

The law firm reimagined

2020 Legal services industry pulse check

I bank with Macquarie



The law firm reimagined

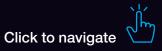
What's the state of legal services today? How are firms performing? And what are they set to focus on over the year ahead?

To answer these and other key questions, Macquarie Business Banking ran a targeted survey of law firms around the country, looking to uncover attitudes to innovation and change. It reveals an industry that is continuing to evolve and adapt to a changing operating environment, with the best-performing firms re-shaping their businesses to drive growth and improve client service.



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Introduction The evolution continues

Since our last legal benchmarking study in 2017, the legal services sector has experienced significant growth, after a period of flat or declining demand.

According to Thomson Reuters, the market grew 7.8% in the 2018 financial year, while our 2020 pulse check shows that three in four firms lifted revenues in the 2019 financial year, fuelled in part by a number of government enquiries, regulatory changes and major infrastructure projects.

However, underlying structural challenges in the sector remain. Since our 2017 study, there has been further democratisation and commoditisation in legal services, driven by multiple, converging trends – from firms with a genesis in technology (New Law), to legal process outsourcing (LPO) and the rise of the in-house counsel. That's seen better informed and increasingly pricesensitive clients put firms under pressure to deliver legal advice in a way that demonstrates value offered, not just time invested.

Then there are the persistent challenges of finding and retaining talented people, which remain acute even as firms seek to become leaner and more efficient. We see a number of converging trends here. Junior lawyers are increasingly pursuing flexibility and balance, while resisting or rejecting the previously attractive lure of future partnership in a traditional firm model. Meanwhile, it has become simpler for senior lawyers and partners to step outside the major firms and establish their own specialist practices, with all of the advantages of independence and control that brings. As a result, firms across the industry are very much focused on engaging and rewarding staff, with larger firms facing the greatest challenges. Yet there are also signs that Australia's legal practices are successfully adapting to this changing environment – re-engineering their billing and business models, using technology to underpin flexibility and efficient delivery, and remaining resilient in the face of pricing pressure. The process of evolution is far from complete, and the rate of change and the nature of change is not consistent across the industry, varying considerably by firm size and type. Nonetheless, our pulse check confirms that many firms have made tangible progress towards adapting the delivery of legal services in a changing operating environment to best meet the needs of clients and drive profit growth. The result: better outcomes for the firm's clients, staff and financial performance.



Matthew Bolle

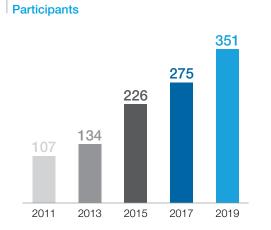
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Richard McCabe National Head of Legal Services Macquarie Business Banking

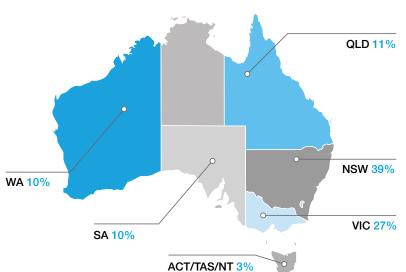
About the research

Our 2020 pulse check is based on a focused online survey of 351 law firms across Australia, conducted for Macquarie Business Banking by Fiftyfive5 in August 2019. It builds on four previous comprehensive industry benchmarking studies, conducted since 2011.









Key trends Revenues rise, with pricing under pressure

In a challenging operating environment, law firms have continued to drive earnings higher, with three in four firms increasing gross fee revenue in the 2019 financial year, up from 65% two years earlier. Nonetheless, pricing pressures have continued to squeeze margins. While 78% of firms made a profit in the 2019 financial year, only 56% had a margin of 10% or more, down from 72% in the 2017 financial year. Yet there are also indications that many firms are successfully adapting to a changing environment. While the evolution of the legal services market is not yet complete, these higher performing firms have already begun to create the law firm of the future, combining a clear firm vision with engaged staff and greater value creation, underpinned by technology. Here are four key trends shaping the legal services market today based on our 2020 pulse check.

Four key trends



Pricing and business models are evolving

Two in three firms say changing billing models will be a key challenge over the next two years, as pricing pressures mount and business models become increasingly underpinned by technology. X

Technology usage has accelerated

Firms of every size have adopted a range of value creating or enhancing technologies, while the proportion of firms who say a lack of knowledge stands in the way of technology adoption has fallen by more than a third.



Client relationships are in focus

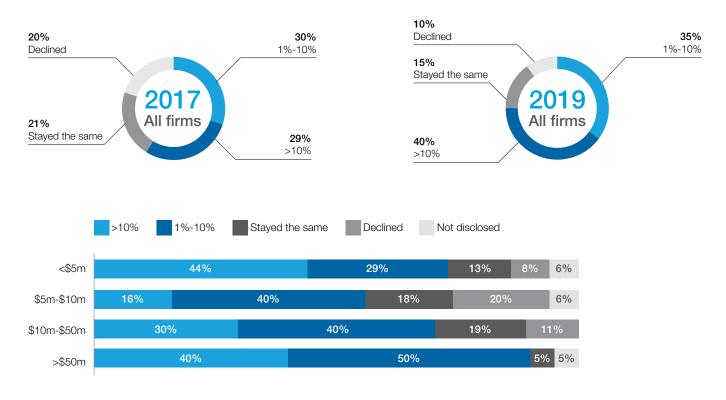
While successful law firms have always been built on strong relationships, firms are more focused than ever on retaining and strengthening their connections to key clients.



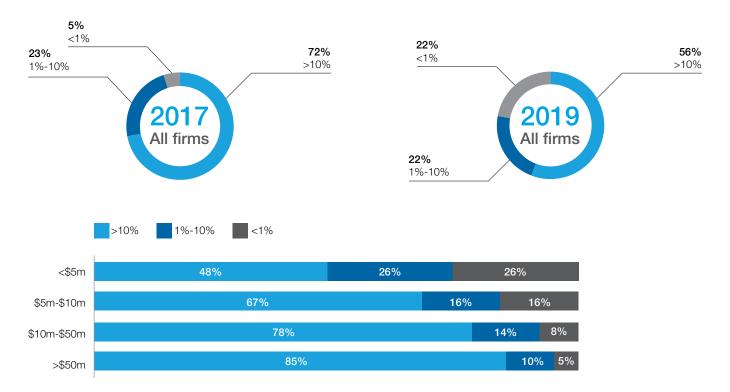
Staff challenges are rising

Changing business models have seen the proportion of junior lawyers employed by firms drop by almost half across the industry. Yet firms are also struggling to attract and retain experienced lawyers, as an evolving market creates a variety of opportunities for a generation of lawyers no longer content to follow traditional pathways.

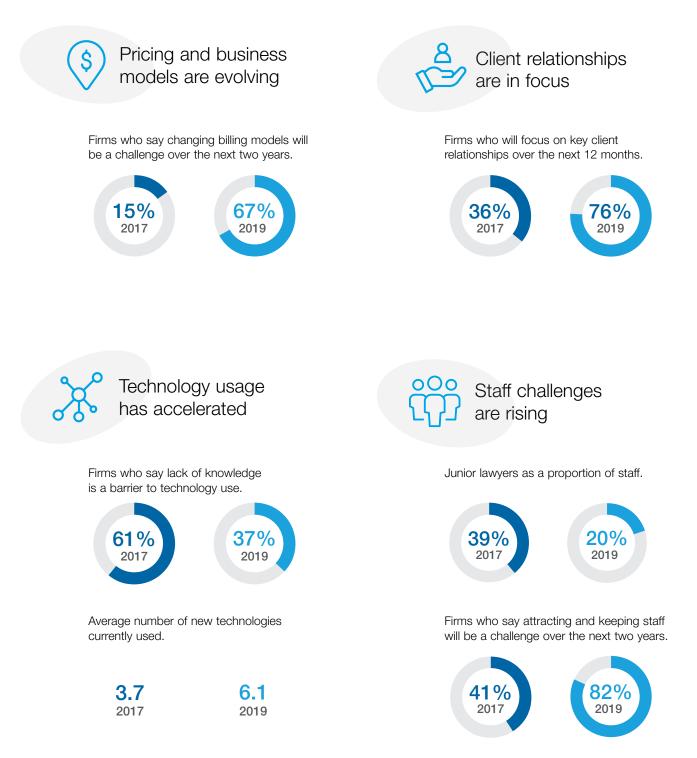
Gross fee growth



Profit margin



Four trends shaping the market



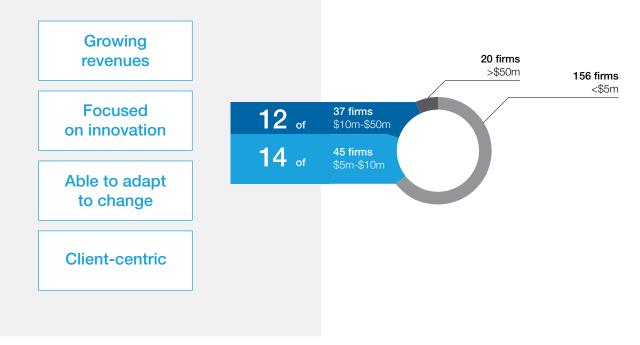
Mapping the market

From specialist micro firms to fast-growing New Law startups with dispersed workforces, the legal services sector is more diverse than ever. To help navigate that diversity and isolate the key trends shaping different parts of the market, we have divided our participants it into four distinct clusters, under \$5m, \$5m-\$10m, \$10m-\$50m, and over \$50m.

For two of those clusters, we have also taken a deep dive into the distinctive characteristics of higher performing firms who are growing their revenues and successfully adapting to change.

Throughout this pulse check, we describe firms using these definitions, based on FY2019 results.

Higher performers



Challenges Rebuilding the plane mid-flight

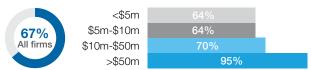
Our survey clearly reveals the challenges of re-engineering established business models under the impetus of continued pricing pressure from clients, with 70% of firms saying they are under pressure to deliver value and solve problems, not bill time. Across the board, firms competing on price are seen as the top competitive threat, followed by New Law competitors (firms with a genesis in technology or alternative business models), although large firms also expect in-house legal services to have a growing impact. Despite increased technology usage, firms are also still grappling with the best way to harness the technologies they have been so rapidly adopting, particularly larger firms, who have been investing most heavily in innovation. Meanwhile, firms of every size are facing greater challenges attracting and keeping talented staff, with the proportion of firms citing hiring and retention challenges doubling from 41% to 82% since 2017.

Challenges over the next two years

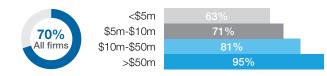
Business models

Clients are demanding high value legal advice, without the high end price. Technology and competition amongst firms is driving a better pricing outcome for legal consumers.

Changing pricing and billing models



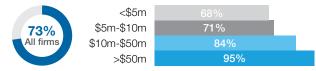
Pressure to deliver value, not bill time



Competition

The legal industry continues to evolve, as traditional and non-traditional market participants compete over finite pools of work.

Firms competing on price

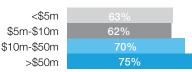


Growth of in-house legal services



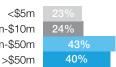
New legal service models





Big four accounting firms

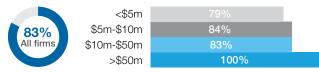




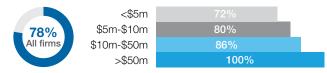
Technology

Clients seek efficient, cost-effective and high quality work. Firms right across the industry are continuing to adopt technology, to ensure optimal service for their clients.





Using technology to deliver efficiently



People

Demographic shifts continue to evolve in the legal industry. 3-5 year senior associates continue to be a rare commodity, as opposed to the plentiful junior lawyer cohort. Meanwhile, the road to partnership may not hold the same appeal it once did for younger lawyers.

Attracting key staff



Workplace diversity



Retaining key staff



<\$5m	65%	
\$5m-\$10m	80%	
\$10m-\$50m	84%	
>\$50m	90%	

Opportunities From trusted adviser to problem solver

Our research shows firms responding creatively to these challenges by exploring a variety of solutions – from business model and pricing innovation, staff flexibility, specialisation (especially among smaller firms) and efficiency gains powered by technology.

Underpinning these changes is a need to deliver legal advice in a way that demonstrates value, not time spent, significantly driven by cost-conscious and informed clients, who are looking for their legal problems to be solved, not just advice to be delivered. As a result, firms of all sizes are set to focus on client relationships, client service and the client experience over the next 12 months, as clientcentricity becomes a non-negotiable starting point for sustainable success.

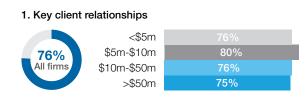
Technology adoption continues to accelerate, as firms seek to simplify and automate key processes for fast, cost-effective and efficient service delivery. Use of process support tools, like accounts automation (up 93% since 2017), automated documentation (up 333%) and legal project management tools, (up 180%) have increased enormously over the last two years. For many firms, the focus has now moved to integrating the new technology they have acquired, rather than adding more, although large firms continue to explore investment options.

Together, we see these changes marking an evolution in the role of the lawyer – from trusted provider of considered legal advice, to a creative problem solver and project manager.

Top 10 focus areas in 2019

Clients

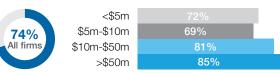
Key client retention is the battleground in a highly competitive environment.



3. Business development



2. Client service and experience



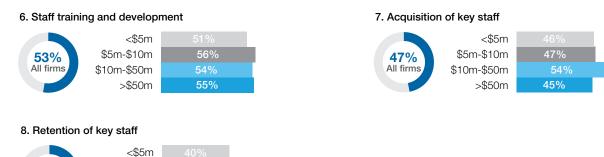
Technology

Technology is an enabler of innovation. Knowledge around legal technology within firms is improving, but gaps remain.



People

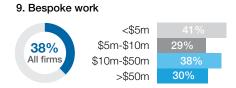
Leaner, more versatile workforces, augmented by technology are driving a leaner, more streamlined firm structure.



Service offering

45% All firms

Strategic decisions around practice lines, focusing on higher value work, are driving more specialist firms to enter the market.



\$5m-\$10m

\$10m-\$50m

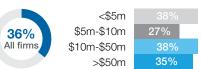
>\$50m

53%

57%

35%

10. New offer or advice areas



What are firms like yours focusing on?

Annual revenue

Highly focused on the client experience and extending key relationships

Least likely to focus on business development

Most likely to consider new technology investments

Least focused on staff acquisition and retention, despite having greater staffing challenges than other clusters Annual revenue \$10m to \$50m

Focused on nurturing key client relationships

Prioritise integrating current technology over making new investments

Place a high priority on staff training and retention

Annual revenue \$5m to \$10m

Highly focused on the client experience and extending key relationships

Most seek to integrate current technology, but many are also exploring new tech

Among the most likely to consider expanding into new advice areas



Highly focused on the client experience and extending key relationships

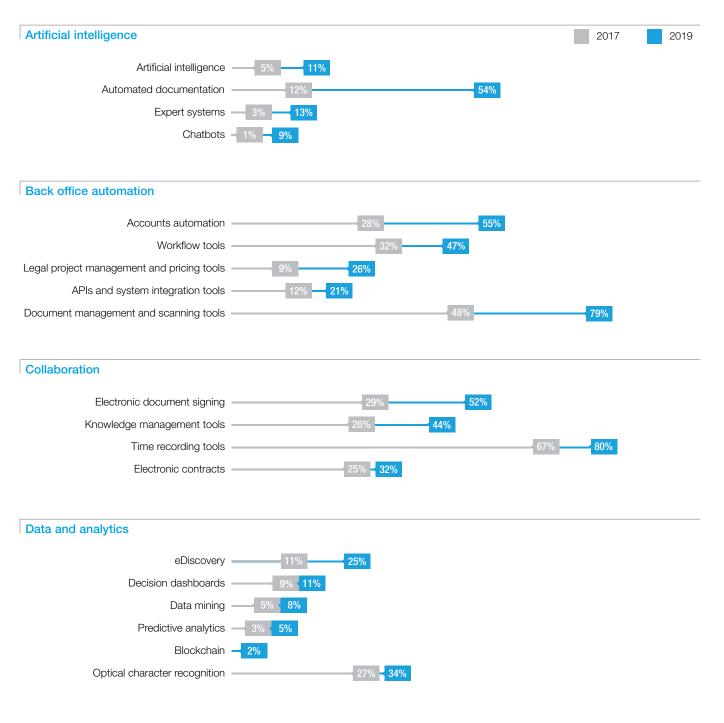
Prioritise integrating current technology over making new investments

Many are specialists, focused on bespoke work

Technology use

All respondents, 2019

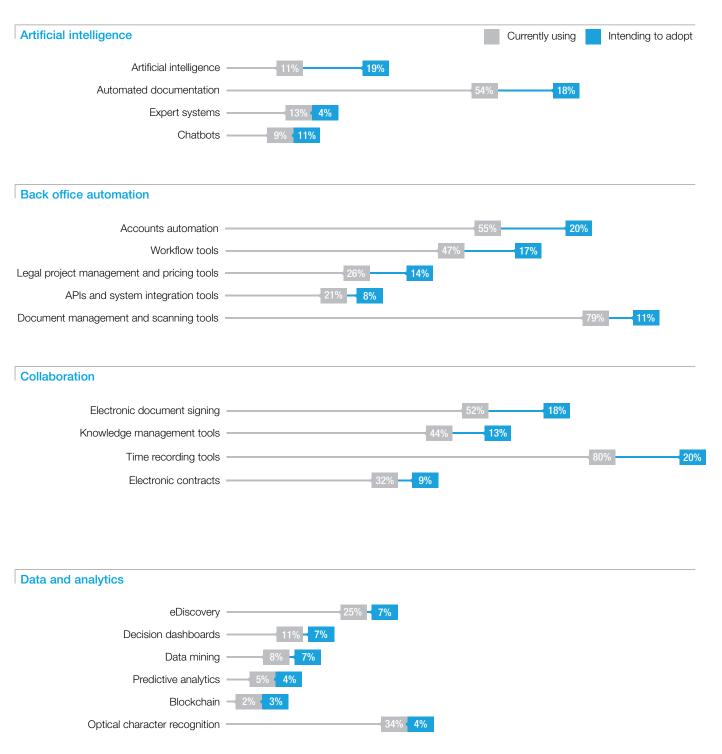
Knowledge amongst partner group has grown significantly; effective adoption and utilisation remains the core challenge.



Technology: current use and intention to adopt

All respondents, 2019

Efficiency-enhancing technology shows highest adoption in a lean competitive environment.





Evolving business models and the ecosystem of the future

Our 2020 pulse check confirms the continuing evolution of the legal business model. In a traditional firm model, a partner's expertise is leveraged and multiplied by a hierarchy of senior and junior lawyers, all clocking up billable hours. But the firm of the future is likely to be less like a hierarchy and more like an ecosystem, in which partners act as project leaders and problem solvers, co-ordinating practitioners, technologies and processes to deliver value to the client.

Deep dive: Annual revenue over \$50m

Driving continuous innovation

Firms with annual revenues over \$50 million are among the most active innovators. Not only are they the group most likely to say that innovation is important to future success (40%), three in four also agree that alternative billing methods are important to their firm. They are also enthusiastic users of new technologies, with 100% adoption of process efficiency tools for document management, eDiscovery and knowledge management, and more than 80% set to adopt a range of automation tools within two years. Yet of all the revenue clusters, they also face some of the greatest challenges in recruiting and retaining fee-earning staff, especially junior lawyers, despite evolving staffing models that have seen the numbers of junior and senior lawyers move close to parity.

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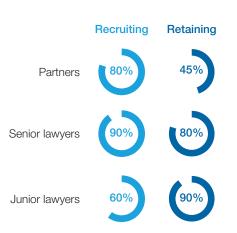
Having accepted significant change on the horizon, firms have adapted new business models and educated themselves on technology (70% do not see knowledge as an issue). Pricing pressure continues from educated clients and in-house counsel poses the biggest threat to fee revenue. Engaging staff through a significantly busy and dynamic period has been a challenge."

Matthew Bolle

National Head of Legal Services Macquarie Business Banking



Challenges



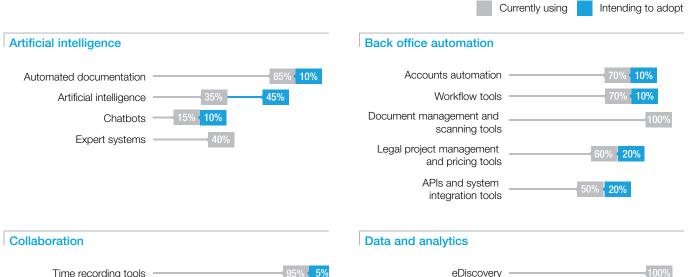
Deep dive: Annual revenue over \$50m

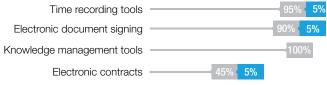
Driving continuous innovation

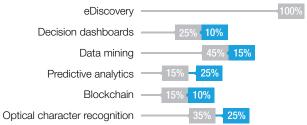
Challenges and opportunities

		Percentage of firms
	Using technology to deliver efficiently	100%
	Adapting systems or platforms	95%
Challenges	Changing pricing and billing models	95%
	Pressure to deliver value, not bill time	95%
	Growth of in-house legal services	80%
Opportunition	Alternative billing methods are important to the firm	75%
Opportunities	Innovation drives success	40%
	Client service and experience	85%
Focus areas	Exploring options for technology investment	80%
	Workplace flexibility	50%

Technology







Deep dive: Annual revenue **\$10-\$50m**

Building stronger relationships

Challenges and opportunities

Firms in the \$10 million to \$50 million revenue cluster are strongly focused on becoming more client-centric in the face of competition from in-house counsel and the big four accounting firms, among others. They are the group most likely to say that being client-centricity is important to future success (that is, having a business model aligned to the needs and desired experiences of clients), along with staying financially focused. Strong adopters of new technologies, they are set to accelerate their investment in back office automation tools over the next two years, including automated documentation, accounts automation, and legal project management and pricing tools. Yet they are also the group most likely to say that a lack of knowledge, as it pertains to technology and its implementation in the firm, is the main barrier to further innovation. Their greatest staffing challenge is in recruiting senior lawyers, although 59% also say that creating workplace diversity is set to be challenging over the next two years, as they seek to re-shape firm cultures and embrace innovation.

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Higher performing firms are consistently showing adaptability and financial focus. They have a clear vision and strategy, with many successful firms adopting a narrow or specialised focus. While recruitment of senior lawyers and workplace diversity are ongoing challenges, these firms also have a strong focus on workplace flexibility, so that staff readily adopt technology that augments their work."

Matthew Bolle

National Head of Legal Services Macquarie Business Banking

Average staffing levels



Challenges



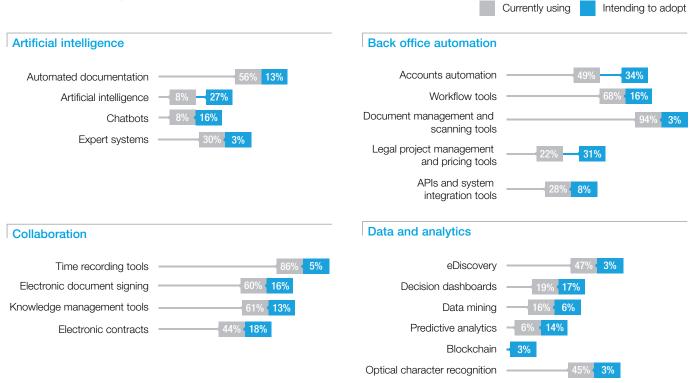
Deep dive: Annual revenue \$10-\$50m

Building stronger relationships

Challenges and opportunities

		Percentage of firms
	Growth of in-house legal services	57%
	Competition from big four accounting firms	43%
Challenges	Competition from international firms	38%
	Workplace diversity	59%
	Knowledge is the main barrier to innovation in our firm	49%
Opportunition	Client-centricity drives success	57%
Opportunities	Being financially focused drives success	38%
	Client service and experience	81%
Focus areas	Key client relationships	76%
	Business development	76%

Technology



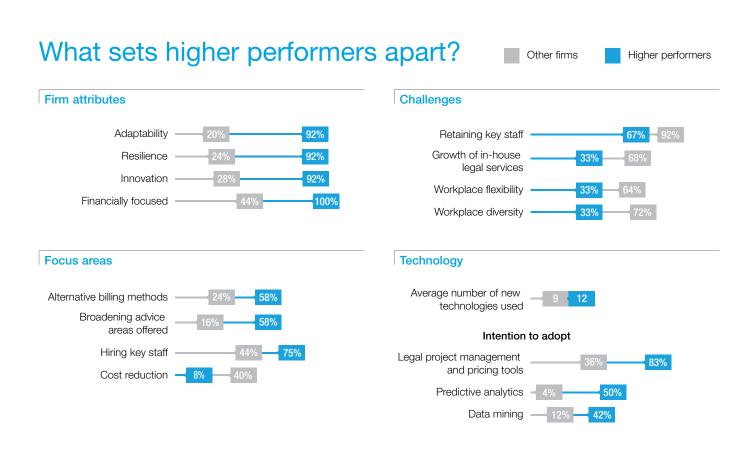
Deep dive: Annual revenue \$10-\$50m

Building stronger relationships

Higher performers

Looking at the higher performers in the \$10 million to \$50 million revenue cluster, a more complex picture emerges. These firms are markedly more confident than their peers, with more than 90% rating themselves highly for adaptability, resilience and innovation, compared to only around one in four other firms. They are much less likely to see workplace flexibility and diversity as challenges, and much less threatened by the growth of in-house legal services. They are also more than twice as likely to be focused on exploring alternative billing areas and expanding the areas of advice they offer.

Helping to support this confident outlook is a significantly higher rate of technology adoption, with more investments to come in the future. In particular, higher performing firms in the \$10 million to \$50 million group are much more likely to invest in legal project management and pricing tools, and in data mining and predictive analytics tools that harness their technological edge for strategic planning and better client service.



Deep dive: Annual revenue \$5-\$10m

Adaptable and people-oriented

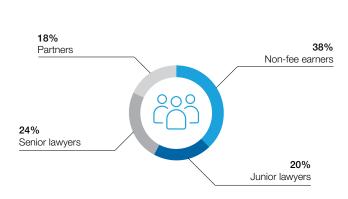
Firms in the \$5 million to \$10 million revenue cluster stand out for their strong focus on people and culture. They are the group most likely to say that being people-oriented is important to success (49%), along with adaptability (36%). They see staff recruitment, retention and training as key challenges, and are set to make stronger client relationships and staff skill development priorities over the next two years. Many are also set to increase their investment in technology, with a focus on process aids like workflow and knowledge management tools. However, they are also the group most likely to say that staff resistance is the main barrier to innovation, suggesting that more needs to be done to create a culture of innovation and client-service. Many are also seeking to improve financial management, with 58% looking to decrease debtor days, and around two thirds set to use accounts automation tools within two years.

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Partner stability and retention is a key area of strength in these firms, but attracting senior lawyers and workplace diversity is problematic. Revenue growth has been stymied as small boutique firms and larger firms try to compete for clients in the same space with economies of scale or lower cost bases."

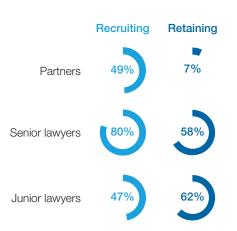
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Average staffing levels

Challenges



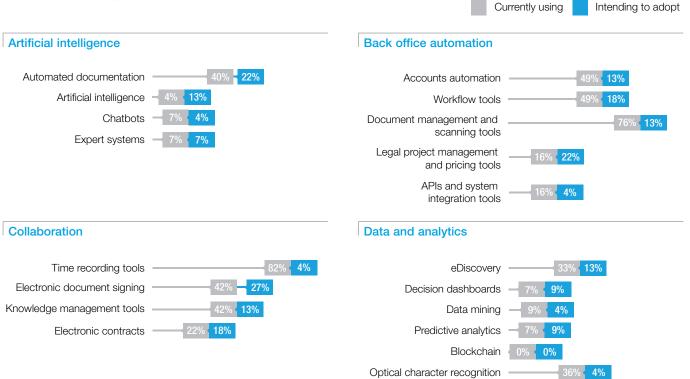
Deep dive: Annual revenue \$5-\$10m

Adaptable and people-oriented

Challenges and opportunities

		Percentage of firms
	Using technology to optimise client interaction	84%
	Attracting key staff	82%
Challenges	Retaining key staff	80%
	Staff training and development	71%
	Staff resistance is the main barrier to innovation in our firm	56%
Opportunition	Being people-oriented drives success	49%
Opportunities	Being adaptable drives success	36%
	Key client relationships	80%
Focus areas	Staff training and development	56%
	Decreasing debtor days	58%

Technology



Deep dive: Annual revenue \$5-\$10m

Adaptable and people-oriented

Higher performers

Higher performing firms in the \$5 million to \$10 million revenue cluster are innovative, adaptable, entrepreneurial, and excel at vision and strategy. They place a high priority on client service, with 79% saying that being client-centric is important to future success, compared to 32% of other firms in the same group. They are also significantly more likely to use technology for improved service delivery, with higher levels of current technology usage, a greater focus on integrating current technologies into their business processes, and a higher appetite for exploring new investments. Interestingly, the higher performers in this revenue cluster are more likely to cite a range of issues as likely challenges over the next few years, including the use of technology to optimise client interaction (100% versus 77% of other firms) and changing pricing and billing models (86% versus 55%). We see this as an indication that they are actively considering how their firms need to evolve and working to transform them. At the same time, they are much less likely than other firms to see reducing costs and debtor days as key challenges, suggesting that their financial processes are well-managed and effective.

What sets higher performers apart? Other firms Higher performers Firm attributes Challenges Excel at vision and strategy Use of technology to optimise 77% - 100% client interaction Innovative Changing pricing Adaptable and billing models Entrepreneurial Use of data to industrialise advice Workplace diversity Focus areas Technology Average number of new Integrating technology 86% technologies used Cloud based systems 79% Intention to adopt Exploring options for 79% technology investment Legal project management and pricing tools Cost reduction 14% Workflow tools Reducing debtor days APIs and system integration tools

Deep dive: Annual revenue under \$5m Resilient specialists

The smallest firms in our survey, those with annual revenues under \$5 million, tend to be nimble and resilient specialists. They are most likely to say that vision and strategy drive success (47%) and that resilience is important. With 44% growing revenues by 10% or more in the 2019 financial year, they are relatively unaffected by the competitive challenges impacting larger firms. For example, only one in three say that the growth of inhouse counsel is likely to affect them over the next two years. Similarly, while they face challenges attracting and retaining staff, these are less acute than for their larger peers, reflecting a growing trend for experienced lawyers to prefer the flexibility and lifestyle benefits of a small firm to the rigours of life in a larger firm. Instead, these firms are focused on building key client relationships and offering bespoke work in their areas of specialisation, although 38% are also looking to expand into new advice areas.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their lower revenues, they have the lowest levels of technology adoption across the market, although more than half are set to use a range of process efficiency technologies within two years, including document management, time recording, accounts automation and workflow tools.

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These firms are quickly embracing the workplace flexibility mantra and lower cost to access, subscriptionbased technology. People management and occupancy costs are non-issues allowing more time to focus on technology, strategy and client focus."

Matthew Bolle

National Head of Legal Services Macquarie Business Banking



Challenges



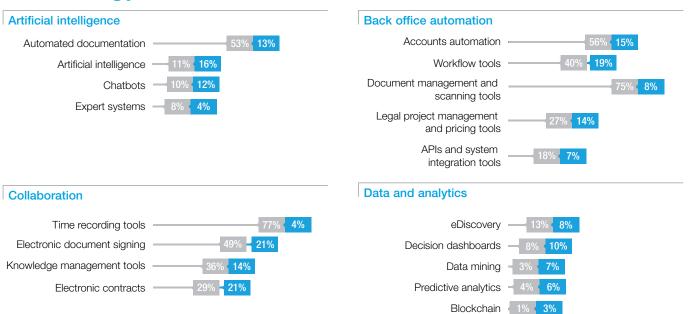
Deep dive: Annual revenue under \$5m

Resilient specialists

Challenges and opportunities

	Percentage of firms
Attracting key staff	71%
Retaining key staff	65%
Adapting systems or platforms	62%
Training and development	53%
Growth of in-house legal services	32%
Vision and strategy drive success	47%
Resilience drives success	10%
Entrepreneurialism drives success	8%
Key client relationships	76%
Business development	72%
Bespoke work	41%
New offer or advice areas	38%
Alternative billing methods	27%
	Retaining key staff Adapting systems or platforms Training and development Growth of in-house legal services Vision and strategy drive success Resilience drives success Entrepreneurialism drives success Key client relationships Business development Bespoke work New offer or advice areas

Technology



Optical character recognition -

Currently using

31%

Intending to adopt

What are successful firms doing now to thrive tomorrow?

There's more than one way to build the firm of the future. Our 2020 pulse check reveals an industry in evolution, with firms exploring a variety of options for more sustainable and value-driven business models.

As you would expect, there are significant differences between the pathways chosen by firms in different revenue clusters. Yet all share a willingness to innovate and an unwavering focus on rethinking their operating models to deliver more value to their clients more efficiently.

Here is a snapshot of the key initiatives that successful firms from our 2020 pulse check (in each revenue cluster) are pursuing today.

Over \$50m annual revenue

Business and pricing models

 Rethinking business and billing models to focus on value delivered, not time invested

Technology

- Re-engineering processes to fully leverage current technologies
- Accelerating investment in Al, predictive analytics, and legal project management and pricing tools

Client offering and experience

 Integrating technology, people and processes to deliver an exceptional client experience

People

 Harnessing technology and changing processes to offer more flexibility – addressing significant retention challenges with both junior and senior lawyers

\$10m to \$50m annual revenue

Business and pricing models

• Exploring alternative billing models to focus on value delivered, not time invested

Technology

- Re-engineering processes to fully leverage current technologies
- Accelerating investment in predictive analytics, data mining, and legal project management and pricing tools

Client offering and experience

• Extending into a broader range of advice areas

People

- Increasing workplace diversity to capture a wider variety of skills and perspectives
- Harnessing technology and changing processes to offer more flexibility and address retention challenges with both junior and senior lawyers

\$5m to \$10m annual revenue

Business and pricing models

- Developing a vision for the firm's future and a sustainable strategy to support it
- Exploring new pricing models

Technology

- Adopting cloud-based systems to support greater mobility and flexibility
- Accelerating investment in workflow tools, system integration, and legal project management and pricing tools

Client offering and experience

- Harnessing technology for better client interactions
- Using data to industrialise advice

People

- Providing development opportunities
- Engaging and retaining key staff
- Building a culture of innovation

Under \$5m annual revenue

Business and pricing models

- Developing a vision for the firm's future and a sustainable strategy to support it
- Exploring alternative billing models

Technology

- Integrating current technologies into key processes
- Accelerating investment in efficiencyenhancing technologies, including electronic contracts, electronic document signing and workflow tools

Client offering and experience

- Sustaining and nurturing key client relationships
- Creating opportunities for bespoke work and specialisation
- Adding new advice areas where specialist skill aligns

People

• Recruiting experienced senior lawyers

Discover how we can keep your law firm in front

For a closer look at how your business is performing against key industry benchmarks, please contact your Macquarie Relationship Manager visit **macquarie.com/legal**

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