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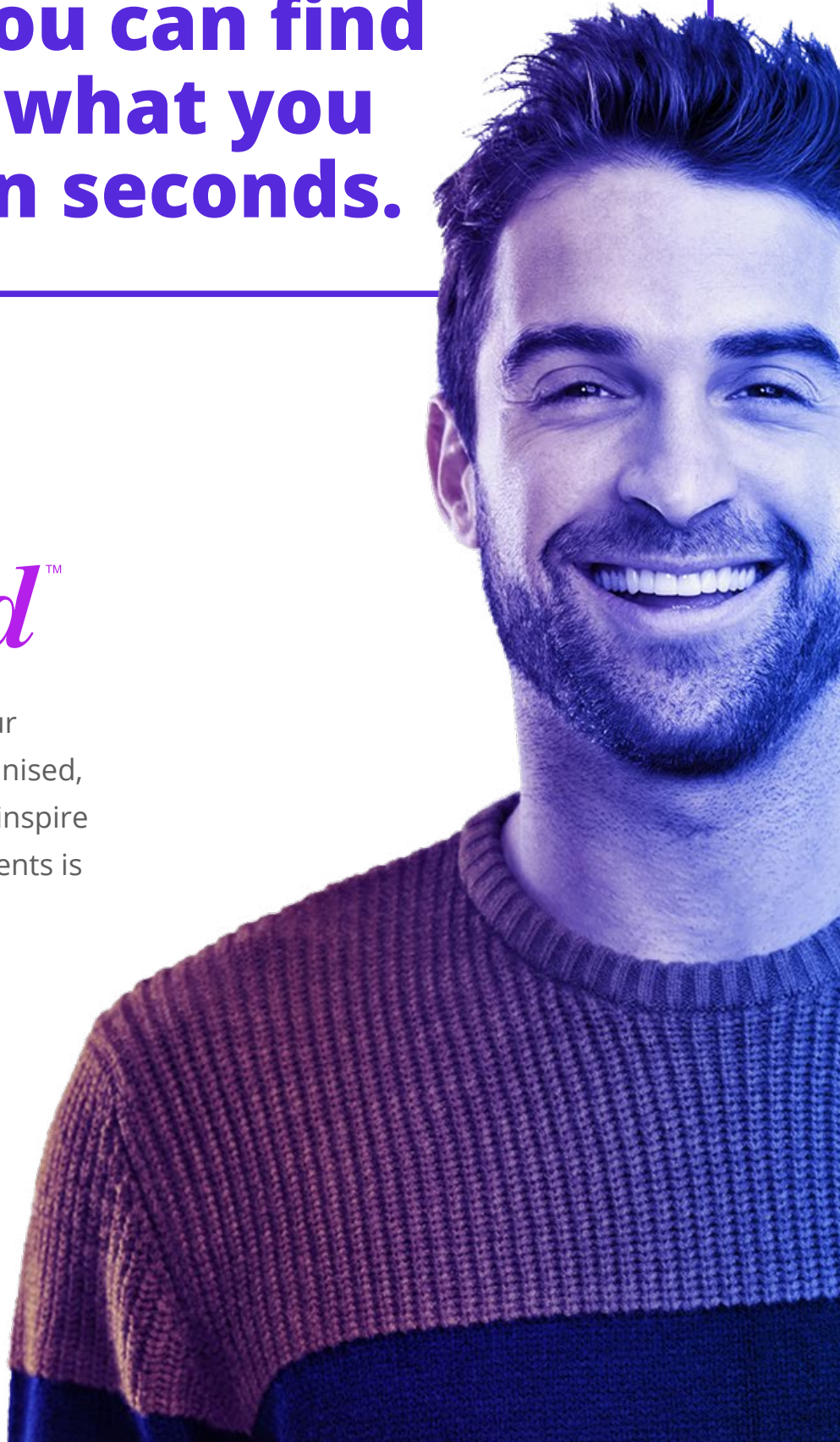
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We've heard our share of speculation about what the legal sector will look like after the pandemic – we're now closer than ever to seeing the shape of change for ourselves. This year's LPM Frontiers research takes a close look at new and shifting business challenges, progress on the tech front, attitudes to hybrid working, and the road to building a greener business.

A total of 60 senior operational leaders answered this year's survey – many of whom have also given me extra perspective on their worlds via in-depth qualitative interviews. We've combined the numbers and commentary to give you a full picture of the sector as it stands, and we've even split the data by a firm's total headcount (<50 or >50) for some of the biggest topics to highlight the diversity of positions and perspectives in the SME legal market.

Our tracker of how different examples of tech compare for enhancing competitiveness and efficiency makes a welcome return – providing an overview of what's really heating up in the legal tech world of 2022. Plus, our report partners – **Access Legal**, **NetDocuments**, **Osprey Approach** and **Accesspoint** – offer their thoughts on the data and how to tackle the defining challenges facing today's SME law firm.

Aftab Bose, editor
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IN BRIEF

78%

say that recruitment challenges present the biggest strategic change consideration

87%

say salary is the biggest factor at play here



Average IT spend is

6.23%

- nearly 8% for firms with under 50 headcount



2-3
DAYS

AVERAGE TIME IN OFFICE

57% say behavioural aspects of hybrid working need work

CRM and client facing tech will draw the most tech spend in the next year

71%

say that clients rarely or never screen their sustainability profile when choosing to work with them



FRESH FUTURES

The much-cited observation that businesses underwent years of transformation in weeks during the pandemic seems to manifest itself in LPM Frontiers 2022 – as our annual survey of UK SME legal leaders reveals a range of new strategic considerations on the agenda.

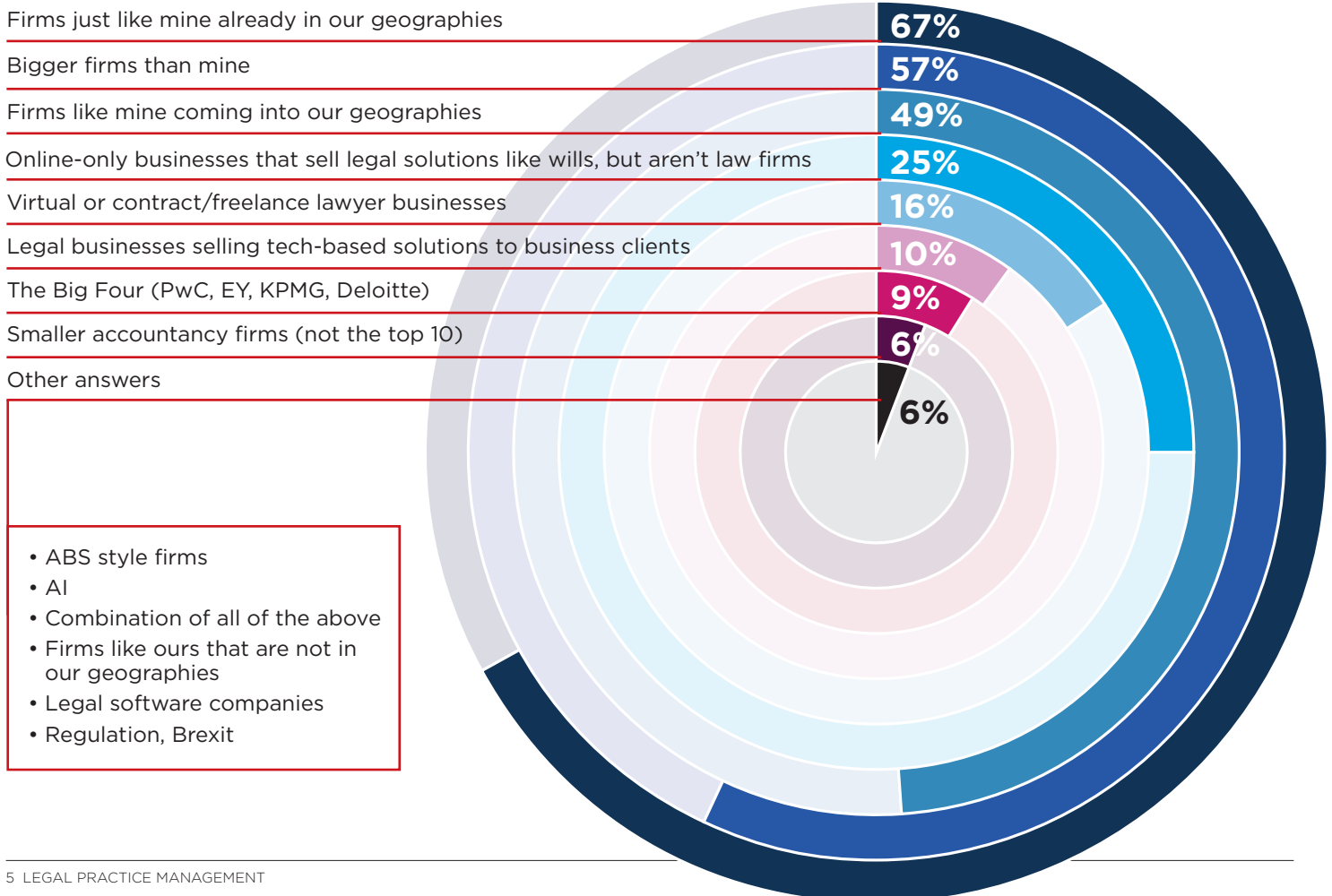
Last year was still rife with discussion of the ‘new normal’. Horizons were broadened, and law firms were worried about a vast array of competitive threats – from larger firms using the virtual working paradigm to access their clients more effectively in several geographies, to online-only disruptors capturing an increasingly tech-savvy customer base. Things have demonstrably settled down in 2022 – large firms seem to have enough on their own plates without edging into the SME market share, and the biggest threat to the latter comes from direct peers in the same geographies – as noted by around two-thirds (67%) of our respondents.

“There’s so much work around, combined with a dearth of talent, which means bigger firms are under

immense pressure and are no longer looking to smaller firms’ client bases for work,” says Glyn Morris, partner at Higgs. And according to Peter Ambrose, managing director at The Partnership, the local focus hints at a degree of stagnation in the market. “As it stands, it would appear that firms aren’t really moving around – they’re just competing for clients within the same territories and nothing is really changing,” he says.

Opinion is more divided around potentially ‘disruptive’, online-only legal services businesses – with only 25% positioning them as the most threatening competitor to their firm. Many dismiss their ability to permeate more complex areas of legal work, while some suggest they could be a significant threat. “These digital entities are working on ways to deliver legal services without the need for too many skilled fee earners, which makes them a significant potential threat in light of the current talent shortage. They could alter the way legal services are approached and delivered, and subsequently shift the

Which kinds of competitor are most threatening to your firm’s future?





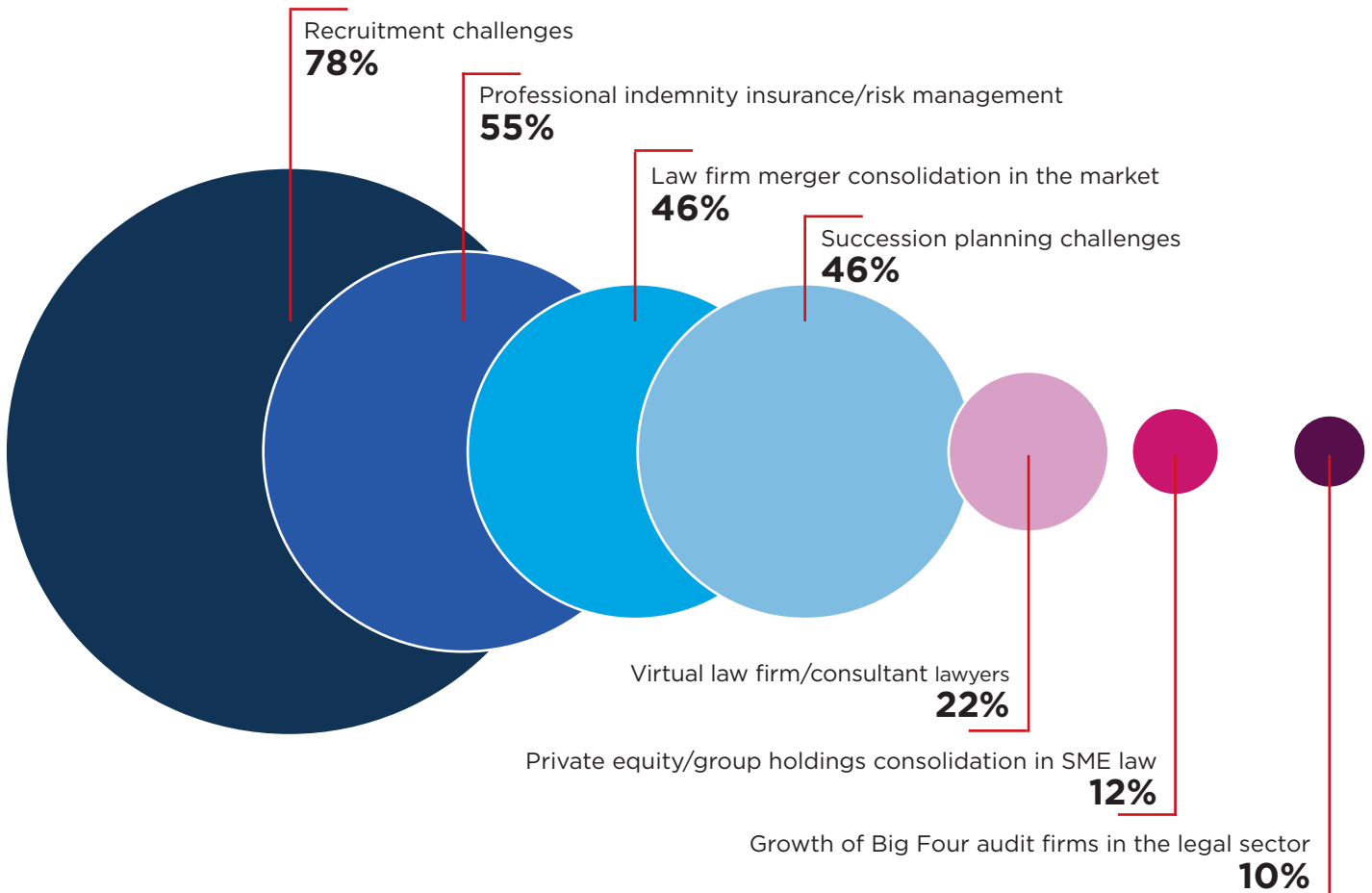
TALENT ROULETTE

Attraction and retention is inescapably the biggest challenge facing SME law firms - reflected in these numbers as well as qualitative discussions. Firms are busy building attractive employee value propositions that combine flexibility and progressive attitudes - as they attempt to counter balance wage inflation

entire competitive landscape - so they do deserve some attention," says Morris.

Other alternative options - such as freelance or contractor-based staffing models - also remain secondary threats for now (p3), cited by only 16%. "Business development is not a strong suit for lawyers, so drawing in clients as a freelancer without the gravitational pull of a brand and marketing team behind them up can be a full-time job in itself. It can work, but individuals attracted by the freelance model may discover they do not generate enough revenue, while clients may be uneasy to discover that 70% of their fee is kept by the lawyer," says Neil May, chief operating officer at Thackray Williams. As for the Big Four professional services firms, they haven't quite made the waves that were anticipated in recent years. "Many were expecting them to capture a big market share, and they have the resources to be big disruptors, but they haven't been able to deliver real quality of service - and I don't see them challenging

Which sectoral trends present the greatest strategic change considerations for the SME law market?



“As it stands, it would appear that firms aren't really moving around – they're just competing for clients within the same territories and nothing is really changing”

Peter Ambrose, managing director, The Partnership

firms of any size in the near future,” argues Wendy Edwards, finance director at Attwaters Jameson Hill.

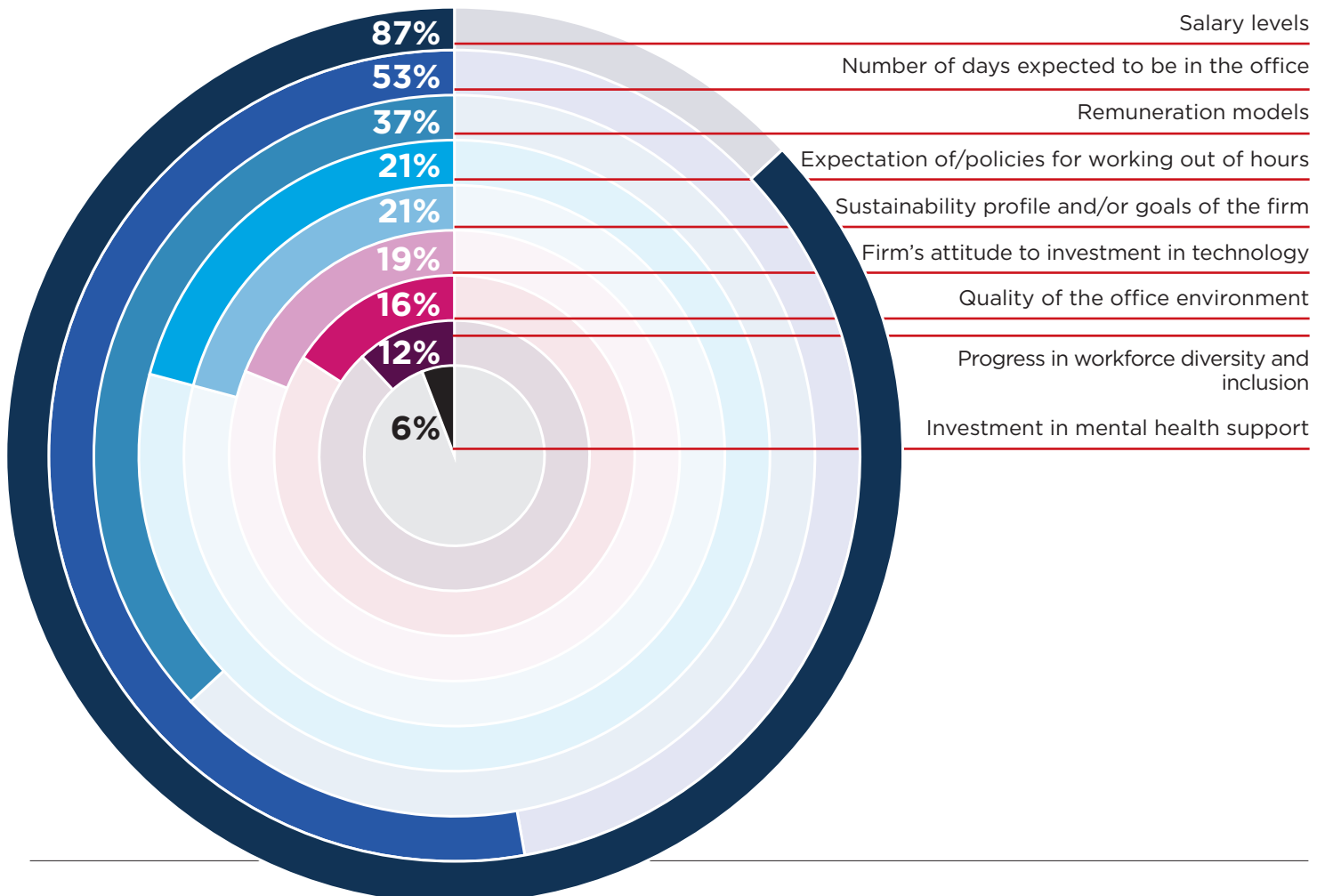
If not new competition, what is the biggest driver of strategic change in the legal landscape of 2022? Recruitment is the central factor at play, according to 78% of respondents (p6), while 87% report that salary is the most influential metric in the competition for talent – a trend now accentuated by the ‘cost-of-living crisis’. Many firms have a cap on salaries, beyond which they choose not to compete with much higher offers in the market – and they lose out on much-needed additional hands on deck as a result. “Getting two- or three-year-qualified lawyers, who have been well trained and can hit the ground running, is really challenging – and it’s holding our business back. We’re turning away work because of it,” says Ambrose.

Firms are being strategic in building what they believe to be a compelling and holistic employee value proposition in a bid to counterbalance wage

inflation. “We don’t just talk about salary, we talk about remuneration and therefore our employee benefit package that goes with it, as well as the culture of the firm and the opportunities available for professional development,” says John Turner, chief operations officer at Ellisons. For The Partnership, being more technologically advanced has also helped with recruitment, says Ambrose. “People want to move out of traditional law firms and do something modern, so it’s very important to demonstrate a certain digital prowess.”

Leaders are also noting that wage hikes are limited in their long-term attractiveness – people do move for better-paying jobs, but then move back to

Which of these most significantly influence your ability to attract and/or retain talent?



“Private equity could potentially shift the market. We’ve seen some movement in the intellectual property space already. It’ll be interesting to see if it has a large-scale impact



Zoe Bailey, head of strategic operations, Withers & Rogers

their previous firms shortly afterwards, as they realise the workloads entailed by higher pay, and the importance of having a small and supportive team. “Having a firm where people are valued, have development opportunities, and have interesting work is like a glue that attracts new people and keeps relationships with former colleagues intact,” says May.

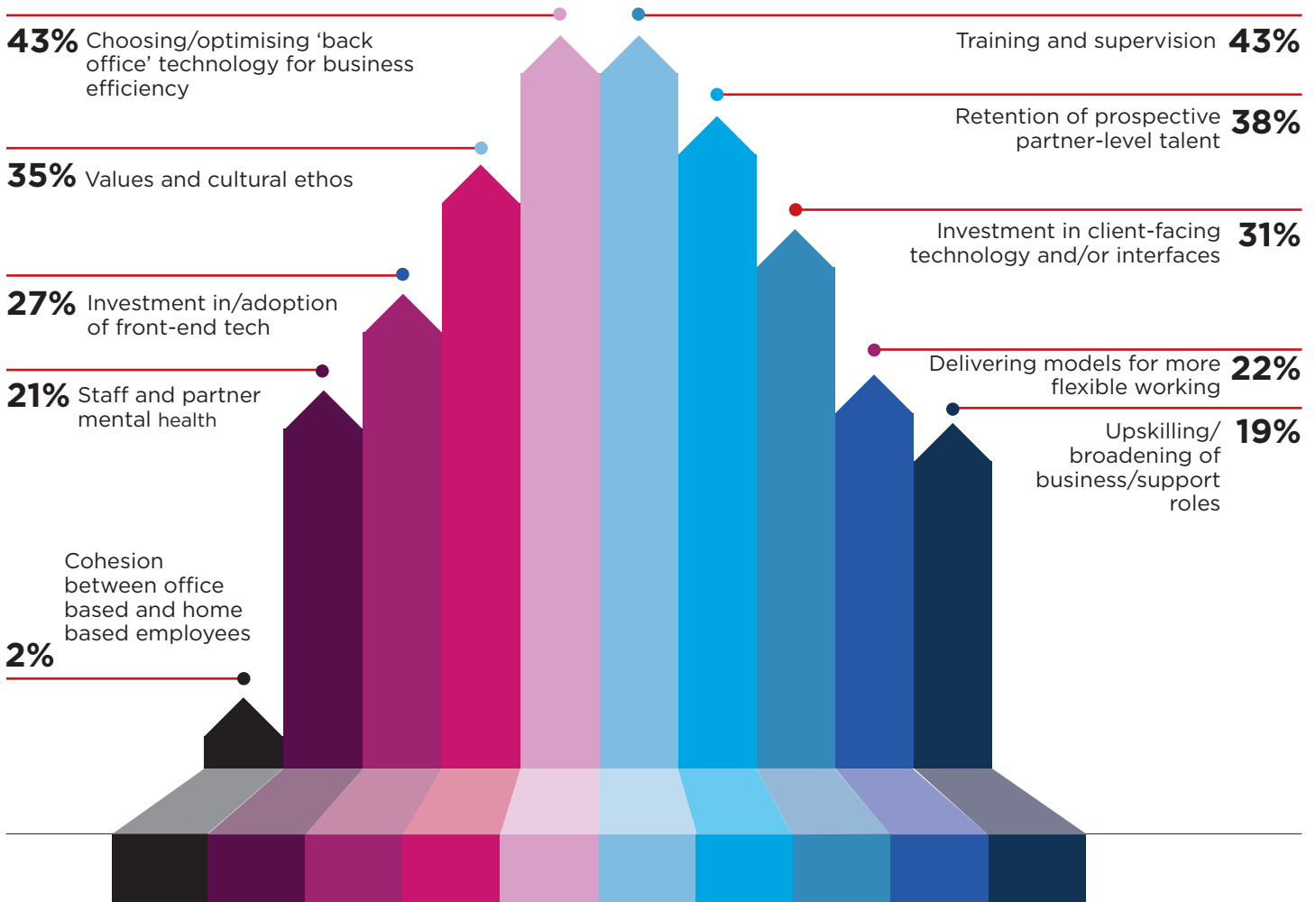
Alternative remuneration models – such as commission – have the potential to influence recruitment success too, according to 37% of respondents (p7). “I did some benchmarking recently, and commission-based pay seems to be expected – particularly within certain cohorts of the business and

at a senior level. But it’s always challenging to ensure that variable pay drives the right behaviours, and that it’s perceived in the right way if compensation varies from one group to the next,” says Zoe Bailey, head of strategic operations at Withers & Rogers.

Neil May of Thackray Williams elaborates on the behavioural challenges around commission-based pay. “People end up acting in their own interest, rather than that of the clients or the firm. Our compensation structure is linked strongly to business performance, and our appraisal scores reflect quality of service rather than just billed hours. Bonuses should be based on value delivered to the client, not hours devoted,” he says. So, while these models have a strong role to play in attracting talent, they are approached by firms with caution.

After talent attraction and retention, professional indemnity insurance (PII) is the second biggest consideration for strategic change (55%) as firms continue to evaluate the risk profile of their activities and keep an eye on the market for alternative

Which organisational challenges are of greatest concern?



providers – the former being a more popular avenue for now (p6). “Our focus remains on the quality of our work. If this is upheld, then insurance doesn’t necessarily become a negative consideration – it’s largely a problem if a firm encounters negligence issues, and if the subject of an organisation’s quality of work falls down the strategic agenda,” says Bailey.

Nevertheless, PII costs are high, and are even affecting firms’ appetite for consolidation and succession – other strategic change considerations that are prominent on the law firm radar, each accounting for 46% of respondents (p6). Some suggest that the market today is particularly ripe for mergers and acquisitions (M&A). “Some firms have performed well while others have really suffered through the pandemic, and there are small firms out there where the equity partners want to take their money and exit, which creates opportunities,” says Turner.

“While our focus is on organic growth and developing internal capabilities and efficiencies, we



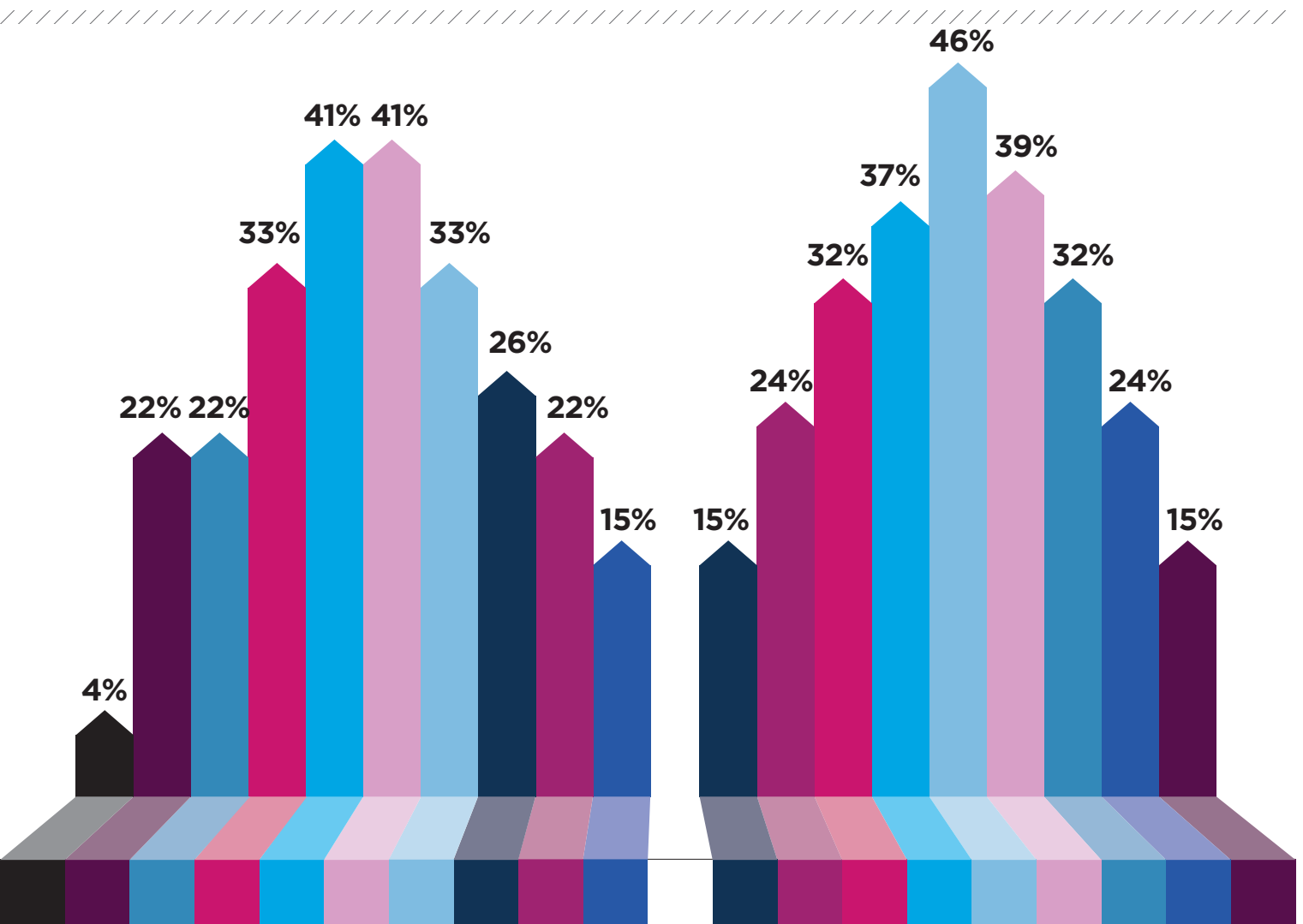
TRAINING TROUBLE

On aggregate, picking and effectively implementing the right business efficiency technology is tied with training and supervision at the top of the organisational challenges list. Larger firms are particularly concerned with training – owing to a lack of experienced talent available, and barriers to supervision in a hybrid world

Which organisational challenges are of greatest concern?

Under 50 headcount

Over 50 headcount



always keep an eye out for opportunities – such as distressed firms or those executing their succession plan. Our operational infrastructure allows us to merge with firms quite easily, although there are several factors to consider such as PII – which can skyrocket without the right due diligence – and, in succession cases, run-off cover. Cultural affinity is also crucial for us – we don't want to merge with a firm unless they have the same values as our business," he adds.

And while larger players in SME legal are scouting out consolidation options, Peter Carr, head of IT at Fisher Jones Greenwood, suggests that M&A backed by private equity entrants – currently a strategic change consideration for only 12% – is also set to increase (p6). "There's significant overlap in what many local firms are doing, so consolidating these presents a major saving opportunity. I wouldn't be surprised if private equity was to move up the strategic agenda next year," he says.

Bailey holds a similar view: "Private equity could

potentially shift the market. We've seen some movement in the intellectual property space already. It'll be interesting to see if it has a large-scale impact, as there tends to be tension in professional services when it comes to private equity. The partnership model is attractive as it provides business ownership and direct input into a firm's future – accentuated further at our own firm, where there is a sense of altruism and a recognition that people are our greatest asset. This can be disrupted by the introduction of external expertise through private equity – it is an interesting tension to navigate."

“We are wary of infrastructure that has too many different products, because it would be a nightmare to manage, and you end up with conflicting software and excess costs.”

Neil May, chief operating officer, Thackray Williams

CULTURE OF SUPPORT

If people have powered law firms over the past two years, 2022 will be about empowering those people with technology that makes their working lives easier and more rewarding.

Against a backdrop of the Great Resignation, eye-watering salaries and a rejection of old ways of working, the legal sector will need to invest in all areas of the employee experience.

SME law firms recognise the impact the war for talent is having, as this year's LPM Frontiers research findings are centred on strategy and investment around people. Asked about which sectoral trends pose the biggest strategic change for firms, 76% said recruitment challenges. It's increasingly clear that they cannot deliver exceptional client experiences without first empowering their people.

People have always been swayed by a better salary and a new challenge – but they're also seeking modern working practices. The days of updating targets manually and remembering multiple passwords are fading fast thanks to the cloud-based collaborative tech

now available to smaller and mid-sized firms. People want the technology they use at work to mirror what they use at home, so it has to be intuitive, responsive and highly personal.

Hybrid working is again high on the agenda, but just offering it won't be enough in 2022. The research shows that more than 75% of SME law firms are asking employees to come in three days or less a week, while just 14% still expect practitioners to be in full-time. It's highly likely that firms that insist on the latter will lose out on talented new recruits – but equally, those who implement hybrid working without equipping people with the right tools for the job are just as likely to suffer skills gaps.

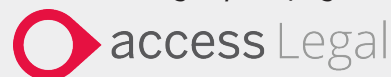
According to the survey, 44% of legal leaders said that training and supervision, and 38% said values and cultural ethos, are among their greatest concerns. Maintaining a culture, an ethos and supporting practitioners while they are spread across multiple locations isn't as straightforward as having the team all in one place. This is why the right tech is so critical to hybrid working, since it enables people to

access files from any location and to communicate and collaborate with ease.

Ultimately, SME law firms will need to make strategic decisions and investments that prioritise their people. Looking at the research and what is front of mind for legal leaders, it's clear we will see investment in workplace culture, continuing professional development, and also in integrated software solutions – to boost efficiency and remove frustrations in everyday responsibilities of legal practitioners (nearly 2 in 10 firms and over 1 in 10 firms said they plan to invest in customer relationship management or case management software).

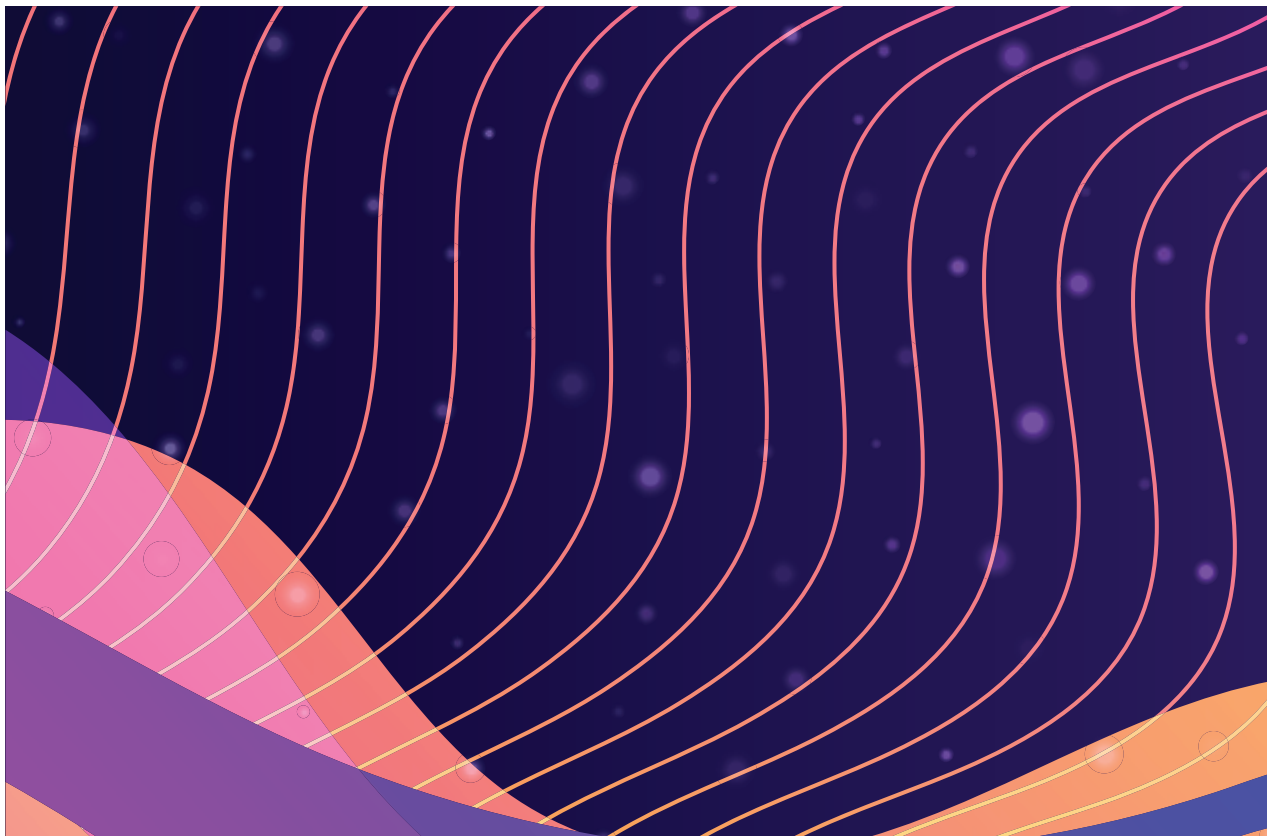
One thing is clear – people will need to be central to SME law firms' strategies this year to ensure success. **LPM**

Doug Sawers, managing director, Access Legal
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Organisational challenges

Consolidation might be one thing to watch for on the horizon, but for now many firms are content with growing organically and solving their internal challenges to maximise efficiency and profitability. The rush of tech investment through the pandemic has now given way to a period of optimisation, where firms need to ensure adoption and secure a return on that spend. The task of joining up systems, particularly of 'back office' tech, is ranked highest on this year's list of organisational challenges by the biggest share of respondents - tied at 43% with training and supervision (p8).

"We're making sure that all our systems and people are working together to sustain our goals, which involves reducing lawyer input and ensuring the right people are doing the right tasks. But that's always going to be a top challenge, as it's a continuous process," says Glyn Morris at Higgs. Integration is similarly the story at Thackray Williams. "We are wary of infrastructure that has too many different products, because it would be a nightmare to manage, and you end up with conflicting software and excess costs. We've been doing a comprehensive review of our choices in the back office over the last two years to look at opportunities for streamlining," says May.

Splitting our LPM Frontiers results by the size of a firm's headcount - between firms with fewer than 50 employees and those with more - reveals that smaller firms, presumably with fewer resources for IT optimisation, are more concerned about their back-office technology than their larger counterparts (p9). The latter are more focused on training and supervision, which Ambrose links to recruitment challenges. "We're having to take on people with less experience due to the talent shortage, but they need substantial help and supervision as a result," he says. According to Edwards, firms also don't necessarily have the capacity to meet this need. "So many of our partners and senior

associates have taken on so much more work, and they're dealing with client demands every day. So they rarely have time to train younger staff," she says.

Looking at these figures in the context of wider market trends, Bailey suggests that burgeoning challenges around training and supervision have cultural implications. "It's surprising, as the pandemic changed attitudes to be more output-focused. There has been a societal move away from 'management by attendance to management by achievement', which has further moved businesses away from micromanagement. There isn't a sign that productivity has dramatically tailed off following this seismic shift, but time will tell if future adaptations will need to be made," she says.

Also among the highly cited challenges (35%) is building or maintaining 'values or a cultural ethos' within a law firm (p8). According to Turner, culture forms the bedrock of all work done at Ellisons. "We have a firm set of values, which relate to putting the client at the heart of everything, working hard but also playing hard, supporting the local community, recruiting, developing and retaining a talented workforce and working as a team. All our strategy and implementation upholds these values, and it's been successful so far - it's very apparent when someone doesn't quite adhere to these," he says.

"Our challenge is to make sure that people really imbibe this ethos, rather than using it as a checklist, and that they can uphold the values even when inundated with work," he adds. Managing people is key to several other key business challenges too, such as mental health, flexible working and upskilling - all cited by around a fifth of respondents (p8). Client-facing technology is another significant challenge (more on this in the next section), vying with talent for business leaders' attention in 2022.

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PRACTICE EFFICIENCY
AWARD

2021 WINNER



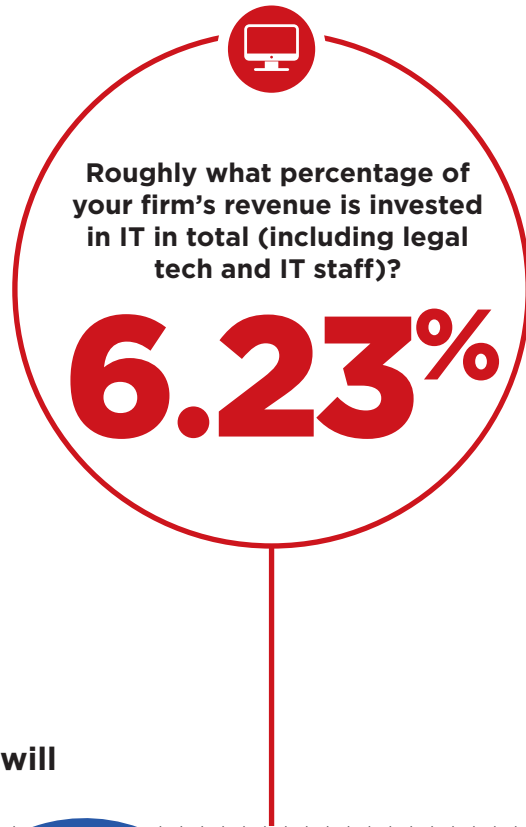
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TECH CHECK

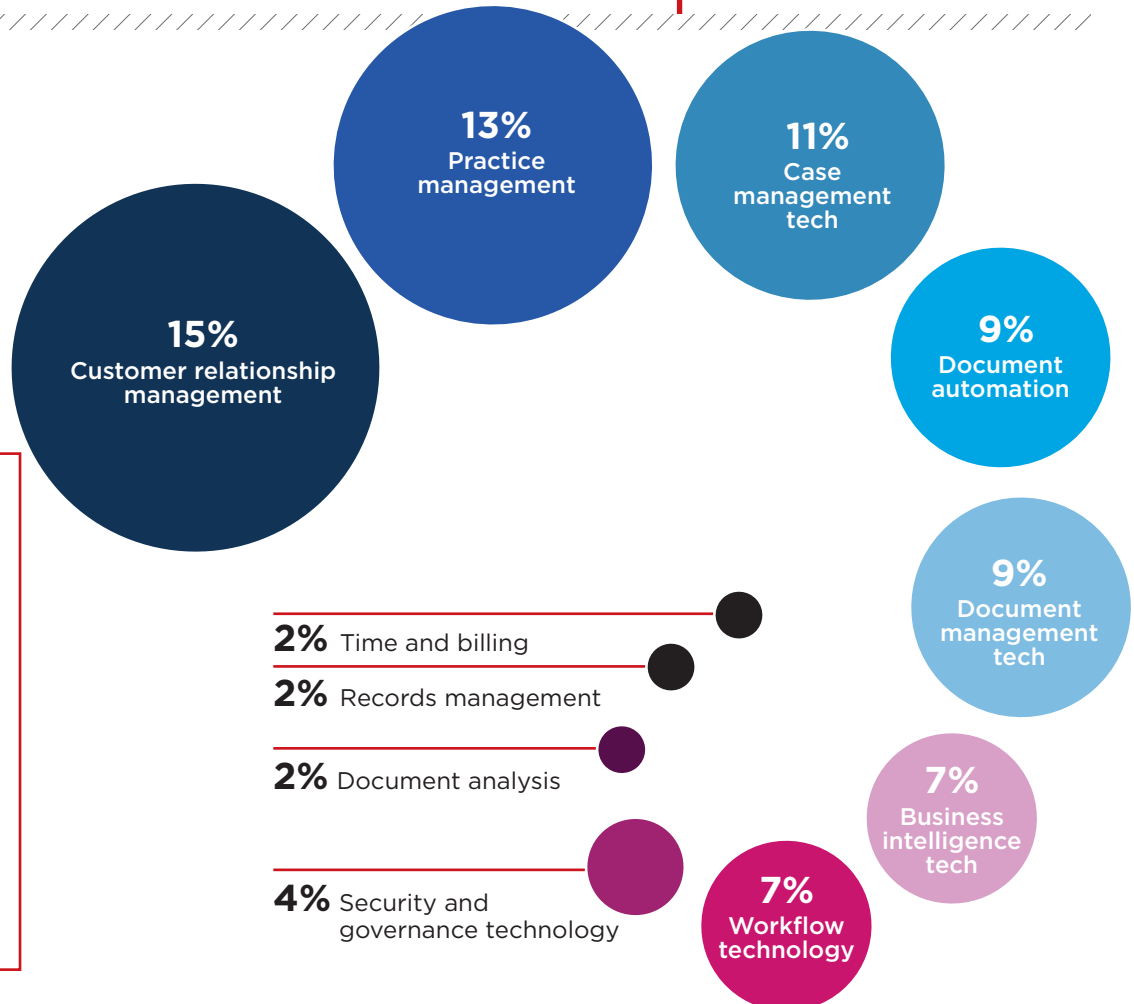
On average, SME law firms are spending just over 6.2% of their revenues on IT (including legal tech and IT staff) – very little movement on last year’s 6%. “It’s impossible to run a law firm without IT – it’s just as necessary now as having people. Our spend edges closer to 7% – of which around 5% goes on maintaining the current infrastructure and the 2% above that is channelled into research and development and new tech,” says Peter Carr at Fisher Jones Greenwood.

Law firms have a range of tech spending plans for the next year or so, although improving client relationships and experience features prominently in their top picks. “A digitalised client experience is the new arena of competitiveness for law firms. Most firms can handle a matter competently, and winning and retaining business is now about the quality of service delivery,” Carr adds.

Firms are focused on improving different aspects of service delivery. Wendy Edwards of Attwaters



What is the next technology project your firm will invest in, that isn’t in progress currently?



- 19% Other answers**
- Already doing all of the above
 - Client experience software
 - Client onboarding and compliance
 - Don’t know
 - Intranet
 - New telephone system
 - None contemplated
 - None of the above, we are already invested
 - Nothing planned
 - Onboarding/client communication

“The end goal is efficiency – handing over the administrative burden to artificial intelligence so that our people can do higher-value tasks.”

John Turner, chief operations officer, Ellisons Solicitors

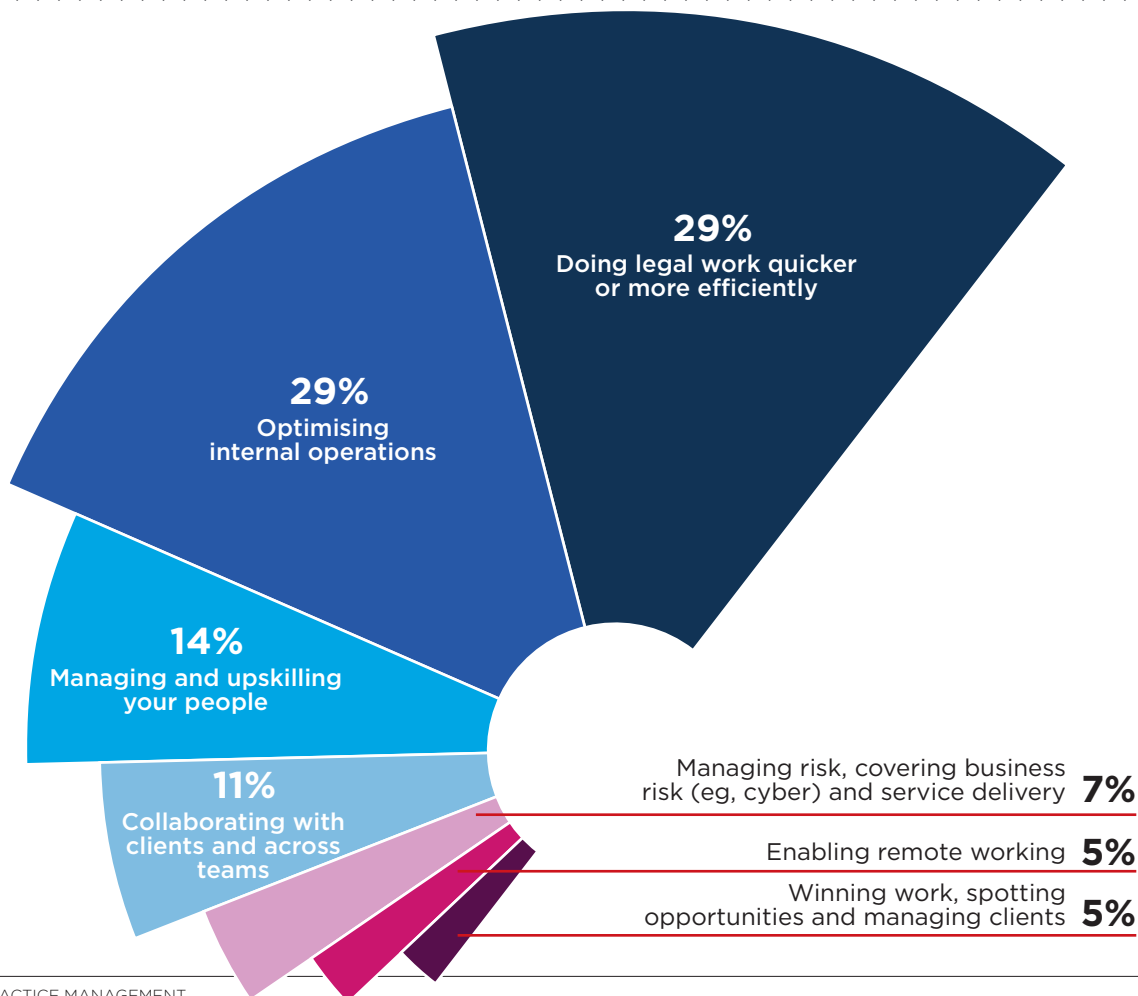
Jameson Hill says: “Customer relationship management (CRM) is our next project – mainly to keep our clients updated regularly so they don’t have to keep phoning in. Knowing what clients want before they demand it can save valuable time and resources.” Glyn Morris of Higgs confirms that a similar journey is ongoing at his firm. “We’ve been working on client matter inception technology over the past 12 months, and we’ll tie that up with CRM this year to take us into the digital client experience space next,” he says.

But there are challenges in such a change. “CRM is a big project for us this year, but it links strongly to data management, and its challenging to establish

exactly what your firm requires from a system. Do you want to be managing interconnections with each client? Or are you trying to understand your client base and referral networks better? There have been significant changes to marketing strategies over the last two years, and things will only partially revert to how they were – what implications does that hold for your CRM setup? These are some of the questions we want to answer,” says Neil May of Thackray Williams.

Beyond this, May recommends a strong focus on security in 2022 – only 4% have noted it as the next technology project planned at their firm (p12), indicating a degree of competence in this area, but there is always room for improvement. “Firms should have a third party monitoring their systems for strange behaviours or anomalies, so that they’re not caught out in the escalating cyber warfare and ransom attacks that we’re seeing as a result of events in Europe,” he says.

Where do you see the most potential for greater automation to drive efficiency within your firm’s ‘new normal’?



Security is in focus elsewhere too. “We do a review of our cybersecurity every year, and put it among our top priorities in the tech space when required. We subscribe to the old adage that we don’t have to be more advanced than the attackers – just more secure than our competitors, so that we’re not the primary targets,” says John Turner of Ellisons.

“The second thing on our radar is artificial intelligence (AI). We successfully piloted AI solutions in two departments, so we installed the software there and are now looking at where else it could apply. The end goal is efficiency – handing over the administrative burden to AI so that our people can do higher-value tasks. One of the tools that we use puts together a commercial property pack for clients with the push of a few buttons, as opposed to the three hours that it previously took someone. We want to bring in more automation and AI so that we can work smarter,” he adds.

Optimising internal operations and doing legal work faster and more efficiently are the top agenda points

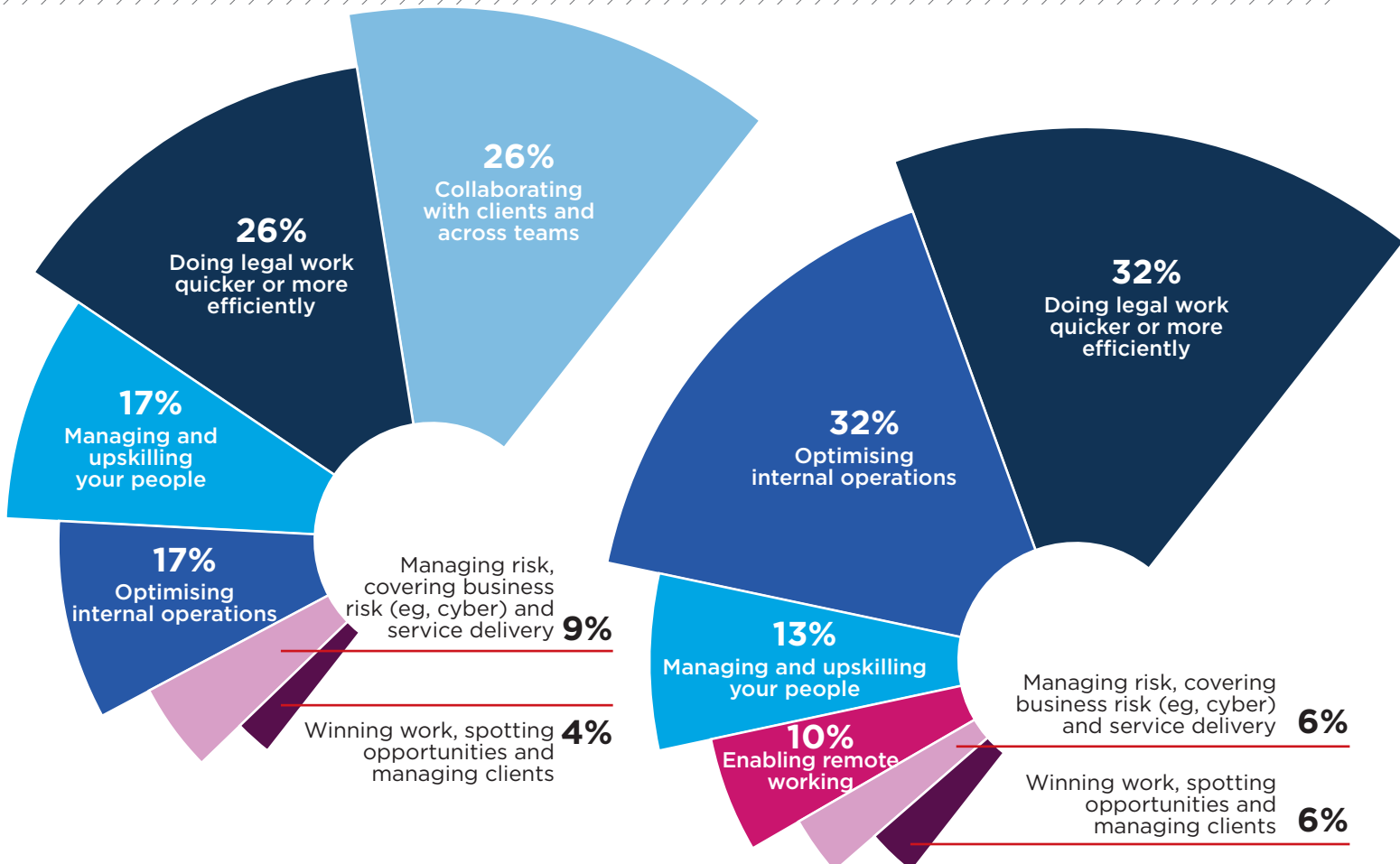
when it comes to automation this year – each representing 29% of respondents (p13) – and Morris reports that similar projects are underway at Higgs. “We have automation in place to ensure that a single capture of information is fed through to the relevant areas – we’re now looking to restrict duplication of processes. The next step would be to generate accurate automated documentation from that information,” says Morris.

AI has a big role to play in document automation and interpretation, particularly for firms with a heavy conveyancing workload – as highlighted by Peter Ambrose of The Partnership. “Document analysis and AI take a lot of interpretation work away from people, and also reduce the amount of error and risk. We work a lot on conveyancing, so distilling information from documents takes up a substantial amount of our time. We want to hand that over to AI, so our lawyers can be more analytical and curious with their work,” he says.

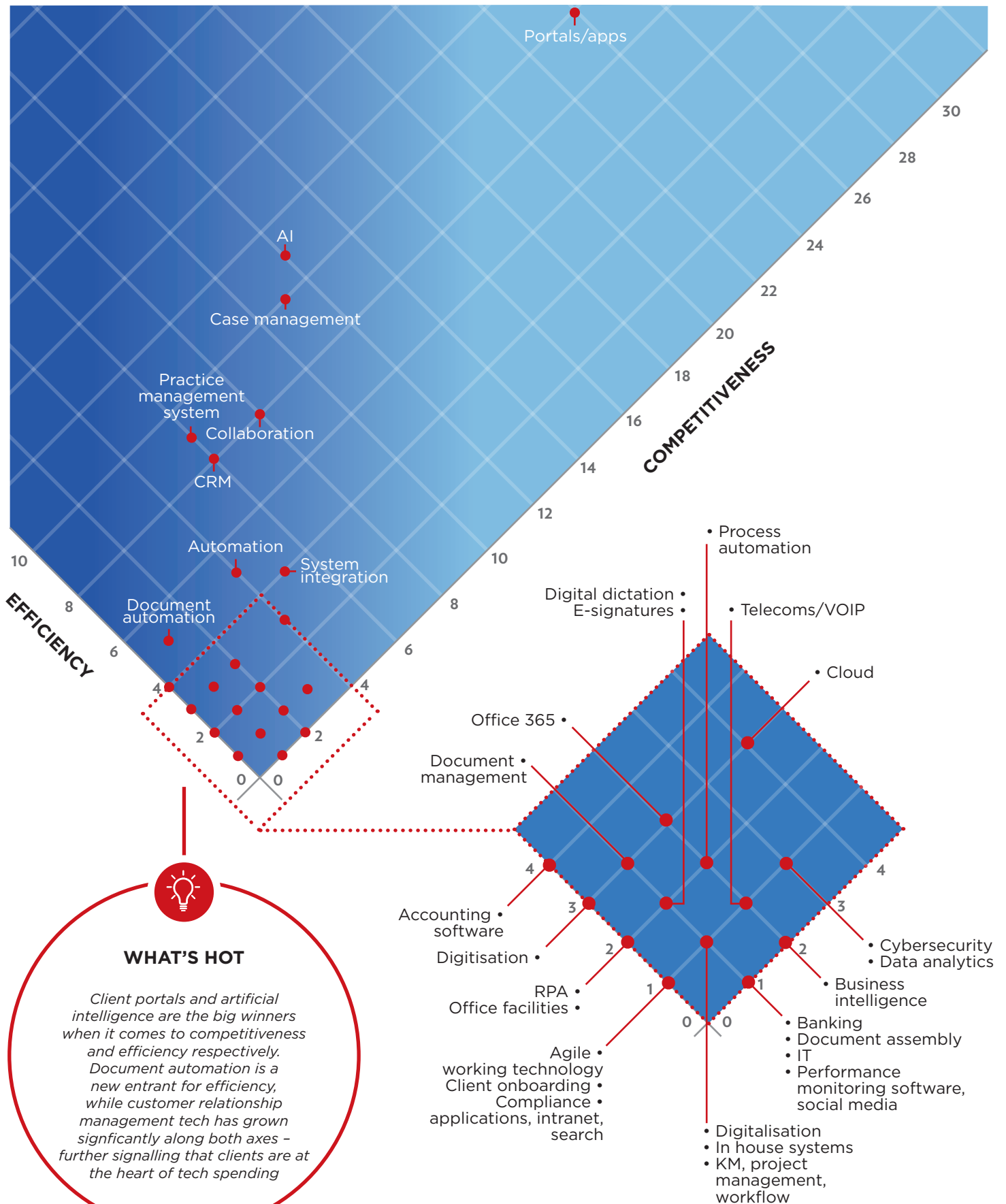
Where do you see the most potential for greater automation to drive efficiency within your firm’s ‘new normal’?

Under 50 headcount

Over 50 headcount



Competitiveness vs efficiency



Competitiveness vs efficiency

Unsurprisingly, document automation is a new and popular entrant in this year's ranking of technologies for their competitiveness and efficiency impact (p15), placing particularly high on the latter scale. At tops the efficiency chart, while also placing high on the competitiveness front – consistent with the 2021 findings. Other popular responses over the last two years include practice management systems, collaboration technology and automation, while client portals/apps maintain their commanding lead for competitiveness – indicating that consumer preferences have retained the new shape they took over the course of the pandemic.

“People's patience has diminished – they expect things at the touch of a button, and are pushing law

firms to be more proactive when it comes to client portals with in-built analytics on demand,” says Zoe Bailey of Withers Rogers.

Notable changes from last year include a dip for the case management system (CMS) on the efficiency scale. CMS still does better than many technologies, but this was clearly the the big winner for efficiency in 2021. Cloud technology also appears to have dipped, ostensibly due to the fact that most firms have now reached a basic standard in this space. The same can be said of agile and remote working, which was among the stronger outliers last year, but scores very low along both axes in 2022 as businesses have hit a rhythm with hybrid working. And for the reasons discussed earlier, CRM is a popular option on both fronts.

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POTENTIAL TO AUTOMATE

Automation, marketing and working environments remain at the forefront of this year's predictor scale. Competition seems to be on everyone's minds, and it may be closer to home than you think. In last year's Frontiers report, when asked which kinds of competitor are most threatening to their firm's future, the top answer for SME law was bigger law firms. This year the same threat has fallen to second place, as 67.3% answered that law firms of similar size and proposition are the biggest threat.

With the swimming pool of like-minded competitors getting larger, and the number of available clients seeming to shrink, what can your firm do to stand out and make an impact?

A huge untapped area that is sure to set your firm apart but is yet to be fully utilised lies within legal tech and automation, as the study indicates – the average tech spend as a percentage of an SME firm's revenue is only 6.2%.

Your firm could be an unstoppable machine with innovative automation that significantly reduces the amount of manual work, while also cutting the administrative burden on fee earners through digital solutions. It could also make space for flexible and remote working, which is a top trend right now amongst SME firms – as five days of going into the office is becoming less popular as a model. A hybrid approach is now

taking the lead with two to three days of office working expected on average in the future.

To aid this switch to hybrid working, various tools within tech and automation are available in the market right now. Well thought-out automation can provide your firm with clear reporting and maximise analytical capabilities and, as a result, guarantee smart, data-driven decisions are made to benefit the firm. Examples of this can be seen in prospect time recording and other similar areas in which valuable data can be automated and analysed – such as digital onboarding, website lead tracking, web payments linked into your practice management system and much more.

Also consider exploring ways in which your firm can enrich the client journey, to make starting the process of legal work with your firm that much more appealing, easy and seamless. Besides updating your online presence to increase marketing opportunities, it's worth considering smart client-facing software that is readily available to help facilitate client onboarding, transaction fees, case progress and much more.

Look towards secure, cloud-based legal platforms now if you wish to achieve smooth and safe remote working, efficient automation, and a competitive advantage all in one place. A legal platform offers many benefits

across different departments, and can quickly transform your firm – simplifying the process of retrieving important information such as matter updates, project status reports, knowledge, and insights about cases, as well as pull billing information, documents and reporting. When joined up with automated legal software, your firm will be able to use apps centred around reducing the amount of manual work, and data handling seen within a firm – resulting in major efficiencies and cost savings as well as an improved end-user experience.

Observing trends and acting accordingly could be the difference between a firm that makes an impact this year or one that remains in the same position as last year. We encourage your firm to partner with people who can keep a close eye on the landscape for you, as anything could change in the blink of an eye – we wouldn't want you to miss a thing. **LPM**

Gary Shaw, commercial director,
Accesspoint
www.accesspoint.legal



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HYBRID IN FOCUS

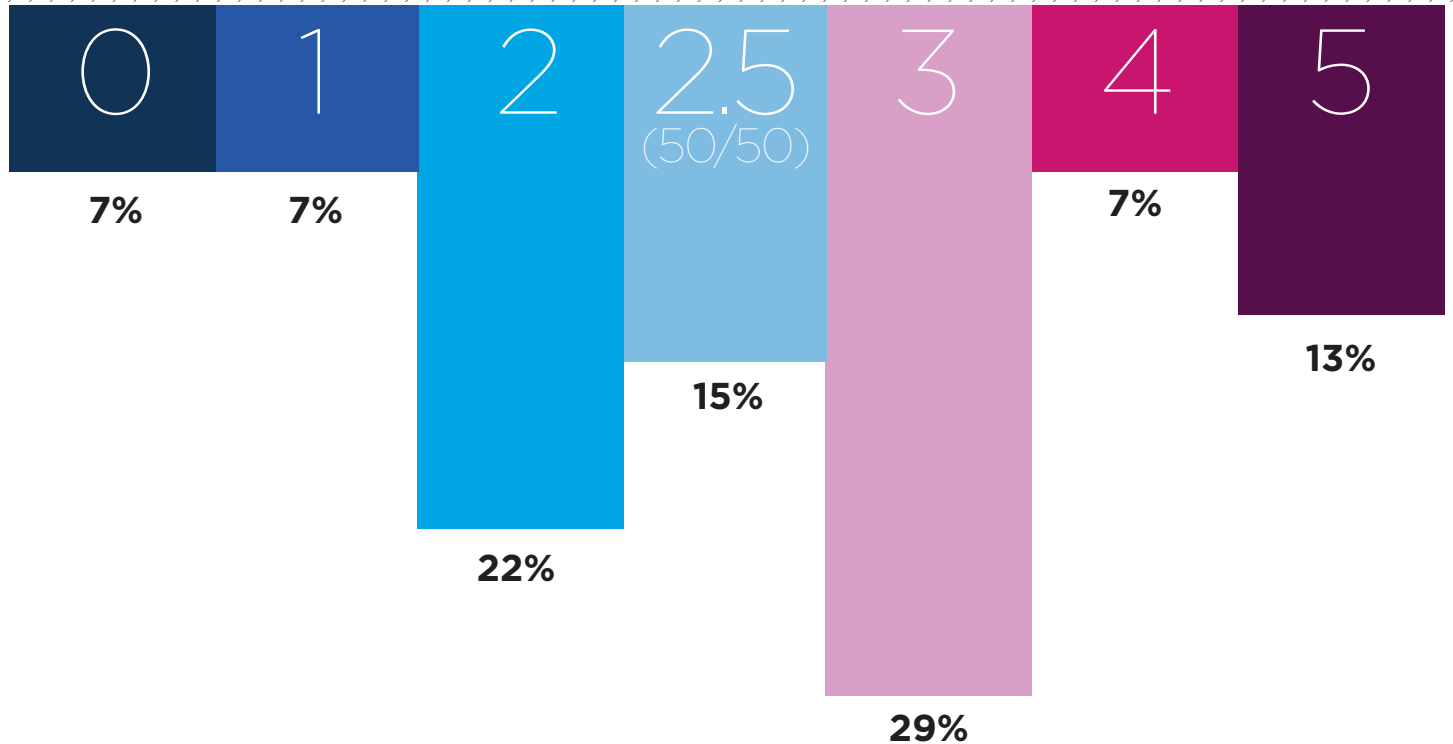


With the volatility of outbreaks and consequent restrictions over the last year, firms have had time to trial hybrid working of various forms, and scrutinise their effectiveness as long-term arrangements. For two-thirds of respondents, two to three days in the office is satisfactory, with creative and flexible arrangements being applied from one firm to the next.

“We’re striving for our people to spend 40% of their work week in the office, and we are using an app where people can book themselves in, check in and check out. But we haven’t necessarily needed to track activity – people want to be together, and they want to get focused time at home, so they self-regulate quite effectively,” says Glyn Morris of Higgs.

“We review our policy on a quarterly basis, but we will carry on with hybrid working because it works for a lot of our people. We were surprised that we didn’t lose any productivity during the pandemic – in fact, we gained efficiency when people were working from

In future, how many days per week will most people in your firm be expected to work in an office that the firm pays for?



home. The flexibility of being able to run errands, or pick children up from school and make up for lost time later, really works for us as a team,” says John Turner of Ellisons.

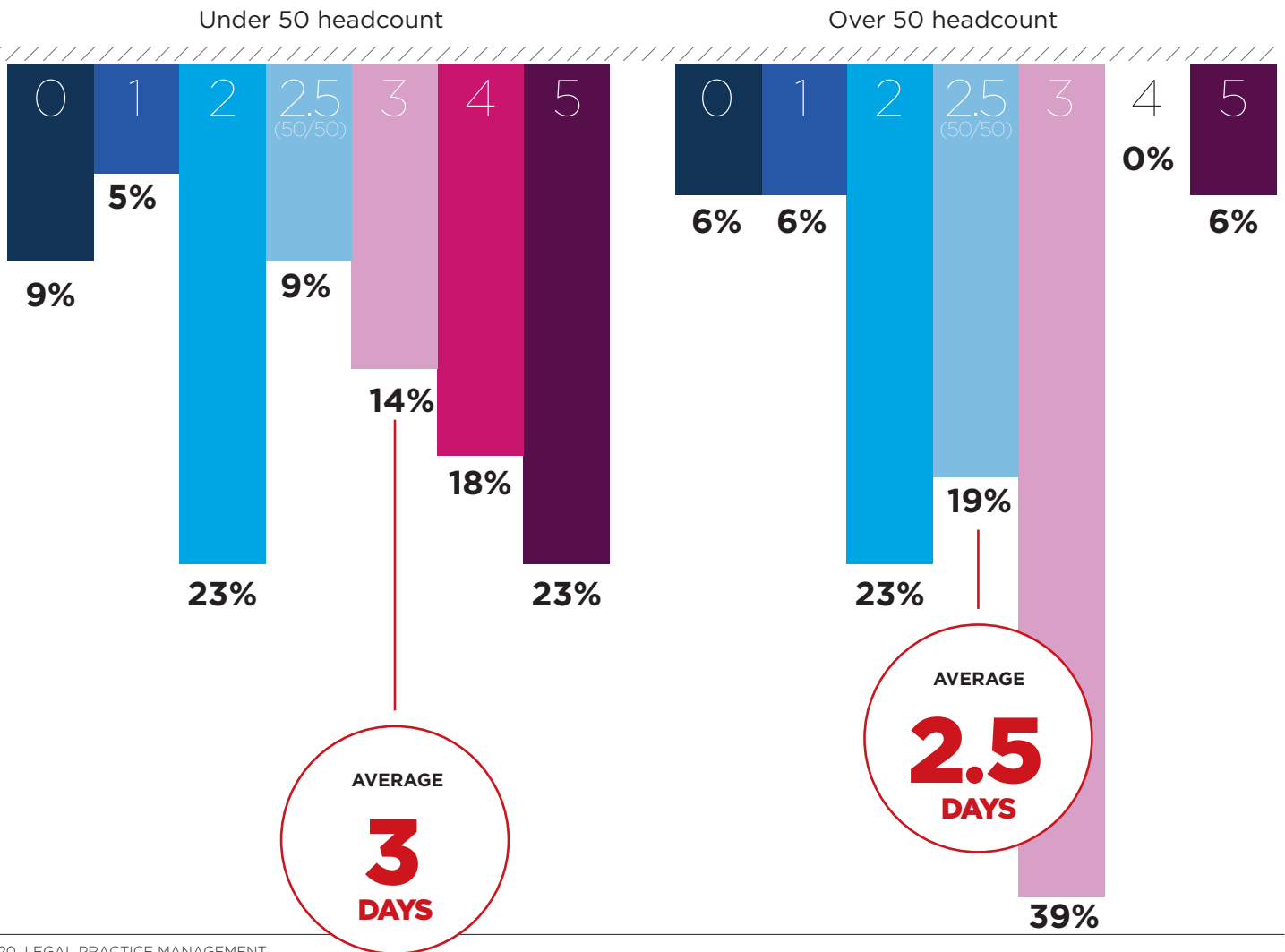
Days in the office have their own value – with common expectations linked to this time being cohesion of culture, engagement and training. “People need the space and flexibility that comes with hybrid working – especially with all the strain we’ve all been through over the last two years. Our time in the office is to make sure our people are learning and that their career is developing. In a hybrid setting, there are situations where only your line manager knows what you’re working on, and that’s not good from a development or a career viewpoint. People need to build their relationships and networks, because a lot of guidance can come from just running into someone at work,” says Neil May at Thackray Williams.

For around 13% of respondents, considerations like these are enough to merit a full-time return to the office, while another 7% are looking to return to four

“ We’re striving for our people to spend 40% of their work week in the office, and we are using an app where people can book themselves in, check in and check out.”

Glyn Morris, partner, Higgs

In future, how many days per week will most people in your firm be expected to work in an office that the firm pays for?



days a week (p18). One such firm is The Partnership, where Peter Ambrose suggests that being back in the office full time also has a positive role to play in supporting employee mental health. "We've been able to track activity, and we've seen first hand that when people were working remotely during the pandemic, they put themselves under far more pressure and worked longer hours than they do now. We need a dividing line between work and personal life, which comes from being in the office or being at home. Blurring this line has only increased stress levels," he says.

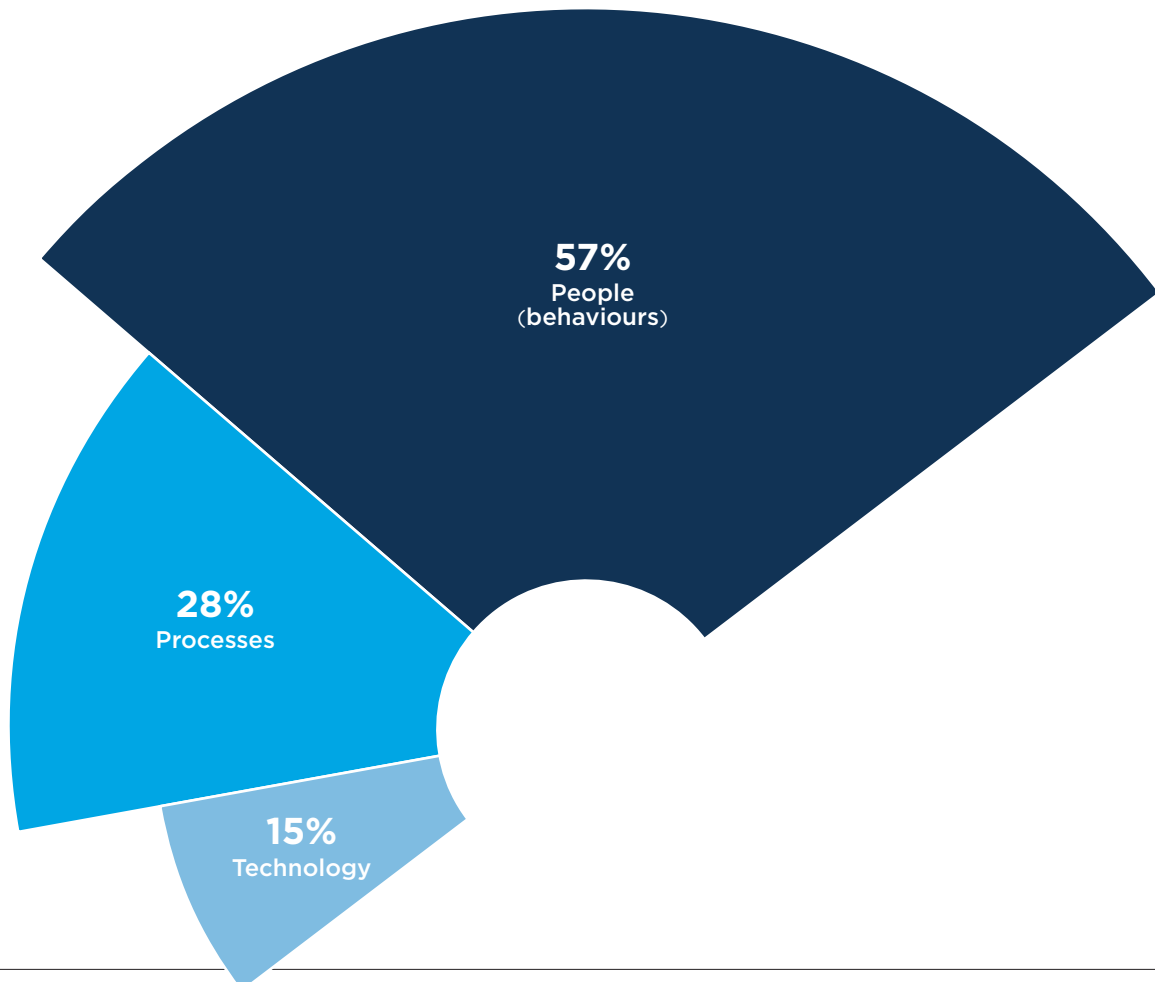
"Plus, people need training and supervision - especially younger lawyers. Our senior lawyers are given leeway to work from home if they need focus time, but the majority are expected in the office five days a week," he adds.

A number of firms are applying similarly differentiated policies based on seniority - with younger, more inexperienced, people expected in the office for a certain number of days - operating based on an assumed link between office working and training and engagement. For others, new working patterns are challenging this assumption. "We've been able to supervise our colleagues quite effectively

“It's our job to create an attractive and productive environment where people can actually meet personal and professional needs if they come in **”**

Zoe Bailey, head of strategic operations, Withers & Rogers

In which of these areas does management at your firm need to take most urgent action to improve the hybrid-working experience for all?



during the pandemic. We use a system called Rilliance that allows us to review electronic files remotely, which is important because we're Lexcel-accredited, so thorough file reviews are critical for compliance," says Turner.

A certain degree of trust is also key to a successful hybrid setup. "People are really grateful that they are allowed to work from home, and you tend to find that they don't take advantage of that situation. Plus, there is so much you can do for cultural engagement virtually – we've had cocktail evenings, quiz nights and other things that have actually improved engagement. If these were organised in the office, people would either not attend or leave early due to their commute, but in a virtual setting people are happy to spend that time," says Wendy Edwards of Attwaters Jameson Hill.

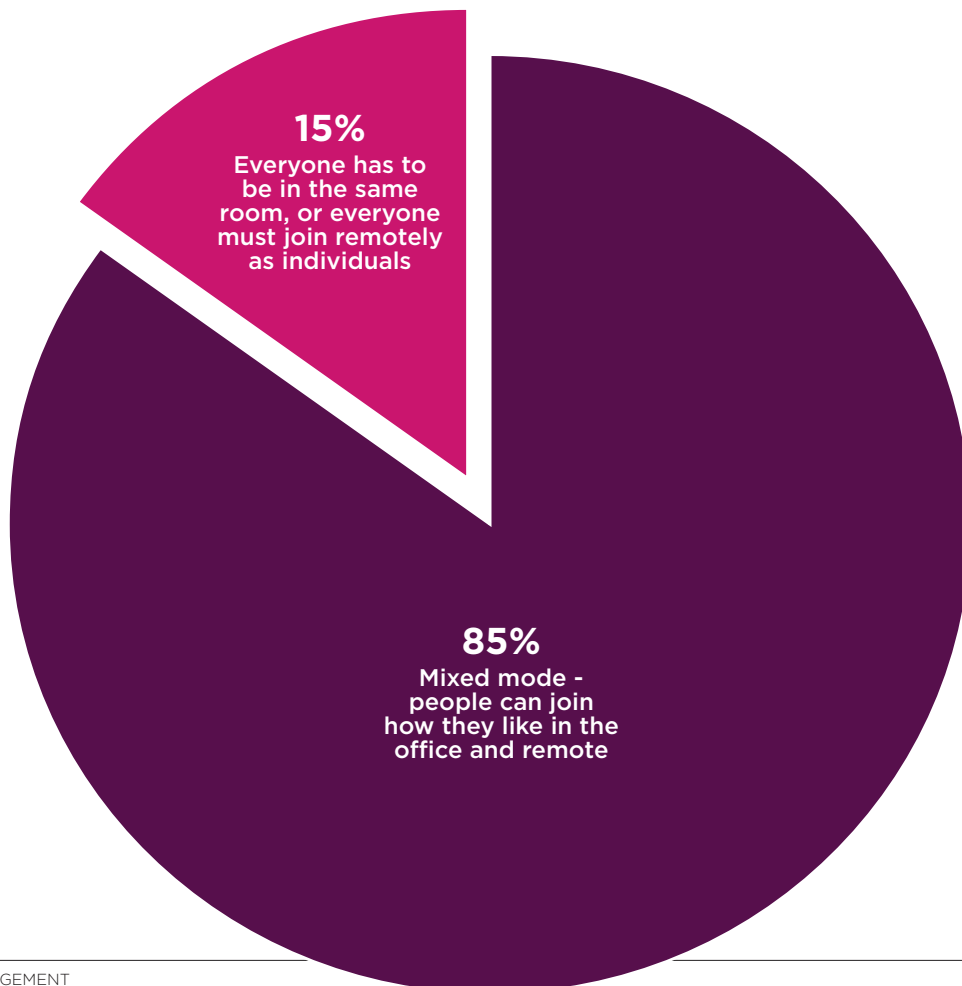
Zoe Bailey of Withers Rogers agrees with this assessment: "I wouldn't say you have to be with each other face-to-face to be able to determine your culture and your cohesiveness. And I don't think

business leaders can sit and decide that people's wellbeing will be better served if they commute and spend time in the office. We have intelligent people here who can determine what is best for them, the firm and our clients.

"For us, it's about finding the balance between what's good for the individual and what works best for the firm. And if that means we want people to come in for a couple of days per week, then it's our job to create an attractive and productive environment where they can actually meet personal and professional needs if they come in. It's about moving forward – we need to incentivise attendance," she adds.

At any rate, people-related factors of culture, engagement, training and supervision seem to be the biggest challenges when it comes to hybrid working – as noted by more than half (57%) of respondents (p20). Mixed-mode meetings – where some people are in person while others join virtually – are a microcosm of the more operational barriers to hybrid

For hybrid meetings, with people in the office and remote, how does your firm advise people to work?



“There is so much you can do for cultural engagement virtually – we’ve had cocktail evenings, quiz nights and other things that have actually improved engagement.”

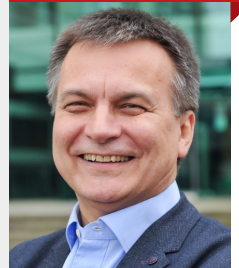
Alison Lobb, managing partner, Morecrofts



working. “As a chair, you have to work incredibly hard if you have a hybrid meeting. It’s certainly doable, but you have to be very aware of the fact that you have two audiences – one online and one in the room – and the preference always tends to be for those in close proximity, so it’s harder to make sure that people feel engaged and part of the meeting. But it is possible – the chair just has to take on that responsibility and work hard to include everyone,” says Bailey.

“It does take getting used to, and there is some training needed to ensure that we don’t ignore people that are on screen. But it’s something we should work on, because the alternative is to spend time and money commuting just for one meeting, which is not very sustainable,” adds Peter Carr of Fisher Jones Greenwood. Only 15% of respondents report that their firm insists against hybrid meetings, while the rest allow people to assemble in mixed mode whenever preferred or necessary (p21).

SPONSOR COMMENT



FIT TECH FOR PEOPLE

The ‘Great Resignation’ is upon us. According to some recent research from Microsoft, more than 40% of workers around the world are considering quitting jobs or changing their professions. This could be positive for the legal sector, an opportunity for fresh blood to enter the industry. However, it could also be detrimental to talent retention if law firms don’t play their cards right.

The global pandemic has given law firm employees a taste of hybrid working and a better work-life balance. Now the genie is out the bottle. Law firms will need to ensure flexible working isn’t simply a one-off but rather a permanent part of their employment strategy. This means doubling down on technology investments and putting in the right processes to enhance working practices and employee wellbeing.

It’s therefore extremely positive to see that many leaders recognise the importance of investing in technology such as automation to increase productivity, making the lives of legal professionals easier. As the research results show, the leading reason for more automation is to help make legal work quicker or more efficient. However, it’s also clear from the research that more can be done from a technology and user adoption standpoint to make hybrid working a success. For example, client relationship management, intranet/KM systems, e-signing and internal project management/portal-based collaboration were all highlighted as top areas where law firms now need to drive up use across the business. This highlights that the legal sector is still very much at the start of its hybrid-working journey as further efficiency and productivity gains are being left on

the table.

Investing in technology to support hybrid working will now play a vital role in ensuring that talent can work productively from any location. With legal business leaders estimating people will be in the office just two days a week on average in this new working world, firms must ensure that those employees are equipped with the right tools to be able to work effectively. Those that don’t risk watching their talent walk out the door. **LPM**

Andy Baldin, vice president of international business, NetDocuments
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An intensifying focus on environmental sustainability worldwide has permeated the SME legal sector, but isn't a major source of pressure right now – 71% of respondents report that clients rarely or never assess their firm's environmental policies before choosing to work with them (p25). "Clients who come to SME law firms are usually in need of help in some way – from divorces and wills to litigation – so it is less of a priority to ask about our environmental policy," explains Neil May of Thackray Williams.

There is progress on sustainability nonetheless – 83% report that their firms recycle wherever possible, with 76% also saying that old computers and other office equipment goes to a secondary market (p26). Energy efficiency is also high on the agenda – for 49% – although only around a fifth are focused on cutting emissions from work-related travel. "We made a lot of progress along the lines of sustainability over the last two years as people were more receptive to change, but things are tailing off now that the

intensity of the pandemic has also eased. I've worked in a number of sectors, and I can say that legal is always incredibly slow to change," says John Turner of Ellisons.

According to Zoe Bailey of Withers Rogers, a number of factors hinder sustainability progress in SME law. "Firms don't know where to start, or what they can do to achieve tangible changes. We're experiencing growing pains as an industry, and we need to collectively identify small steps that we can take to make a difference in the long term."

There is plenty for businesses to do – and between 10% and 15% of respondents are exploring various initiatives, such as controlling their overall carbon footprint; having an independent committee focused on environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors to advise the board and accelerate change; creating awareness around sustainability and biodiversity; or carbon offsetting through planting trees. While clients are not yet screening law firms for their sustainability activities in a significant manner,

HABITUAL EFFICIENCY

Over a third of SMEs (37%) said that 'doing legal work quicker' has the most potential for greater automation to drive efficiencies. Reducing manual administrative tasks, introducing workflow automation to decrease workloads, and removing the reliance on support staff will inevitably improve efficiencies while positively impacting the firm's bottom-line and client experience.

However, the benefits of legal software solutions go beyond making tasks quicker, and the effects of investing in and utilising reliable technology solutions helps to solve myriad challenges faced by today's modern SME law firm.

Building effective business habits – facilitated by technology – creates a solid foundation for a successful operation that enables firms to focus on employee wellbeing, risk management, sustainability initiatives, client satisfaction, and many more of the things that SME firms want to achieve. While 42% said choosing/optimising back-office tech for business efficiency is a concerning challenge, only 20% said they were looking to invest in case management or practice

management systems, which suggests that firms are looking to optimise the systems they already have in place.

This is also reflected in the common themes discussed when respondents were asked to choose one thing to increase productivity. Firms said that maximising their existing solutions to implement automation, integrate disconnected tools, extract the right data, or better train users would help their teams do more with less. It's clear that dedicating time to review current solutions and processes for optimisation should be the top priority for maximising profitability and long-term success.

Firms should continually audit their existing processes and technology to ensure it's still meeting their needs. With so much change and disruption over the last 24 months, taking the time to review what was implemented and what still needs improvement is a good place to start to remain competitive.

Building better business habits through technology sets the foundations for a more streamlined internal operation, which 28% of respondents said would have the biggest impact for efficiency. It

enables firms to focus on broader strategy and goals and creates opportunities that may otherwise have been ignored. For example, only 7% said there's potential to use automation to mitigate risk, but with 56% saying the cost of PII and risk management poses the biggest impact to strategy, there's a missed opportunity to rely on technology to reduce errors, improve accuracy, and increase accountability to mitigate risk.

Investing in and maximising legal software to create solid and reliable foundations provides firm-wide benefits that impact success. Without technology facilitating basic business habits, it's impossible to realise the opportunities that'll help SME firms stay competitive. **LPM**

Chris Pucci, chief executive officer, Osprey Approach
www.ospreyapproach.com



SPONSOR COMMENT



some expect the pressure to increase in the near future, and are acting accordingly.

Bailey says: "We're starting to see an increase in clients asking for our credentials and our positioning around sustainability. Our purpose is building trusting relationships, and devoting ourselves to the ESG agenda is important in retaining trust, particularly among our younger people. We like to see ourselves as leading on certain important matters, and we have work to do here, but this is one of them."

"I think we'll come to a point in the next two years when we'll have to demonstrate our green credentials and a certain level of carbon footprint – to regulators and clients alike. We're trying to put everything in place before we start losing business because we can't prove our commitment to sustainability, or we deal with the wrong kind of businesses," adds Turner.

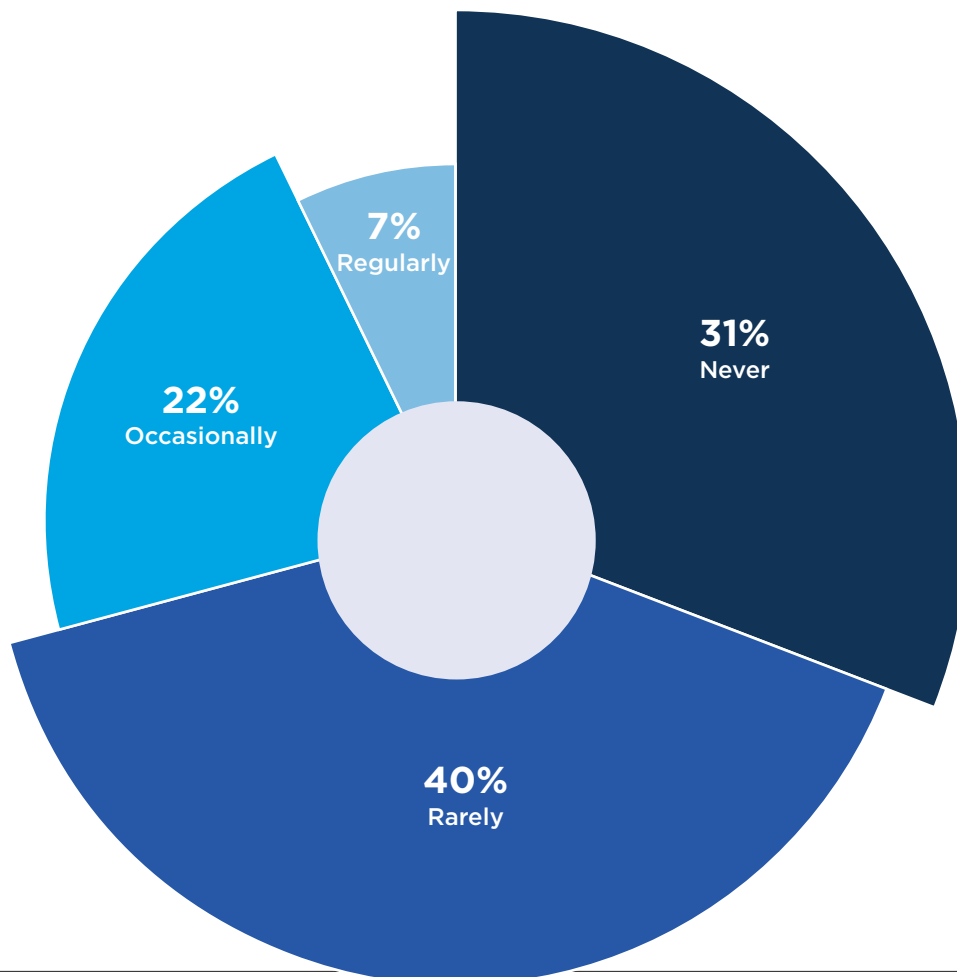
Others expect the pressure to come much sooner. Glyn Morris at Higgs says: "I think sustainability is going to become a much bigger issue over the next six months. We're not confronted with it in the same



NOT-SO-GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Pressure to go greener is lacking in SME legal – with 71% reporting that their clients rarely or never screen them for environmental policies and targets. But with pressure increasing in other sectors, some believe a more sustainable approach to business will be imminently necessary for law firms

To what extent are your clients assessing your firm's environmental policies and targets when deciding whether to work with you?





CHECKING BOXES

There is a desire among law firms to do their part – low hanging fruit in the sustainability space such as recycling and repurposing have gained traction among the majority of firms, while just under half (49%) have invested in energy efficiency. More advanced initiatives such as carbon offsetting are considerably less prolific

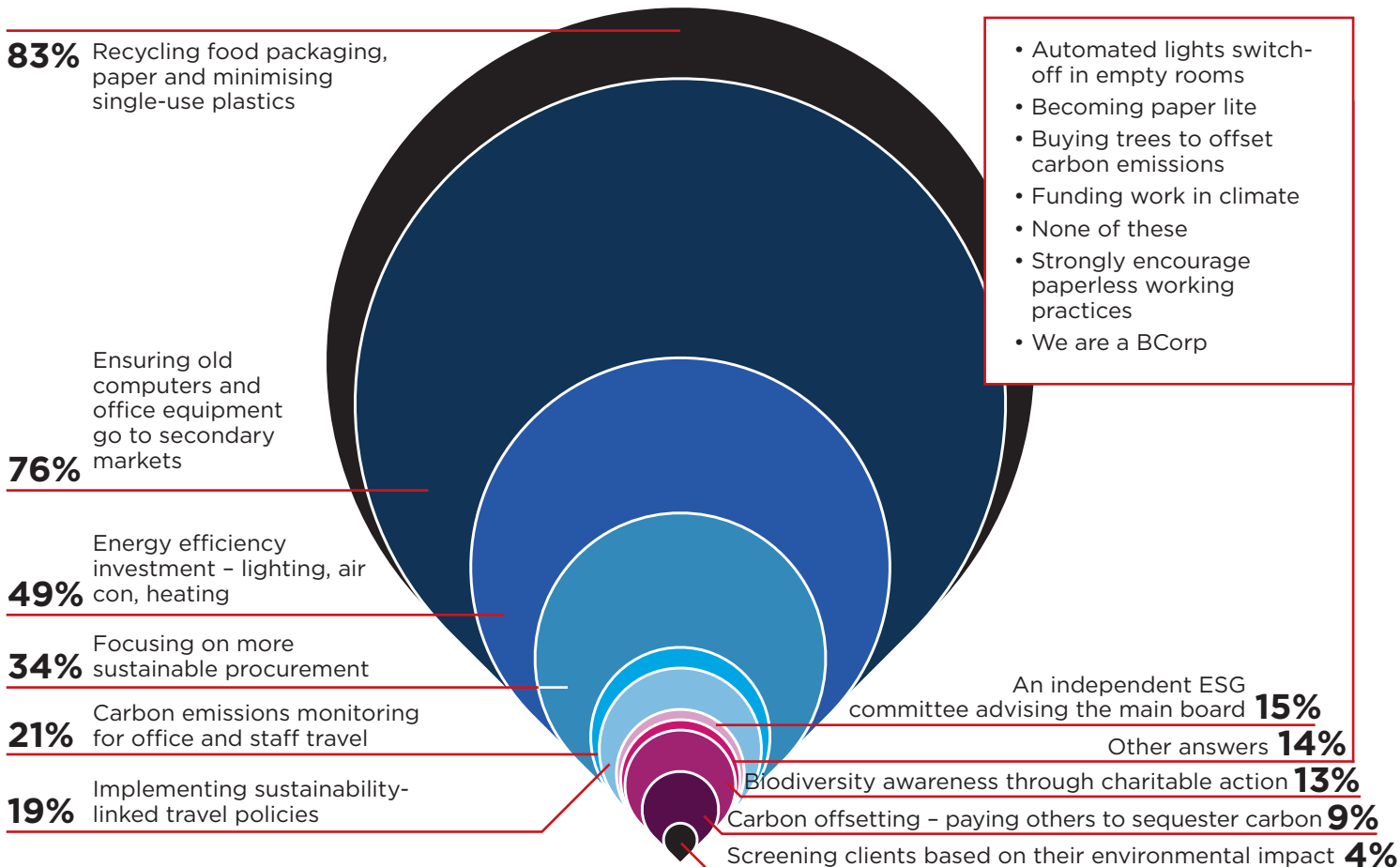
“ We want to make progress in these areas because our people demand it, and because it’s the right thing to do ”

Neil May, chief operating officer, Thackray Williams

way as we would be if we were acting for institutional clients or large entities, but our banks are very interested in our activity in that area, and so are our people. There’s a lag, but it’s only a matter of time before clients of a particular size and mindset will start to hold us to account. It will be the next big thing, and we’re trying to pre-emptively get a good foothold.”

As such, a firm’s sustainability profile could have a significant bearing on recruitment of younger generations of talent, those who many believe to be more engaged with discussions in the ESG space. Many have this idea at the heart of their sustainability efforts, although there is a humanitarian side to efforts as well. “We want to make progress in these areas because our people demand it, and because it’s the right thing to do,” says May. **LPM**

Which of these actions is your firm taking to be more sustainable?



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