The Rise of the Consultant Lawyer: Why 33% of Lawyers Could Join the Model by 2026

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The rise of the consultant lawyer is challenging the traditional UK law firm model. Consultant lawyers (also known as Freelance lawyers, Fractional General Counsel/Fractional GC) have been on the rise since the 2020 pandemic. According to research by LexisNexis, **by 2026, 33% of UK lawyers could become consultant lawyers.**

What is a consultant lawyer?

A consultant lawyer is a self-employed legal professional who works independently or through a platform firm, offering legal services to clients without being tied to a traditional law firm structure. They have the flexibility to choose their workload, clients, and working hours, often operating remotely and managing their own practice.

Sterling Law is a great example of a growing player in the sector, benefiting from this shift in the firm setup.

Consultant lawyers work on their own initiative and deal with their own clients. They are not involved in administrating or managing a law firm that they might otherwise be in a traditional law firm. This means highly qualified, independent lawyers can work for themselves without being partners in a law firm. However, they will enjoy the back-office benefits of being attached to a platform law firm that provides all the processes and regulatory and compliance systems.

The technological advances that drove lawyers during pandemic lockdowns have provided the blueprint the consultant lawyer can follow. Remote connectivity to back-office services, cloud computing options and remote video meetings allow for the distributed delivery of legal services, which fits the consultancy model well.

This article will explore the pros and cons and future implications for the consultant lawyer.

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What is the Consultant Lawyer Model?

A consultant lawyer is self-employed and works with their own clients. They can decide which and how many clients to take on at any one time and operate independently. Some lawyers take up this role to achieve a work-life balance that might not be otherwise in more traditional law firm models. Consultant lawyers earn their own fees and share a proportion of these with the platform firm to which they are attached. Platform firms are enablers, allowing consultant lawyers to operate successfully. Platform firms provide a range of services that benefit the consultant lawyer.

Read more: Success Strategies for Consultant Lawyers and Platform Firm Owners

Key elements of platform law firms

- **Infrastructure and resources:** This includes legal technology, insurance, branding, and administrative support. This allows consultant lawyers to focus on their legal work without the overhead and complexities of running an entire firm.
- **Revenue-sharing:** Consultant lawyers retain a significant percentage of their billings (**often around 70%**). The remainder funds the platform's operational costs.
- **Flexibility and autonomy:** Platform law firms enable lawyers to set their schedules, choose clients, and work remotely. This makes the model especially attractive to those seeking a better work-life balance.
- **Attracting talent from traditional firms:** Platform firms are well-positioned to recruit lawyers leaving traditional practices who are dissatisfied with rigid hierarchies, billing targets, or lack of flexibility.
- **Disruption accelerator:** By leveraging their scalable infrastructure, platform firms are positioned to consolidate smaller law firms or attract lawyers from merged or closing firms, further transforming the legal industry.

Why lawyers are switching: The pros

As independent and self-employed legal professionals, consultant lawyers enjoy a range of benefits unique to their model. These benefits, which include increased client time, greater autonomy, and improved work-life balance, make the consultant lawyer model an attractive choice for many legal professionals.

- **Increased client time:** Due to management and administrative time being reduced to almost zero, the consultant lawyer is able to focus on the client's needs. This means more time spent on client-focused work. In addition, the availability of remote technology allows the consultant solicitor to spend more client-facing time than having to attend an office to carry out the legal work.
- **Greater autonomy:** Consultant lawyers have the flexibility to choose the type and number of clients they wish to work with. They are not accountable to a boss for their workload or billing hours, giving them complete autonomy over their schedules. They can work from anywhere, in a way that suits them, and adjust their client engagement as needed—whether to take time off or increase their workload to boost their income.
- **Improved work-life balance:** Consultant lawyers typically work from home, eliminating the need for daily commutes or participation in departmental or management meetings. They can set their schedules, often working outside the traditional nine-to-five office structure. This flexibility is key to a healthy work-life balance, vital for overall well-being and productivity

Challenges of the Consultant Lawyer Model

No business model is perfect, and the consultant lawyer model comes with its own challenges. The challenges start right with the first decision to become a consultant lawyer.

- **Teething problems:** There are always challenges when setting up a new business. Because consultant lawyers are self-employed, they need to set themselves up as such with HMRC. The consultant lawyer will need to fund the initial period following setting up until fee revenue is realised from client work. As they are self-employed, they do not receive a salary from the platform firm. Until a consultant lawyer becomes established, income is likely to be uncertain and erratic.
- **Less stability:** Consultant lawyers need to find and keep their own clients. They cannot rely on the platform firm to feed or cover clients when they do not have any current clients. In addition, consultant lawyers need to rely on the platform firm's branding and support infrastructure. Some of this might be very good, and others less so. That means consultant lawyers must think carefully and work smarter to ensure they grow their client bank. However, the adverse effects of this instability can impact both personal and work performance, making it crucial to manage stress effectively.
- **Reduced collaboration and accountability:** The platform firms to which consultant lawyers are attached tend to be very flat structures. There are few if any, management tiers between the consultant solicitor and the owners of the platform law firm. Consultant layers work on their own rather than in teams, and the potential for collaboration with others is very low. This can lead to isolation and a feeling of disconnection.

- **Work-life balance:** A poor work-life balance can have profound negative implications on physical and mental health, emphasising the importance of finding balance to reduce health problems and improve overall well-being. Recent research highlights the evolving nature of work-life balance, particularly due to the increasing blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. In addition, a study conducted by UCL involving over 10,000 participants highlights the detrimental health risks associated with overworking, emphasising the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Finally, respecting working hours is crucial to maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

What does this mean for the future of the legal profession?

The legal sector is undergoing significant consolidation, with smaller firms merging or being absorbed by larger practices. This often leads to disillusioned lawyers departing from these newly enlarged firms to set up independently. Such individuals are well-suited to becoming consultant lawyers as this model becomes increasingly popular.

While the rise in consultant lawyers creates opportunities for cross-referral, this is less likely to occur than in traditional law firms, where collaboration is actively encouraged.

Mergers can also leave some towns without sufficient legal coverage to meet community needs, and consultant lawyers may struggle to provide the comprehensive range of services typically offered by larger firms.

Moreover, clients may not always realise they are engaging a consultant lawyer, as branding usually belongs to the platform firm that provides back-office and regulatory support. This lack of transparency can create challenges when handling complaints about poor service or unprofessional conduct, as the platform firm typically has no involvement in the case.
Additionally, as independent professionals, consultant lawyers must ensure arrangements are in place for client support during absences, such as holidays, to avoid leaving clients without assistance. The platform firm is often unable to step in due to its limited knowledge of individual cases.

The role of legal technology in addressing these challenges

Legal technology presents an effective solution to many of these issues that consultant lawyers and fee-sharing firms face. By adopting modern legal practice management software, consultant lawyers can streamline their operations, improve transparency, and deliver a more consistent client experience.

For example, case management tools can centralise client information, ensuring seamless collaboration and continuity of service—even during periods of absence. Automated workflows and task management features help minimise delays and keep cases on track, regardless of the consultant's availability.

Integrated client communication tools can enhance transparency, enabling lawyers to provide regular updates and maintain clear communication channels with clients. This helps build trust and ensures clients remain informed about the status of their matters. Legal technology can also facilitate cross-referrals by providing a shared platform for consultant lawyers to collaborate more effectively, mirroring the teamwork seen in traditional law firms. Additionally, secure document management and data-sharing capabilities can support compliance with regulatory requirements while simplifying dispute-resolution processes if complaints arise.

Consultant lawyers are here to stay

Consultant lawyers are on an upward trajectory; **by 2026, around one-third of lawyers could be consultant lawyers.** Whilst this may benefit the lawyer, it may be challenging for the client. If the lawyers choose the consultancy model as a lifestyle choice, how that will help the needs and demands of the client is likely to be questionable.

The rise of the consultant lawyer provides an alternative to the traditional law firm model. Rather than striving to move from an employed solicitor in a law firm to the owner of a law firm, lawyers can now work for themselves with the backup of a platform law firm.

The option to become a consultant lawyer also gives those lawyers who are unsettled following a merger or acquisition the opportunity to go their own way rather than become part of the larger, combined firm.

Having the option of becoming a consultant lawyer widens the scope for those looking to advance their career whilst giving a nod to their work-life balance and personal life. It might not be for everyone, but this emerging model is likely to prove attractive to sufficient numbers of lawyers who want to disrupt the status quo.

Those thinking of going solo and who would like to consider their flexible options should book a demo with Clio to see just how effective using technology as a consultant lawyer and firm can be.

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