

WORKQUAKE

How UK law firms are responding to the seismic changes in work.

Research and report by



DOHERTY
ASSOCIATES

Combined Expertise

Executive summary

As part of its ongoing research programme, Doherty Associates wanted to find out more about the new working practices and technology adoption of those working in UK legal services since the radical change in working patterns in 2020.

In Workquake, we share research findings and insights into the associated elements of work and IT in flux and transition since that time, and discuss organisational readiness for the next wave of transformational technologies.

The research

The research was conducted in March 2023. The research panel comprised 379 people working in law and legal services firms. In addition, a panel of 56 IT leaders and IT professionals working in capital markets, professional services and other knowledge-powered businesses were asked questions relating directly to the IT function and its changing role in business today.

Key findings

- 40% > of workers are expected in the office only 1-2 days a week
- 33% > have difficulty using tools to access or retrieve data
- 49% > say hybrid work has increased cyber security risk
- 35% > say hybrid working has not increased organisational productivity

Executive take away

Complexity has increased for workers, and for IT teams working ever closer to the heart of law firms as they continue to transform. Firms leading in this space are evolving their technology estates to make them agile and fluid for a future characterised by yet more complex demands, a range of emerging data (and data capability) risks and the opportunities brought about by the arrival of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Great rewards are on offer for those with the right technology in place to take them.

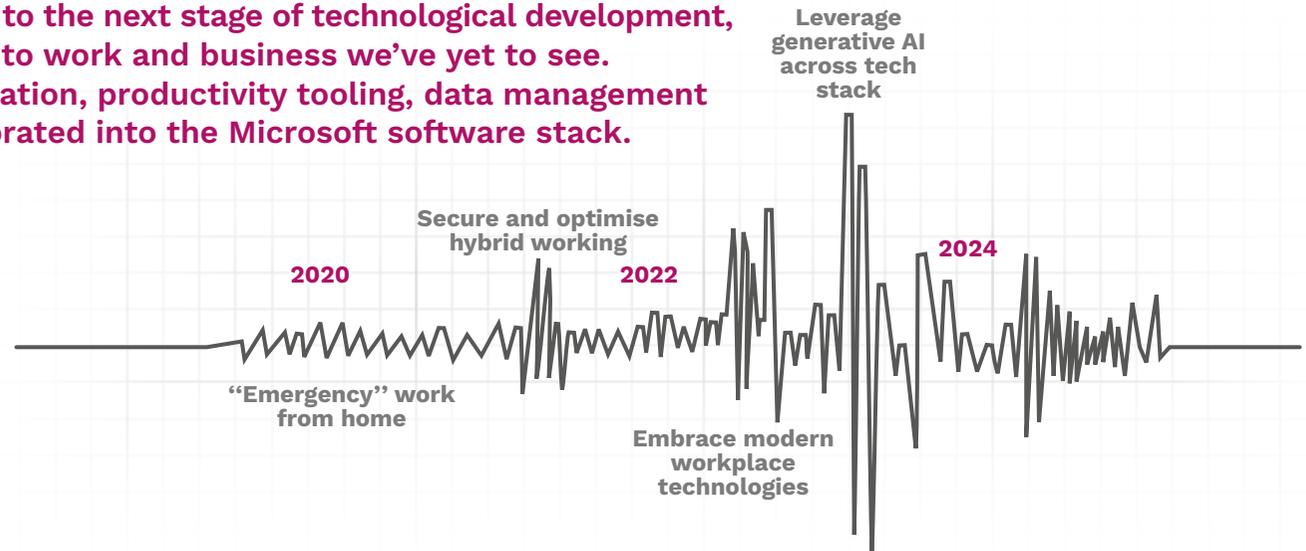


Introduction

Welcome. You and your firm are on a journey to the next stage of technological development, which promises some of the biggest changes to work and business we've yet to see. That is: modern working practices in collaboration, productivity tooling, data management and security, with generative AI being incorporated into the Microsoft software stack.

The latest leg of the journey has been full of incidents and events. Many lawyers were already comfortable with mobility and doing business away from the office, breaking their time down into 6-minute increments, but the pandemic forced them to rapidly extend the ability to work remotely to non-lawyer, legal support staff. This meant accelerating plans in some areas, and fully improvising in others. Such 'forced' digital transformation – often bypassing testing, procurement diligence and training – means that the technology estate and working practices of many firms exist through necessity as much as design.

Our research shows how some employees are grappling with a proliferation of new applications and features, many of which they know how to use only partially. Some may still be using unmanaged personal devices. They say they have too many passwords to remember, that systems are disjointed, that they can't find or access the data they need to do their jobs. The 'workplace technology' expectation has risen significantly, be that from support workers, in-house lawyers or sub-contracted fee earners – covering elements from device flexibility, ease of use and application performance, to collaboration platforms and working between home and the office.



The transition to hybrid and remote working was in many ways just an early tremor of the workquake to come; evidence that things could change faster and could be a lot better. The truth is, the pandemic years brought only a relatively small amount of change from an IT perspective, with 'work from home' being the poster child of that period.

Now, far bigger changes are taking place, and this is before we think about the revolutionary incoming AI-powered technologies and applications that promise to enhance, accelerate and transform business and work almost beyond recognition. The workquake is happening now, and companies are in vastly differing positions to respond.

We are excited about the opportunities ahead and we are here to help. We hope Workquake helps you to think about where you and your firm are going and to assess how prepared you are for what lies ahead.
Doherty Associates

Organisational fluidity

Law firms leading in this area are making people, process and tech choices that set them up to be more agile, adaptable and more fluid when it comes to working from anywhere. They are sharing data safely and opening their business models up to future collaboration, both within the business and with fee earners beyond their organisational boundaries.

Policies and options for how people work in UK legal businesses changed overnight in 2020, and they're still changing. Our poll shows that some 15% of workers say they can work entirely remotely, while two in five are expected to be in the office only one or two days a week.

New work life, new approaches to security

Some 49% of survey respondents say that their company's adoption of hybrid work has increased cyber security risk. New ways of working bring a new raft of security implications, but also significant opportunities to reduce risk. The best way to improve security is to improve knowledge, though it can be difficult to train partners properly or regularly (especially in some areas, such as corporate law), because of their intense focus on billable hours. The result, in a data-driven world, is reputational and business risk.

Tech changes made in 2020 were intended as short-term, stop-gap measures – security considerations were outweighed by the imperative to support remote working. In many cases, these security shortcomings have not been reassessed, and appropriate measures now need to be put in place to centrally manage devices and user identities in the new cloud-first world.

A law firm client of Doherty Associates suffered from issues such as resetting expiring passwords, and challenges with laptop replacements soon after switching to remote working, with many of its support staff forced to set up their own laptops for work. An evolution of their IT systems was needed to address these issues and provide a way to centrally manage all corporate devices and user identities, no matter where they were. We call this process 'Secure and optimise the edge'.

RESEARCH BOX

- 15%** > are never expected to work in the office
- 40%** > are expected in the office only 1-2 days a week
- 71%** > say the majority of people at their organisation have adopted hybrid working
- 46%** > say hybrid work policies have been in place since pandemic restrictions were lifted
- 75%** > say their organisation has deployed new tools and technology to support hybrid working and collaboration



Together, alone

Law firms leading technological change in the industry are building co-working and collaboration functionality into their business tools. Where we used to hear, 'I need this system to work better or quicker,' we are now hearing, 'we need to collaborate with this organisation,' or 'I need to share data safely with this person right now.' In law, these demands are commonly complicated by contractual obligations on confidentiality, 'Chinese walls' and Swiss verein structures.

The data sets firms are collecting and dealing with are ever larger and more varied too. The adoption of modern tooling and associated training provides the opportunity to harmonise collaboration channels and associated data sets, while restricting access and providing assurance of confidentiality when needed – when an outside fee earner is working with the firm for a short period of time, for example, or when porting data across sovereignties.

Conversations with clients on instant messages; data sets that are shared with a potential acquirer in a deal room; information shared with accountants and lawyers; internal, 'by-product' intelligence, that firms want to retain to support future deals. It all needs to be considered as part of designing the overall worker data experience.

The deployment of new tools for collaboration – for example, Teams, OneDrive, Slack, SharePoint, Trello, Zoom – has also given rise to new data sharing practices and job roles at larger law firms. In the realm of data analytics, for instance, or ensuring that systems are integrated with the help of tools like Microsoft Power Automate.

From functionality to fluidity

We're moving from IT Operating Model 1.0, which was about being able to work in two locations securely and with stability, to 2.0, where expectations go beyond the basic test of being able to support hybrid working, creating new challenges for IT. How can an acceptable security posture be achieved in harmony with organisational fluidity? How do we embrace new tools to support a geographically broader hiring strategy without creating technology overload? How can we share and access data more widely, but at the same time retain control and visibility for the right workers at the right time?

The role of IT is no longer just to 'keep the lights on' but to help businesses solve ever more complex questions. The most forward-looking organisations are thinking of the future in this way, and they don't want their agility to be compromised by not having the right tech set-up.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Free users from dependency on traditional office IT systems

Leading law firms have completed a shift to cloud management of devices and user accounts, leveraging technologies such as Azure Active Directory and Intune. This is a step to free the team to work anywhere while restoring a level of control that was often lost during the rush to enable hybrid working.

They have removed any requirement for connection to the office – often by eliminating technologies like VPN, Citrix or Virtual Desktops. Their users enjoy fully enabled laptops that work the same way regardless of their location and can even be used offline. When away from their laptops, workers can securely use corporate or personal mobile devices with a seamless user experience.



Divergent work experiences

A wake-up call for law firms in our research is that significant portions of the workforce are falling behind in their day-to-day experience of work. Some 14% of workers polled say that hybrid work is hindering productivity, and a further 21% report no productivity benefits.

Of this combined group, people report having too many tools to be productive (21%) and trouble remembering passwords (19%). In addition, some 33% say they have difficulty retrieving data from systems, and 5% report this as a daily occurrence.

Closing this 'experience gap' in law is a route to competitive advantage, but it also means a reassessment of IT operating models (ITOM). Many firms are stuck in a model adapted to get through Covid. Some have moved on and embraced modern tooling, though in ways that are often far from optimal. A few are digitally thriving with true modern work practices and tech stacks. These are the legal businesses best placed to win in the upcoming tech revolution.

RESEARCH BOX

For those who say hybrid working has had no or a negative affect on their productivity:



New divisions in worker experience

For a significant portion of law firm workforces, technology appears to be getting in the way as much as it's helping, which raises questions of attrition, losing talent, low engagement levels and key person risk. Fortunately, some solutions are in relatively easy reach. Passwordless login – using biometrics such as Windows Hello or FaceID – and Single Sign On (SSO) are examples of technologies that make the organisation more secure and life easier for the user.

User-friendly technology also supports productivity gains, higher levels of employee engagement, the ability to onboard new starters in a more streamlined way, and to lock people out of ALL applications when they have left the organisation.

Lawyers and business support staff alike are spending less face time together. The office is a place where technical tips and best practice – when searching for information, for example – are often shared and passed around as part of the working day. Bridging this gap today may mean inventing the water cooler forum in the virtual realm, or taking training and standards far more seriously. Investing in meaningful training for modern tools is something many business leaders know is long overdue.



WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Turn IT into a differentiator

High-performing law firms understand that their EVP (employee value proposition) and employee productivity are enhanced when they embrace modern technology stacks together with employee education and updated processes. They have made deliberate employee-centric decisions when choosing technology, having most likely consolidated down to a smaller number of strategically adopted toolsets from the sprawl that emerged during Covid.

At such firms, IT teams are focussed on projects and activities that contribute towards organisational differentiation, rather than commodity, non-value add operational activities. Employees are proud of their organisational IT, and new starters coming from more outdated organisations have a sense of learning and progression to aid their onboarding experience.

A complexity avalanche for IT teams

The breadth and depth of what law firms' IT teams, especially smaller IT teams, are being asked to do on top of business as usual has greatly increased. New security issues, moving to the cloud, the proliferation of tools ushered in during the Covid years, more frequent updates and more use cases for IT generally are just some of the pressures. IT skills attraction has never been more difficult, or important.

Our polling of IT professionals reveals that 59% say IT budgets have seen no, or not enough, increases to deal with the changes brought about by hybrid work. This is despite 71% of respondents saying that IT teams now have to cover new work with extra hours or cut back on activities in other areas to service hybrid work demands.

The amount of information that needs to be structured and searchable continues to grow, due to increased use of instant messages and more video calls, for example. And the next wave of tools such as AI-enabled MS Copilot, mean decisions loom about search and risk management, especially for those law firms that are not yet working across a single platform, such as Microsoft 365.

At the same time, users crave simplicity. They want to work effectively and find the information and tools they need to do their jobs with minimal hassle.

RESEARCH BOX

IT professionals say:

- 14% > IT budgets have not increased to deal with changes brought about by hybrid work
- 45% > IT budgets have increased, but not enough
- 34% > There has been an increase in hours to cover extra work
- 38% > Have cut back on other activities to meet hybrid work-related demands

'T' and 'N-shaped' people

The depth and breadth of the job IT is facing means law firms need to attract and retain a wider range of people and skills for the function to continue adding value.

When asked about the main challenges ushered in by distributed workforces, 30% of our IT cohort referenced the difficulties of managing an expanded technology stack, while some 28% said that handling a greater volume of support queries from people working outside the office was the main challenge. Other challenges included integrating existing or legacy systems with capabilities that enable hybrid work (23%) and hardening the increased attack surface of the organisation in these new arrangements (18%).



Law firms need access to ‘T-shaped’ professionals, that is, those highly specialised in a single area, such as cloud, databases, automation or devices. But they also increasingly need ‘N-shaped’ people, who can grasp issues across disciplines, communicate widely and constructively with others and exert influence at senior leadership level.

IT issues in the wake of M&A

Law firms that have grown through M&A, been acquired, or operate throughverein structures are often plagued by too many legacy systems, some of which don’t talk to each other, some of which overlap, a mixture of cloud and on-premises, or systems housed in multiple locations. Doherty Associates has recently worked with a firm that had five overlapping tools in one area, and this in a business of under 50 people. The results, predictably enough, were confusion and duplication of effort.

To meet the challenges and opportunities of the near future some firms will need to review and improve what they currently have, others may need to refit and upgrade, or both concurrently. Whatever path they take, the principles of technology life cycle management remain a constant: set things up to be safe and scalable, and always in line with a deliberate enterprise application architecture.

IT closer to the heart

As well as keeping the businesses running, IT is being asked more directly to support business and enterprise performance. In the realm of reporting, for example, law firms are using Power BI and other analytics tools to surface business risks and opportunities so that leaders can make faster, better decisions, based on data-backed insights.

Working with contractors and fee earners who are not directly employed by the organisation is another area where IT must walk the risk versus opportunity line. If business models dictate this must happen (and they do increasingly), then IT must find legal, secure ways of accessing and sharing data that are compliant with data regulations.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Streamline systems and free IT from the day to day

High-performing law firms use fewer tools, but use them well. They streamline their applications, allowing them to reduce overhead and risk exposure while also properly training their teams in the chosen toolset. When choosing toolsets, they consider interoperability, usability and support overhead, often choosing SaaS applications that score well across these points.

IT teams are then able to drive further initiatives to reduce overhead and improve user experience. Technologies such as passwordless authentication, Single Sign On, Self Service Password Reset and Autopilot are ways to empower the end user to help themselves, while reducing IT overhead.

The best IT teams have either attracted and retained the right ‘N’ and ‘T-shaped’ individuals or augmented internal capability through relationships with trusted partners. They’ve evolved to be more business facing than technology facing, freeing themselves to be more collaborative and engaged in adding business value.



Productivity

The good news for fans of the changes flowing from the workquake is that twice as many people working in UK law feel that hybrid working has improved organisational productivity than believe it has had zero or negative impact.

More than a third of survey respondents say they are yet to see productivity benefits, or they report negative impacts. Productivity problems can stem from having too many tools, and not enough knowledge and experience of how to use them. This can lead to a 'collaboration maturity gap', where laws firms are investing in CRM, knowledge-based systems and document templating, but are frustrated that their people are yet to use the tools in a meaningful way.

RESEARCH BOX



Learning to digitally thrive

Firms need to concentrate on employee experience by choosing and implementing a set of tools that work well together and in the same way, wherever people are working. They should be secure and managed centrally. Workers demand 'good' tooling, but they also don't want to make choices themselves (see [Gartner research](#)). Crucially, simply having more tools does not equal better outcomes.

Again, some solutions are within relatively easy reach. Common platforms are an undoubted boon for productivity. If users have email in Outlook, tasks in MS Tasks and files in OneDrive, they can safely open operations up to automation tools that can seamlessly move data between applications.

Some firms are also beginning to open access to data sets for users to create their own applications in the spirit of the 'citizen developer'. When done well, this approach can unlock huge productivity gains, where traditional technical development and long lead times are replaced by empowered workforces that can self serve. Law firms and their IT departments must here walk the line between opening the door to shadow IT and encouraging innovation. And this oversight role is soon to be tested to the max with the next generation of business tools.

Finally, productive law firms that are already leveraging consolidated tech stacks, with empowered and well-trained workforces, are the best placed to capitalise on AI functionality as it arrives. Their data is in the right place. Collaboration trails can be interrogated. Corporate assets and knowledge can be surfaced. That's a great start for AI to be set to work in the most productive ways.



WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Develop a structured programme for technology adoption

The pace of change means it's not possible to stand still, or to look for single solutions. You need a methodical approach to introducing technology. Progressive firms are making this an integral part of the way they operate. They are systematically looking at how they can apply technology effectively to their problems by creating working groups empowered to continually change the way the business uses technology.

The answer might be new technologies (for example, workflows from Power Automate to integrate data from different systems), or simply using existing features better – shared whiteboards, multi-editing of documents and effective data exchange between organisations. This review process is continuous, replacing old systems and practices, so that the complexity avalanche doesn't intensify.

Afterword

The future is bright for UK law firms. With the advent of practical and soon-to-be-widely-available AI-powered tools, we are on the precipice of transformative changes that will finally allow humans to use machines for work in a seamless way. To take advantage of this though, you need to be ready.

The legal industry has several advantages here. AI products have been used within many law firms for several years, so the concept and practice of applying generative AI will be far from alien. Common structures within legal contracts, precedents and language mean the domain is ripe for potential performance gains and efficiency savings.

At the same time, firms must guard their own reputations and ensure that confidential, inaccurate, or even prejudicial material becomes part of their own work. Implementing the appropriate policies and security controls is the price of converting new opportunities, as well as being technology ready.

Readiness is a journey, a scale, a spectrum. A key piece of advice for firms is that they need to assess and understand where they are on this technology readiness spectrum. Are you poised to leap on every opportunity that comes your way, or do you need to make technology changes to position yourself at a more basic level, or somewhere in between?

Most law firms are somewhere along a spectrum, which can be divided into three sections. Starting with:

Secure & Optimise the Edge

The implementation of modern device and people management practices to simplify, secure and optimise how end users and devices connect with your application ecosystem and corporate network.

Transition to the Cloud

The adoption of cloud-based infrastructure and application services to eradicate traditional on-premises infrastructure, and enable application portfolio optimisation, and modern working practices.

Digitally Thrive

The evergreen process of business-driven evaluation and adoption of technologies that underpin your digital strategy to achieve business goals. You can't do this effectively if you haven't achieved stages 1 and 2.



About Doherty Associates



Doherty Associates is a London-headquartered IT consultancy and services provider with over 30 years of experience providing technology solutions and 24/7 managed services for our clients, including international law firms, barristers' chambers and other legal services businesses.

Nominated as Best Managed Services Provider at the private fund operations focussed Drawdown awards, in 2021 (winners) and 2023, Doherty Associates understands the pressures and expectations of working with legal services organisations. With a client attrition of just 1.4% in 2022, service excellence singles out Doherty Associates in a market that is both crowded and diverse.



*Terry Doherty
Founder and CEO
Doherty Associates*

*Here at Doherty Associates, we can help you chart your position on the spectrum compared with the higher-performing organisations in your sector. We call this process SmartPath, where we help you to think about your existing IT operating model vs good practice and common industry standards, to land your best IT strategy and action plan.
That's our offer to you.*

Microsoft partnership

As a long-standing Microsoft partner, Doherty Associates has satisfied the rigorous requirements of experience, customer satisfaction and know how to be recognised as being in the top tier of Microsoft's 'partner ecosystem'. Our four main Microsoft Solutions Partner designations span the crucial areas of cloud computing, data analysis, communication and collaboration and server infrastructure.

