

THE 2022 Legal Support Staff Research Findings

Across May 2022, BigHand gathered over 800 responses to its industry survey revealing the latest trends in lawyers to support staff work allocation from firms in North America (NA) and the UK. Preview the key findings below.



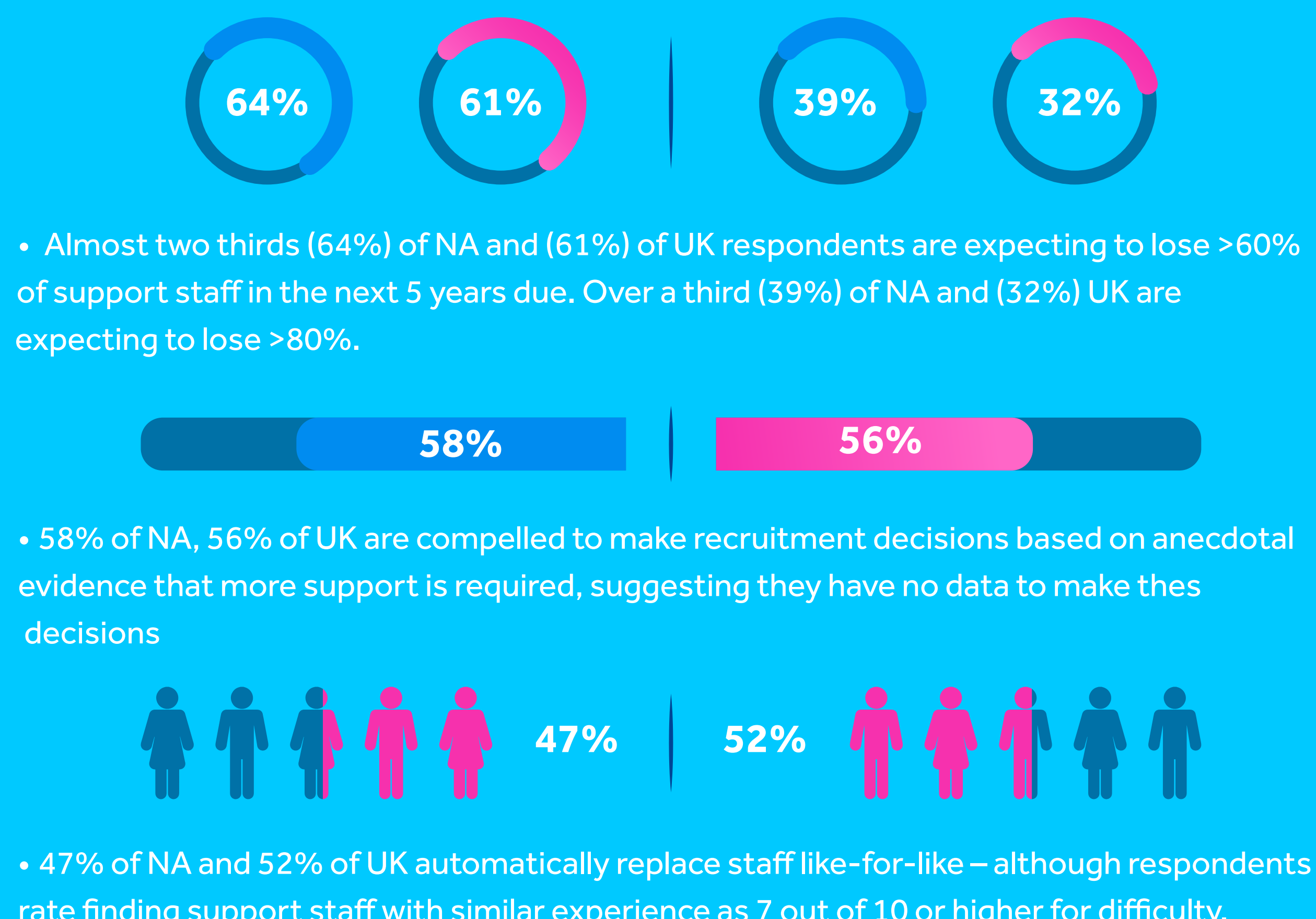
Support Staff Embrace Hybrid Working

Hybrid working is the biggest change to legal support services ever. While firms are adjusting to changing employee expectations, their current policies are not supporting either support staff or lawyers, leading to additional costs and discontent. Firms need to urgently consider how to create a new operational model that is efficient and optimizes the time, skills and expectations of staff.

- 55% of NA and 48% of UK respondents working in support services would look for a new job if required to work more than three days in the office.
- 39% of NA, 45% of UK confirm that achieving an even distribution of work between support staff is one of the biggest challenges of hybrid working.
- 65% of NA, 58% of UK respondents say their firm has different hybrid working policies for lawyers/partners and support staff.

Pressure on Support Staff Recruitment

Increasing retirement and attrition have put pressure on support staff recruitment for years – but it is now worse than ever, and firms face huge disruptions over the next five years. Firms need to replace like-for-like recruitment with a data-led approach that reflects current and evolving trends in support requirements.



Almost two thirds (64%) of NA and (61%) of UK respondents are expecting to lose >60% of support staff in the next 5 years due. Over a third (39% of NA and (32%) UK are expecting to lose >80%.

58% of NA, 56% of UK are compelled to make recruitment decisions based on anecdotal evidence that more support is required, suggesting they have no data to make these decisions

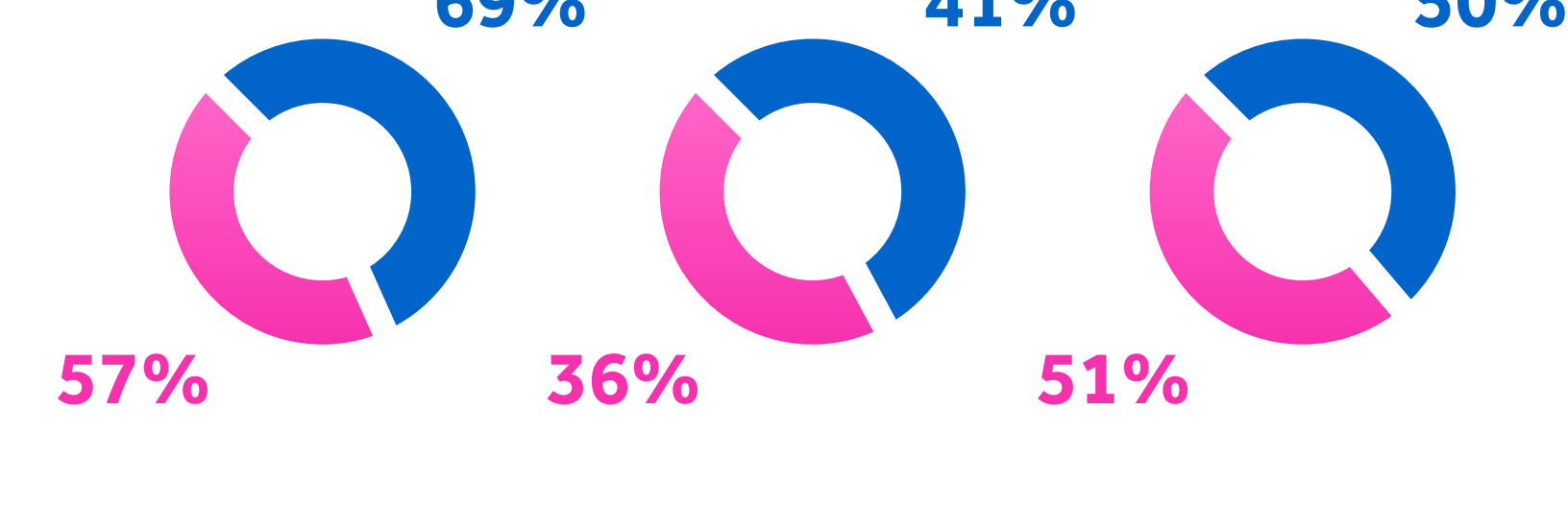
47% of NA and 52% of UK automatically replace staff like-for-like – although respondents rate finding support staff with similar experience as 7 out of 10 or higher for difficulty.

The data indicates that firms need to better understand what skills are required and move away from blindly replacing like-for-like. To future proof service delivery, firms need to identify current and emerging skills gaps and put in place robust plans for attracting, retaining and upskilling to safeguard productivity.

Evolving Support Staff Structures

Changes to support services have been occurring for years, with a clear shift towards larger centralized teams and proactive career development. It is vital that firms' restructure their support teams, have adapted work delegation practices and leveraged digital technology to achieve a more efficient, equitable and flexible approach.

- Secretary ratios continue to increase (39% of NA and 38% of UK).



(69% of NA, 57% of UK) firms are introducing junior administrative roles. Yet, less than half (41% of NA, 36% of UK) of firms are committed to retraining and upskilling over the next two years. Reliance on outsourced support has increased over the past year, up 12% in NA to 50% and up 12% in the UK to 51%.

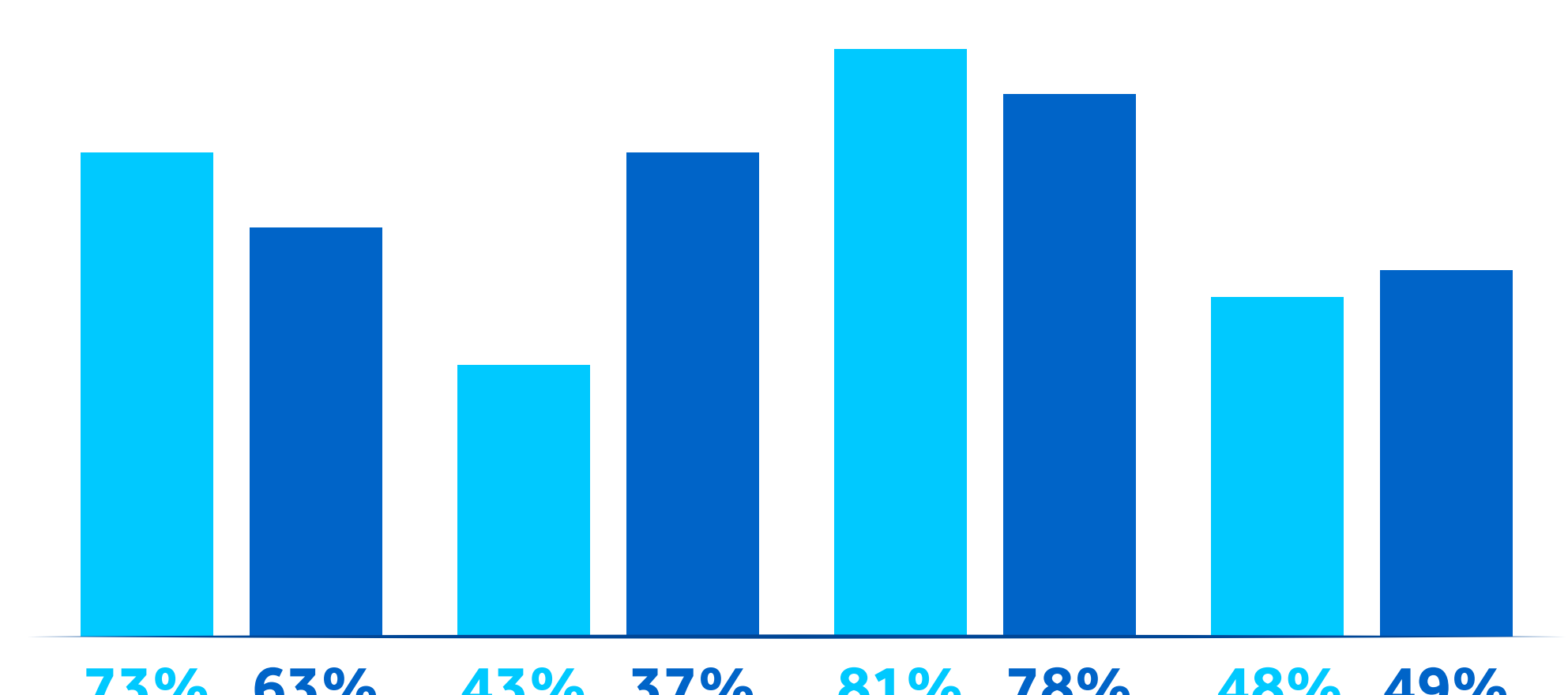
The findings show firms are adapting and have restructured their teams or have made plans to make changes in the next two years:



89% of NA, 88% of UK say they have restructured or introduced teams in the last two years, with 61% NA and 60% UK saying they plan to make more changes in the next two years

Effective and Profitable Task Delegation

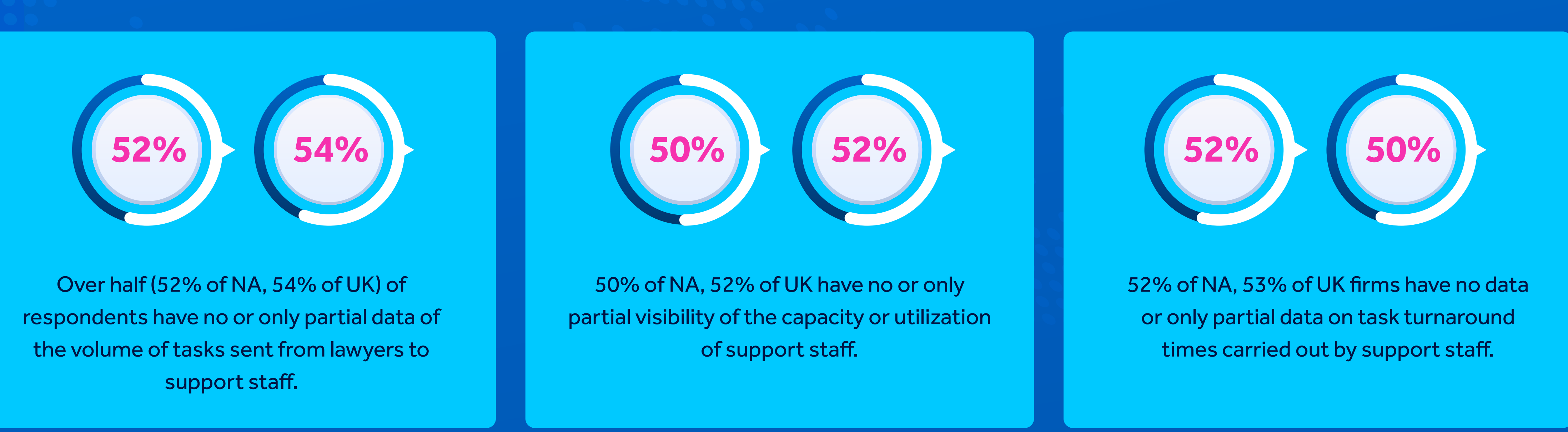
Firms need to prioritize the right work to the right resource at the right level to maximize profitability. With increasing cost pressures from clients, and sharply spiraling lawyer salaries putting pressure on profits, manual/inefficient delegation of tasks is a waste of billable time.



- 71% of NA, 63% of UK say they have received pressure from clients to make sure legal work is completed by the most cost-effective resource available.
- Yet 43% of NA, 37% of UK admit that lawyers are doing more administrative work instead of delegating to support staff.
- 81% of NA, 78% of UK firms are still manually delegating tasks to support staff working in the office and support staff working from home.
- 48% of NA, 49% of UK say that reviewing the resourcing / staffing of matters based on profitability is a priority in the next two years

Optimizing Task Management with Data and Systems

Firms recognize the need for new support staff capacity, task volume and processing the immediate access to information about staff capacity, task volume and processing time, which is imperative for firms to set up optimal team structures and hybrid working arrangements to support lawyers and clients.



Over half (52% of NA, 54% of UK) of respondents have no or only partial data of the volume of tasks sent from lawyers to support staff.

50% of NA, 52% of UK have no or only partial visibility of the capacity or utilization of support staff.

52% of NA, 53% of UK firms have no data or only partial data on task turnaround times carried out by support staff.

The need for improved data is widely recognized with firms implementing changes to improve their workflow visibility:

Over half (55%) of NA, and 45% of UK respondents have plans to implement workflow technology to manage legal support tasks in the next 24 months.

This represents a 12% increase from last year in NA and 11% increase in the UK, underlining the growing recognition of the importance of investing in technology to create a support service that truly meets the needs of law firms.

Summary and Action Points

People

Change – both operational and cultural – cannot be achieved if lawyers cannot seamlessly gain access to the right resource at the right time. Valuable support staff will not remain with a firm that fails to meet their needs for flexible working, a manageable workload, a modern methodology for task delegation and data-driven plan for their career development.



Process

If firms are to safeguard profitability (key to retaining top performing lawyers) – and meet the higher salary expectations of lawyers and staff, while also retaining talent – it is vital to implement a more efficient hybrid working model. Improving back-office operations is imperative to optimize service delivery, meet client expectations for cost transparency and ensure lawyers' needs are met without having to undertake their own admin tasks.



Technology

Easy access to the right resource is essential to allow lawyers to rapidly allocate tasks to the correct resource and provide clients with confidence in the firm's business processes. Having meaningful data on performance, availability and capacity allows firm leadership to evolve their support structure to best support their lawyers and clients. With access to improved data around work types, volumes, team capacity and utilization, Workflow Management technology futureproofs a firm by supporting better decisions around staffing, training and performance.

