



The State of Collaboration in Corporate Legal Departments



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Table of Contents

4	Introduction
5	Key Findings
7	Internal Collaboration
16	External Collaboration
24	Technology Utilization And Needs
30	Participant Profile
31	Survey Details

Introduction

The need for more effective collaboration in the workplace has never been greater. Technological advances have enabled teams (including the legal department) to work and connect from anywhere, enhancing our ability to collaborate beyond our own teams and even outside our organizations. At the same time, these same advances have brought on a new set of legal challenges. Increasing business complexity is also leading to a wider range of business units now being potential sources of risk for companies, resulting in a greater volume of legal work and a broader set of legal challenges.

Given this environment, the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) and [Everlaw](#) conducted a survey of 373 in-house legal professionals in the US to better understand the extent to which corporate legal departments are collaborating with other business units, how legal teams are collaborating with their law firms and other vendors, and how technology plays a role in enabling collaboration. The results reveal that although legal staff desire greater collaboration and there is a clear recognition of the benefits of doing so, there are impediments preventing legal teams from realizing that full potential.

Eighty percent of respondents agree that their company as a whole understands the value they contribute to the organization, but those in other business units still often say that legal slows down projects (58 percent) and is overly risk averse (41 percent). This may be why 47 percent of respondents say that business leaders bring the legal team into important corporate initiatives only after most strategic decisions have been made. Seventy percent of respondents say the top goal for their legal department over the next year is to better align with other internal business units. However, this will not be without difficulty as 71 percent cite lack of bandwidth for process improvement as the greatest obstacle to strong internal collaboration.

When it comes to collaborating with external partners such as law firms and vendors, respondents see clear room for improvement. Law firms are viewed as insufficiently transparent and other partners and vendors are seen as lacking an understanding of company objectives. Respondents note that greater collaboration would lead to enhanced operational efficiency (32 percent) and greater freedom to focus on risk management and business issues (27 percent) but legal teams say they need more standardized collaboration processes and integrated collaboration tools to improve external collaboration.

These and many more findings are presented throughout the report. We would like to thank those who took the time to participate in the survey, and we hope this report serves as a useful resource for ACC members and the broader in-house legal community.



Key Findings



Improving cross-departmental alignment is the top priority for legal teams over the next year.

Legal professionals' top goal for the next 12 months is better alignment internally with other business units (70 percent). However, lack of bandwidth for process improvement is cited as the greatest obstacle to strong internal collaboration across the organization by a majority (71 percent) and insufficient resources are cited by nearly a half (45 percent). Notably, differences in priorities (47 percent) and resistance from other departments (43 percent) are also viewed as hurdles to effective internal collaboration.



Though highly valued by their companies, legal teams are still often perceived as roadblocks and overly risk averse.

Most respondents agree that their company at large understands the value the in-house legal department brings and 74 percent say they deliver strategic business advice. However, more than half say the legal department is perceived as a roadblock that slows projects down (58 percent). Forty-one percent believe the legal team is seen as overly risk averse, which may be the reason that nearly half say they are brought into important corporate initiatives only after most strategic decisions have been made. As a result, 64 percent say their legal team takes a mixed approach to addressing legal issues: sometimes proactively and sometimes reactively.



Legal teams want to employ greater use of technology but lack the bandwidth needed to realize its full value.

Greater use of technology is the second-highest priority in the coming year, at 66 percent, and a vast majority (80 percent) say it is critical for the collaboration tools they use to be integrated with the company's to improve collaboration across the business. However, only 33 percent say they need new technology to centralize data and collaborate. Even if legal departments did bring new technology in to increase efficiency, bandwidth issues hamper the majority of respondents from realizing its full value, with 71 percent saying they lack time to improve processes and procedures.



Law firms are seen as insufficiently transparent while other partners/vendors are seen as lacking an understanding of company objectives.

When it comes to collaborating with external partners, in-house legal professionals see room for improvement. Law firms are seen as insufficiently open and transparent. Outside counsel score high on communication and collaboration, but low on transparency and only middling on project management. Partners/vendors also score poorly on understanding company objectives and strategic collaboration. Legal teams say they need more standardized collaboration processes and integrated collaboration tools to improve external collaboration.



The top strategy for controlling legal costs is to bring more work in-house.

The number one strategy for cost control is to bring more work in-house, cited by a majority of respondents (66 percent) with the primary benefit being to lower total costs (82 percent), underscoring continued budgetary strain. Other benefits include increasing value by leveraging internal expertise (54 percent) and improved cost predictability (51 percent). About a third of respondents cite another way to increase efficiency is through more effective collaboration with outside counsel (32 percent). More respondents are opting to shift work from big firms to smaller firms that provide similar/higher value (39 percent) than leveraging technology/AI to control costs (33 percent).

Internal Collaboration



This first section examines the extent to which legal departments collaborate with other internal teams across their organizations, how the legal team is perceived by other business units, and the challenges preventing legal teams from more effectively collaborating across the organization.

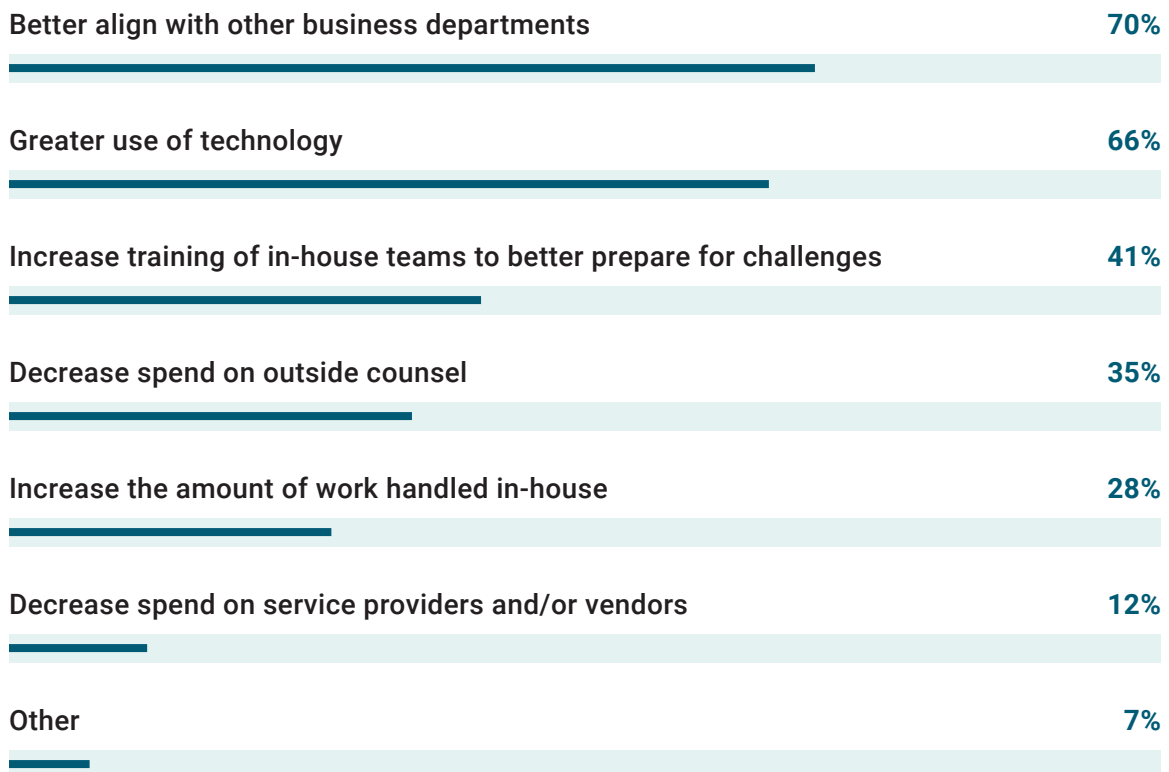
When asked to identify their legal departments' top priorities over the next year, respondents overwhelmingly say that they wanted to better align with other business departments (70 percent) and employ greater use of technology (66 percent). The results are mostly consistent across different business sizes; however, a higher percentage of smaller companies say they plan to increase the amount of work handled in-house (36 percent) compared to 26 percent among those in larger organizations.

70%

of legal departments want to better align with other business departments

Our legal department priorities in the next 12 months include...

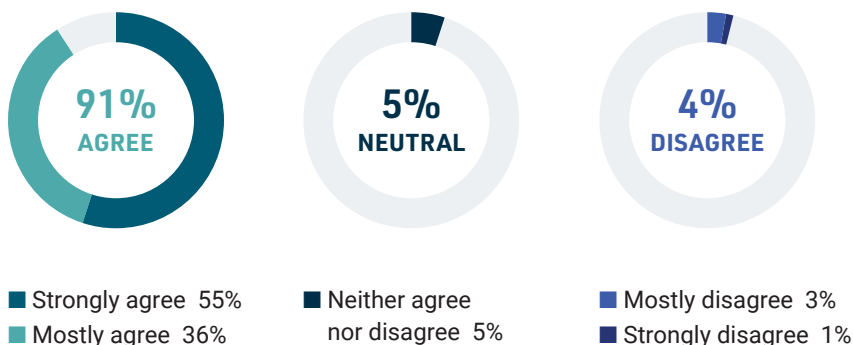
Select your top 3.



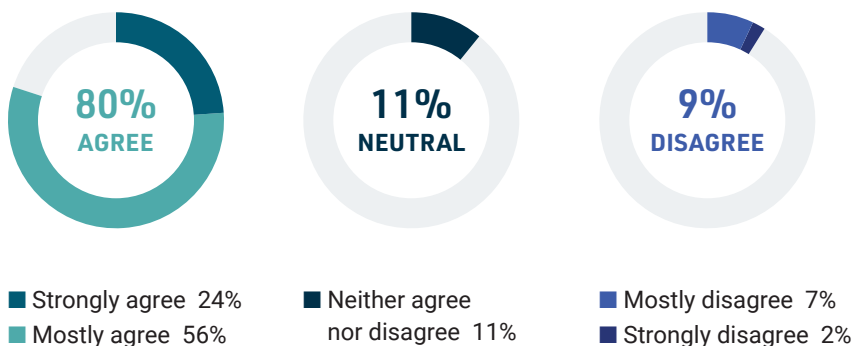
Other priorities making up a smaller percentage of responses include: better collaboration within the legal department, establish policies for using generative AI tools, improve efficiencies and internal processes, and train internal clients on business legal processes.

Within legal teams, most respondents agree that their individual contribution is understood and valued. Fifty-five percent strongly agree that this is true, while 36 percent mostly agree. In other words, nine out of ten respondents say they feel valued by their colleagues in the legal department, while only 4 percent believe that they are not valued.

My internal legal team understands the value I contribute to the organization.



The company as a whole understands the value I contribute to the organization.



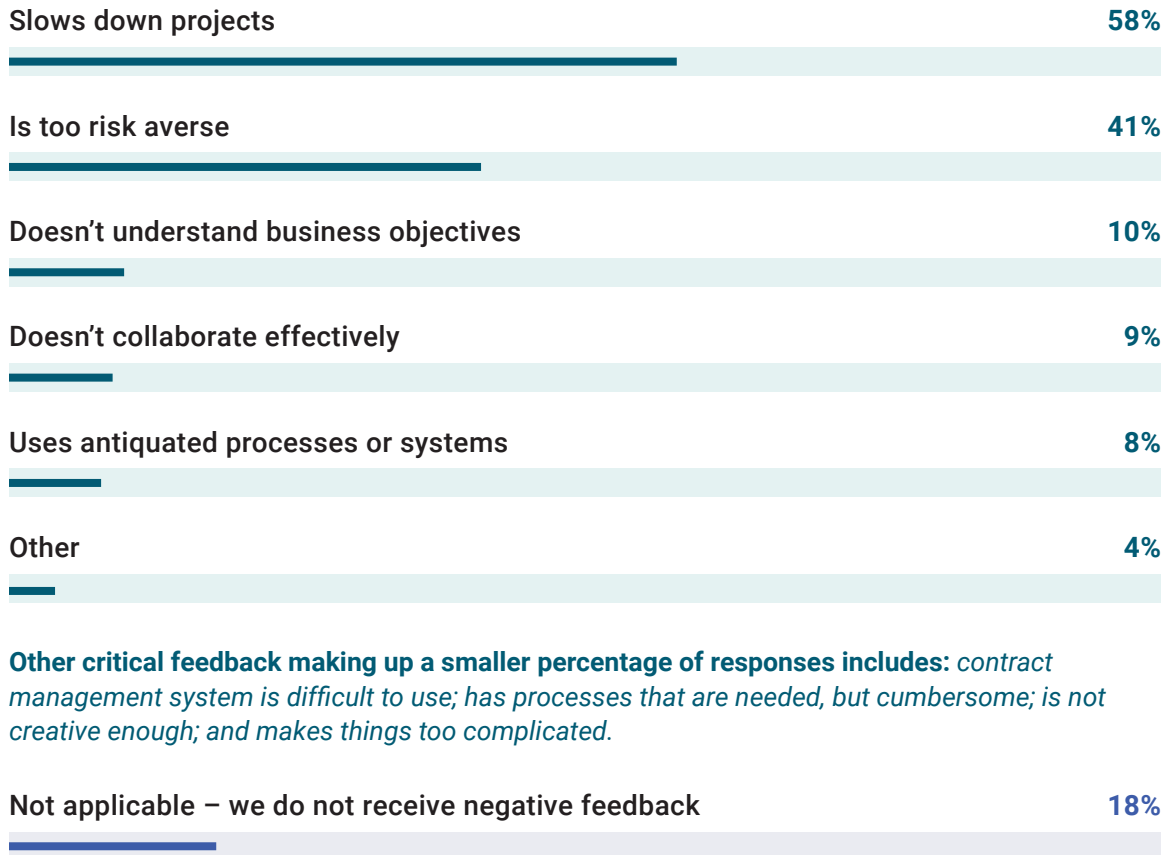
When asked whether the company as a whole understands the value they contribute, 80 percent of respondents agree, while 11 percent were neutral and 9 percent disagreed. Respondents in smaller organizations (83 percent) say they feel more valued by their company than those in larger organizations (71 percent).

97%
of GC agree that their team understands the value they contribute to the organization compared to **89%** of non-GC in-house counsel and **82%** of legal operations professionals.

Furthermore, **77%** of CLOs and GC strongly agree with this statement, compared to just **49%** of other in-house counsel and **27%** of legal operations professionals.

If providing critical feedback, our legal team's cross-functional partners are most likely to say that the legal department...

Select all that apply.



Other critical feedback making up a smaller percentage of responses includes: *contract management system is difficult to use; has processes that are needed, but cumbersome; is not creative enough; and makes things too complicated.*

Although staff in other business units may generally understand and value the work carried by the legal department, respondents still indicate that the most common form of critical feedback that the legal department receives is that it slows down projects (58 percent). Forty-one percent also indicate that the legal team is seen as being too risk averse. Additionally, 10 percent say that the legal team does not understand the business objectives and 9 percent say they do not collaborate effectively, which may be contributing to the perception that in-house legal professionals slow projects down. Eighteen percent, however, say that their department does not receive any negative feedback.

Legal being too risk averse is a complaint that legal operations professionals receive more frequently about the legal department than other legal professionals:

52%

When asked about inter-departmental collaboration, 56 percent of respondents say that the legal team works most closely with business operations (56 percent), followed by sales (45 percent), human resources (43 percent), and finance (40 percent). Only 20 percent work closely with marketing and information technology, and even fewer work with industry-specific departments such as engineering or research and development.

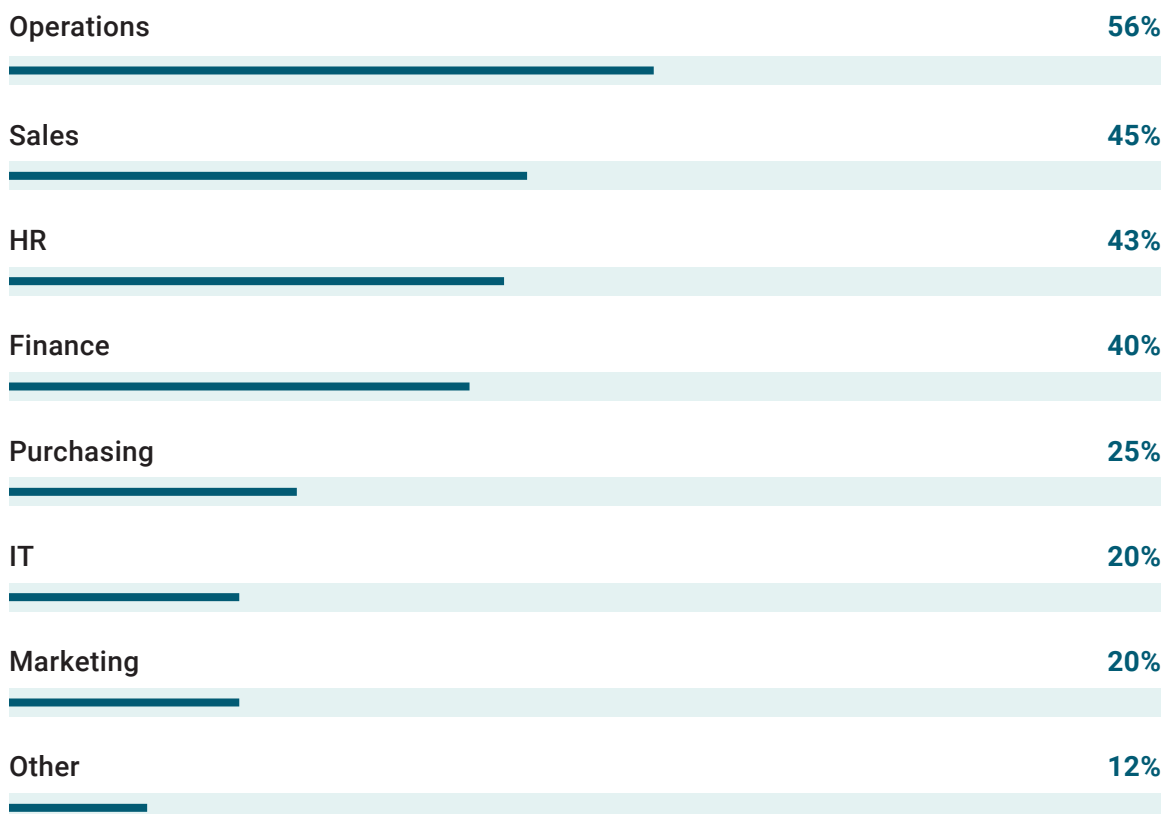
Our legal team works most closely with...

Select your top 3.

Legal teams in smaller companies work more closely with HR,

55%,
compared with just
29%

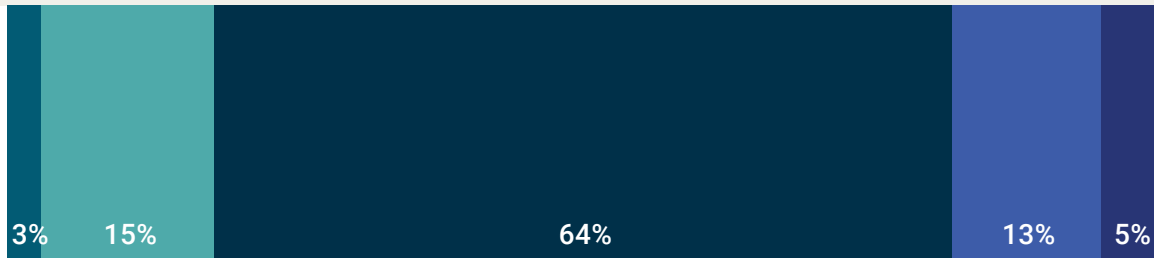
of legal teams in larger companies.



Other business functions making up a smaller percentage of responses include: business development, compliance, ethics, engineering, products and technology, research and development, and senior management.

Respondents were asked to indicate how their team addresses legal issues on a five-point scale from “always proactive” to “always reactive.” The results resemble a classic, bell-shaped normal distribution with almost two-thirds of respondents having selected the middle value on the scale (“mixed: sometimes proactive/sometimes reactive”). Eighteen percent say they tend to address issues more proactively, while another 18 percent say that they normally take a more reactive approach.

Please characterize how your team addresses legal issues:



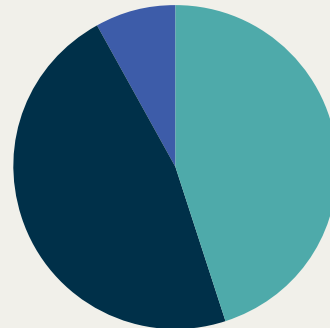
PROACTIVE ————— REACTIVE

- Always proactive
- Somewhat proactive
- Mixture: sometimes proactive/sometimes reactive
- Somewhat reactive
- Always reactive

A greater percentage of legal operations professionals say their team is more reactive in addressing issues (28 percent) compared to just 13 percent of GC and 18 percent of other in-house lawyers.

Business leaders typically bring the legal team into important corporate initiatives...

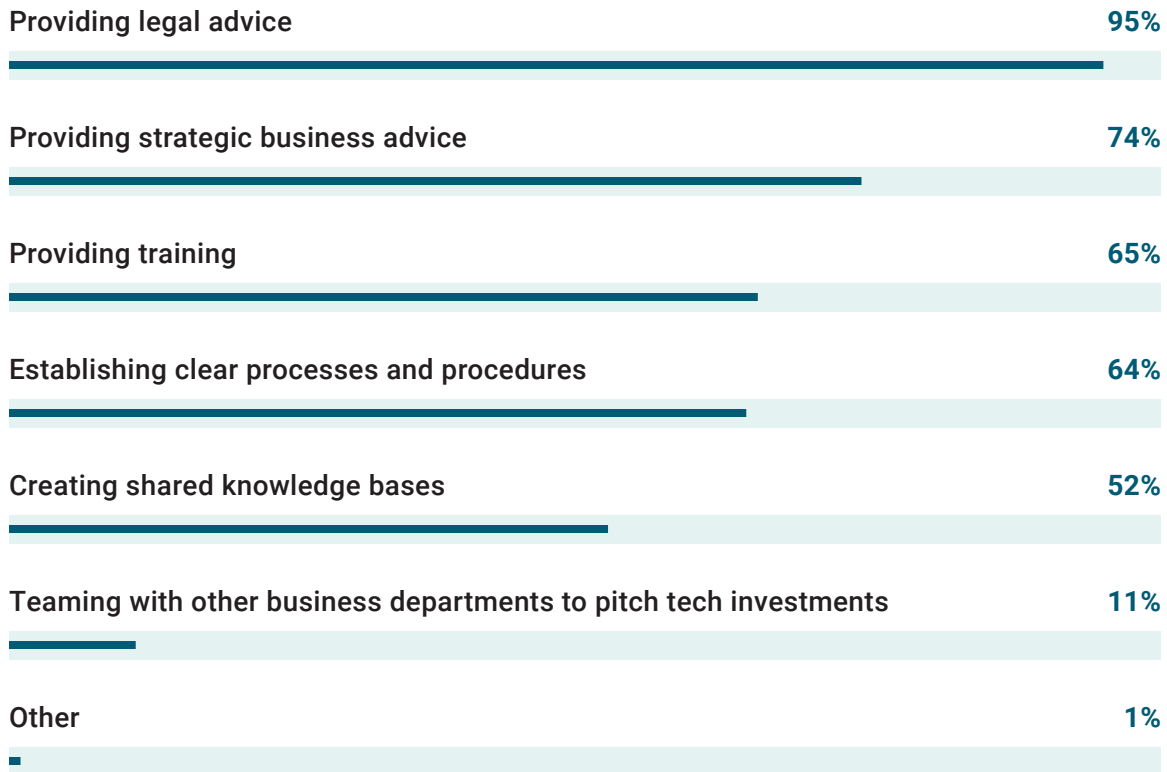
Forty-five percent of respondents say that business leaders tend to bring the legal department into important corporate initiatives at the early stages; however, this is less frequently done in smaller organizations (38 percent). Forty-seven percent say that the legal team is brought in midway, after most strategic decisions have already been made. Just under one in ten legal departments are brought in only after a crisis hits.



- At the earliest stages when legal can have the greatest impact 45%
- Midway, when most strategic decisions have been made 47%
- After a crisis hits 8%

Our legal team collaborates across the business in the following ways:

Select all that apply.



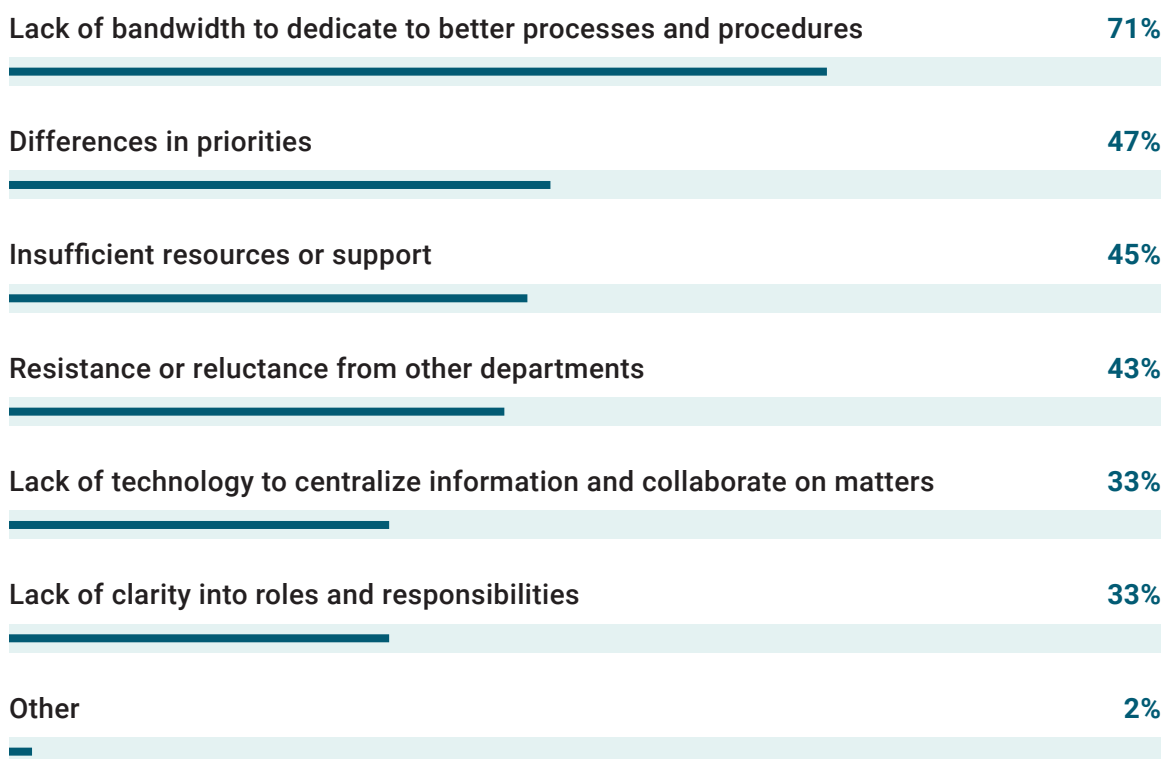
When working with other business units, collaboration most often takes the form of providing legal advice (95 percent), but 74 percent also say that the legal department provides strategic business advice. About two-thirds of respondents say that the legal team also collaborates with other teams by providing training (65 percent) and establishing processes and procedures (64 percent), while 52 percent indicate that the legal department creates shared knowledge bases for the benefit of the whole organization.

Legal departments in larger organizations are less likely to provide strategic business advice (66 percent) and to establish clear processes and procedures (58 percent). Those in smaller organizations are less likely to provide training (58 percent).

Despite collaborating across the business in several ways, respondents identify many obstacles preventing greater collaboration across the organization. By far, the top challenge is having a lack of bandwidth to work on better processes and procedures for the organization (71 percent of respondents). Just under half of respondents report differences in priorities among departments (47 percent), insufficient resources or support (45 percent), and resistance from other teams (43 percent) as other impediments to greater cross-departmental collaboration.

The greatest obstacles or challenges to strong internal collaboration across the organization are...

Select all that apply.



Most of the challenges appear to be more pronounced for legal operations professionals. In particular, differences in priorities (73 percent), insufficient resources (55 percent), and lack of technology (55 percent). However, the lack of clarity into roles and responsibilities is less of a challenge (23 percent) compared to the views of GC (30 percent) and other in-house counsel (35 percent).

In order to improve business outcomes through collaboration, 60 percent of respondents say the legal department is working to align more closely with the business operations, while about four in ten say the priority is also to better align with sales and finance. About one-third say that working more closely with information technology and human resources is a priority. More participants emphasize wanting a stronger collaboration with information technology than what they have now, while the opposite appears to be the case for collaboration with the human resources department.

To pave the way for better business outcomes through collaboration, the legal team is actively working to more closely align with...

Select all that apply.

Operations



Sales



Finance



IT



HR



Marketing



Purchasing



Other



- Departments currently working closely with the legal team
- Departments that the legal team wants to work more closely with

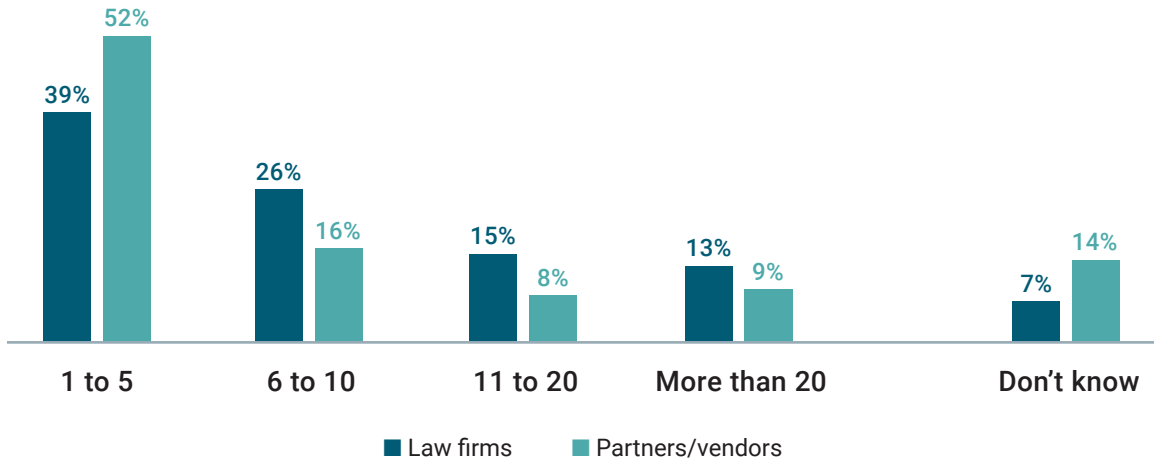
External Collaboration



Beyond collaborating with internal business departments, legal teams often must work with a wide variety of external partners, including law firms, alternative legal service providers (ALSPs), and technology vendors. This section examines the extent to which legal teams collaborate with these external parties and the benefits that could result from more effective collaboration.

In a given year, 39 percent of respondents work with an average of one to five law firms and 52 percent work with one to five other partners/vendors. Larger companies tend to work with a greater number of law firms and other partners/vendors compared with smaller companies.

What is the average number of outside law firms and partners/vendors (such as managed services providers, alternative legal service providers, tech vendors) you work with in a year?



Most respondents say they have no plans to change the number of law firms and other vendors they work with in the coming year (close to 70 percent). Just 8 percent anticipate that they will be working with more law firms and 17 percent that they will be working with more partners/vendors. One in four respondents expect, on the other hand, a decrease in the number of law firms they engage, and 14 percent expect working with fewer alternative partners and vendors.

How do you plan to change the number of law firms and partners/vendors you work with in the next 12 months?

Law firms



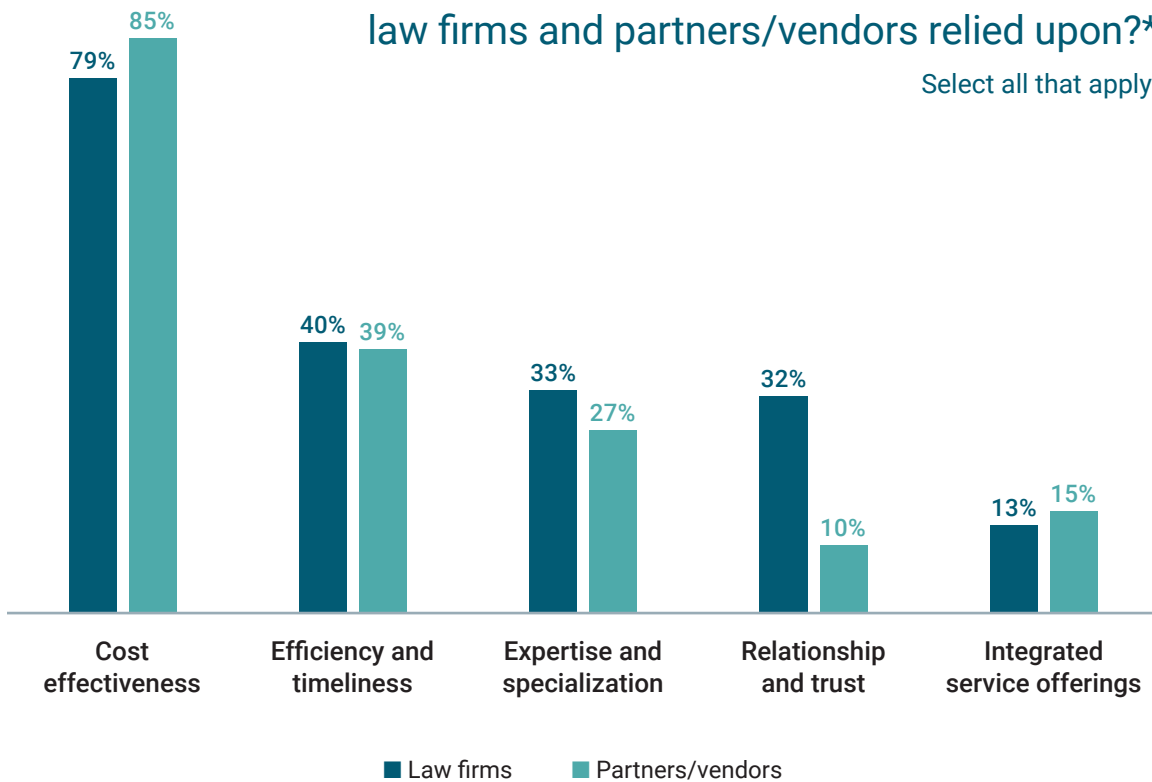
Partners/vendors



■ Increase ■ No change ■ Decrease

What is your rationale for reducing the number of law firms and partners/vendors relied upon?*

Select all that apply.



* Only asked those planning to decrease the number of law firms and partners/vendors they work with.

While cost-effectiveness is the most common rationale for reducing the number of law firms and other vendors, nearly half of respondents in smaller companies (43 percent) reported efficiency and timeliness as the second most important reason, while 63 percent of those in larger companies ranked expertise and specialization as the second most important factor.

Most respondents that anticipate reducing the number of law firms and vendors they work with in the coming year report a need for greater cost-effectiveness as their rationale. About 40 percent indicate that efficiency and timeliness is also important. About one-third cite expertise and specialization and relationship and trust as important factors. Fewer respondents selected these latter two factors as reasons to drop the number of other partners, with 27 percent saying expertise and specialization led to reducing the number of alternative partners/vendors, and just 10 percent said that relationship and trust play a role.

Since 2020, I feel more comfortable in requiring my outside counsel to use modern technology to increase efficiency.

Forty-one percent of respondents say they always require outside counsel to use modern technology to increase efficiency, and an additional 27 percent say they require this sometimes. Only 2 percent say they never require it. The remaining 31 percent of respondents indicate that they have never had any issues with requiring their outside counsel to use modern technology to increase efficiency.

ALWAYS 41%

SOMETIMES 27%

NEVER 2%

IT'S NEVER BEEN A PROBLEM 31%

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their law firms and partners/vendors. A majority of respondents say they are either extremely or somewhat satisfied with law firms in the following areas: quality and responsiveness of communication (76 percent), collaboration on key strategy (70 percent), understanding of company objectives (63 percent), and project management (51 percent). Respondents are not as satisfied with other outside partners and vendors in these areas, with satisfaction below the 50 percent mark in all four. Respondents are most satisfied with their non-law firm partners/vendors related to their cost predictability (46 percent), which incidentally is the feature with the lowest satisfaction rate for law firms, with just 38 percent being satisfied with the cost predictability on their engagements with outside counsel.

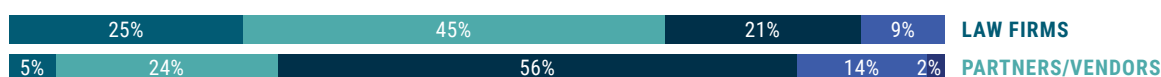
When working with external law firms and partners/vendors, how satisfied are you with...

Please rate on a five-point scale ranging from “extremely satisfied” to “extremely dissatisfied”.

Quality and responsiveness of communication



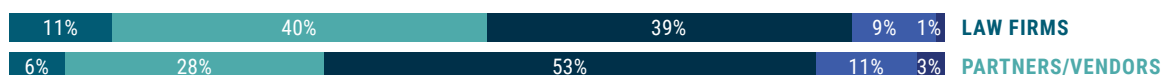
Collaboration on key strategy



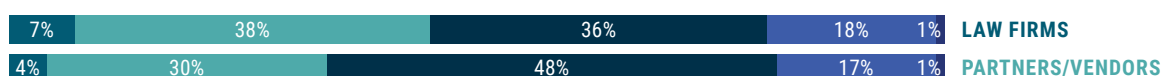
Understanding of company objectives



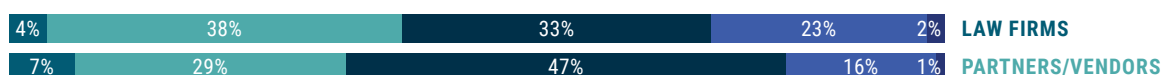
Project management



Transparency into processes



Transparency into costs



Cost predictability



■ Extremely satisfied ■ Somewhat satisfied ■ Neutral ■ Somewhat dissatisfied ■ Extremely dissatisfied

Note: Items sorted by the percentage of satisfied respondents, combining the “extremely satisfied” and “somewhat satisfied” categories, for law firms, from highest to lowest.

What do you believe would be the *primary* benefit that could be achieved if we had more effective collaboration with outside counsel?

When asked about the primary benefit that could be achieved if their legal team had more effective collaboration with outside counsel, about one-third of respondents say that it would deliver enhanced operational efficiency. Twenty-seven percent believe that it would result in greater freedom to focus on risk management and business issues, and 22 percent think that it could deliver improved legal outcomes. Eight percent say that no additional benefits could be achieved from more effective collaboration with outside counsel.

**ENHANCED OPERATIONAL
EFFICIENCY 32%**

**GREATER FREEDOM TO FOCUS
ON RISK MANAGEMENT AND
BUSINESS ISSUES 27%**

IMPROVED LEGAL OUTCOMES 22%

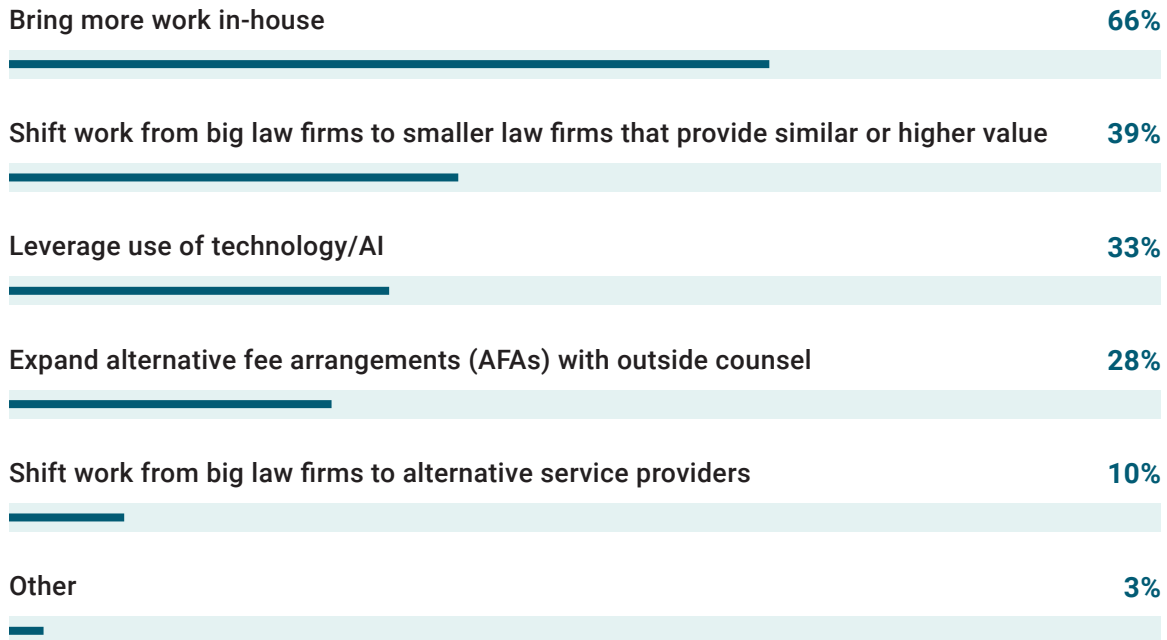
**GREATER TRANSPARENCY INTO
MATTERS 8%**

OTHER 3%

**I DON'T BELIEVE ADDITIONAL
BENEFITS COULD BE ACHIEVED 8%**

What are some strategies your department is employing to control costs?

Select all that apply.



Other strategies making up a smaller percentage of responses include: enabling business self-service for low-risk matters; greater oversight, accountability, budgeting, and invoice review; invest in training in-house staff; shift work to some firms; and use of diverse firms.

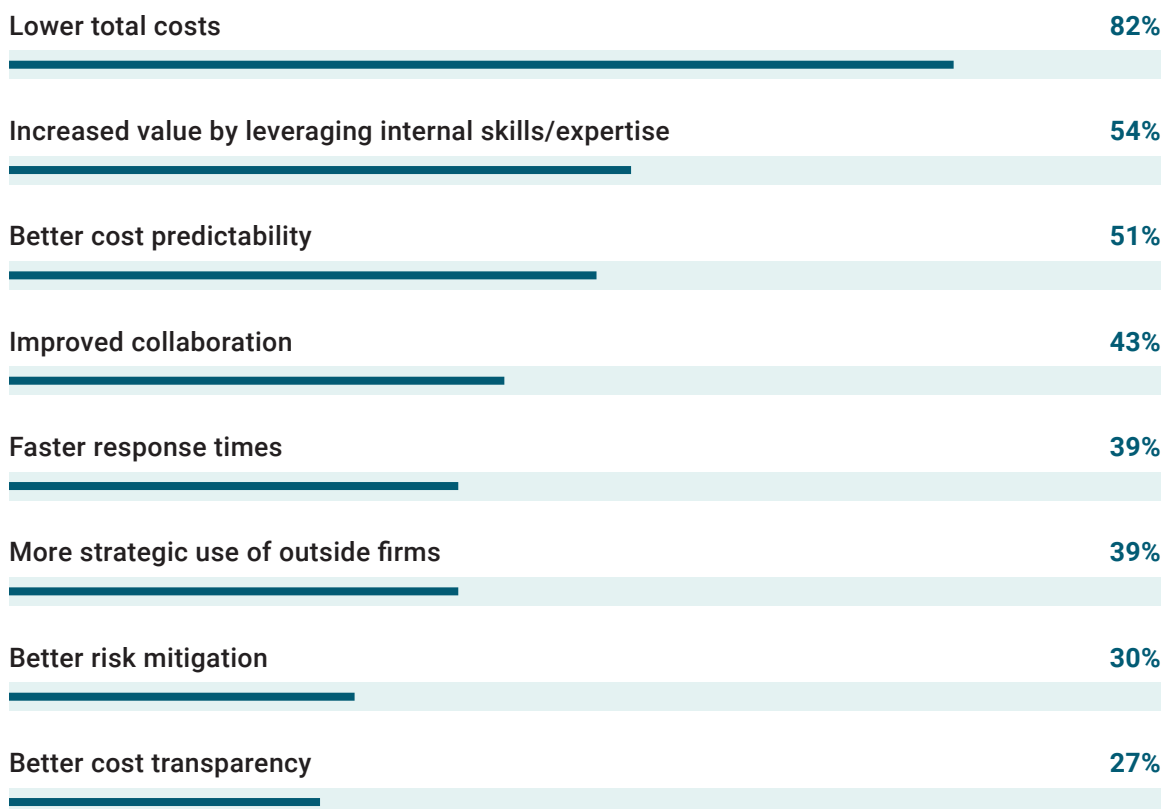
In order to control legal costs, two-thirds of respondents say their legal department is bringing more work in-house, which is the most common strategy reported. About four in ten are shifting work from larger law firms to smaller law firms, 33 percent are leveraging the use of technology and artificial intelligence (AI), and 28 percent are expanding the use of alternative fee arrangements (AFAs). Just 10 percent say they are shifting work from law firms to alternative legal services providers in order to reduce costs.

A higher number of respondents in small and mid-size companies (69 percent and 67 percent, respectively) say their department is bringing in more work in-house to control costs, but only 58 percent of those in large companies say that this strategy is being employed. In large organizations, 41 percent of respondents say their department is controlling costs by expanding the use of alternative fee arrangements (AFAs) with outside counsel.

According to 82 percent of respondents, the main benefit of bringing more work in-house is lower total legal costs. A majority also believe that insourcing work increases value by leveraging internal skills and expertise (54 percent) and provides better cost predictability (51 percent). About four in ten respondents indicate that other benefits include improved collaboration (43 percent), faster response times (39 percent), and more strategic uses of outside law firms (39 percent).

In bringing more work in-house, what related benefits would you anticipate?*

Select all that apply.



*Only asked those who selected "bring more work in-house" as a strategy that their legal department is employing to control costs.

Lowering total costs and increasing value by leveraging internal skills and expertise are the two main anticipated benefits of bringing more work in-house according to participants across company sizes. However, 82 percent of those in small companies anticipate lowering total costs compared to just 73 percent of those in large organizations, while 55 percent of those in small companies expect to increase value by leveraging internal skills and expertise compared to 62 percent of participants in large organizations.

Technology Utilization and Needs



Whether legal teams are collaborating with other internal departments or with external parties such as law firms and other service providers, more effective use of technology can help to enable stronger collaboration and result in better overall legal and business outcomes. This final section examines the kinds of collaboration tools legal teams are using, the challenges they are experiencing, and the kinds of benefits they expect to derive from greater technology utilization.

Which of the following cloud-based tools does your legal team use in-house?

Select all that apply.

Esignatures	83%
Cloud-based documents (M365, Google Docs)	74%
Contract life cycle management	44%
Ebilling software	43%
Workflow management	28%
Ediscovery software	20%
Other	3%

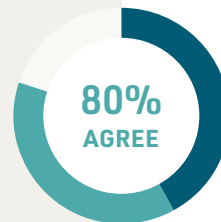
Other tools making up a smaller percentage of responses include: legal research, matter management, patent docketing, privacy and risk management, and SEC filing.

By far, the most common cloud-based tools legal teams are using include esignature tools (83 percent) and cloud-based documents such as Microsoft 365 and Google Docs (74 percent). Under half of respondents use contract life cycle management tools (44 percent), ebilling software (43 percent), workflow management tools (28 percent), and ediscovery software (20 percent).

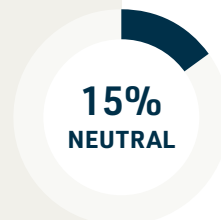
Ebilling and ediscovery are the two tools with the widest difference in usage based on company size. Just 26 percent of respondents in small organizations use ebilling and 10 percent use ediscovery tools compared to 65 percent and 31 percent of respondents, respectively, in large organizations.

I consider it important for the collaboration tools that the legal team uses among its members to be integrated with my company's to improve collaboration across teams/business units.

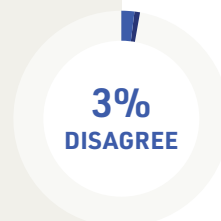
Eighty percent of respondents believe it is important that the collaboration tools that the legal department uses should be integrated with those of the company to improve collaboration across business units. Forty-two percent strongly agree with this, and an additional 38 percent mostly agree. Just 3 percent disagree. This sentiment does not vary across different types of in-house positions, although it is slightly less important for respondents in small organizations – 74 percent agree that collaboration tools should be integrated company-wide.



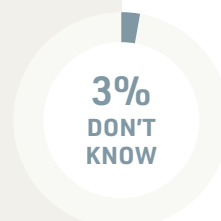
- Strongly agree 42%
- Mostly agree 38%



- Neither agree nor disagree 15%



- Mostly disagree 2%
- Strongly disagree 1%



- Don't know 3%

Limited integration between systems and platforms is ranked as the most pressing technology challenge by 34 percent of respondents, followed at a considerable distance by data security and privacy concerns (21 percent), hesitancy to move from established systems and processes (19 percent), lack of training (16 percent), and lack of communication and data-sharing tools (10 percent). Respondents had the option to rank these five challenges, and 78 percent indicate that limited integration is among the top three challenges when collaborating between internal and external teams.

What are your biggest technology challenges when collaborating between internal and external teams?

Rank the items below, with “1st” being the biggest challenge.

Limited integration between systems or platforms



Data security and privacy concerns



Hesitancy to move from established systems or processes



Lack of training, adoption, or buy-in



Lack of communication and data sharing tools



■ 1st ■ 2nd ■ 3rd ■ 4th ■ 5th

Respondents are divided in selecting what would be best for better collaboration across internal and external teams. One-third rank standardized collaboration processes as the top strategy, while 30 percent believe that integrated collaboration tools are more important and another 30 percent believe that a single centralized collaboration tool is what would most impact the ability to collaborate effectively. When combining the first three ranked options, integrated tools were selected by 89 percent of respondents, followed by a single centralized collaboration tool (77 percent), and standardized collaboration processes (73 percent).

Our legal department’s ability to collaborate across internal and external teams would be best served by which of the following?

Rank the items below, with “1” being the highest.

Standardized collaboration processes



Collaboration tools that are integrated with one another across teams



A single centralized collaboration tool



More automation capabilities integrated with collaboration tools



More AI features to help with problem solving



■ 1st ■ 2nd ■ 3rd ■ 4th ■ 5th

TECH PRIORITIES FOR DIFFERENT COMPANY SIZES

38%

IN SMALL COMPANIES
RANKED 1ST:

**Standardized
collaboration
processes**

38%

IN MID-SIZE COMPANIES
RANKED 1ST:

**Integrated
collaboration
tools**

33%

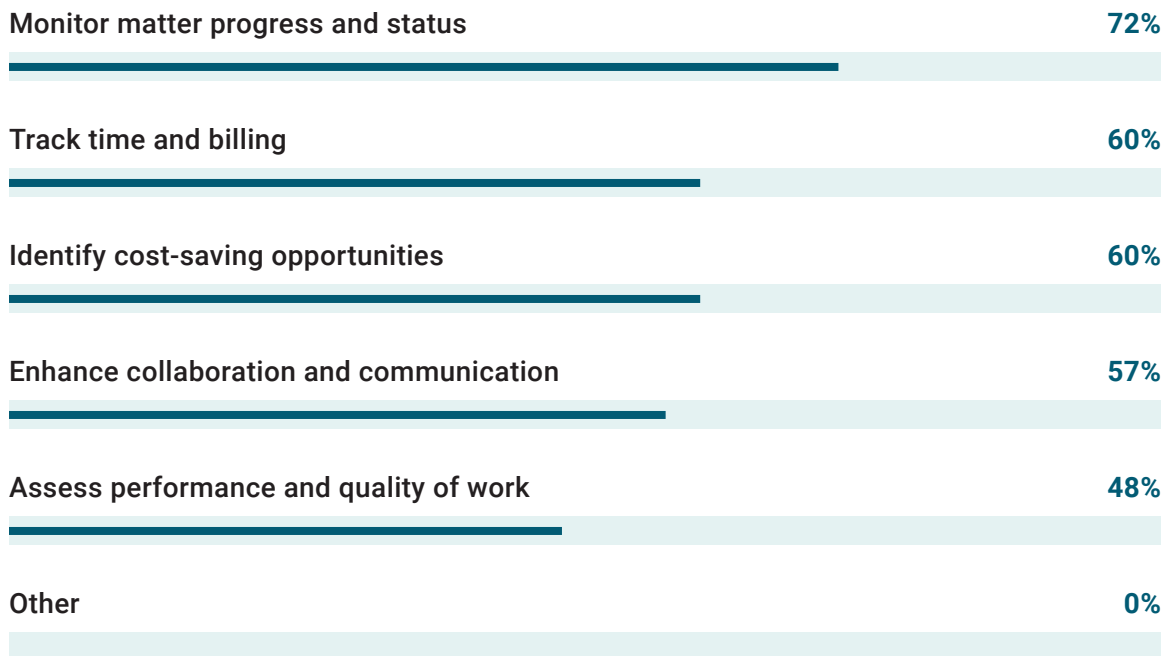
IN LARGE COMPANIES
RANKED 1ST:

**A single
centralized
collaboration tool**

Respondents mostly agree that technology that enables greater visibility into outside counsel activities would provide several benefits. Seventy-two percent say that such technology would increase their ability to monitor matter progress and status, 60 percent say that it would improve time tracking and billing, another 60 percent believe it would assist in identifying cost-saving opportunities, and 57 percent say that it would enhance collaboration and communication. Almost half of respondents (48 percent) also believe that such technology would assist in better assessing performance and the quality of work done by outside counsel.

Technology that enables greater visibility into outside counsel activity would allow us to...

Select all that apply.



Participant Profile

Annual company revenue

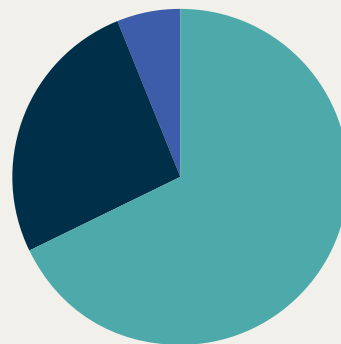
Small companies: Less than \$1B **45%**

Medium companies: \$1B to <\$10B **30%**

Large companies: \$10B or more **26%**

Participant primary in-house role

- In-house counsel (non-GC) **68%**
- General counsel/CLO **26%**
- Legal operations professional **6%**



Survey Details

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The survey questionnaire was offered through an online survey platform. Personalized survey links were sent by email to the target population, which allowed participants to save their responses and fill out the questionnaire in more than one sitting, if needed.

FIELDING PERIOD

The survey opened on June 8, 2023, and closed on July 7, 2023. Reminder emails were sent weekly.

TARGET POPULATION

We targeted ACC members located in the United States.

PARTICIPATION

A total of 373 in-house professionals participated in the survey, including in-house counsel, legal operations professionals, and other legal staff.

ANONYMITY

Survey responses were completely anonymous. No information is linked in any way to an individual respondent. The results are provided only at the aggregate level.

DATA ACCURACY

Not all respondents answered all questions. The percentages provided are based on the number of valid responses received for each individual question. Many survey questions offered the opportunity to select multiple response options. In those cases, percentages may not total to 100 percent. Occasionally, percentages may also not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

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HEADQUARTERS

1001 G Street NW, Suite 300W
Washington, DC 20001 USA
+1.202.293.4103

EUROPE OFFICE

Rue de la Science 14b
1040 Brussels – Belgium
+32.488.46.72.88

APAC OFFICE

P.O. Box 422
Collins Street West
Melbourne, Victoria 8007
+61.3.9248.5500

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US HEADQUARTERS

2101 Webster St.
Suite 1500
Oakland, CA 94612
1 844 Everlaw

LONDON OFFICE

32-38 Scrutton St.
London, EC2A 4RQ
0800 068 9249

NEW YORK OFFICE

1230 Avenue of the Americas
Floor 15
New York, NY 10020

WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE

1301 K St. NW
Washington, DC
20005

