilst compliance teams prioritised risk. Learning managers placed leadership skills within their top three, whilst practice managers and IT placed information and cyber security within their top three. IT teams also prioritised systems and software training whilst finance teams and support teams highlighted role specific training.



Top priority learning topics

Learning specific for law firms

Looking at the top priority topics the importance of legal specificity within training comes into sharp focus. In fact, 96% of firms preferred law firm specific training, with 51% preferring **all** topics to be law firm specific.



96%
prefer law firm specific



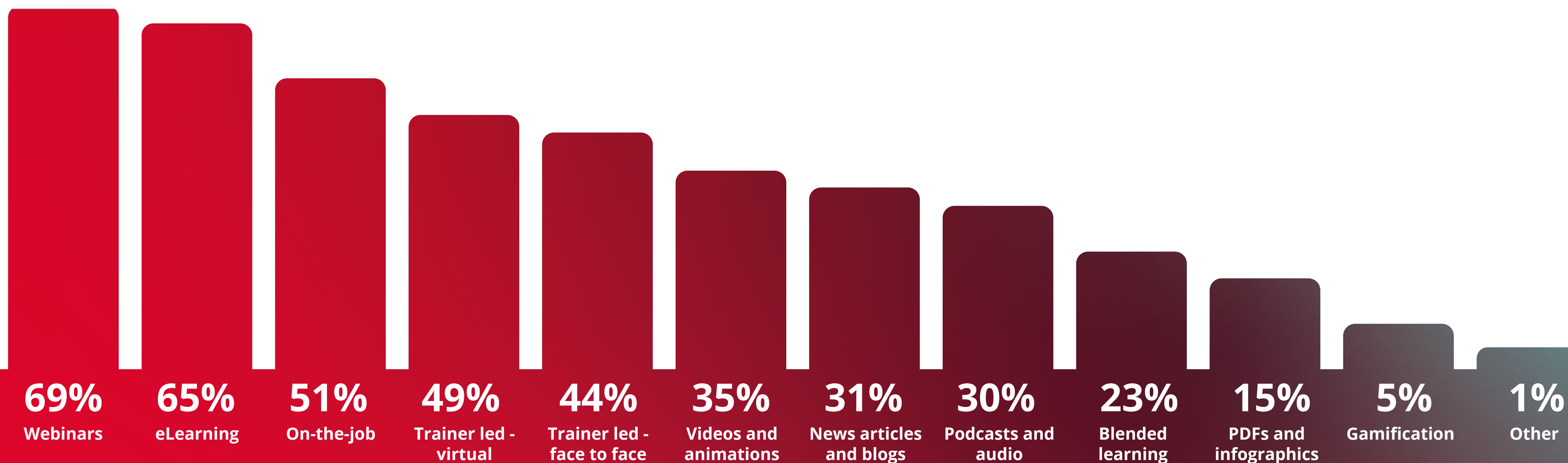
"Our firm is a niche family practice and we have specific requirements"

Solicitor

Learning formats and functionality

Webinars (69%) and **eLearning** (65%) were the most popular formats for learning within law firms and legal practices. This was followed by **on-the-job training** (51%). Trainer led sessions were also popular - both virtually (49%) and face to face (44%) (despite acknowledgment that we cannot do the latter for now). These appeared in the top three preferred formats for all sizes of law firms and for all job roles.

The results show a diverse range of formats being used by firms. This is encouraging as we know the key to any good learning programme is to utilise the right type of content at the right time.



Learning formats and functionality

Content functionality

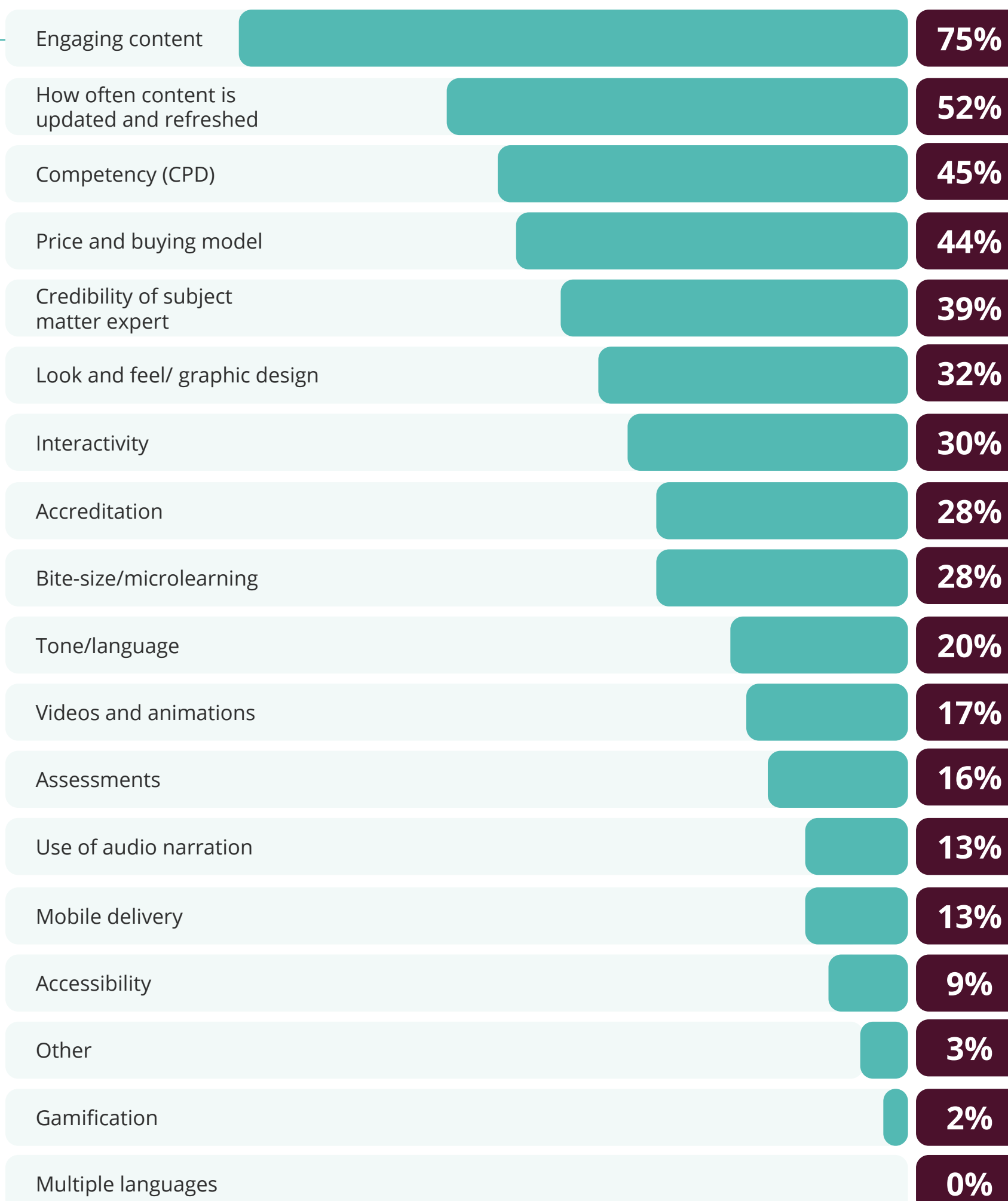
Engaging content is the top requirement with 75% of respondents stating they cared about this the most. This was the case for all sized firms and all job role groups. Of course, engagement is the holy grail of learning content so it is not surprising that this came out top but with legal learners having so little time, the importance of ensuring every minute of content is truly relevant cannot be underestimated.

How often content is updated and refreshed was key to 52% of our respondents. This makes sense considering the importance of staying up-to-date with both regulatory requirements and practice area changes. This was a top three priority factor for all sizes of law firm and most job roles.

Competency/CPD was a focus for 45% of our respondents. In particular, partners and solicitors placed this as their second priority content functionality suggesting that they prefer learning that fulfils their competency requirements. **The price and buying model** (44%) was particularly important to smaller firms (<50) and was a top three request for managing partners, compliance teams, finance teams and practice managers. **Credibility of the subject matter expert** (39%) was a top three concern for managing partners, partners and solicitors and learning teams whilst the **look and feel** (32%) was a top three request for larger firms (>150), learning managers, IT and support staff.

It would seem that providing engaging, credible high quality content, refreshed regularly and at a good price will go a long way to satisfying all teams within both large and small law firms and legal practices.

75%
prioritised
engaging content



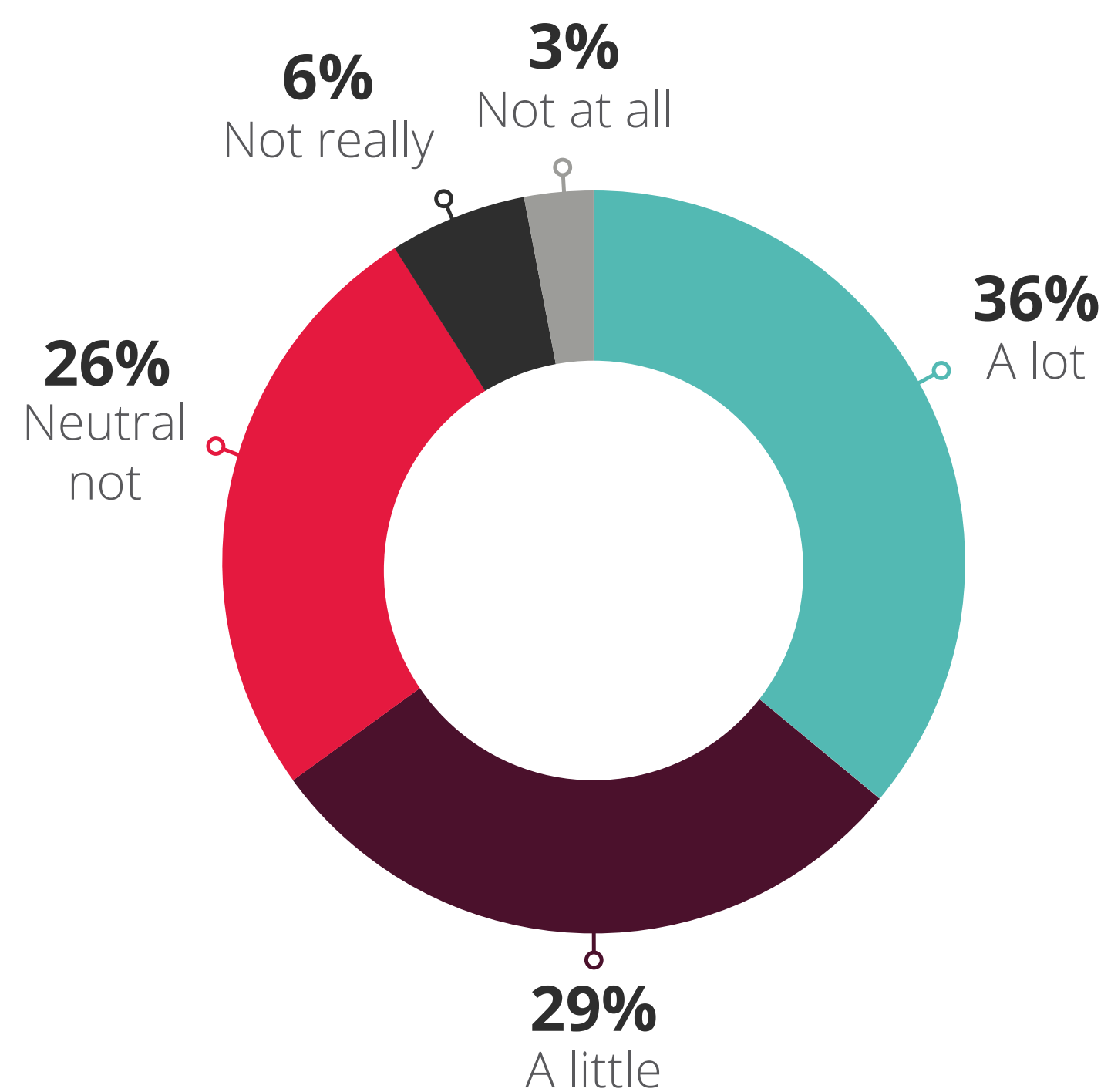
"Engaging content, updated on an annual basis is what I look for"

Director

Learning formats and functionality

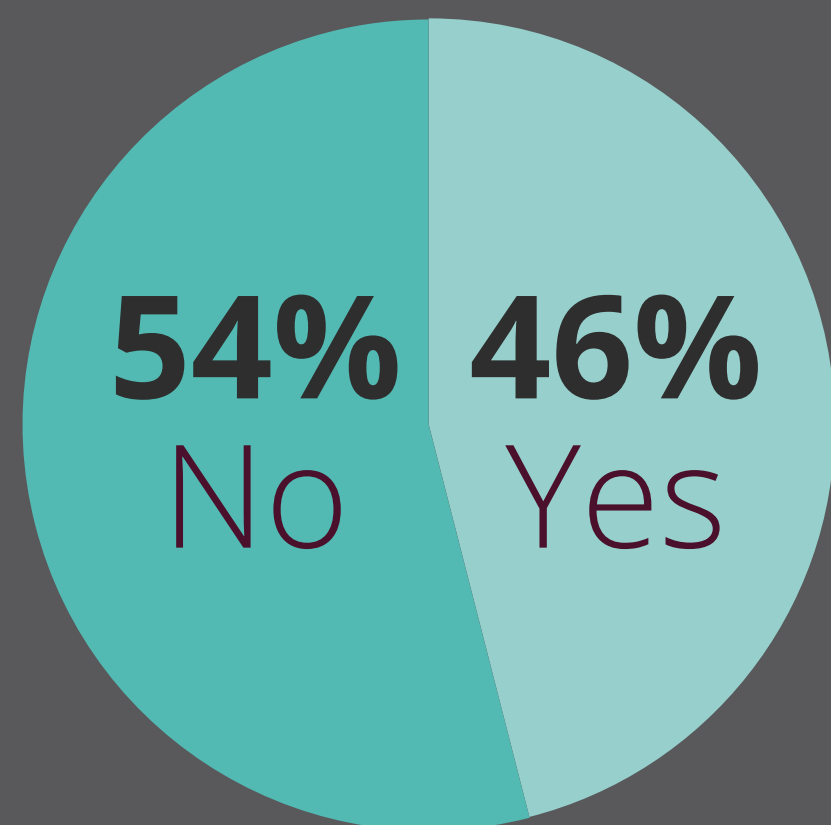
Learning delivered by mobile

Whilst 65% of firms state they care (a little or a lot) about mobile learning, it was not a top priority content functionality (13%). With most of us working from home and spending more time on our computers, it will be interesting to see if the need for mobile delivery changes after the pandemic.



Impact of the COVID pandemic

Have your learning needs changed as a result of the COVID pandemic?

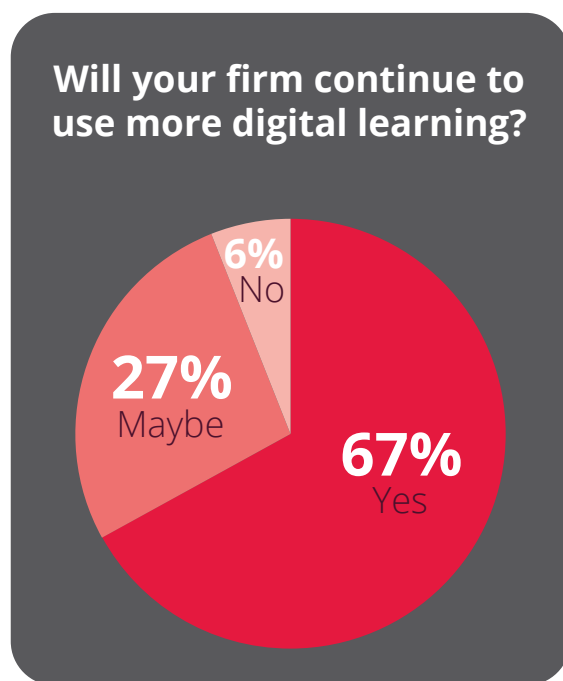
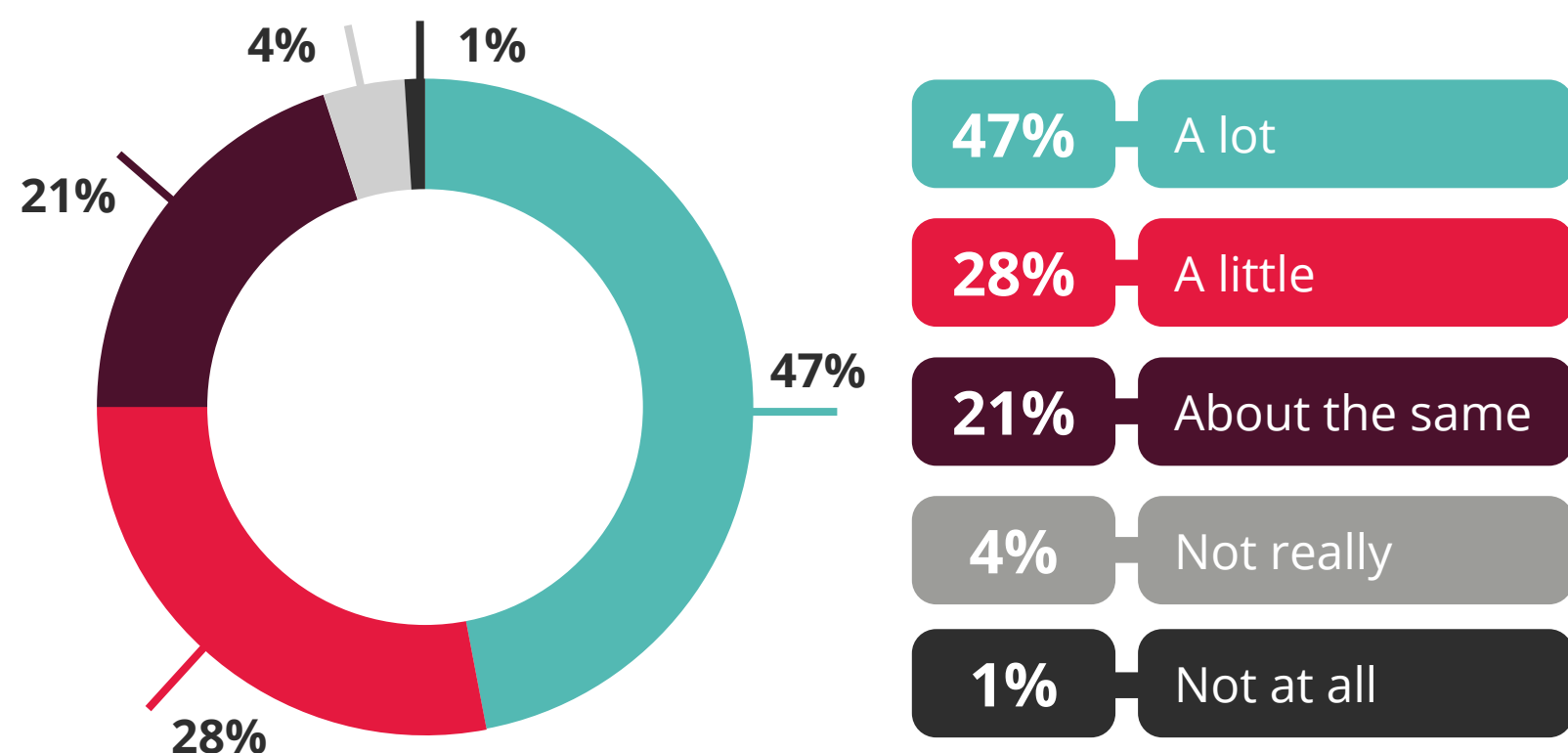


Learning needs changed for 46% of firms as a result of the COVID pandemic. Out of those who said their learning needs had changed, 64% mentioned they had moved to online, virtual or remote training.



Impact of the COVID pandemic

Has your use of digital learning increased as a result of the COVID pandemic?



Increased use of digital learning

75% stated digital learning use had increased (either a lot or a little) as a result of the COVID pandemic. 67% said they would continue to use more digital learning. This suggests that whilst the increase was forced by necessity, the result will be a permanent rise in the use of digital learning within law firms.

A mixed response

However, our respondents' comments showed a mixed response towards this change. Whilst some appreciated that digital learning is "economical", "efficient" and "easier to access", others found that it was "less sociable" and face to face training meant staff could engage and attend more easily in work time.

"[I] cannot see why anyone would go to an in-person training event these days."

Partner

"We will probably revert back to physical conferences once it is safe to do so."

Partner

With 33% saying they are unsure if they will continue to use more digital learning and the popularity of face-to-face training (44%), learning in-person will likely make a strong return albeit not to pre-COVID levels.



Providing and promoting learning

Why do you provide training?

There were four top reasons why firms and legal practices provided training:

80%

To help employees do their jobs

78%

To enhance performance

77%

Competency (CPD) requirement

72%

Compliance requirement

These four reasons were uppermost regardless of size of firm and job role (although learning teams also included creating a proactive learning culture as a top two reason).



Providing and promoting learning

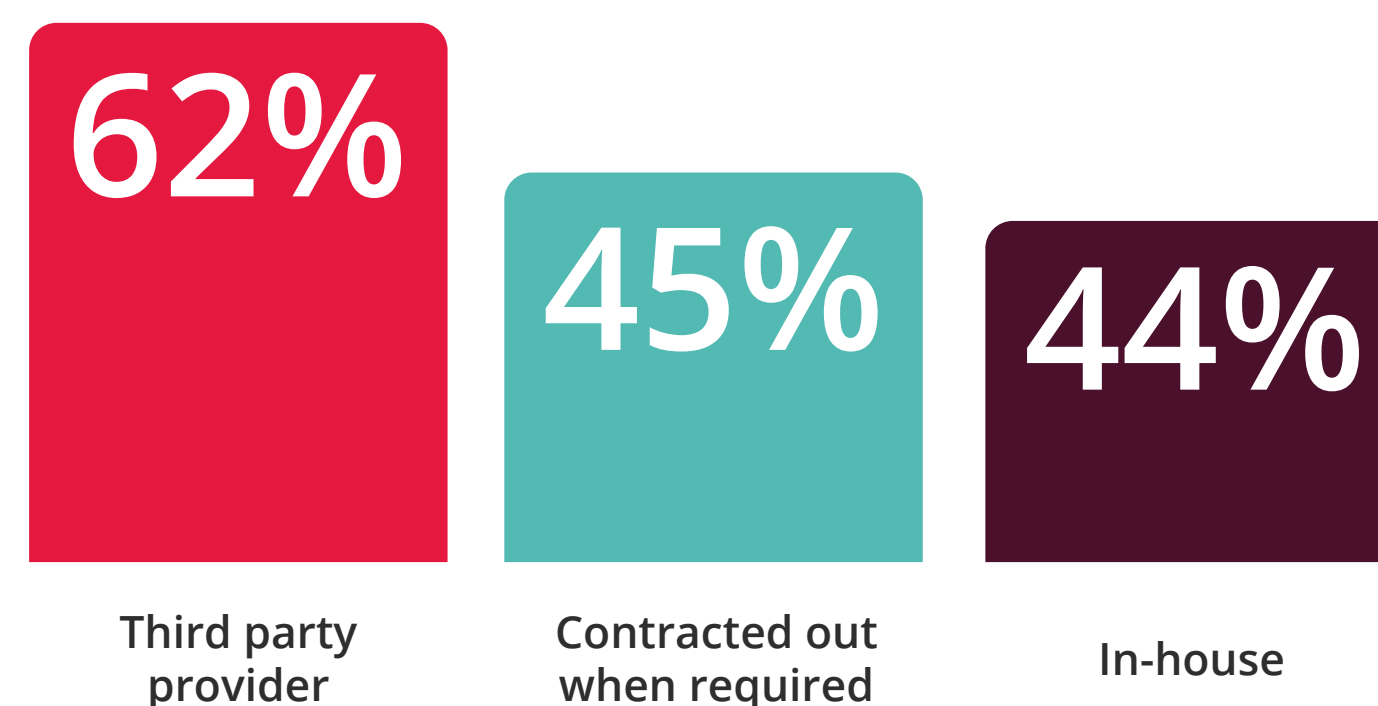
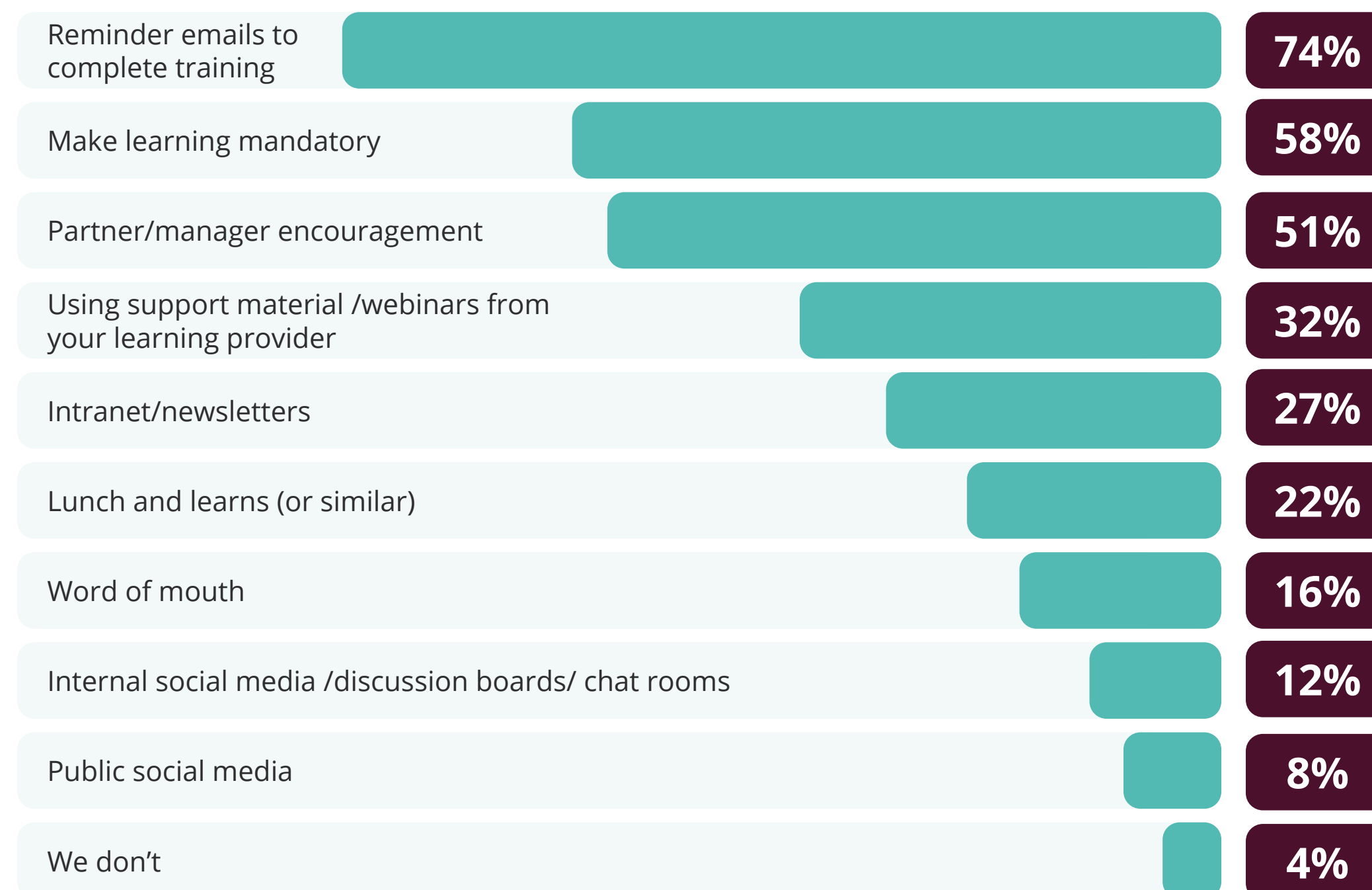
How do you promote training?

74% used **reminder emails** to complete training whilst 58% **made learning mandatory** in order to promote learning. Together with **partners and managers encouraging users to complete content** (51%) there are a wealth of 'push' techniques used in law firms. With the lack of time, the urgency of compliance and the competency requirements for learners within law firms, perhaps this is predictable.

The challenge for law firms will be how to ensure these requirements are met whilst also creating a strong learning culture using 'pull' techniques and a broader range of promotion. The wider learning community is moving towards greater use of social learning and although not commonly used within law firms (lunch and learns 22% and internal social media, discussion boards and chat functions 14%) perhaps this is one way that law firms can enhance engagement.

Who provides your training?

Overall training was provided by a combination of: third party providers (62%); contracted out when needed (45%) and created in-house (44%). Larger firms (>150) used a higher percentage of in-house training (61%) than smaller firms (<50) (29%), indicating potentially the wider dedicated learning resources available within larger firms.



Access Legal Learning's view

It would seem we are in the midst of a learning revolution with the rapid adoption of virtual training and digital learning within law firms. However, some of the old challenges remain. How do we fit learning into an already squeezed work schedule? How do we create engaging and relevant content which effectively utilises every precious minute our busy learners give us? How do we ensure the job gets done and our regulatory requirements are met whilst also creating a strong learning culture where learners are 'pulled' rather than 'pushed' towards engagement?

Our view is that by creating solutions which utilise best practice from adult pedagogy and learning design and integrating them into the flow of work, learning will no longer feel like an effort. If we create training set firmly within a legal context, where learners can centre themselves in the experience and leave with deeply practical knowledge, then the sacrifice will be worth it for the benefit of being able to do the job better and faster.

At the same time, we must benchmark against the wider learning community and ask ourselves some questions:

- 1. Are we providing the right content, at the right time and in the right place?**
- 2. How do we know? Are we adequately measuring staff feedback and learning impact?**
- 3. Are we using these metrics to ensure good ROI?**
- 4. Are we embedding social learning and providing highly personalised learning journeys?**
- 5. Are we using learning to attract and retain the top talent?**

By asking and answering these questions, we will ensure that legal learning is always at the forefront of best practice.



Access Legal Learning is here to help. We have a long tradition of combining legal subject matter expertise with world class learning design. We look forward to working with you further to understand and respond to your needs and move the legal learning agenda forward.

We understand the need to keep your practice and teams safe and compliant - enabling them to deliver the best possible service to your clients whilst ensuring they have the right skills and tools to do so.

Whether you are looking for regulatory training to ensure they are up to date on everything from SRA Standards and Regulations, AML, GDPR and cyber security to providing specific support for mental health and wellbeing, we can help.

Get in touch to speak to one of our legal training specialists or [download our learning course brochure](#) for the full range of what is available to support your law firm



theaccessgroup.com/legal



0845 345 3300