



Action on admin

Briefing's latest survey, run in partnership with Intelligent Office, highlights some of the big decisions UK law firms have made about their secretarial and admin function in the last six months. Kayli Olson reports

No well-run business can be without the massive amount of support provided by those in secretarial and office admin roles. What has been the impact of lockdown and the pandemic on secretarial and office admin support inside top-tier law firms?

The first big question is 'to furlough or not to furlough?' The majority of respondents (66.7%) said their firm only had to put 0-5% of secretarial staff on furlough. A further 18.5% said they furloughed 20-40%. For respondents who said they worked at a large firm with over 200 secretaries (21.4% of responses) this doesn't sound like too much of an issue. Comparatively, for those firms with significantly fewer secretaries (28.6% of those surveyed said they had between 20 and 50), furlough numbers carry more weight in terms of percentage – this could perhaps explain the significantly higher rate of furlough in second place, albeit at a much lower response rate. Overall, these numbers suggest that the secretarial function

wasn't too badly hit by the effects of lockdown. That being said, the majority of respondents were unsure as to whether there would be a permanent reduction in the number of FTE secretarial and office admin staff in the firm (39.3%). This wouldn't necessarily be too worrying if not for the next largest number of respondents (at 21.4%) saying that it would be 'likely'. Though this is followed by 17.9% of respondents giving a hard 'no' to any permanent reduction of secretarial and office admin staff. Answers to 'yes' and 'unlikely' both saw 10.7%. Perhaps the secretarial and admin function may indeed have a rocky future ahead if you look at responses to how Covid-19 has impacted plans (graph p29). 'Moving secretarial and office admin staff to more fully flexible working mode' and 'reducing individual support for partners and fee earners' were the two areas where the majority of respondents said they were 'reshaping plans'. Might we see new innovations in the secretarial and admin roles as we work toward a new normal?

Careful measures

This is also especially interesting when compared with results about how effectively firms said they could track the productivity of secretarial and office admin staff while they were working remotely (see graph below). There was almost a 50/50 split in responses saying this was the 'same as in the office', or 'less' so. Only 4% said that tracking productivity of admin staff was 'better than it was in the office'.

Louise Hadland, HR director at Shoosmiths, says: "The critical question here is what are we measuring? Many employers continue to describe their job roles and measure success in terms of inputs and required, historical qualifications. Defining what you want an employee to achieve, being able to describe the purpose of a role and how it adds value is more difficult but if home/remote working is here to stay then it's time to pivot and put the work in. When there is a clear understanding of what's needed from an employee then we can build the measures and development to support those outputs. There's an old saying 'what gets measured gets done' – and investing time now to define what you want to measure will reap dividends later in terms of easier supervision and employee satisfaction."

Clearly, the productivity 'problem' isn't so easily isolated – being able to track productivity doesn't necessarily equate to actually being productive, which is what makes this all so difficult to pin down. And, certainly, the effects of Covid-19 itself on productivity have been mixed.

Penny Newman, chief people officer at Lewis Silkin, says it's important to recognise that everyone's lockdown experience was different. "We've operated a model that is based on trust. Because many of our people have childcare and home-schooling responsibilities, they've had to find ways to manage work around their other commitments. We asked people to let us know if they were struggling and took steps to support them.

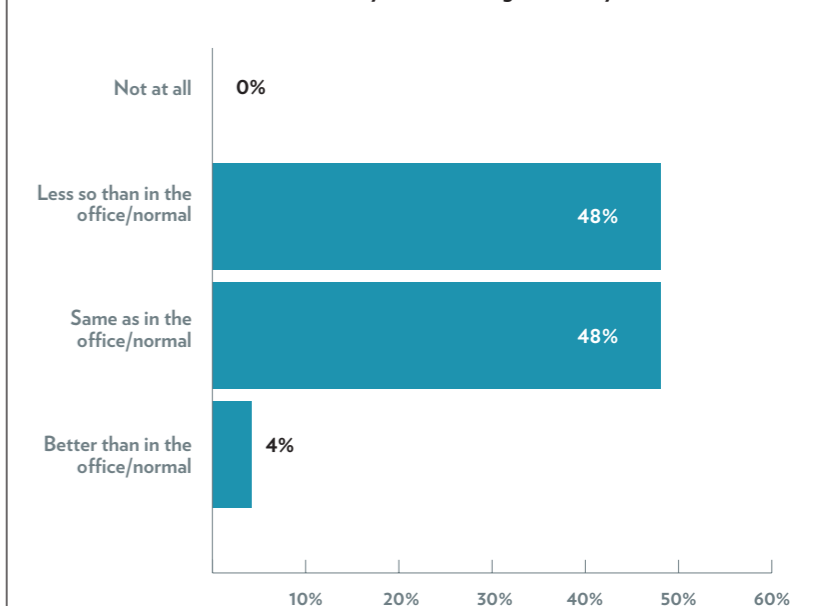
"We increased the frequency of our internal employee engagement survey and asked specific questions around support and productivity. Some felt they were more productive, but they tended to be those staff who did not have childcare or caring responsibilities. When schools open in September we expect this to change. Constant engagement and dialogue with our people are key to overcome any challenges faced."

When it came to joining up fee earner and

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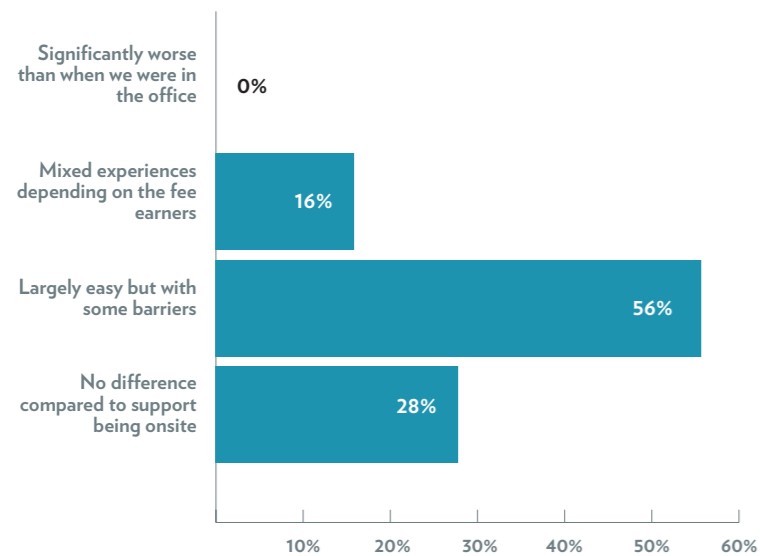
Penny Newman, chief people officer, Lewis Silkin

How effectively can your firm track the productivity of secretarial and office admin staff while they are working remotely?

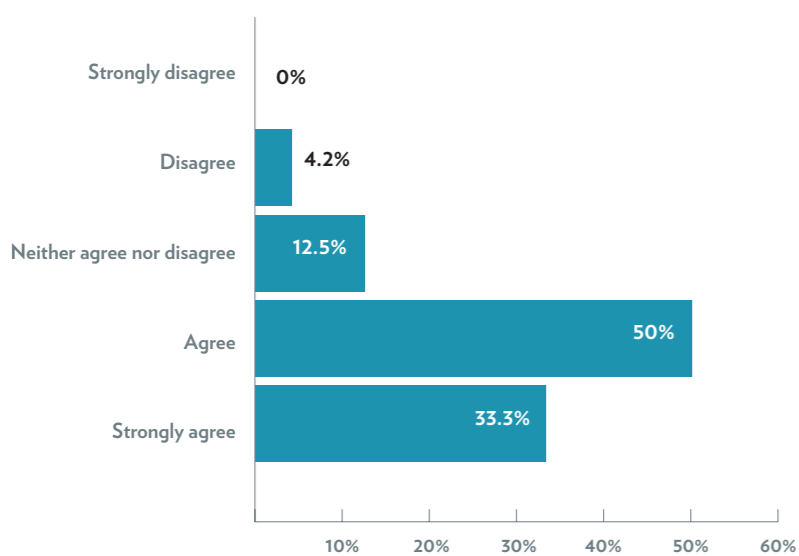


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Can you rate the level of access fee earners have to secretarial and other admin support when everyone was at home (try to discount difficulties faced by any furloughed staff)?



To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'We have the infrastructure/tools to manage the delivery of secretarial and office admin services when they are largely based at home?'



secretarial staff collaboration while working remotely, there wasn't too much difference in how firms worked when their people were mainly onsite (top left graph). Responses show that the majority of fee earners have a good level of access to the support staff they need, bar some barriers (56%). A further 28% said there was no difference, at all, to when people worked onsite.

With work levels in some areas remaining below last year and the level to which most firms will have matched their support resource, Hadland at Shoosmiths says it's difficult to establish whether support resources are pitched at an optimum level. "And we've already seen support staff redundancies in some firms. If support numbers do reduce then it's even more important to think about the processes behind connecting fee earners to their support teams. Fee earners will need to be more organised in the way they manage their workloads, not leaving tasks to be completed by others to the end of the day, and adhere to standard practices to enable support staff to be at their most efficient."

Newman at Lewis Silkin says: "We've not had complaints about access to support. Naturally some things now take a little longer, especially where third parties are involved, but people have generally adapted their working styles and practices to account for this – and support across the firm remains as was. As with most things during lockdown, good two-way communication between relevant groups is key."

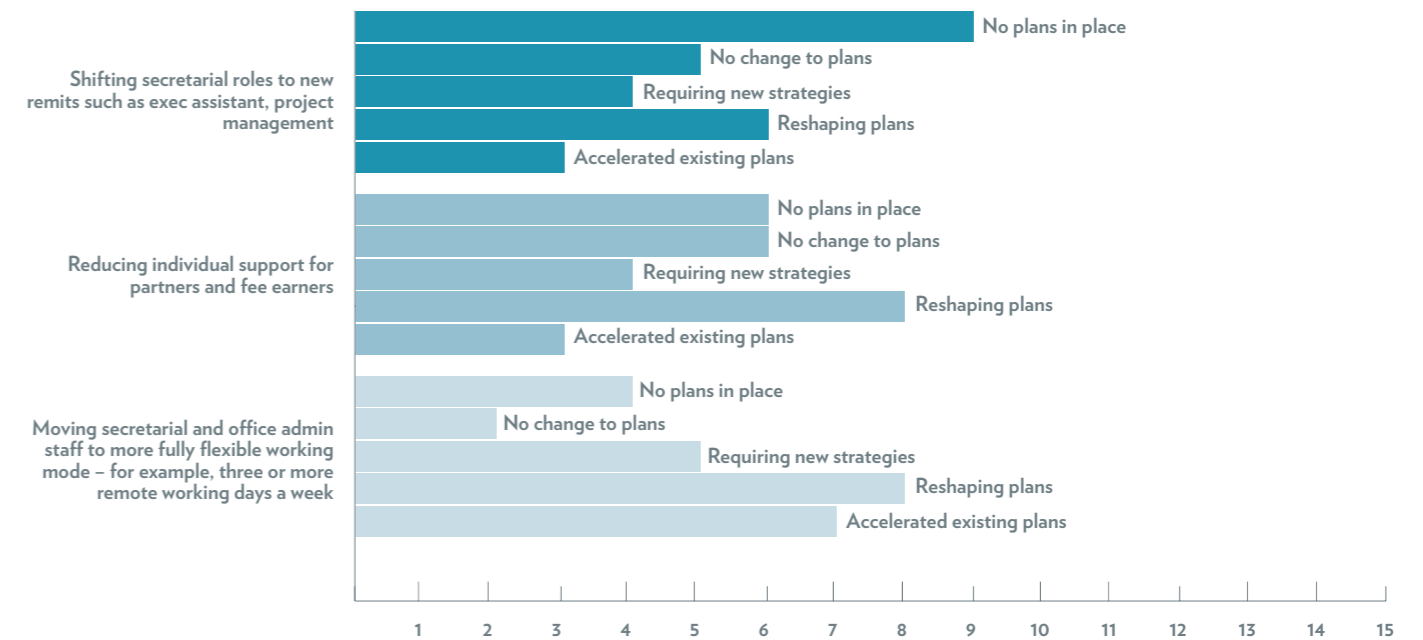
While firms may be understanding of delays and less support during lockdown, as pressures begin to rise it may not be sustainable in the long term, Sam Nicholls, head of business development at Intelligent Office, points out.

Tech in or tech out?

Not surprisingly, an overwhelming percentage of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they have the infrastructure/tools to manage the delivery of secretarial and office admin services when they're largely based from home, at 73.3% (lower left graph). But this doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement and growth. Darren Mitchell, chief operating officer at Hogan Lovells, says: "Most things have worked well without our lawyers and secretaries being located together in the office."

For example, he says, processes like billing have proven more efficient – but at the same time the lack of proximity is highlighting the need for enhanced workflow tools to ensure that the right tasks are allocated to the right individual, "something we were already focused on before the pandemic."

Pick answers that match how Covid-19 has affected the following change plans (total responses)



Newman adds that good connectivity is the key. "Everyone at Lewis Silkin has the same kit – and we made every effort to ensure office equipment was couriered to our people so that their home setup was as comfortable and practicable as possible. But not everyone has access to reliable high-speed broadband. Some of our people have moved back to the office as soon as they were able because of their issues with connectivity."

"We've found that most people have been able to manage. Tech moves fast, however, and as the period of working from home extends, we'll continue to review our tech setup to make sure it matches the needs of our people and the requirements of our business."

Hadland at Shoosmiths also stresses the importance of staying on top of tech. "Existing technology has delivered a great result for most in terms of managing through lockdown. And while technology will be developed and enhanced over the next couple of years to better facilitate remote working – VR is bound to take over from Zoom before long – as the survey suggests, the tech is good enough."

But, she adds, such developments will be wasted unless 'how' it is used also changes. "There are three critical points at which remote working is likely to fail: inadequate supervision, inability to performance manage or inability to build an online brand and sell/market from that platform. Failure at any or all of these points is likely to see managers demanding staff come back to the office where they can 'keep an eye on them'."

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Louise Hadland, HR director, Shoosmiths

"If we try to overlay old working practices over remote, tech-based working we will fail. Design thinking is being extensively employed for client needs but it's just as important to consider new ways of working effectively intra-firm between fee earners and support staff."

And, Hadland says, it doesn't need to be complicated, just considered and consistent – fee earners need to spend the time properly supervising their support staff. She says time invested here will reap dividends for staff and clients alike.

Nicholls at Intelligent Office says the varied responses to the survey point to the wide range of experiences that law firms had during lockdown. "Many firms have coped well during the crisis management phase of the pandemic. In the longer term, there remain significant operational and people management challenges ahead, particularly as demand increases, alongside a clear opportunity to use the positive lessons learned during the lockdown to introduce transformative operational change."