
The Good Solicitor's Skill Set

Is there a disconnect between assumptions and reality?

Are the human, legal, and business skills solicitors recognised as the most important ones, in fact, the most lacking in the profession?

Introduction

The LexisNexis Bellwether reports explore and investigate the issues facing the SME legal market, conducting ground-breaking market research in order to offer insights and guidance, and contribute to the discourse on the future of independent law firms.

In this report, we've investigated the attributes that solicitors consider to be essential in today's rapidly changing legal landscape and how these fit in with their roles. From what we've seen, there is a fundamental disconnect that mirrors what previous Bellwether reports have identified; there is a tendency to cling to the status quo, even when beneficial changes, with clearly articulated parameters of success, are identified.

Is this indicative of short-sighted, short-term thinking? And would a more proactive approach ensure success into the long term?

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1. The job of a solicitor

Solicitors believe that, in order to be successful, they need good business and human skills alongside their legal acumen.

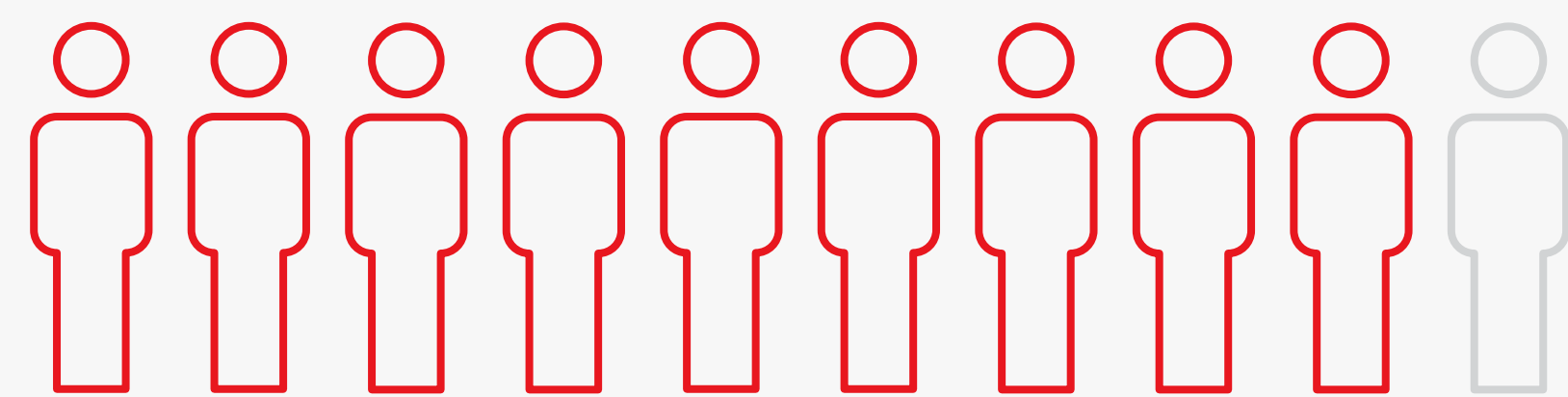


1. The job of a solicitor

Solicitors, on the whole, love their jobs. 4 out of 5 of those surveyed this year express high levels of job satisfaction, which is an increase from 2016. Indeed, 91% of solicitors are confident about the future, with a further 91% describing the performance of their practice as stable or growing and around three-quarters of those surveyed asserting that they are energised by practicing law.

In short: optimism reigns supreme.

9 in 10



solicitors agree that good business skills and good human skills are of increasing importance if solicitors are to be successful.

“What clients want to know when they first sit down is – is this the person I want to handle this potentially huge situation for my business. Do I feel I can trust their judgement? Will they back me 100%? They assume you know the law, so at the end of the day, it really all comes down to trust.”

1. The job of a solicitor

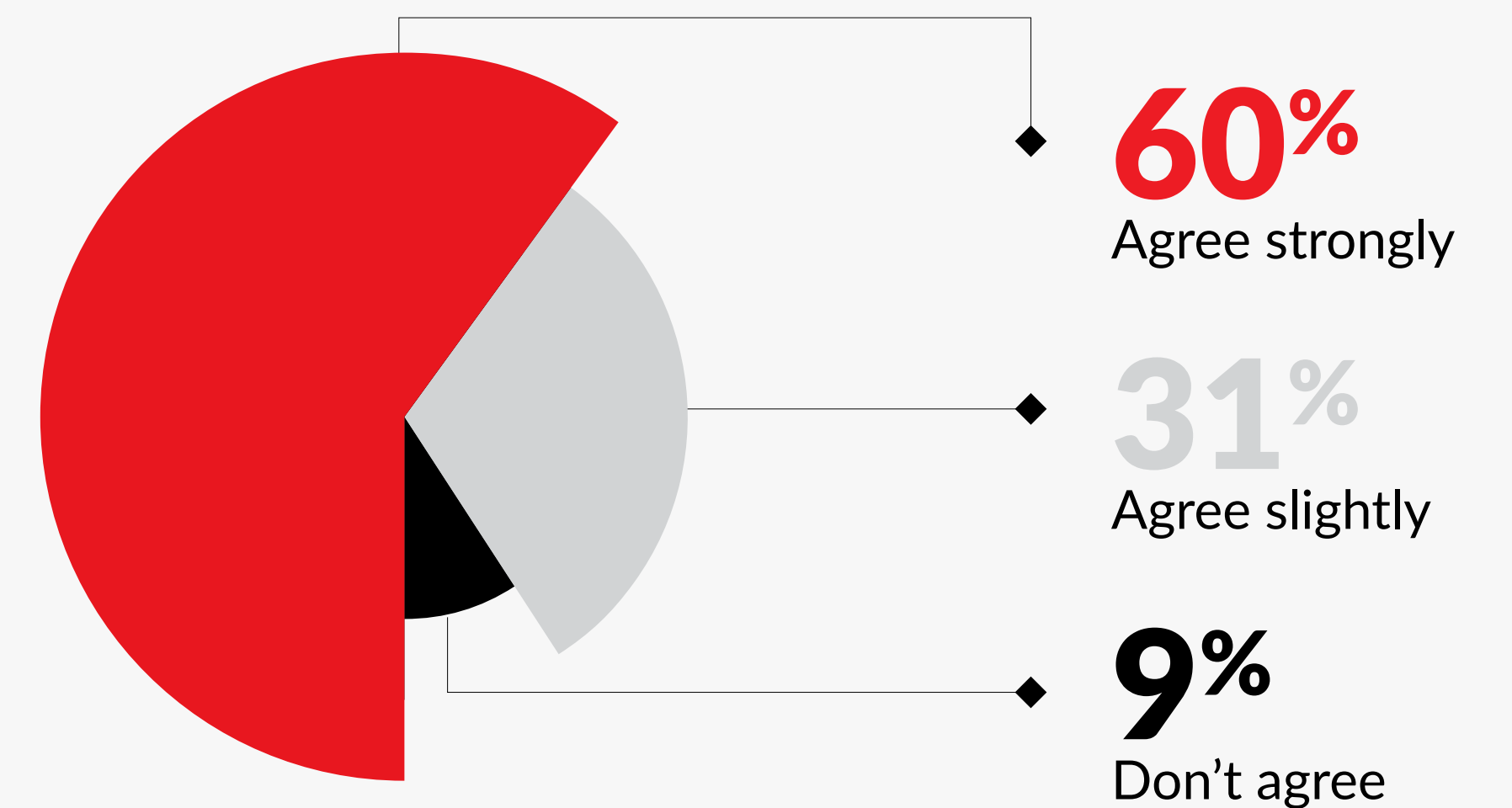
But optimism doesn't equate to success. **How are solicitors planning to follow through on their positive outlook? What do they think makes them successful and what attributes do good solicitors, as a whole, possess?**

According to the independent legal market, with 9 out of 10 solicitors agreeing that good business skills and good human skills – in addition to excellent legal skills – are of increasing importance to long term success as a solicitor.

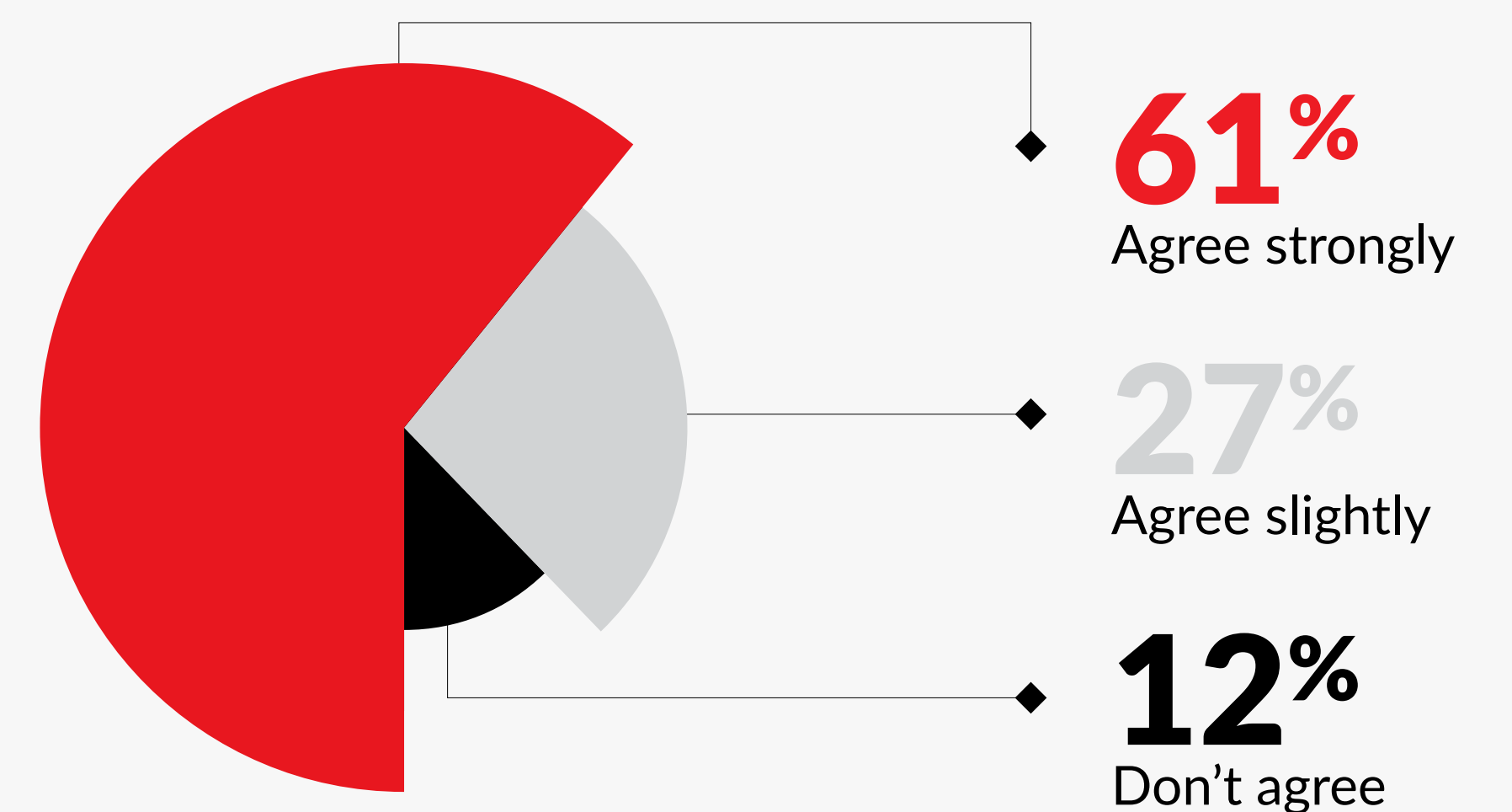
There is clear consensus that these skills are vital - but what exactly do solicitors mean by good human skills and good business skills? How are they made manifest – and how do they contribute to the work of a solicitor?

GOOD SOLICITOR ATTRIBUTES

Having good business skills is increasingly important to succeed in the law



Having good human skills is increasingly important to succeed in the law



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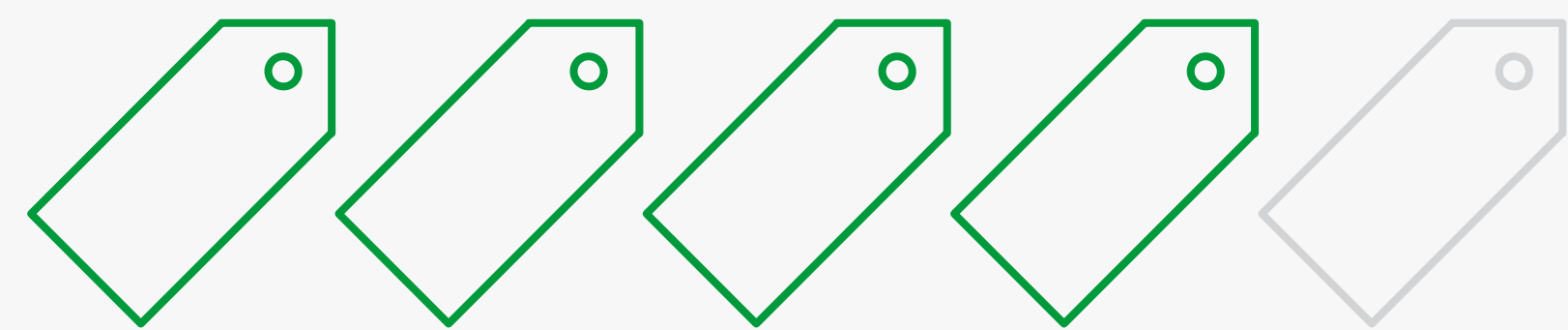
2. What skills are essential in today's marketplace?

While solicitors were equally weighted in their assent that both business and human skills are important, it seems in practice human skills are considered a higher priority.



2. What skills are essential in today's marketplace?

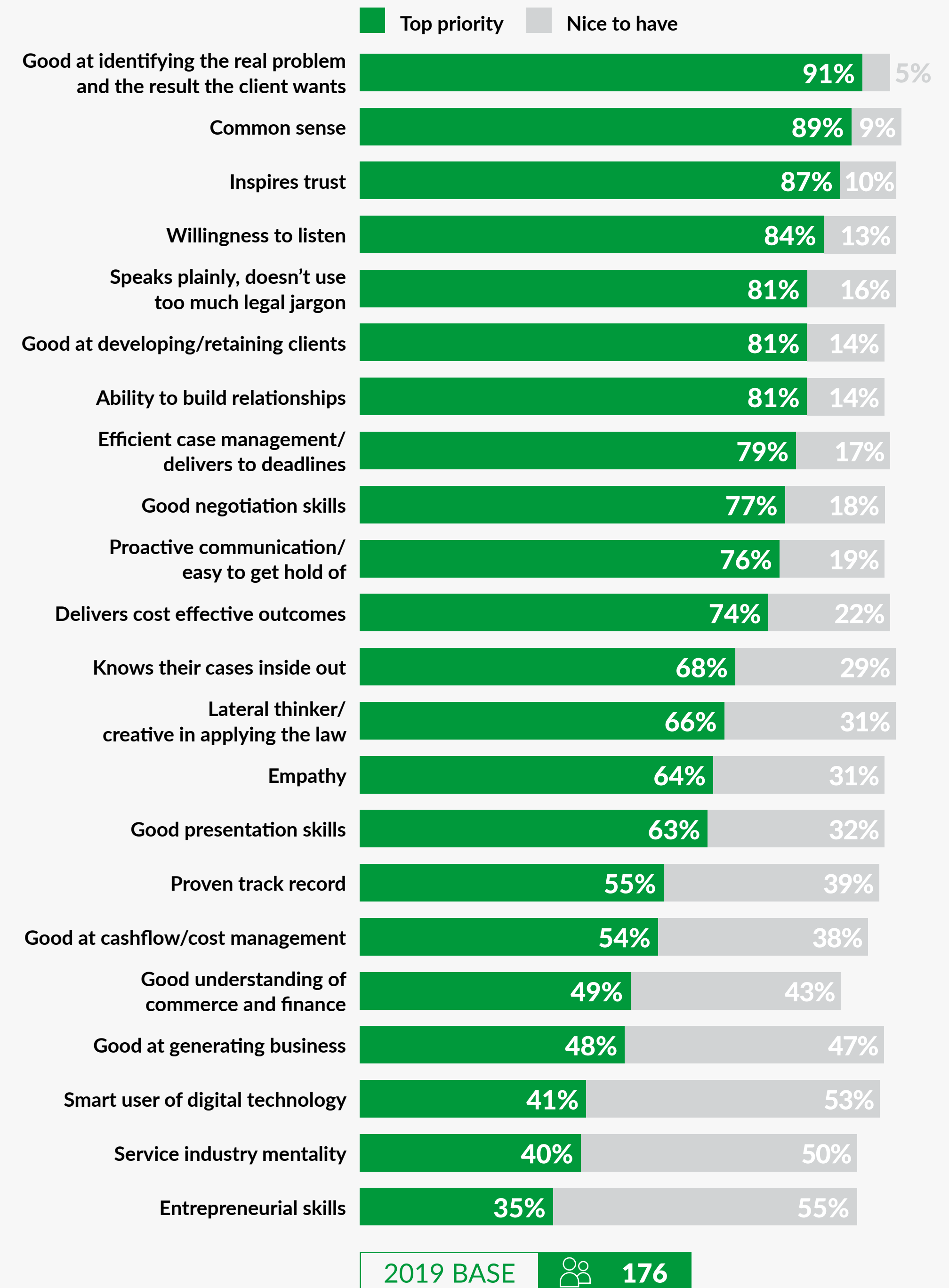
When it comes to thriving as a solicitor, there are a myriad of attributes that respondents believe contribute. Indeed, of the 22 attributes put to the sample, over 90% of respondents agreed that each attribute played a role.



4 in 5 of the attributes identified as top priorities for success are human skills

“It’s about having a relationship. It’s about using human skills for a business purpose.”

IMPORTANCE OF ATTRIBUTES TO THRIVE AS A SOLICITOR



2. What skills are essential in today's marketplace?

Even though solicitors agree that human and business skills are increasingly important it is interesting to note which skills they regard as essential within this. Of the top five attributes identified as a “top priority” for a good solicitor, four of them – **common sense, inspiring trust, a willingness to listen, and use of normal language rather than legal jargon** – are human skills. It appears that the ability to develop a relationship with clients is considered foundational in the creation of a successful practice. As one solicitor articulated: “It’s about having a relationship. It’s about using human skills for a business purpose.”

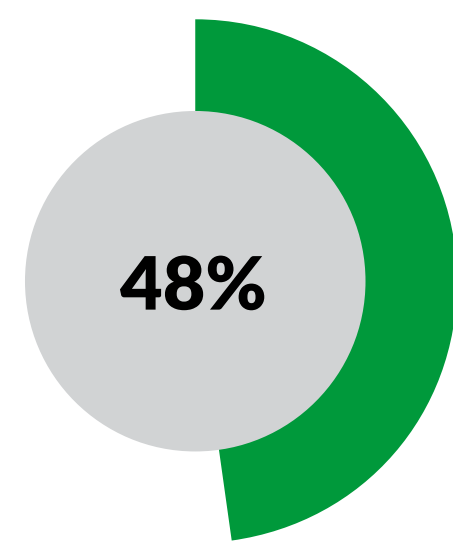
Nevertheless, the most important skill required for being a solicitor, according to respondents, is a legal one. Namely, it’s the ability to identify the central problem and zero in on what the client really wants. Other legal skills also appeared in the top 10 most important priorities, including efficient case management and proactive communication.

Only one business skill makes an appearance in the list: developing and retaining clients. This is understandable considering that respondents consider business acquisition and waning client loyalty to be two of the top challenges facing the legal industry in today’s market.

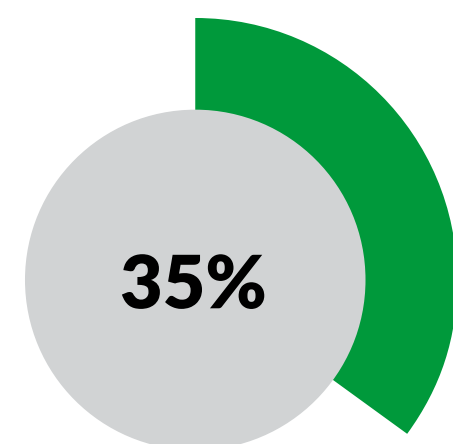


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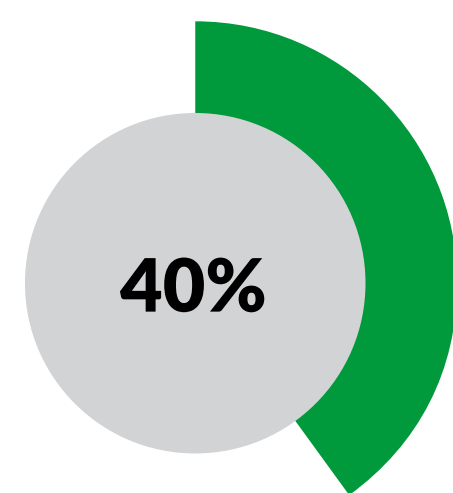
Solicitors consider business skills, in the abstract, to be of critical importance to success. When pressed, however, respondents view many of the individual business skills as less essential, or even simply “nice to have”.



For example only 48% believe that the **ability to generate business** is a vital skill.



While 35% say that **entrepreneurial skills** are a priority.



Substantially less than half of the sample think that **service industry skills** are important.

So are solicitors simply paying lip service to the business side of running a successful law firm?

Our respondents make it clear that solicitors are not unaware of the vital role business skills play in today's marketplace. But then again, as the overwhelming evidence of their optimism shows, the profession is comfortable at the moment.

It may be that it's easier to adhere to the status quo: the comfortable mindset of the trusted advisor who solves problems on behalf of their clients.

But could it speak to a more fundamental disconnect between ideals and reality?

3. Blind spots and challenges

Solicitors are aware of what's necessary to be a successful, but acknowledge that they are often lacking in these core areas.

3. Blind spots and challenges

There appears to be a blind spot with regards to the skills our respondents perceive as necessary to be a successful solicitor.

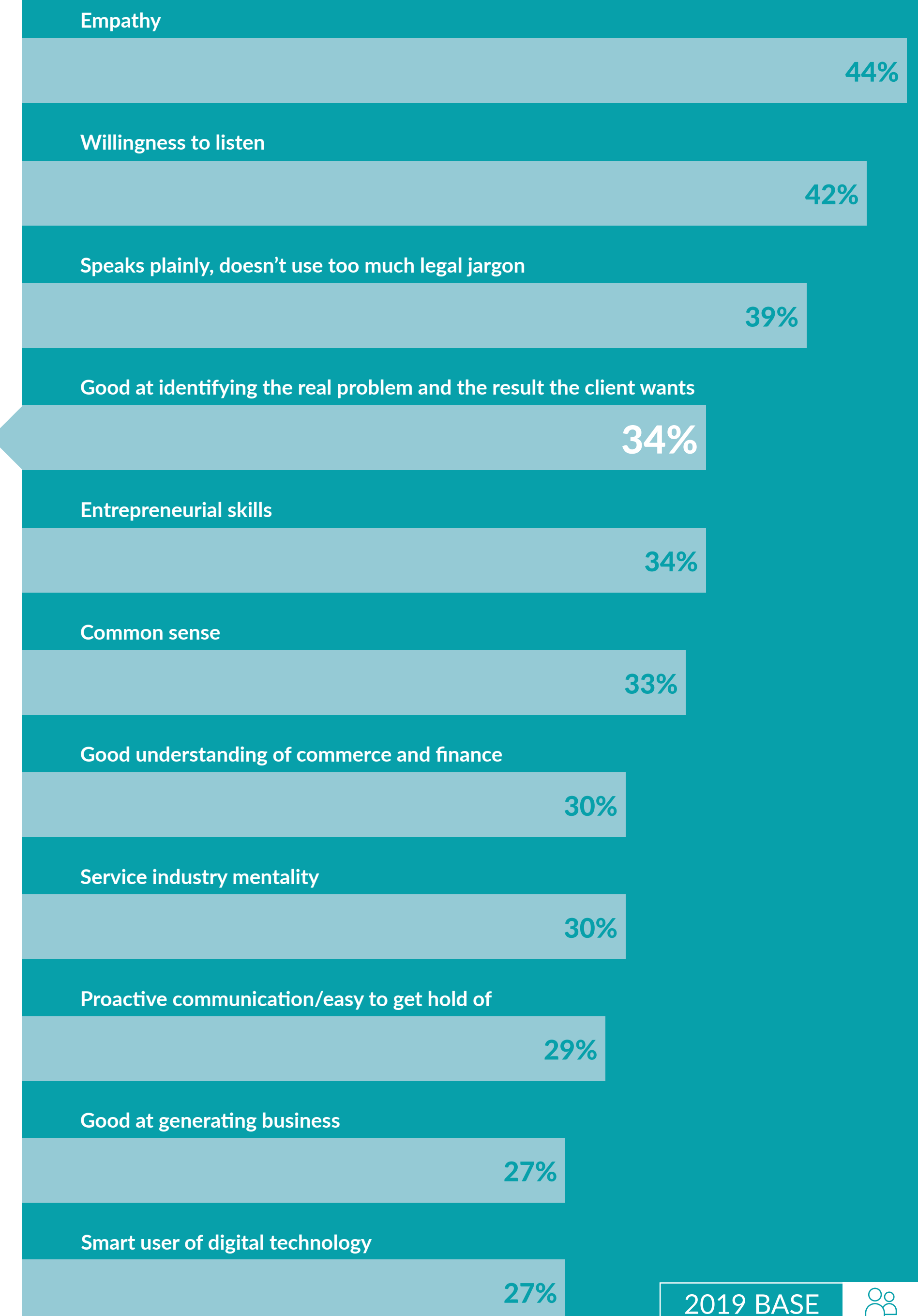
With 91% of respondents agreeing that business skills are of increasing importance in order to succeed in the law, for example, why aren't more solicitors making actual business skills a top priority? Is optimism clouding their judgment? Or is there a more fundamental failure to connect the dots?

“What we do is provide a professional service. Please understand that I feel it could be misleading saying a service industry.”

Identifying the problem and giving the client what they want is the most important attribute for success, according to solicitors, but it's the 4th most lacking skill.



PERCEIVED SKILLS GAPS IN THE PROFESSION



3. Blind spots and challenges

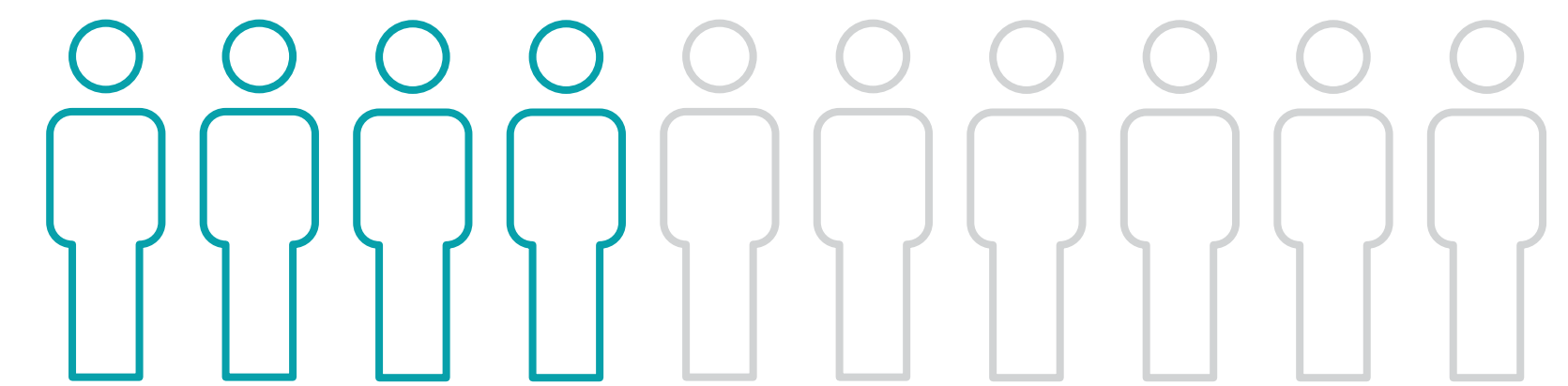
To explore this further, we pivoted on the issue and asked whether there are any particular skills gaps in the profession today. The results were illuminating.

According to respondents, **4 of the top 10** skills lacking in the profession at the moment relate to business:

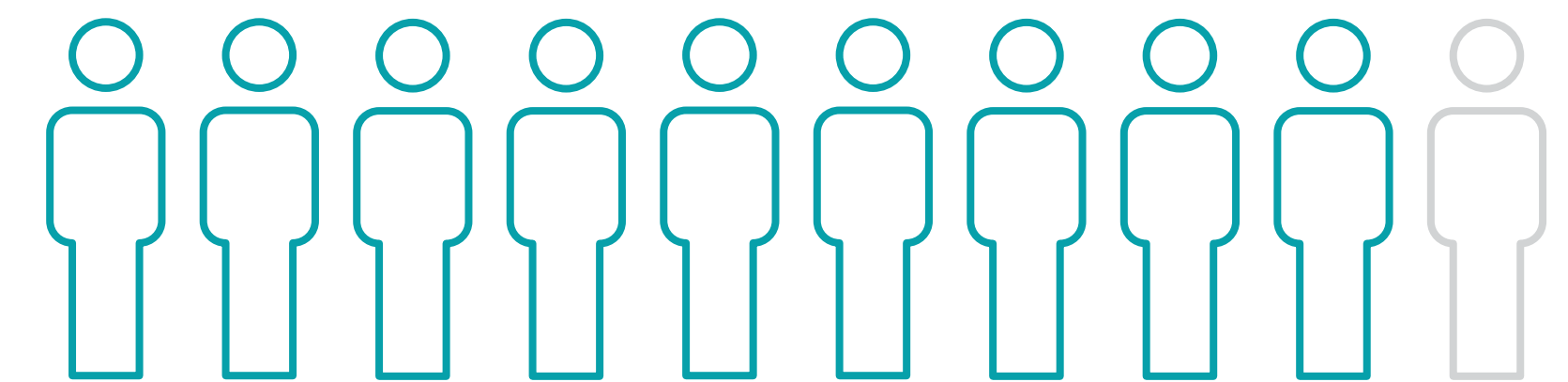
- entrepreneurial skills,
- a good understanding of commerce,
- a service industry mentality, and
- generating business.

However, while business skills are a concern, 4 of the top 5 “skill gaps” overall were focused on human and legal qualities. A number were, in fact, the same human and legal skills previously identified as the top priorities for success, highlighting that solicitors feel that many in the profession are lacking in a few core areas. The top criteria for success, the legal skill of identifying a client’s problem, for example, was the 4th most deficient quality. Solicitors are, therefore, aware of the need to improve, if the profession is to achieve its potential.

Tellingly, however, the sample was less willing to identify professional failings across the board, with a maximum of **4 out of 10** solicitors venturing an opinion to the negative.



Compared with over **9 out of 10** solicitors across the board identifying successful attributes.



However, while optimism may be reigning supreme today for many practitioners, if it blinds you to necessary future-proofing, there may be danger ahead.

Conclusion

Players active in the independent legal market are alive to the possibilities of what makes a successful, thriving solicitor. They articulate the need to deliver on three key fronts: human, legal, and business. However, in several key areas, they are seemingly unconcerned with claiming the specific skills necessary for success by making them a top priority moving forwards.

There is a sense that solicitors can see the problems in the profession, and in their own practices, but they are blocked from making changes themselves. The path to success is visible to them, they're just not able to clear some of the hurdles in their way. After all, not all obstacles look like challenges at first glance. Perhaps you think you don't need to change because you're performing well at the moment. Perhaps those issues are a hindrance for everyone else, just not you. But the result is the same; you're standing still.

Over many years of researching independent law we keep coming back to the central concern that practitioners can identify the issues, but are often blind to their own individual failings in these core areas of legal provision.

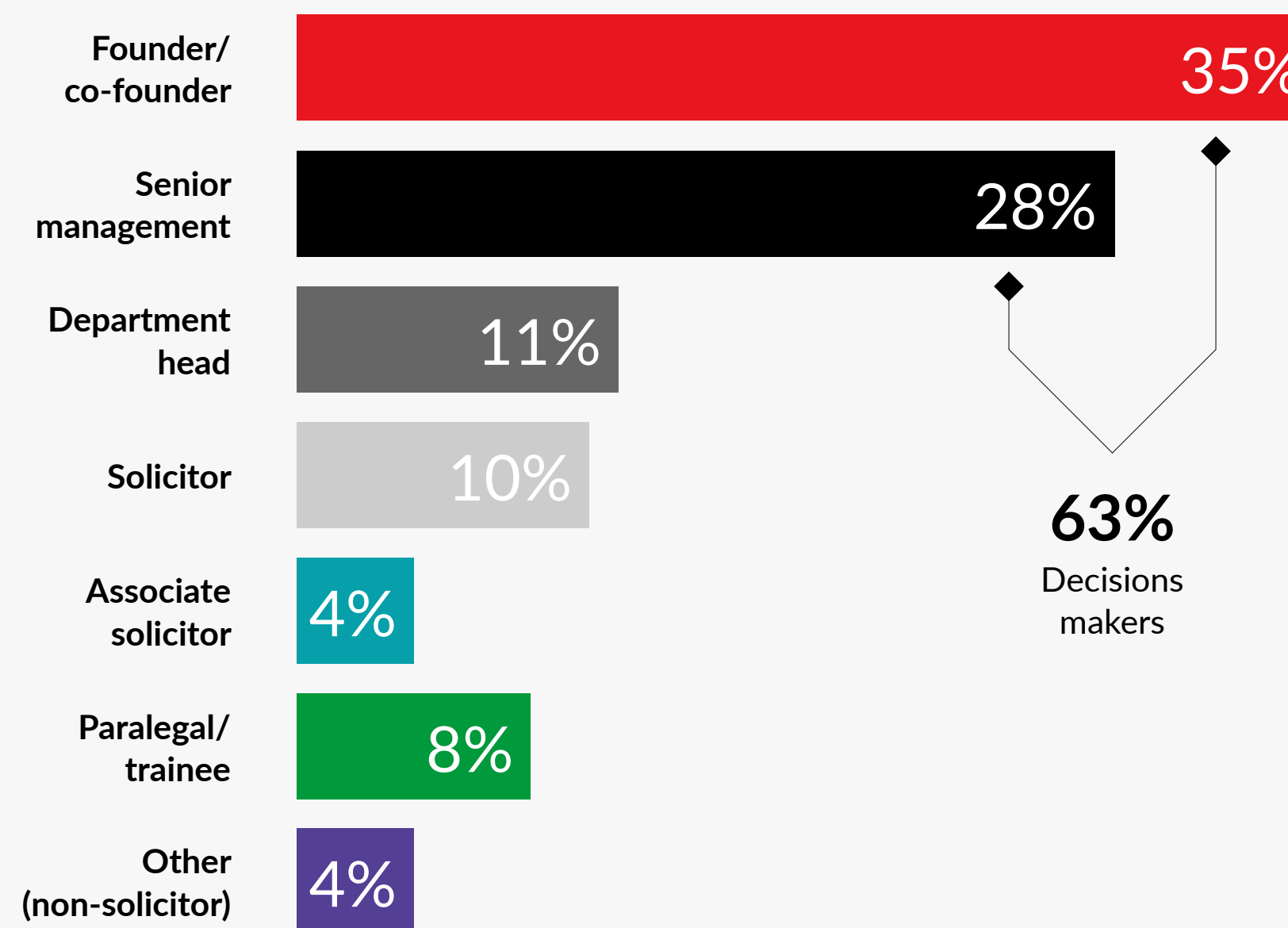
However, with the same challenges besetting the profession year on year, and alarming disconnects revealing gaps between assumptions and reality, is it time for the profession to own up to the larger reality, beyond the moment-to-moment concerns – however positive they might be – and ensure that the path they are travelling down is the right one? Because it might just be the path towards a flourishing practice, a satisfied client base, and a rewarding professional life. With the changes to the SRA Handbook coming in November of this year opening up the market to non-law firms it is more critical than ever that Law Firms and individual solicitors take a long, hard look at what really drives success. The time when to do nothing was an option is rapidly disappearing.

Appendix

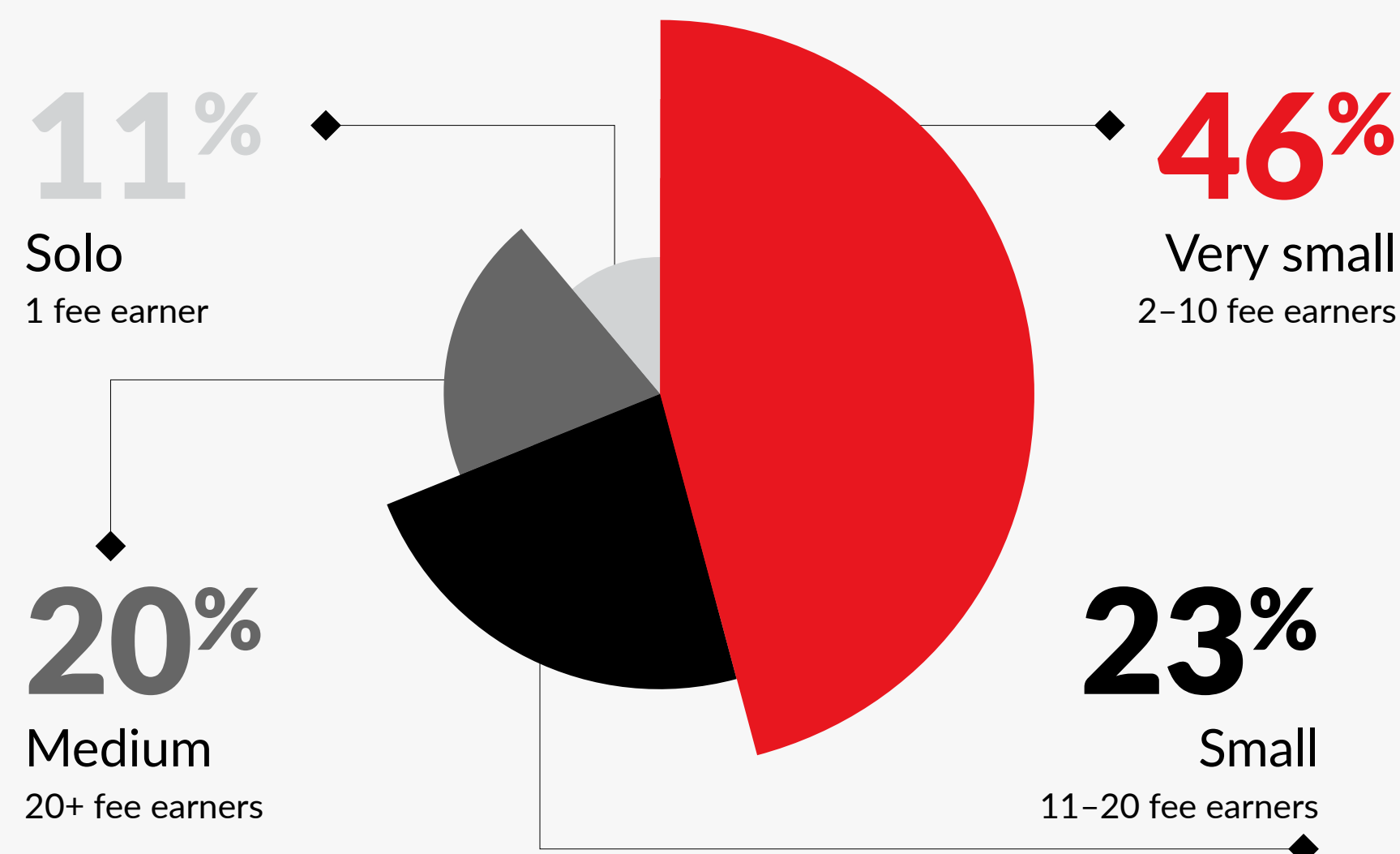
This report was compiled using data from eight in-depth interviews with solicitors in small firms and small offices of larger firms, as well as online surveys completed by 176 solicitors in England and Wales.

Respondents were from a wide geographical area and represented a broad sample of solicitors in a variety of positions in the firm and areas of expertise. The research fieldwork was conducted by an independent market research agency, Linda Jones & Associates, throughout November and December 2018.

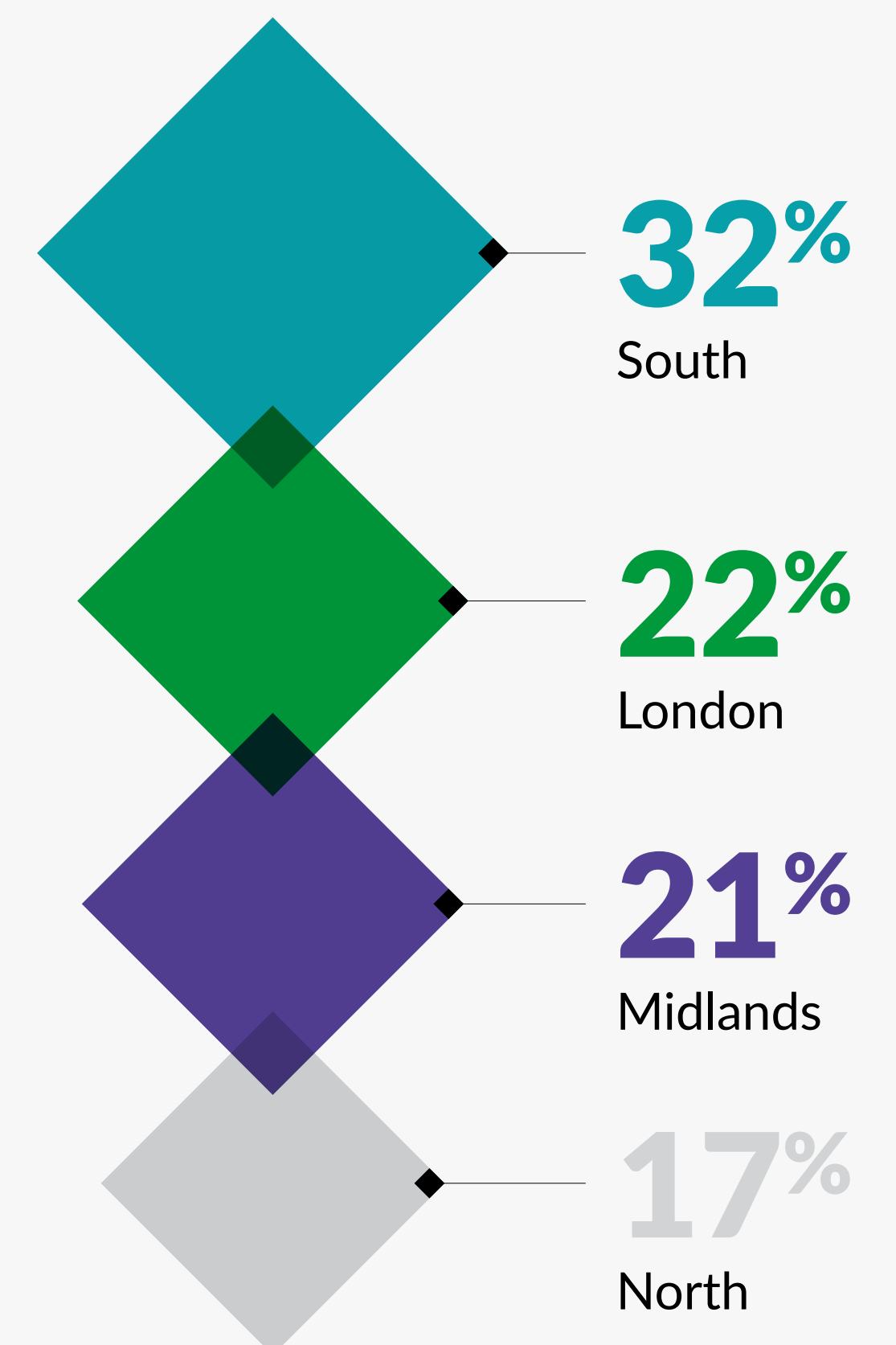
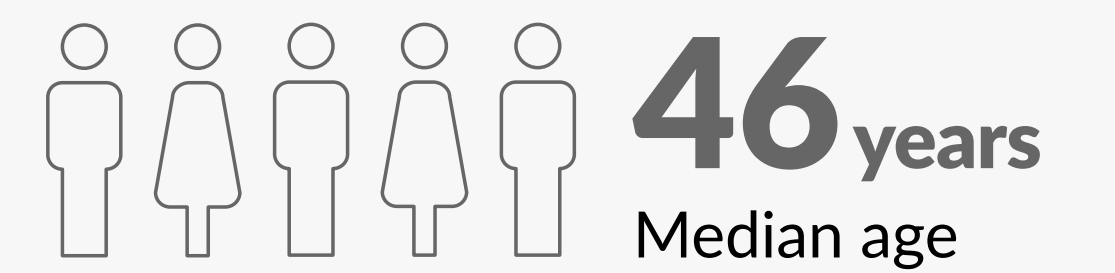
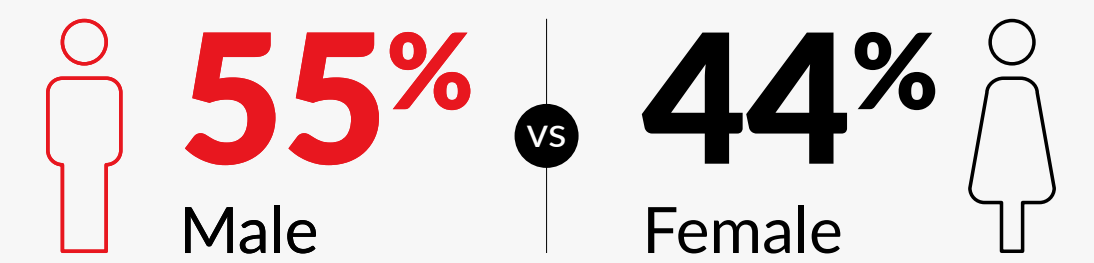
POSITION



PRACTICE SIZE



SOLICITOR DEMOGRAPHIC



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Jon Whittle is Market Development Director at LexisNexis, responsible for the company's offering for the independent legal sector – independent, small law firms and sole practitioners.

With 19 years of experience in research, insight and business strategy, throughout his career Jon's been passionate about understanding and representing the voice of individuals to big businesses.

Jon is currently focused on advocacy and community development for independent legal practitioners. He produces cutting-edge research, such as the industry-leading LexisNexis Bellwether reports which explore the changing landscape for independent legal practitioners and supporting the business of law firms.

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