

Briefing

SMARTER LEGAL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

TEAMS AND TELEPHONY

If remote working is here to stay, is it time for law firms to cut loose the handset and unite all their comms in the cloud?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UK law firms rapidly accelerated their implementation of collaboration tools from March 2020 – for very obvious reasons. Daily channelised chat and video meets are now as common as congregating in the office kitchen once was. The vibe might not be quite the same, but even for those with a very strong preference for working from home, the ability to see colleagues for certain conversations remains indispensable.

Microsoft Teams has quickly established itself as a law firm favourite. Many legal businesses are already heavily invested in Microsoft of course, and as their leaders tell us through this research, they see opportunities to expand use of the platform to power up dispersed-working productivity. Most feel that a working week with significantly less office face-time is here to stay.

However, while appetite for video has soared this year, what has become of connecting on the phone? In handling the first lockdown quite a lot of law firms simply piped office lines out to people's mobiles – although some were also busily rolling out those unified comms at the same time. Our research identifies a few potential pain points to be cautious of in this situation – such as calls not being transferred as they once would have been – but most insist that this hasn't been a major management headache. There has, of course, been quite a lot more going on this year, so perhaps it appears to pale in comparison. The quality of communication as an aspect of client service, however, can never be taken for granted.

All of that said, we can clearly see that law firm telephony is a technology ripe for transformation – that is, by bundling it up with the other communication and process-optimisation opportunities of a cloud-hosted platform such as legal's new best friend, Microsoft Teams. Now that everyone who needs to be is mobile-equipped, law firms are giving serious consideration to pulling out the office handsets once and for all, and they could choose to do the same with their on-premises PBX infrastructure. The office as a fundamental tenet of law firm life will undergo enormous change in the near future, and fixed phone systems are a standout vestige of the past. Our research finds nine in 10 firm leaders saying either that their telephony is already in the cloud, or that the move is under consideration.

The possible upsides of a cloud move generally have been articulated many times – the potential for reduced capex cost and process complexity, as a third party takes on the management burden. In the case of telephony, firms could also take aim at greater consistency across offices internationally, both equipment and carriers. But it's very clear the number-one advantage of cloud telephony for those taking part in this piece of research is that this is another big step on the path of freeing people to work ever more flexibly – but also more productively – in future. ▴

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COMMENT

Covid-19 has driven an unprecedented change in working habits. After an initial scramble to prepare for mass working from home, remote working has become routine for many large law firms, and it is expected to last long after the relaxation of social distancing rules. By and large, firms have adapted well, maintaining client engagement and service delivery, and technology has played a major part in this. According to a global study by McKinsey, the digitisation of customer and supplier interactions has been accelerated by three to four years as a result of the pandemic. This research by **Briefing** considers the recent impact that technology has had on communication and collaboration in the legal sector.

One tool that has seen a rapid increase in adoption during lockdown is Microsoft Teams. This research shows that Microsoft's cloud-based unified communications platform has become the preferred solution for internal collaboration at more than half of the law firms surveyed. And this figure is expected to increase further – in October 2020 Microsoft announced 115 million daily active users on Teams, an increase of 53% in just six months.

But while cloud-based platforms have become the norm for internal collaboration at law firms, the picture for business telephony is more mixed. Obviously, phones are still being answered during lockdown – 85% of firms said that core business telephony challenges were limited or non-existent. But the way that firms responded to lockdown varied – while 42% already had a cloud-based telephony solution that allowed users to access their business line over the internet, others had to resort to forwarding their work phone to a mobile or home phone. This means that basic telephony features like transferring calls to colleagues were not available.

Lockdown has almost certainly accelerated the adoption of cloud-based telephony solutions. At the time this research was conducted in October 2020, most firms that still used on-premises business telephony solutions had selected a vendor to move their telephony into the cloud or were actively considering doing so. Just 11% of firms had no plan to move their business telephony into the cloud. Firms that have already moved to cloud-based telephony reported that it makes it easier for employees to work from any location (70%), as well as offering new user functionality, easier user management, and reduced telecoms costs.

Of those firms that already have a cloud-based telephony solution in place, more than half have selected Microsoft's Teams-based solution. For users, Teams telephony means that internal and external communication – phone calls, instant messaging, videoconferencing and file sharing – is all integrated into a single interface. IT teams only have to deploy and maintain a single unified communications platform with a single licence, and benefit from the reliability and security of Microsoft's Azure global network.

As a result of the radical change in working habits driven by the pandemic in 2020, cloud-based communications platforms have come of age. They are now an essential tool for major law firms to maintain client engagement and service delivery with a remote workforce. LoopUp – a certified Microsoft Gold Partner – provides voice solutions to more than 5,000 organisations around the world, including 20 of the top 100 global law firms. We offer cloud-based telephony for Microsoft Teams as a fully managed service – from solution design and deployment to service delivery and support. ▀



Rob Jardine
Chief marketing officer
LoopUp

www.loopup.com





01

Comms in 2021 – time for Teams

Writing this in the middle of a second national lockdown in the UK, it's quite clear that the disruption wrought by Covid-19 has greatly increased the need for management processes and systems that support more distributed working patterns. And whenever 'office life' as we once knew it may return, we also know law firms are now anticipating a future where significantly more people are likely to be working away from the office (their desk or any other location therein) on any given day.

In August 2020, Linklaters announced a new "long-term" agile working policy globally, which could see people working remotely for 20-50% of their time, a reflection of "lessons learned from remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic." The firm is clear that the policy is intended to apply beyond social-distancing restrictions. More generally, many law firm leaders have indicated the pandemic has paved the way for a working world where people can enjoy significantly greater 'choice' about their place of work.

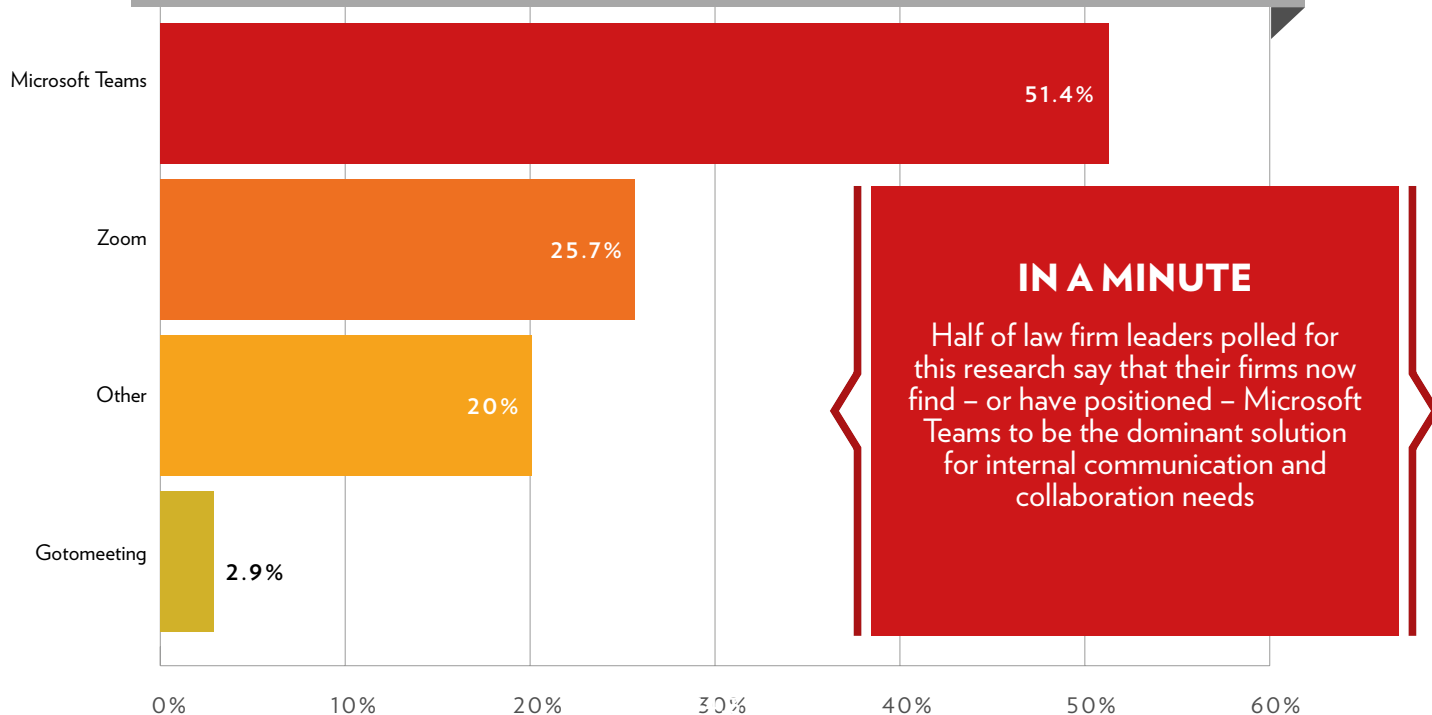
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WHAT IS THE DOMINANT COMMS AND COLLABORATION SOLUTION FOR INTERNAL USE IN YOUR FIRM?



Indeed, place of work no longer means what it once did. Today that is perhaps more accurately the set of collaboration tools firms are using to connect and support their people internally, to serve existing clients, and of course to woo new ones – the likes of Microsoft Teams of course, which half of respondents to our research (51%) would describe as ‘the dominant comms and collaboration solution for internal use’ (see above). The next most likely platform to have risen to the top for reaching-out to colleagues is Zoom – also identified as most

dominant for external comms – but only half as many people (26%) name this. And we know from our earlier research into collaboration technology – Remote control (May 2020) – that the reality is that firms are likely to, if not encourage, at least permit access to several different conferencing and collaboration tools so teams can serve their clients as simply as possible (from those clients’ perspectives).

James Mead, IT director at Stewarts, says: “Homeworking has proved itself an effective model, and it will be a permanent feature in the long term, albeit with a balance to be struck with the benefits of a collaborative and collegiate office environment. We will be seeking the best of both worlds. Optimising for continued use of technologies such as video collaboration once able to return to the office in greater numbers will be key. For example, whether you’ve chosen Teams or Zoom, others will have made different choices, so being able to support multiple platforms while

“Homeworking has proved itself an effective model, and it will be a permanent feature in the long term.”

James Mead, IT director, Stewarts

keeping your collaboration spaces simple and intuitive will be a common challenge.”

Virtual hearings are a particular challenge, he adds. “With no consistent or standardised choice of platform for hearings on the horizon, firms will either need to invest in multiple different platforms, as well as develop the best practice and security knowhow to wield them effectively, or establish strong relations with external expertise to effectively outsource these services.”

Keith Feeny, director of IT and operations at Hill Dickinson, says: “A lot of internal surveys are showing that people will probably want to work from home for two or three days a week as standard.” Hill Dickinson has settled on MS Teams as the platform to enable that effectively, he says. “There’s a place for Zoom. We do allow our users to join Zoom meetings, and certainly clients have asked us to join or host Zoom meetings, and we give guidance about that. However, our chosen platform is Teams.

“We’ve been using the video meeting piece a lot of course – for both internal and client meetings. It’s also our instant messaging platform, and we’ve developed a number of team channels. As Microsoft develops, we’re now starting to look at what else it can do for us. One plan is to move the internal meeting room structure into Teams so that whichever device you are on, or if in the room itself, there’s a standard and familiar interface and you immediately know how to join.”

Also favouring Teams is Matt Haynes, IT director at Kennedys, who says: “A lot of our clients are also using Teams, and so it allows us to work more collaboratively with them, such as sharing screens and editing documents together. And it allows us to have better personal relationships when

“One plan is to move the internal meeting room structure into Teams, so that whichever device you are on, or in the room itself, there’s a standard and familiar interface.”

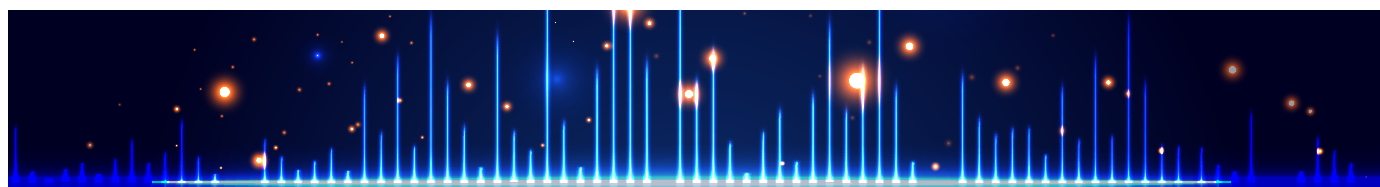
Keith Feeny, director of IT and operations, Hill Dickinson

working remotely – connections that can be hard to create, and which it’s important to maintain.”

Damien Behan, IT director at Brodies, adds: “Teams may be quite a ‘no brainer’ for many, if they have a Microsoft 365 subscription.” It certainly was for his firm, which went from around 100 to 750 users “almost overnight”, he says.

“We had Windows 10 already installed, so all we had to do was begin using it, and of course lockdown was the trigger event. There are also the collaboration opportunities and plenty of apps – and over time Teams is adding functionality available on the Zoom platform, but also vice versa. There’s a degree of levelling happening.”

One thing’s for sure – between them all, these tools could reasonably be described as lockdown ‘winners’, tapping into a very clear business-critical need for connection. The next stage is to make that connection as efficient, productive and comfortable as possible. ▀





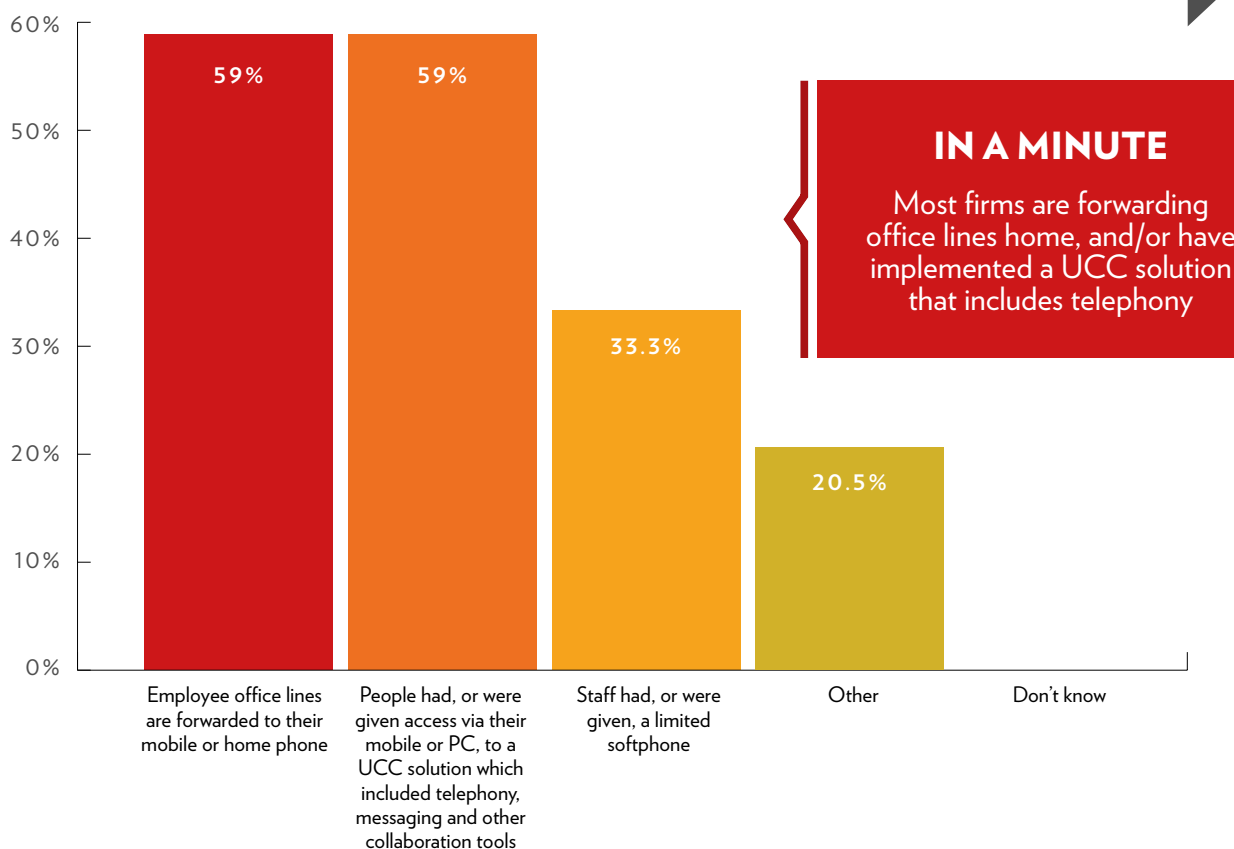
02

Do firms have extra phone work to do?

But is Teams enough to deliver on the future of dispersed working that law firms now expect to be supporting over the next few years? At the start of lockdown, planned collaboration platform implementations were pushed up the strategic priority list and rapidly brought forward (in some cases by 18 months to two years, **Briefing** has heard). When it comes to phone calls, however, our research finds many firms resorting to forwarding office lines to people's mobiles devices (59%). The same percentage of

leaders say they gave mobile or PC access to a unified communications and collaboration (UCC) tool that bundles telephony together with the other comms and collaboration capabilities mentioned (p9). Clearly, they may have done both over the course of the first lockdown and into the summer. Only a third of respondents report that their firms have rolled out a limited softphone solution for mobile/PC that gives access to people's office lines. But will firms' actions be sufficient for the volume and complexity of calls they typically still

HOW HAS YOUR FIRM BEEN HANDLING PHONE CALLS FOR PEOPLE WORKING FROM HOME OR REMOTELY DURING THE PANDEMIC? (CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY)



need to handle, and now from so many locations?

Matt Haynes, IT director at Kennedys, says his firm was quick to take advantage of its smartphone supplier offering short-term contracts at the start of the pandemic to provide additional mobiles as required – but more was also needed. “We deployed Skype for Business several years ago for inter-office calling and messaging, which was

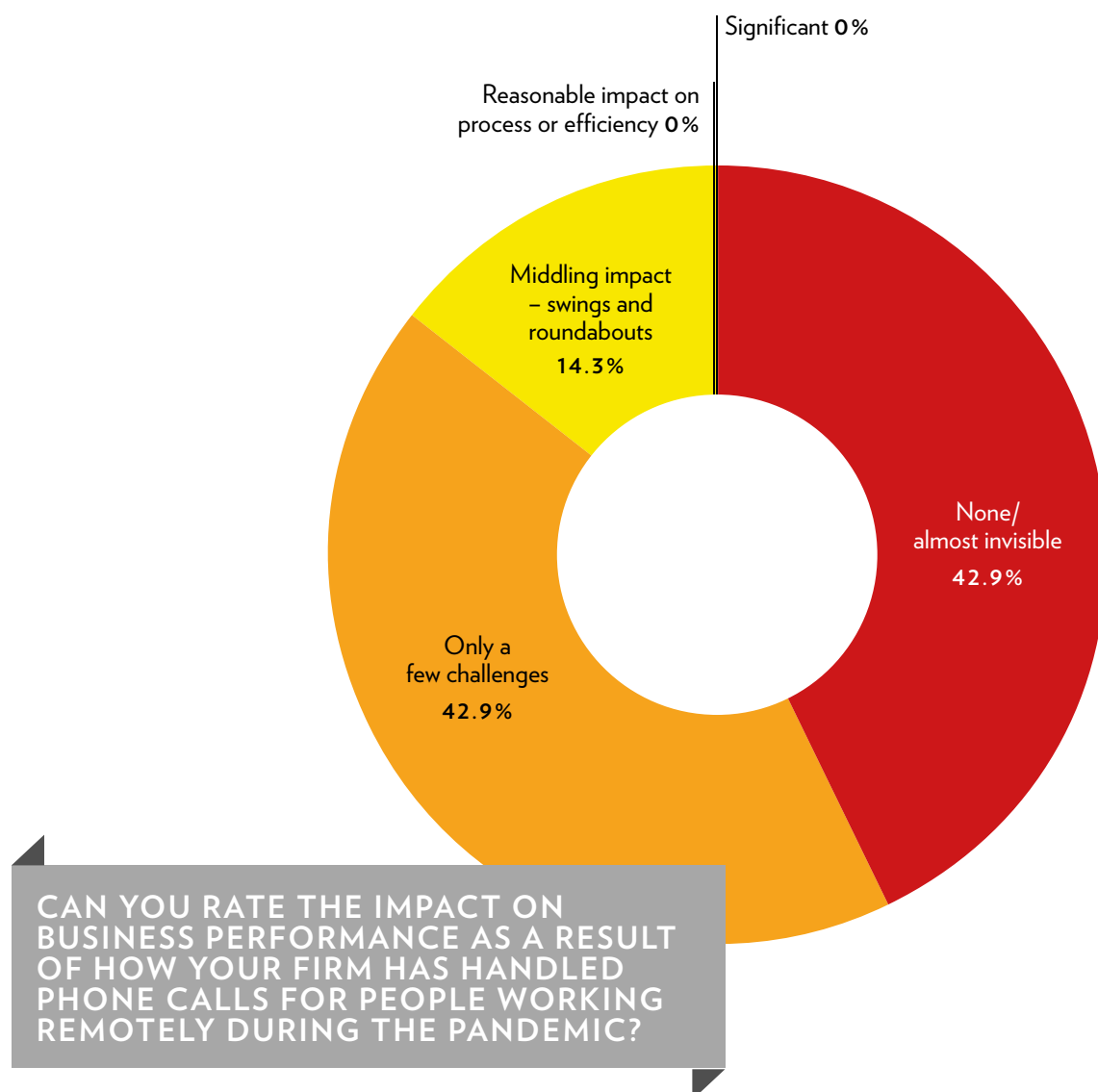
another way for people to stay engaged. And our Madrid office was in the process of moving earlier this year, so we deployed Skype for Business telephony there as a trial, which has now been migrated to Teams.

“We considered the softphone version, but didn’t want to invest in something that was going to provide some value in the short term but not in the longer term. We wanted to focus our effort on the transition to Teams, which we believe at some point will be migrating to include telephony.”

Keith Feeny says that Hill Dickinson, also on Skype, was already on the road to Teams telephony. “We quickly accelerated that project. It’s hosted in the Gamma cloud, and of course we distributed the mobile app as well, so now you can use Teams for telecoms on your mobile or laptop, either with headset or without. Calls come through to both, and our operators operate a Teams-based switchboard.”

“We considered the softphone version, but didn’t want to invest in something that was going to provide some value in the short term but not in the longer term.”

Matt Haynes, IT director, Kennedys



Karen Walker, chief transformation officer at Shakespeare Martineau, is also in the process of rolling out Teams telephony at the time of writing. “It’s a hybrid of that and redirection to mobiles that we have at the moment, but all direct dials will soon be able to receive incoming and make outgoing calls through Teams. In fact, we’ve thrown all the desk phones back in the offices away in the process of modifying them.” Shakespeare Martineau’s management team is also in the process of assessing all its office locations for likely use patterns in future – whether spaces are expected to see more or less time welcoming clients and collaboration activity for example, or serve more as a “drop-in centre” for people to work as and when they wish – potentially even just for the company in the current environment. The balance will of course

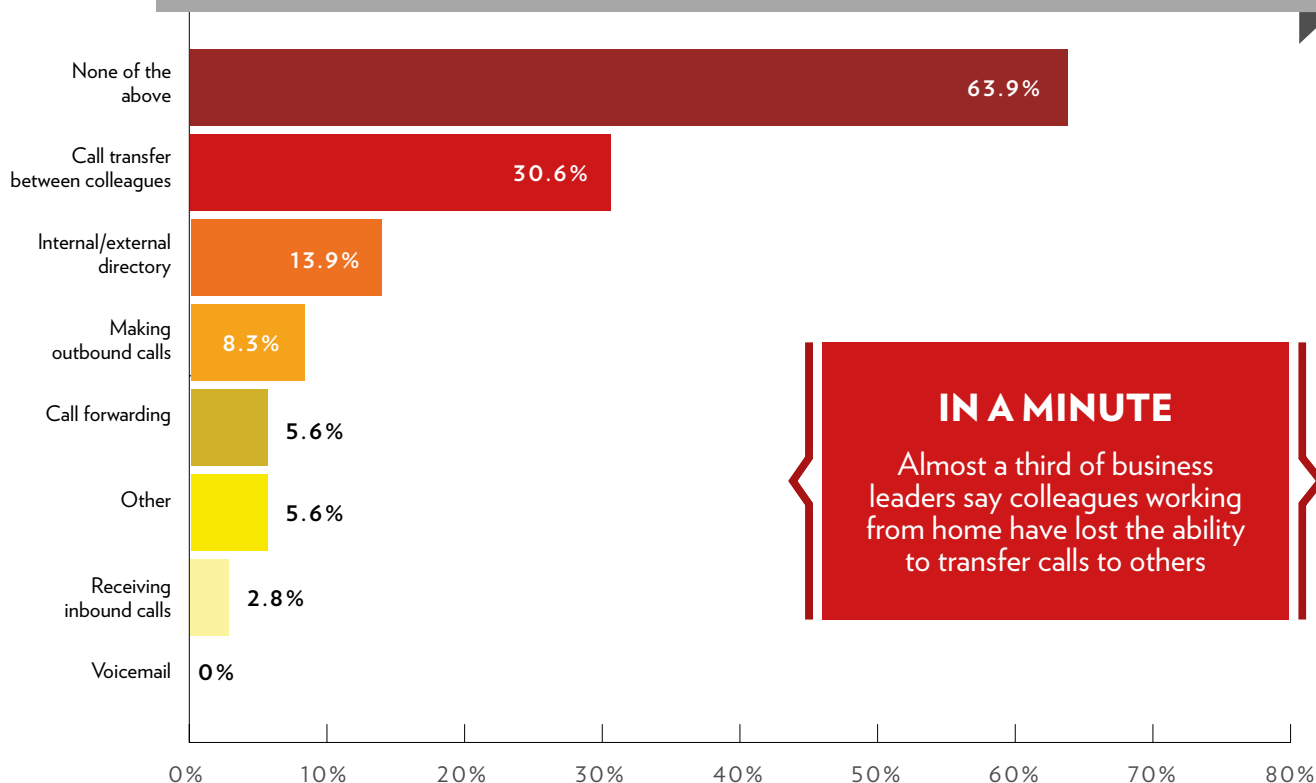
influence the facilities required, and in some cases the number of desks is likely to be scaled back.

“We had an agenda for new ways of working all mapped out prior to the first lockdown, but in terms of phones and Teams we’ve now deployed a 12-month project in around five months,” she explains. “The situation has been a burning

“We’ve thrown all the desk phones back in the offices away.”

Karen Walker, chief transformation officer, Shakespeare Martineau

WHICH FUNCTIONS OF YOUR OFFICE TELEPHONE SYSTEMS HAVE BEEN 'LOST' TO THOSE WORKING FROM HOME/REMOTELY?



platform enabling us to fast-track the change.”

Damien Behan at Brodies is on a similar trajectory, he says. “Our plan to remove physical handsets from desks as part of an office move due next year had seemed quite a radical step – now it just seems sensible, and is certainly much more palatable to people.”

Keystone Law also had to fast-track its roll-out of Teams (it was being piloted by the IT team when lockdown came), says IT director Maurice Tunney. But as a dispersed firm in structure long before

Covid-19, Keystone only had to transition its 52 London-based business services staff from handset to softphone licences.

Asked which functions of pre-pandemic office telephony were ‘lost’ to people suddenly working from home in the first wave, you might consider around two-thirds (64%) reporting “none” as a sign that all is fine (see above). However, almost a third (31%) of respondents say that call transferring between colleagues is lost to them at an economic moment when – for all the tools out there – effective and productive collaboration in such a basic area as telephony is crucial. In addition, 14% report that employees have lost access to directory information, while 8% say they cannot make outbound business calls at all. And it appears a minority – but significant for them no doubt – cannot even receive them (3%). Nobody reports that any of this has a highly significant impact on the firm’s process efficiency, but 14% would describe it as “middling” and 43% admit to some challenges (p10). Some comms difficulties could, of course, potentially be slipping under radars owing

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Damien Behan, IT director, Brodies

to less visibility of exactly how work is happening – while at the same time people increasingly turn to the perceived engagement opportunities of video calls and meetings.

Tunney says some of the challenges Keystone encountered were not so much to do with the technology itself, but the knowledge of the software. And this was quickly resolved through educating people. “In the office you can see and hear colleagues’ phones ringing and can answer them accordingly. While softphones offer this functionality, people were not aware of how it worked. However, through a simple demonstration using the screen-share functionality of Teams, this challenge was quickly overcome so no calls were missed.”

Matt Haynes at Kennedys adds: “People had forwarded their desk phones to their mobiles, and were able to get in touch with those they needed to – it didn’t rise to the top of the list of transition concerns for us. Receptionists will typically have different equipment for transferring calls, so there was some rework there. And of course it assumes that calls are transferred to the right person – a ‘warm transfer’, which allows the time to transfer on to someone else before hanging up. I think the overall impact was quite low.

“It’s also the case that we’ve seen clients needing to adapt their own communication styles. An email or other message is often much easier when there’s a poor signal at home, for example. If we were in an isolated bubble the impact would perhaps be higher, but essentially the entire business world has been adjusting how it previously worked.”

And Damien Behan at Brodies says that

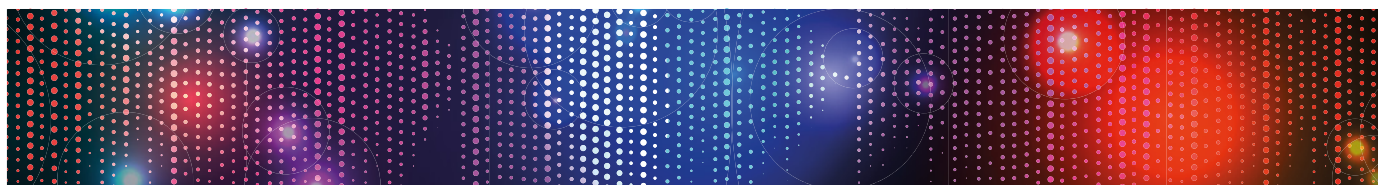
“If we were in an isolated bubble the impact would perhaps be higher, but essentially the entire business world has been adjusting how it previously worked.”

Matt Haynes, IT director, Kennedys

demand for call-forwarding, and even voicemail, appears to have dwindled with mass homeworking: “People aren’t travelling as much, so they’re more available – if they aren’t available in the moment, they will be fairly soon.

“Interestingly, we saw quite a spike in audioconferencing in the first month or two, where clients or others didn’t have a softphone option – and of course we could see that reflected in our bill. But that melted away as people grew more comfortable with Teams and video. All internal comms are now through Teams, and so are many client calls as people want to see who they’re talking to in order to keep the human connection and relationship.” A bigger challenge may come if and when people go back to offices in larger numbers, he suggests. “At home managing audio is quite easy – it’s when you start mixing that it’s likely to become more complicated.”

Feeny adds: “We saw a couple of challenges surrounding shared phone boxes and group hunting, but I’d describe it as a straightforward transition overall, and have to say we were widely congratulated.” ▴



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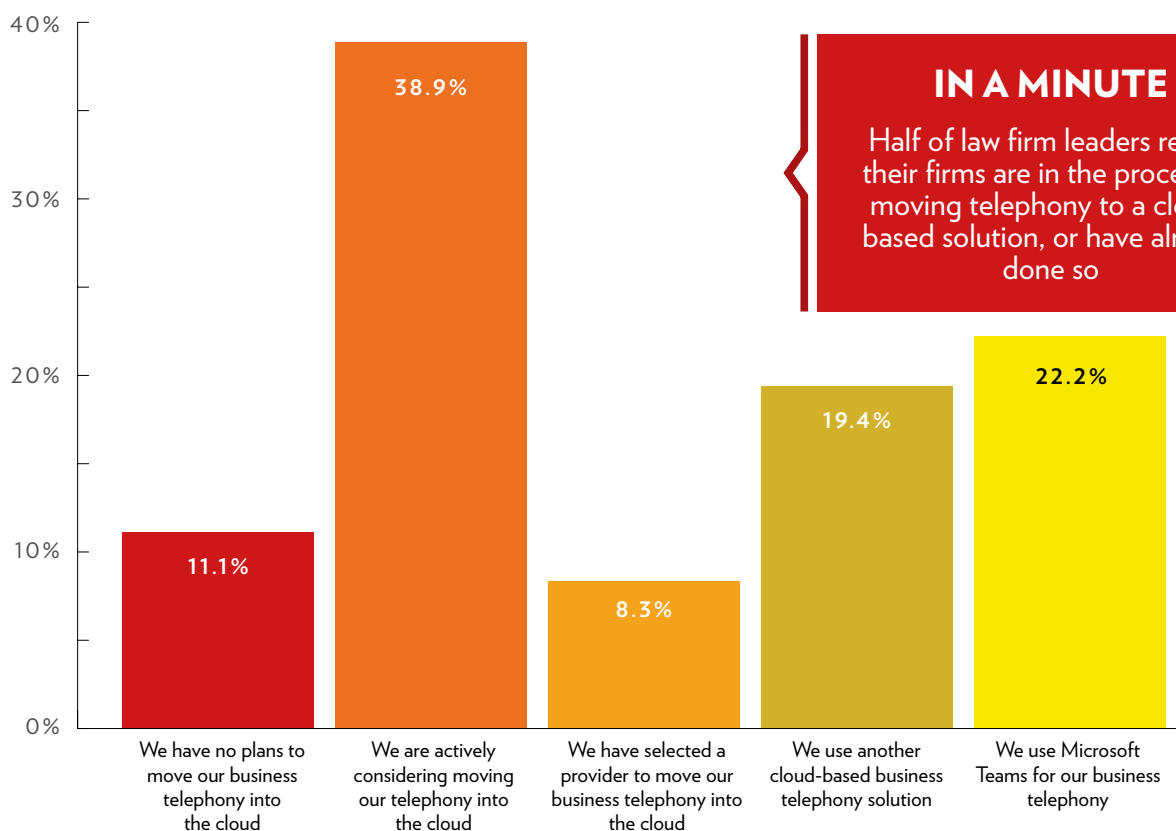
Cloud calling for phones in future?

As we've seen, if law firms have adopted – or are adopting – Microsoft Teams for collaboration, they could choose to move telephony to the cloud, managing it through the same platform. Here people can make and receive calls on any suitable device that connects to the internet, and retain those call features such as forwarding. Firms will have telephony alongside video and the other channels available, while avoiding additional call charges generated by redirecting or transferring, and the business no longer needs on-premises equipment (PBX). They can also partner with a third-party managed service provider to streamline management and pursue economies of scale through 'direct routing'.

It's clear that plenty of law firms are either doing this already, or are well on the way. Just over a fifth (22%) of respondents to our survey said they're already using Microsoft Teams for telephony, with slightly fewer using an alternative cloud-based solution (19%) (p15). Almost two-fifths (39%) are "actively considering" moving telephony to the cloud, and 8% are in the process, having already selected a provider. Only 11% of business leaders say cloud-based telephony does not feature in their IT strategies or discussions at all.

James Mead at Stewarts says: "We'd recognised a need to migrate from our on-prem telephone systems in recent years, and had been working on a UCC implementation as the pandemic

THINKING SPECIFICALLY OF YOUR BUSINESS TELEPHONY, WHERE IS YOUR FIRM ON THE JOURNEY TO A UCC SOLUTION THAT INCLUDES BUSINESS TELEPHONY AND IS DELIVERED FROM THE CLOUD?



struck. While this now enables us to continue communicating with clients as previously, the introduction of video calling may now have become the preferred route for many.”

Keith Feeny at Hill Dickinson explains: “We don’t have a strategy of ‘always cloud’, but ‘cloud if correct’. We’d been sweating our previous on-premise asset quite considerably with virtualisation, so it was time for us to consider the other options regardless of lockdown. Given our other significant investments in Microsoft products, it made sense to move to an all-encompassing solution, bringing channels, instant messaging and calls together in one hit.”

For Damien Behan at Brodies, it isn’t quite as simple. “For the user it doesn’t make a lot of sense to jump between tools for different calls,” he agrees. “We’re also looking at bypassing the standalone softphone and integrating with Teams, but there is quite a basket of considerations, including the option of integrating either a hosted or on-premise

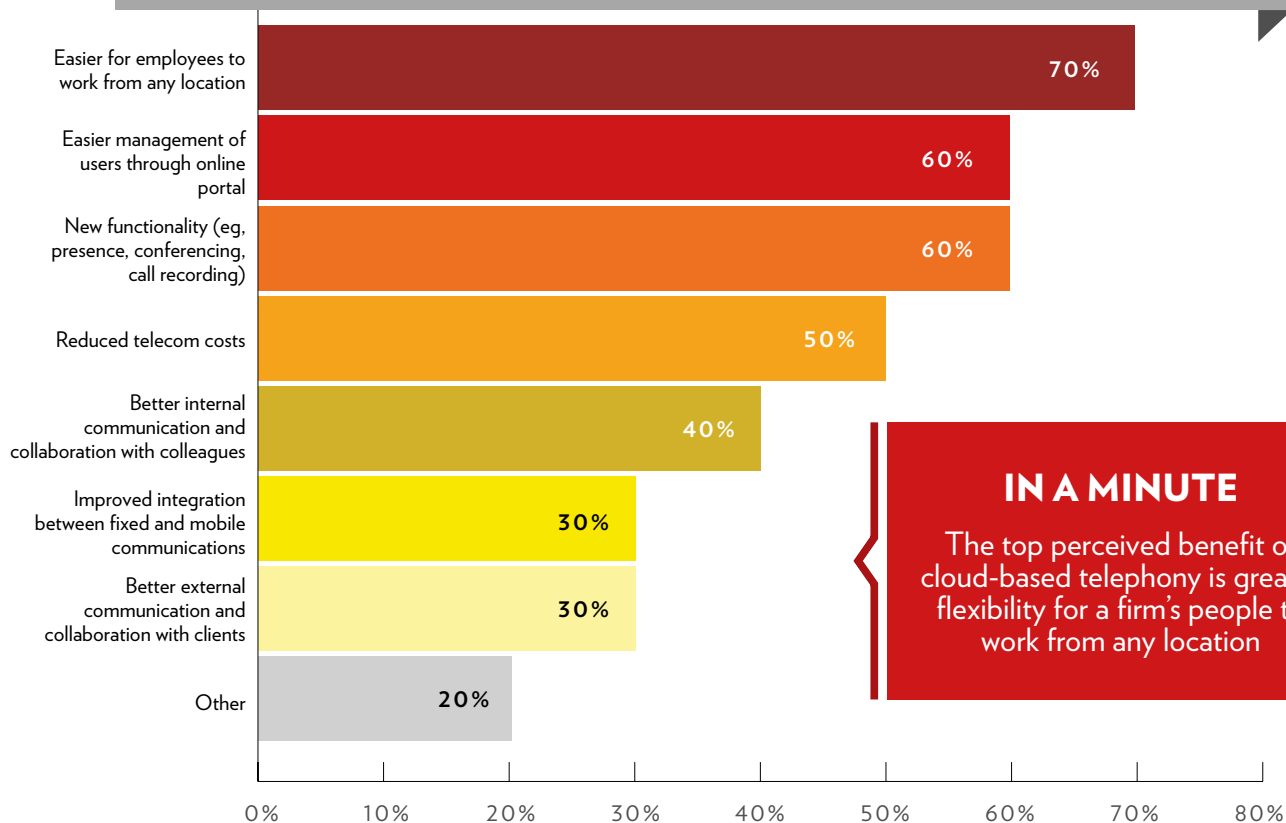
PBX using direct routing. There are questions of cost– including your sunk cost in the PBX – and service levels.”

But if firms are indeed heading for cloud-based telephony now, our research suggests they might anticipate a range of business benefits (p16). It’s a little surprising perhaps that neither improved communication is not a major one. Just two-fifths of respondents cite better internal communication and collaboration with colleagues, and under a third single that out for client comms. However, half see opportunity for reduced telecoms costs (as well as removing a range of PBX equipment across a

“We don’t have a strategy of ‘always cloud’, but ‘cloud if correct’.”

Keith Feeny, director of IT and operations, Hill Dickinson

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS IN MOVING TO A CLOUD-BASED UCC SOLUTION FOR TELEPHONY? (CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY)



network, international firms could also cut down the number of local carriers they use). Simpler management of use and accounts also appeals (60%), as does the new functionality that comes with UCC, such as 'presence' management (60%).

The highest-ranking advantage of a cloud-based UCC solution for telephony, however, brings us back to where we began. It's the opportunity for employees to work effectively on a single platform from any location – home, office, or anywhere in between – where a more even balance of those places increasingly looks like the future normal.

Matt Haynes at Kennedys says: "I wouldn't describe the move to Teams for telephony as a cost-saving initiative – it's an investment. Our firm is thinking hard about all the things that might anchor colleagues to a desk. One of those that I can influence is telephony. It will enable the flexibility we know our people will continue to want in future, while tools that offer it alongside increased productivity will also position us well to attract new talent."

Karen Walker at Shakespeare Martineau says reduced cost could be a benefit, but it isn't "the

fundamental driver" of the shift to Teams for telephony at her firm. "That is supporting people to collaborate more, and to work when and where they want. Some are still only using Teams for videoconferencing, some are using the tracking function, and we intend to try to use it even more effectively going forward – so that it almost replicates the opportunities for sharing, picking up information and camaraderie in the office."

Feeny at Hill Dickinson also raises this, and indeed suggests that therein lies the next challenge for Microsoft itself. "Is there a way to replicate something of the office environment without that needing to mean a face-to-face meeting or the risk of potentially awkward silence?" It isn't easy, he says, but could help with one of the big management challenges of this age of uncertainty. "If there are either ongoing restrictions around who can be in the office, or people just don't want to be, what impact does that have on those people's effective learning and development over time? Otherwise, our main goal is simply to simplify things – to make it as straightforward as possible for our people to communicate with one another and our clients." ■