

THOMSON REUTERS INSTITUTE

2024 Law Firm Office Attendance Policies

Legal professionals and law firms embracing
a new standard of hybrid work



Executive summary

In the grand tradition of navigating societal norms, the new realities of return-to-office strategies and specially, of office attendance policies present the modern law firm with a labyrinth of expectations versus reality. Questions about how many days lawyers should be in the office, how flexible these policies should be, and to what degree they should be enforced have sparked intense debates. For all the initial skepticism and ongoing discourse, however, a fittingly unexpected reality has emerged: legal professionals and law firm leaders have embraced their new office attendance policies with startling enthusiasm.

Legal professionals and law firm leaders have embraced their new office attendance policies with startling enthusiasm.

It's a rather shocking turnaround, given the vehemence which perforated the discussion of office attendance early on in the post-pandemic world.

Many lawyers initially were worried that firms would use a heavy hand to pull legal professionals back to the old world of in-office working five days per week. However, the vast majority of law firms are instead employing a hybrid approach to office attendance with a high degree of flexibility, a choice that has been met with remarkable satisfaction from lawyers. Indeed, rather than rejecting the policies, law firm professionals appear willing to go beyond their firms' requirements. Enforcement of office attendance policies has also been generally reported as lax, with aggressive enforcement nearly unseen.

This has resulted in a majority of lawyers who are outright supportive of their firm's policies and a vast super-majority¹ that are at least neutral. For all the surprising support from lawyers and paralegals, the most enthusiastic supporters of the new office policies are the firms' C-suite and executives, a super-majority of whom said they were satisfied with the policies.

By examining the small minority of lawyers who are dissatisfied with their firms' current arrangement, it's possible to see where the overall industry's success comes from. Unsatisfied legal professionals reported being in the office more than the average respondent and operated under notably less flexible attendance policies. These lawyers were extraordinary for how vehement their rejection of these policies was, to the point where a large proportion of them were unsure if they would be at their firm in six months. Paralegals and other non-billing legal professionals also faced challenges, in which their attendance was much more strictly required and enforced, with a notable polarizing result in satisfaction.

Despite the overall success and satisfaction with hybrid work policies, it does seem like some of the anticipated benefits have failed to materialize. If firms expected any kind of productivity boost from their lawyer's being in the office, the evidence is mixed at best for any kind of increase resulting from higher in-office attendance. More glaring seems to be a disconnect between the intentions of the policy and the on-ground reality when it comes to collaboration and mentorship. While associates are required to be in the office more often to provide mentoring opportunities from partners, those same partners seem to be enjoying far greater freedom. The result is that, despite all the effort to bring legal professionals back to the office, collaboration hasn't improved from the work-from-home era.

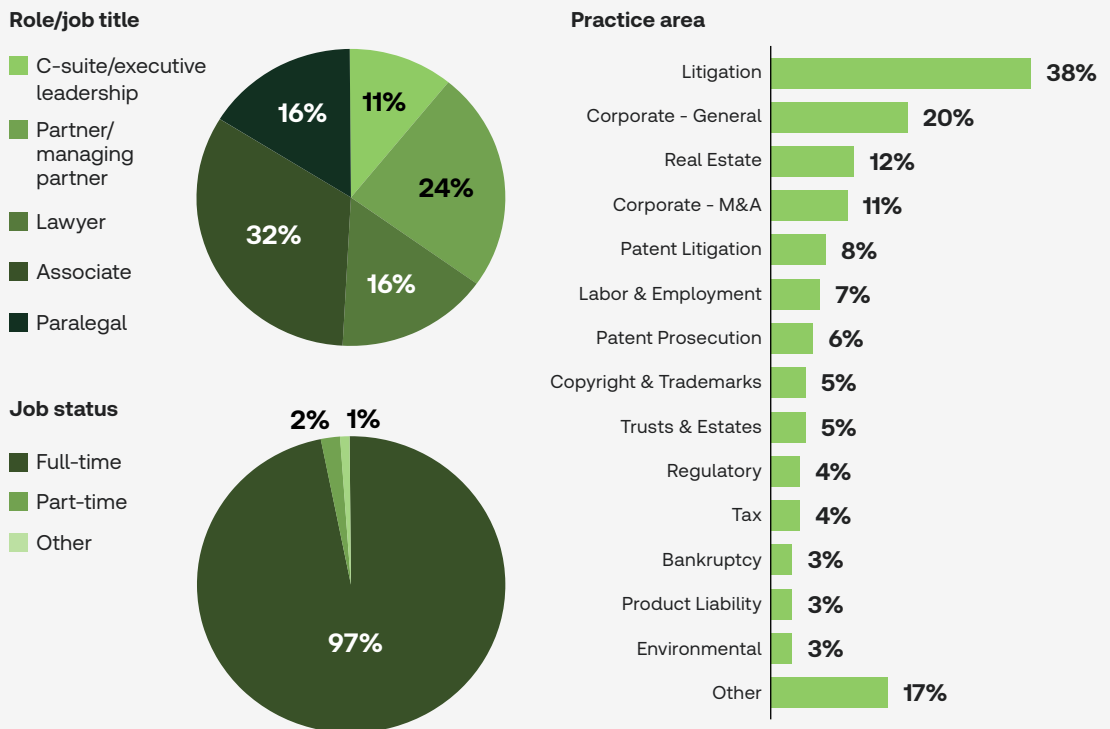
¹ In this context, a super-majority is defined as a majority consisting of 66% or more of the group's total membership.

The law firms’ journey back into the office has been defiant of expectations and its successes so far have been a lesson in flexibility and respect. Even in the cases where dissatisfaction reigns, it seems to be in the places where the overall policy of trust and understanding has failed to manifest. In a world where the relationship between lawyer and firm is set to face startlingly new complexities, whether from the rise of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI); environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues; or an increasingly unstable world, the surprisingly positive results of this first dance should not go ignored, nor should its key lessons.

Methodology

The data from this report comes from a survey conducted by the Thomson Reuters Institute from December 2023 to January 2024. Invitations were sent to a list of verified legal professionals working at large US law firms.² In total, 350 responses were collected from 105 unique large law firms. Almost all (97%) of all respondents were full time workers, with 73% of respondents representing various lawyer classes, 16% representing paralegals, and 11% representing C-Suite or executive leadership. The sample also included a mix of practice areas.

FIGURE 1:
Sample coverage



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

Further data, provided by Thomson Reuters Financial Insights, is based on reported results from 179 US-based law firms, including 48 Am Law 100 firms, 49 Am Law Second Hundred firms, and 82 Midsize law firms (US-based firms ranked outside of the Am Law Second Hundred).

² Large Law Firms in this case are those that employ 30 or more full-time lawyers.

Satisfaction with office attendance policies

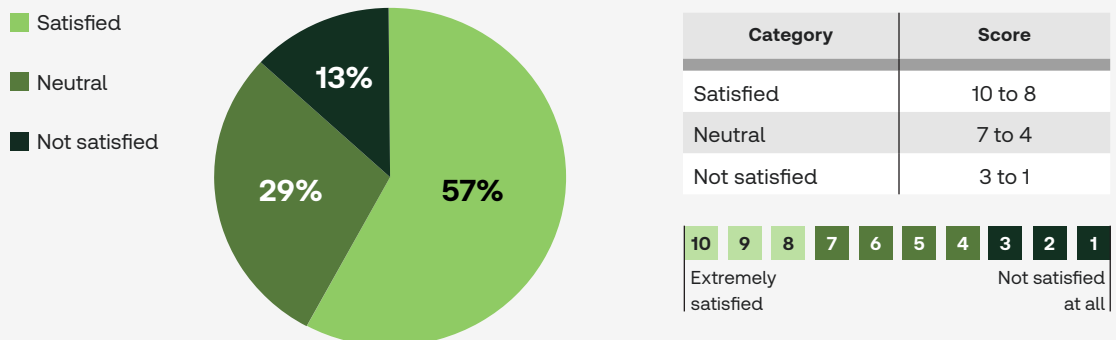
The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in an unprecedented transition from the in-office working environment that legal professionals have experienced for centuries, moving them to a relatively unexplored experience of working from home, a dynamic that extended for years longer than many initially expected. On the positive side, the work-from-home era enabled lawyers and paralegals to discover work-life balance improvements on an incredible scale. For example, time normally spent commuting was now free while lawyers were able to spend more time with family, perusing hobbies, or simply finding more comfortable ways to work from home.

However, the shift was not without its challenges. The lack of in-person interaction strained professional relationships and connections within many firms, hindered the mentoring of junior staff, and complicated the nuances of team dynamics. For many, the blurring lines between work and home life led to burnout and mental health struggles, as the absence of physical separation often made it difficult to disconnect from work. Additionally, while some lawyers found work from home liberating, others found operating outside an office environment difficult. Firms were also faced with the cost of maintaining exceedingly expensive yet hardly used premium office space.

With the worst of the pandemic passing, it became essentially inevitable that firms would, in some fashion, call their people back to the office. Media and professional channels have been filled with instances of businesses calling employees back to the office for full five-day weeks with aggressive enforcement, most notably in professional services businesses like banking and financing.

For law firms, the task of bringing their lawyers and paralegals back to the office was a task fraught with potential backlash. Legal professionals had become accustomed to the advantages in work-life balance that the work-from-home period granted. The pandemic's broader impact on people's evaluation of their careers and the importance of a personal life set up a clash that's already being seen in other industries.

FIGURE 2:
Satisfaction with firms' attendance policy



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

Interestingly, however, that backlash seems to have failed to materialize in the legal industry, as large law firms broadly adopted hybrid office attendance policies with high degrees of flexibility and light-touch enforcement. This has resulted in high degrees of satisfaction from legal professionals.

We asked legal professionals to rate their firms' attendance policies on a scale of 1 to 10. More than half (57%) reported satisfaction with their firms' office attendance policy, rating it 8 or higher. A further 29% said they were at least neutral (rating the policies 4 to 7); and only 13% of those surveyed reported outright dissatisfaction with their firms' policies (rating them 3 or lower).

Fears of firms' adopting en masse five-day-a-week mandates thus far seem to have been unfounded, with lawyers having instead discovered that the gains in work-life balance attained in the work-from-home era have been upheld. While the narrative that firms *gave in* to lawyers demands would be an easy takeaway from this finding, another data point suggests a far more interesting possibility.

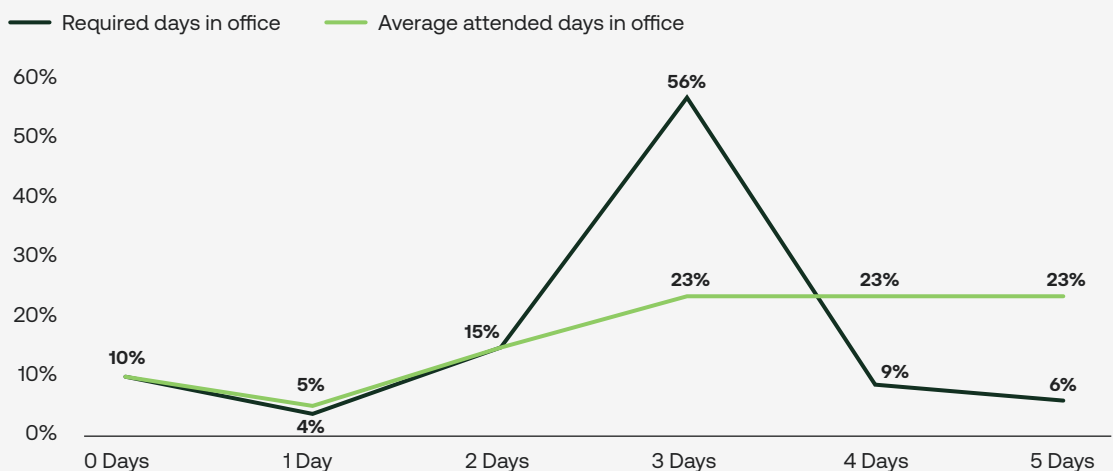
With how happy lawyers are and how much the policies seem to tip in their favor, one may presume that law firm leaders have had to unhappily capitulate to their lawyers under pressure of an uprising. After all, in many cases it seems like lawyers got everything they wanted: A hybrid work option with plenty of time at home, which is highly flexible yet lightly enforced. Regarding other findings in this report relating to productivity and collaboration, one would assume that law firm leaders are more begrudging in their satisfaction on these policies. In truth, it's the opposite. While all title classes were happy with their firms' attendance policies, none were as happy as the C-suite and executive leadership, who had an average of 66% in solid satisfaction. In other words, nobody is more pleased with the new hybrid reality than the bosses.

A flexible, hybrid approach

Flexible attendance policies are one example of how firms have found a compromise between the traditional model of in-office working and the more recent trend of legal professionals wanting to work remotely.

FIGURE 3:

Office required days vs. attended days



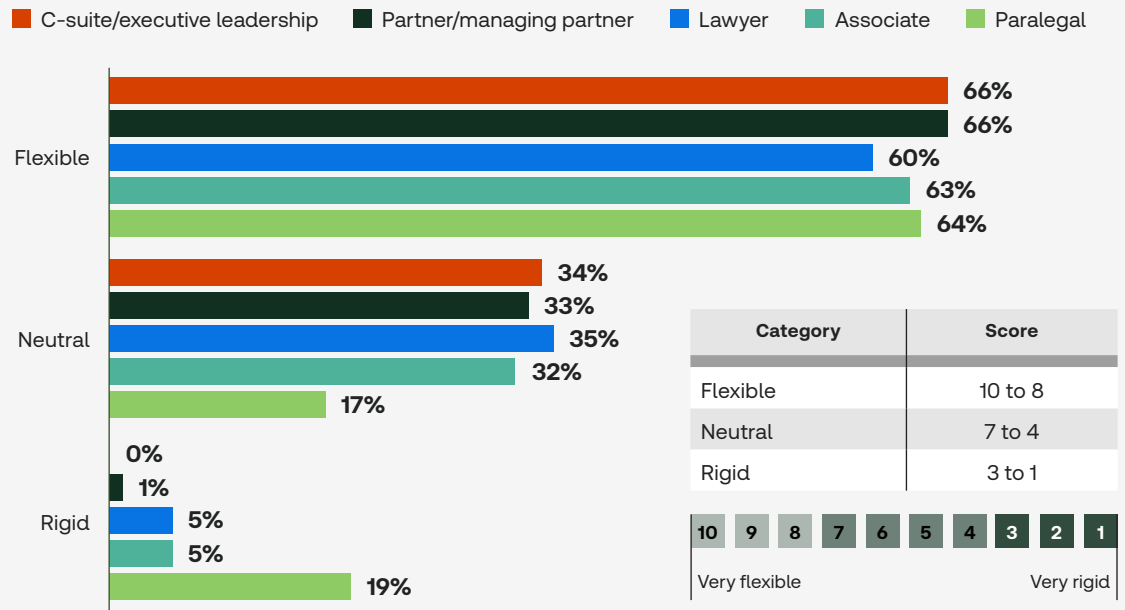
Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

More than half of respondents (56%) report their firm has established a policy that requires lawyers to come in at least three days per week, with 85% reporting a requirement of less than four days per week. Regarding the flexibility of this requirement, 64% report that the overall policy is flexible, allowing staff to largely choose which days they are in the office.

Whereas many companies are struggling to get employees to reach minimum attendance policies, it seems that law firms have a large group of legal professionals that go beyond the minimum requirement. While a majority of law firms require at least three working days in the office, a surprising number of lawyers report actually being in the office more days than are required. While only 15% of law firms require more than three days in the office, 46% of respondents say they are showing up to the office four or more days per week.

As for the much discussed firms which require their lawyers to be in the office five days per week, only 6% of respondents stated that this was their firm’s policy. If our sample is representative, it seems that the vast bulk of of the legal industry has rejected such measures.

FIGURE 4:
Flexibility of office attendance policy (by role)

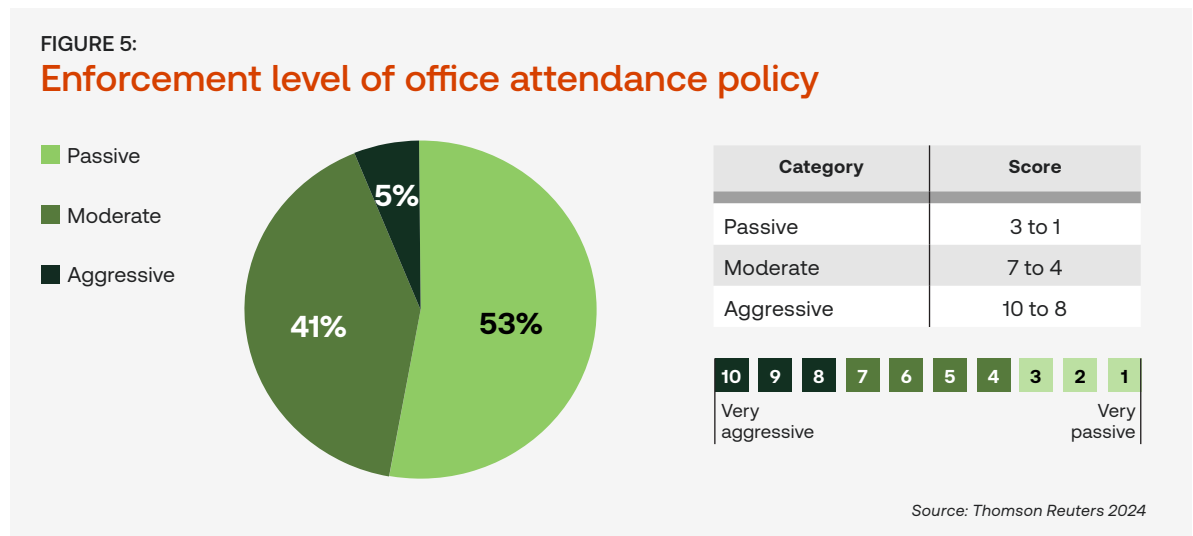


Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

A policy that allows professionals to choose three days a week to attend the office provides some autonomy and flexibility, while also creating opportunities for regular face-to-face interactions with colleagues and clients. This hybrid approach seems to have struck a balance between the personal and business needs of legal professionals, as reflected in the high levels of satisfaction and neutrality reported in the survey. The policy also demonstrates firms' willingness to accept and accommodate the preferences of their staff, rather than imposing a rigid and uniform rule.

The role (or lack thereof) of enforcement

In returning to the office, there was understandable trepidation on the side of legal professionals beyond the return itself. The brief period in 2021 and early-2022 in which the labor economics of the large law firm industry swung in favor of legal professionals has faded, and leverage again seems in the hands of firms. Late 2023 saw Am Law 100 firms severely restrict summer hiring and many top-list law firms publicly let lawyers go in the last few months. A reality in which firms would aggressively enforce their return-to-office plans seemed not out of the question.



Yet survey respondents overwhelmingly reported only passive to moderate enforcement of attendance policies, allowing many professionals to experiment and discover their optimal work mode without facing a rigid schedule. Enforcement from firms regarding their office policies has been lax, according to our survey, with 53% of legal professionals reporting passive enforcement and 41% reporting moderate enforcement.

For those seeking a more advanced statistical analysis, a comparative regression analysis of the impact of flexibility and enforcement found that both aspects strongly affected legal professionals' opinion of their firm's office policy. However, a lawyer's score of flexibility more fully explained their overall approval of the policy, far more than even firms' required number of days in the office. Thus it seems that lawyers are truly reacting to the flexibility and enforcement of the policy rather than just the number of days they are required to be in the office.

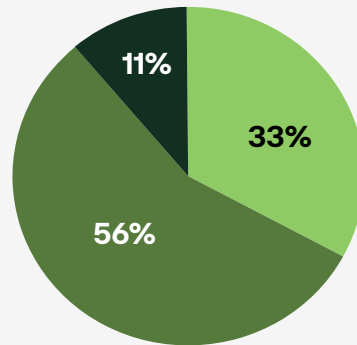
Impact on overall job satisfaction

When asked specifically how their firms' office attendance policies impacted their satisfaction, lawyers were at least neutral if not upbeat about a policy topic that has created distinct heat across the professional landscape. An overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) reported that their overall job satisfaction had either stayed neutral or improved because of the office attendance policy at their law firm. Unlike lawyers' unexpected enthusiasm for the policies themselves, the impact on overall job satisfaction was majority neutral, although there was a notable tilt towards the positive. Only 11% of lawyers saw their overall job satisfaction drop as a result of their firms' policies, a number that was close to the 13% which disapproved of their firms' office attendance policies specifically.

FIGURE 6:
Office attendance policy affecting job satisfaction

Total respondents

- Increased
- Stayed the same
- Decreased

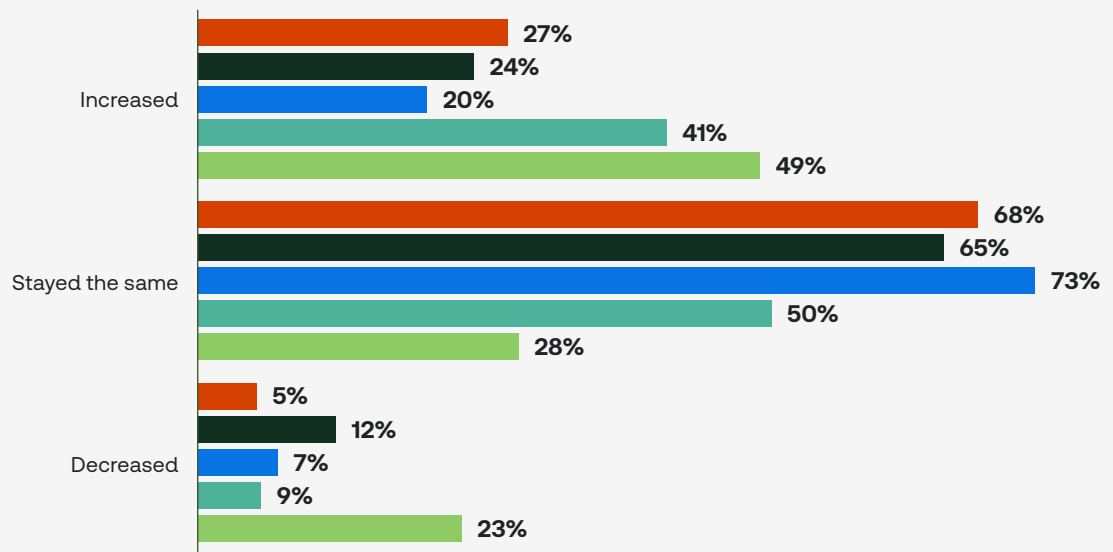


Category	Score
Increased	10 to 8
Stayed the same	7 to 4
Decreased	3 to 1



Total respondents by role

- C-suite/executive leadership
- Partner/managing partner
- Lawyer
- Associate
- Paralegal



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

Among those respondents with the most positive view of office attendance policies was law firm associates, 41% of whom reported an increase in overall job satisfaction compared to the overall average of 33%. This may be unsurprising given that associates have the highest potential gains from an in-office policy that offers them opportunities to be mentored and earn work, yet also provides them with a life-balance according to their own needs.

Paralegals presented a more complex reaction. On one hand, this title class was one of the most enthusiastic respondents, with 49% reporting an increase in job satisfaction as a result of their firms' office attendance policy. On the other hand, paralegals were more than twice as likely to see a decrease in job satisfaction, with nearly a quarter of respondents being less enthusiastic toward their job overall as a direct result of these policies.

Given the general success and approval that return to office generated, we decided that the best way to figure out what was and was not working was to examine the rare instances in which dissatisfaction manifested among legal professionals.

The TR Institute's View:

As in law, it's the details that matter when it comes to office policies.

Law firms seeking to gauge the success of their own policies vs. those of the industry need to go beyond merely comparing their required working days to the overall average. As shown in the report, factors such as the flexibility of the policy and the level of the enforcement, have a major impact on the policy's success. Where there has been a great deal of argument over the number of days a legal professional should be in the office, firm leaders setting policy may be missing the forest for the trees if they do not also take into account these further concerns.

Examining unsatisfied legal professionals

The fact that law firms have gotten as close as they have to such universal acceptance of their office attendance policies is one of the most striking findings of the survey. Of the overall sample, only 13% reported being unsatisfied with their specific law firm's office policy. By analyzing this group (referred to going forward as the Unsatisfied³ group) we found a few striking differences between them and the majority Satisfied⁴ group.

The first was that the Unsatisfied legal professionals reported that their firms are far *less flexible* than the average law firm, with only 28% reporting that their firm is flexible compared to the average score of 64%. The median flexibility score for this group was also two rating points lower than the overall median and three points lower than the Satisfied group.

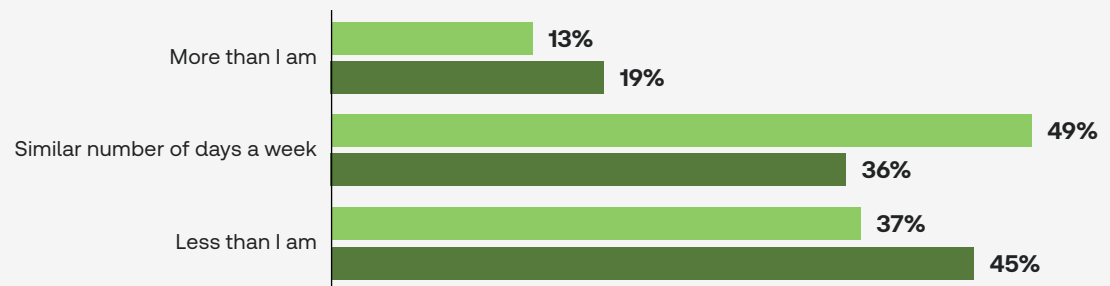
This lack of flexibility seemed to stem, in some ways, from a perception that these legal professionals were working more from the office than their counterparts. Whereas nearly 50% of all legal professionals surveyed said that they were in the office a similar amount of time compared to their colleagues, almost half of Unsatisfied professionals said that they were in the office *more* than their colleagues. This data is somewhat supported by the attendance responses. The Unsatisfied group reported an average days-in-the-office requirement of 3.1, while the Satisfied subset reported 2.6 (compared to the overall average of 2.7 days of in-office attendance).

FIGURE 7:

The unsatisfied professional

■ % of total respondents ■ % of unsatisfied respondents

Office attendance compared to colleagues



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

The dichotomy between dissatisfaction and strict attendance policies was also despite both Satisfied and Unsatisfied lawyers reporting a similar level of enforcement from their firm. It thus seems that their dissatisfaction is not the consequences of the office attendance policies to which lawyers are reacting but rather the inflexible base of the policy itself.

³ The Unsatisfied group is formally defined as the 13% of legal professionals who gave a score of between 1 – Not Satisfied At All, and a 3 when asked “How satisfied are you with your firm’s current Office Attendance policy?”

⁴ The Satisfied group is formally defined as the 57% of legal professionals who gave a score of between 10 – Extremely Satisfied, and a 7 when asked “How satisfied are you with your firm’s current Office Attendance policy?”

The Paralegal – an inequitable polarization

One title that notably deviated from the norms of near-universal flexibility and acceptance regarding RTO policies was paralegals and that does seem to be somewhat by intention. Among paralegals, 64% reported that their firms had different office attendance policies for lawyers and non-billable professionals, with no indications that paralegals were getting the easier, softer policies.

Paralegals were four times as likely to report their office attendance policy as being rigid and they were also half as likely to report a neutral level of flexibility. In other words, paralegals were given fewer options regarding their office experience compared to lawyers and executives. In addition, paralegals were two and a half times more likely to classify enforcement as aggressive and two-thirds as likely to report passive enforcement, a distinct detachment from the norm for lawyers.

This tale was born out in the open answers submitted by both paralegals and lawyers. These open-ended responses pointed towards paralegals and non-billing professions often having less flexibility in their work arrangements, being required to be in the office more and being under far greater scrutiny than their lawyer counterparts.

There did seem to be a positive impact on the productivity front, however compared to the average lawyer. Paralegals were far more likely to report a net increase in productivity as a result of these policies, with 42% reporting increased productivity.

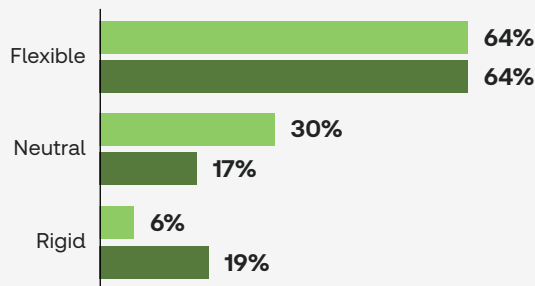
However, that bright spot may be offset by the potential for turnover. While half of paralegals reported that they saw a net increase in job satisfaction, 23% reported a lower overall job satisfaction as a result. While 23% is, indeed, a minority, it is double the level of dissatisfaction reported from associates, lawyers, and partners.

FIGURE 8:

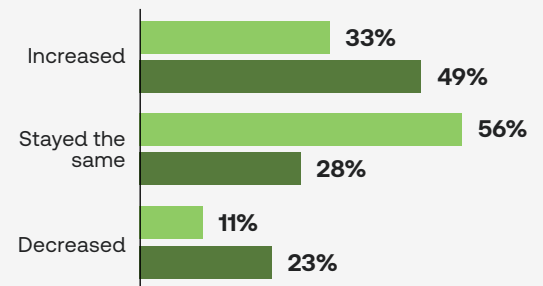
Paralegal’s flexibility and job satisfaction ratings

■ Total respondents ■ Paralegal

How paralegals rate flexibility of office attendance policy



How paralegals rate how office attendance policy’s affected their job satisfaction



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

“Support staff generally need to get special permission to work from home.”

-Associate

“In practice, enforced more strictly against non-billing professionals, particularly legal assistants.”

-Associate

“Some non-billing are required to be in five days a week (e.g., records department).”

-Partner/Managing Partner

“Staff are required to be in the office more than attorneys.”

-C-Suite/Executive Leadership

Impact on overall firm performance

While overall satisfaction of lawyers was a pleasant surprise and though some lawyers have proven to be dissatisfied, it certainly seems like the dissatisfaction stems from policies which differ from the successful blueprint the vast majority of large law firms have adopted.

Yet to paint firms' return-to-office as a smooth trip to success would be an incomplete tale. For a more complete picture, firms must look at why the anticipated improvements that their office attendance policies were supposed to bring to productivity have not fully materialized, casting a shadow over an otherwise bright outlook.

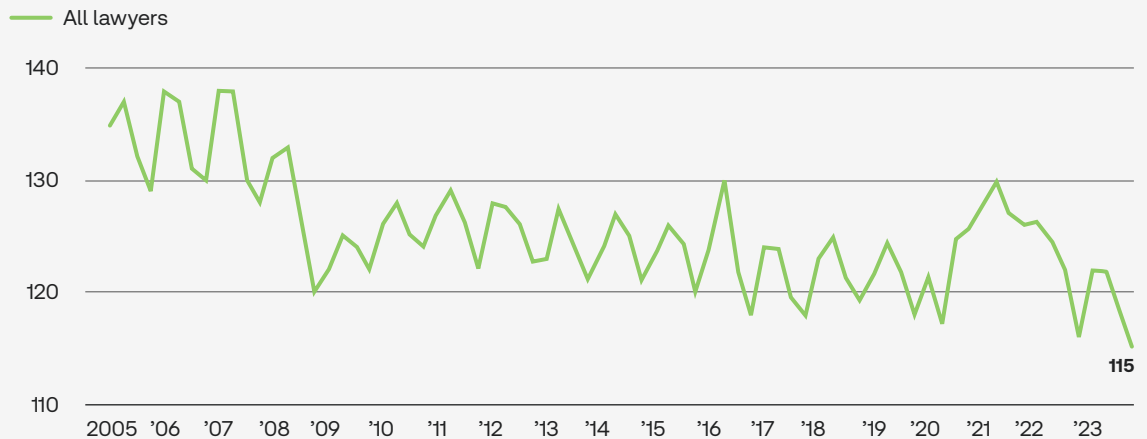
Clouded findings around productivity

Since the onset of the pandemic, productivity in the average law firm has experienced a downturn, with an average yearly decline in hours per lawyer of 1.6% per year since 2020. As reported in the Thomson Reuters Institute's *Law Firm Financial Index* for the fourth quarter of 2023,⁵ productivity declines are nothing new for law firms. The period from 2005 to the end of 2019 averaged a yearly decline of 0.6%, with the current downturn seeing a far greater pace. As a result, the overall hours worked per lawyer have reached an all-time low.

FIGURE 9:

Hours worked per lawyer

Hours worked per month



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

We cannot assert a strict causal relationship between firms' office policies and the overall productivity downturns as there are many other factors at play. Even if returning to their offices did improve the productivity of lawyers and non-billing professionals over the last year, other developments such as technological enhancements that automated previously billable hours and over-hiring relative to law firm demand could be major factors that override a positive impact from in-office attendance.

⁵ <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/legal/lfi-q4-2023-improving-fortunes/>

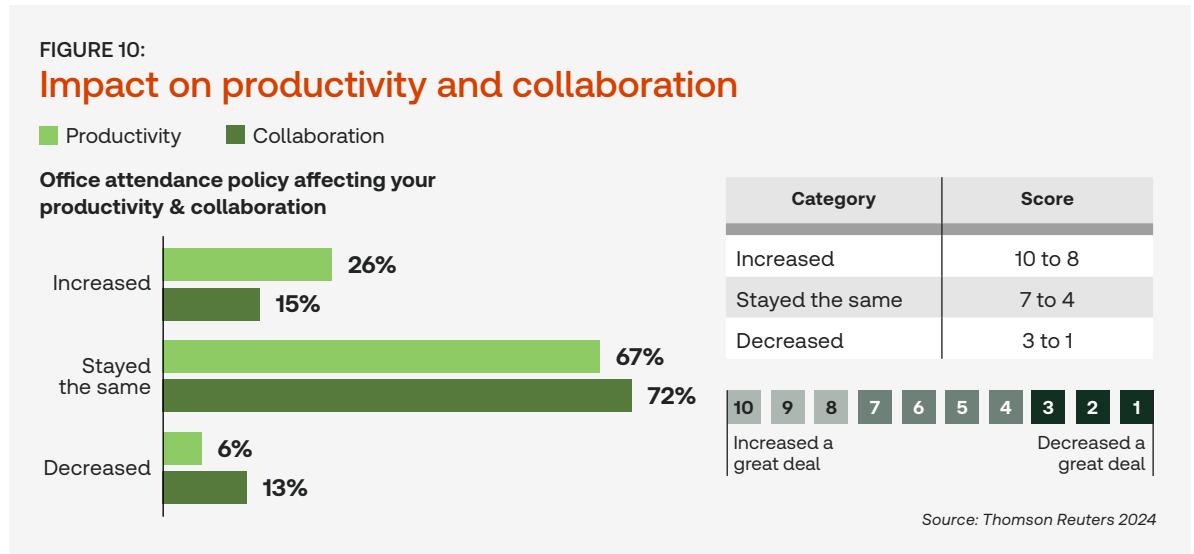
What is clear from the data, however, is that the push to get lawyers to return to in-office work has not resulted in any significant improvement in per-lawyer productivity.

Two-thirds of those surveyed reported that their office attendance policy has had no effect on their productivity, and only 26% report any improvement. Given the difficulty in self-grading productivity, this is not necessarily a strong result.

We did endeavor to divine actual increases in productivity that may have resulted from office attendance policies, however, the results were unsatisfactory. The data samples we analyzed included:

- respondents who claimed to be more productive
- lawyers who spent more time in the office than their counterparts
- Satisfied and Unsatisfied lawyers
- respondents from firms participating in Thomson Reuters Financial Insights.

Even when controlled for practice, title, and other factors, all results came back as inconclusive or insubstantial. If there is a productivity enhancement from having lawyers back in the office, it may be too small for us to isolate or detect.



A collaboration problem

In theory, increasing collaboration should have been a much easier achievement as legal professionals returned to the office, especially as the headwinds of the long-term decline in productivity wouldn't have been as much of a detrimental factor. However, our findings indicate that collaboration also has not improved compared to the work-from-home era, with 72% of respondents saying collaboration with colleagues has remained the same with few outliers to either side.

While collaboration is a difficult phenomenon to statistically analyze, the open-ended responses seem to point in a particular direction. Multiple respondents noted that firms more often allowed more senior lawyers to work from home additional days, while associates (especially the most junior) were required to be in the office more. Many respondents (especially those from the

C-Suite and executive leadership positions) suggest that the intention behind such policies for associates was to foster mentorship and collaboration opportunities. The reality, however, appears to diverge from these objectives.

It seems that there is a paradox that many firms may have inadvertently inserted into their office attendance policies.

The feedback clearly highlights a significant discrepancy regarding the presence of partners in the office: it suggests a lack of visibility, despite attendance data indicating otherwise, hinting that partners may be present but not accessible to associates. Additionally, it is noted, albeit less surprisingly, that partners appear to enjoy more privileges than individuals with other titles. Just 1% of partners reported that their office attendance policy was rigid, compared to 5% of associates and 19% of paralegals. Partners also reported far more passive enforcement of their attendance requirements compared to other titles and noted that other colleagues were in the office far less than they were. Further, while the number of lawyers, associates, and paralegals who reported rigid enforcement were a small minority of respondents, partners experiencing such strict enforcement were effectively non-existent. Open ended responses likewise showed that partners and senior classes were given far greater latitude than other titles.

It seems that there is a paradox that many firms may have inadvertently inserted into their office attendance policies. These policies mandate that associates spend more time in the office than the average lawyer to foster learning and facilitate mentorship opportunities. However, partners, who are the very individuals expected to mentor these associates, are afforded significantly more flexibility to work from home than the average lawyer. In essence, the students are required to be in school, but the teachers aren't in the classroom.

This shortfall undermines one of the primary objectives of encouraging office attendance: to re-establish the communication and connections that were weakened during the work-from-home shift prompted by the pandemic. This failure to return to previous levels not only impacts the professional development of associates but also hints at a broader issue of accountability and equitable treatment within the firm's structure.

Partner attendance in the office verbatim responses

"Partners do not have the same expectations and are in the office as they need or see fit."

-Associate, Satisfied

"Does not apply to partners, apparently."

-Lawyer, Unsatisfied

"Many partners never come in the office and appear to not have any in-office expectation."

-Associate, Neutral

"Non-partners are expected to be in the office and have been told it will be part of the review cycle, and the justification is allegedly for enhanced mentorship, but partners aren't showing up any more often and there has been no increase (and actually a bit of a decrease) in interactions with partners since the policy was announced, and there's no mechanism to hold partners accountable to the supposed 'expectation.'"

-Associate, Unsatisfied

"Associates must be in the office at least 3 days a week to receive a bonus whereas partners can get their bonuses without meeting that requirement."

-Partner/Managing Partner, Unsatisfied

A warning regarding retention

It may be somewhat logical for law firms to conclude that the hybrid model, for all of its surprising popularity, is a failure if it itself fails to improve collaboration and productivity.

We would caution against this conclusion for two key reasons.

First, there may be other solutions to firms' productivity and collaborations issues which could be more effective. Automation technologies from mundane record-keeping to the most advanced GenAI products mean that, while lawyers may be billing fewer hours, they can add more actual value into each working hour.

Collaboration, while again a more complicated and nuanced topic, could also see advantages from efforts that are more simple, relative to a full-time office presence requirement. Workshops, coaching, even something as modest as a firm-provided lunch on a scheduled basis could be enough to start rebuilding communication and cooperation. If there were half the discussion in the legal industry about a *return to collaboration* as there has been about a *return to office*, then solutions will no doubt avail themselves.

Those still looking to office attendance policies as an answer may find one key area needing improvement. More than three-quarters (78%) of legal professionals stated that their firm didn't have different office attendance policies by practice group. By allowing greater flexibility at the practice level, firms may give the space for their partners and associates to learn to work and collaborate together.

If there were half the discussion in the legal industry about a *return to collaboration* as there has been about a *return to office*, then solutions will no doubt avail themselves.

A second reason to caution against imposing more restrictive policies is that, even if a harsher in-office policies do increase productivity and collaboration — and we found no adequate evidence that they do — the proverbial juice may simply not be worth the squeeze. For that, we need to look at the impact of the current office policies on *retention*.

It may be unsurprising, given the high overall satisfaction of legal professionals with their firms' office attendance policies, that the overall impact on retention was also high. Among respondents, 84% stated that they were unlikely to leave their firm in the next six months, with three-quarters of them saying they were highly unlikely to leave. This ratio is similar to how lawyers said they felt their office attendance policies affected their overall job satisfaction.

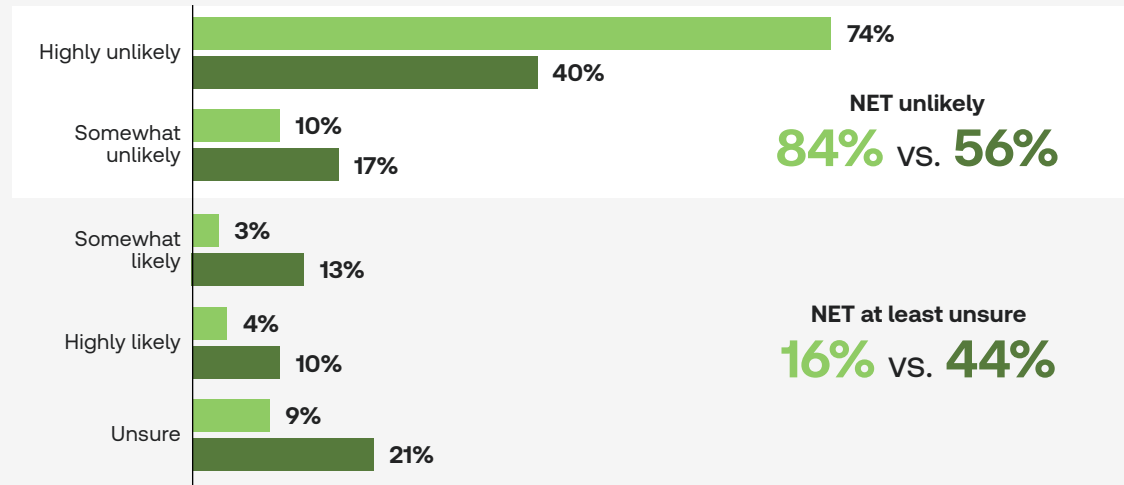
What was far more notable was how starkly this perception shifted when we once again looked at those lawyers in the Unsatisfied category, or those who were sour on their firms' office attendance requirements. Whereas only 16% of total legal professionals were at least *unsure* if they would move firms in the next six months, the Unsatisfied group was nearly three-times more likely to fall into the unsure category.

FIGURE 11:

Retention**Likelihood to move from the current firm in the next 6 months**

■ % of total respondents

■ % of unsatisfied with office policy respondents



Source: Thomson Reuters 2024

This is a significant impact that signals just how much is at stake for firms if they press too hard with this issue of office attendance and how valuable the success is that they have managed to find. It may be tempting for some law firm leaders to view this sort of impact as a potential lever to influence staffing levels without directly laying off professionals, but this would be a mistake. While it is true that summer associate recruiting was at an 11-year low in 2023,⁶ one should remember that pressure tactics of this type are rather indiscriminate in comparison to employing more selective hiring practices. Even for firms which may see a short-term financial incentive for attrition, enacting such policies may make the talent that they want to keep far more exposed to rival firms offering flexible policies. The best talent is as likely to walk away as the rest.

The TR Institute's View:

Firms that attempt to reimpose the old dynamic of the five-day office week in search of productivity and collaboration gains are vulnerable to losing talent.

In a business environment where low-value work is being automated away, top talent is likely only to become more valuable. Harsh, inflexible office requirements open up the prospect for competing firms to lure away top talent with similar or smaller financial packages but greatly increased opportunities for work-life balance. Because of the large-scale adoption of flexible, hybrid work across the industry, outlier firms are now more strategically vulnerable to hostile talent acquisitions. Firms may want to reconsider putting themselves in a situation where they are strategically vulnerable to a competitive advantage adopted by the vast majority of the legal industry.

⁶ <https://reuters.com/legal/litigation/law-firm-summer-associate-recruiting-hits-11-year-low-2023-2024-03-12/>

Conclusion

Recent years have been transformative for the legal profession as the industry has evolved from initial resistance to remote work to acknowledging its advantages and limitations. Lawyers and law firms seem to have navigated the tumultuous waters of initial biases and evolving expectations, and finally learned to find a balance.

This reflects a nuanced understanding that the optimal working arrangement is not one-size-fits-all but rather a hybrid model that accommodates the spectrum of needs and preferences within the legal profession. While the journey illuminated areas of disparity — highlighting moments of dissatisfaction and unmet expectations, particularly around mentorship and equitable engagement — these challenges serve as vital lessons rather than deterrents. Indeed, they underscore the importance of fostering a culture in which communication, understanding, and accountability are paramount, and one that ensures that office policies are as beneficial in practice as they are in principle.

These problems... have solutions beyond forcing lawyers back into the office or attempting more draconian measures which are likely to leave firms strategically vulnerable.

These lessons have not been without disappointments. Firms which may have sought large productivity gains by having their workers back in the office haven't found them, and collaboration has not improved compared to the work-from-home era.

These problems, however, have solutions beyond forcing lawyers back into the office or attempting more draconian measures which are likely to leave firms strategically vulnerable. Communication and mentorship issues, in particular, have more accessible solutions, including those within the realm of office policy as well as those beyond. Aligning firms' strategy, vision, and perhaps most importantly, their compensation system, all to incentivize collaboration will not be easy. Yet such an alignment is the most likely solution that can provide the long-term gains firms are seeking.

As we look forward, the overall message of this report is one of optimism and a recognition of the strides made in adapting to an ever-evolving professional landscape. The successes, marked by a high degree of satisfaction and a flexible, hybrid approach to office attendance, underscore what is perhaps the key development of the past four years. Law firms, once thought of as immovable, static institutions, have learned once again how to grow and change for the better. It's a trait they will require in order to thrive amid the complexities of upcoming challenges such as the evolution of GenAI and the increasing presence of alternative legal service providers.

The current trend indicates a promising, adaptable future for the law firm office, one in which a properly designed and implemented office attendance policy has the potential not to divide lawyers, but to be the means of uniting them.

Thomson Reuters

Thomson Reuters is a leading provider of business information services. Our products include highly specialized information-enabled software and tools for legal, tax, accounting and compliance professionals combined with the world's most global news service – Reuters.

For more information on Thomson Reuters, visit tr.com and for the latest world news, reuters.com.

Thomson Reuters Institute

The Thomson Reuters Institute brings together people from across the legal, corporate, tax & accounting and government communities to ignite conversation and debate, make sense of the latest events and trends and provide essential guidance on the opportunities and challenges facing their world today. As the dedicated thought leadership arm of Thomson Reuters, our content spans blog commentaries, industry-leading data sets, informed analyses, interviews with industry leaders, videos, podcasts and world-class events that deliver keen insight into a dynamic business landscape.

Visit thomsonreuters.com/institute for more details.