Understanding the Reality of Long Solicitor Working Hours

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Solicitor working hours are notoriously long and gruelling, but how many hours do solicitors typically work? And what impact do super-sized workweeks have on solicitors, personally and professionally?

For solicitors, a full-time role rarely means working 9-to-5. In the UK, solicitors commonly exceed a 40-hour work week, often extending into evenings and weekends to accommodate client needs and meet billable hour targets.

It's no surprise that solicitors' working hours are long. There's so much to do—meeting billable hour requirements, managing clients, court appearances, casework and case preparation, and more. Add professional competition and extreme pressure, and you have a recipe for exhaustion.

However, simply accepting that the working hours of solicitors are exceptionally long and demanding isn't a sustainable solution. Normalising overwork fuels a legal industry that suffers from burnout, excessive stress, mental health issues, and an overall lack of well-being.

This blog post will examine how many hours solicitors work, and why. We'll also discuss the potential health consequences of consistent overwork for solicitors. Most importantly, we'll explore ways to manage and balance the working hours of solicitors. (Hint: using powerful legal technology can help. Book a personalised demo of Clio to see how).

How many hours a week does a solicitor work?

While many lawyers maintain a standard 40-hour workweek, a considerable number often exceed these hours. Average weekly work hours for different types of lawyers include: Lawyers in large firms typically work about 66 hours per week, while those in small to medium-sized firms work between 42 and 54 hours per week.

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How many hours a week does a solicitor work?

While many lawyers maintain a standard 40-hour workweek, many often exceed these hours. The hours worked by lawyers largely depend on the type of firm the lawyer works with.

- Lawyers in large firms typically work about 66 hours per week.
- Lawyers in small to medium-sized firms work between 42 and 54 hours per week.
- Lawyers in Magic Circle firms often work even longer hours, with many working until 8pm or later.

Which solicitors work the most? Due to billable hour quotas, solicitors at Big Law firms commonly work 80-hour weeks.

Do solicitors work 9-to-5?

What hours do solicitors, especially junior lawyers, work if they're working more than full time? During the week, many solicitors work additional hours outside the traditional 9-to-5 business day.

The *2022 Legal Trends Report* offers some insights on solicitor working hours:

- 86% of solicitors work outside the typical workday (between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. and between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m.).
- 56% of solicitors reported working after 5 p.m. and 28% reported working past 6 p.m. in the evening.
- On the higher end of working hours, 11% reported working after 10 p.m.

Do solicitors work on weekends?

It's common for law firms to operate on Saturdays, accommodating clients who are unavailable during regular weekday hours. While most law firms close on Sundays, some services may still be offered, depending on agreements between a client and their lawyer.

Why do solicitors work so many long hours?

For most solicitors, not just one (or two, or three) factors drive long working hours. From heavy workloads to pressure from peers and clients to billable hour requirements, practising law calls on solicitors to take on multiple time-consuming tasks and

responsibilities. In fields like corporate law, the workload and expectations are particularly intense.

Unfortunately, the mountain of work and expectations often can't be surmounted in an eight-hour workday or 40-hour workweek.

While not every reason applies to every solicitor, below are common reasons solicitors work so many hours.

Billable hour requirements

When law firms have minimum billable hour requirements, solicitors must work a minimum number of hours on billable client work. When these billable hours are combined with those spent on non-billable (but still essential) tasks like client onboarding, research, travel, and communication, it becomes difficult to do everything within a standard workday. Understanding these expectations is crucial when applying for training contracts.

The catch-up cycle

The majority of solicitors—77%, according to the *2018 Legal Trends Report*—work beyond regular business hours to catch up on work that wasn't completed within regular hours. If you don't create more efficient systems, you may always be "catching up."

Communication with clients

Every day, solicitors spend hours on the phone, email, text and in meetings, advising clients about aspects of their case. Not all of these communications activities are constructive, but they use up time that could otherwise be productive. This leads to the need to do productive work outside regular office hours.

Deadlines

Many of the matters solicitors work on are time-sensitive. When serving a client means meeting a deadline, filing documents on time, or being prepared for a hearing, solicitors often put in extra hours to finish the job.

Unpredictable hours

Similarly, scheduling challenges (whether due to court hearings or meetings) can lead to prolonged or unpredictable hours.

Client service

Clients come first, but being available to clients outside of regular business hours can impact overall solicitor working hours. Specifically, the *2022 Legal Trends Report* notes that 74% of solicitors make themselves available to communicate with clients on the weekend, and 69% offer to communicate in the evening.

Practice area and geographic location

The type of law you practise, and where you practise it, can also impact solicitor working hours. Think: How many hours do corporate lawyers work compared to other practice areas like family law? Solicitors in commercial firms may also experience different work-life balance dynamics.

Regardless of the reasons, working overwhelming hours is unsustainable for many people. The pressures and exhaustion that accompany long-term overwork can impact lawyers' career paths and health.

Some of the most common health issues fuelled by gruelling solicitor hours include:

1. **Burnout.** Solicitor burnout is more than just being tired. As the Stress & Resilience Institute's Paula Davis-Laack explains on this episode of Clio's *Daily Matters* podcast, burnout is "the manifestation of chronic workplace stress. By working excessive hours in a high-stress environment, lawyers erode their energy stores and become highly susceptible to burnout.
2. **Mental health issues.**Lawyer anxiety, depression, and mental health problems are prevalent in the legal industry. The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation study found that 28% of licensed, employed solicitors suffer from depression, and 19% deal with symptoms of anxiety.

Are the long hours lawyers work bad for your health?

Regardless of the reasons, working overwhelming hours is unsustainable for many people. This is particularly true for newly qualified solicitors, who often face demanding work cultures despite high salary offerings. The pressures and exhaustion accompanying long-term overwork can impact lawyers' career paths and health.

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How to restore balance to your work-life as a solicitor

It's possible to balance the demands of solicitor working hours with wellness, but it takes effort.

Here are some key ways to take care of your health and mitigate the impact of the legal profession's long working hours.

Take care of your health and wellness

Looking after yourself will help you better manage stress. Below are some different ways to prioritise your wellness.

Eat well

Working so hard that you forget to eat—or regularly eating food that doesn't make you feel great or provide nourishment—isn't doing your work-life balance any favours. Instead, fuel yourself to support productivity in your work hours by avoiding excessive caffeine and alcohol, and eating regular healthy meals.

Keep hydrated

Keeping hydrated at work will help your concentration, mood and clarity of thought. Failing to hydrate properly during the day will lead to fatigue and lethargy.

Stay physically active

Moving your body with physical activity is essential for solicitor wellness and helping to manage anxiety. Try to get up and move away from your desk regularly throughout the day, and doing some light exercise will recharge your energy levels.

Prioritise downtime and time off

Rest is critical to keeping burnout at bay, and sleep deprivation negatively impacts our health. But rest is often the first thing to go when working long hours. To mitigate this, you might need to schedule downtime and make a concerted effort to prioritise rest.

Set boundaries

Know your limits, articulate them, and stand by them. It can be challenging, but learning to say no when necessary can improve your work-life balance.

Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness and meditation can be powerful tools for supporting mental wellness for solicitors. If you need help tapping into mindfulness, you can also use technology to help, with many apps available to help you manage stress and prevent burnout.

Maintain social connections

It can be easy to let social connections slip through the cracks when hyper-focused on your career. However, these connections are essential for your overall health and well-being.

Strategies to create balance in your work and life

You can also take steps to restore—or create—the balance in your work and life.

Seek work with meaning

Working long hours can be stressful. But if you're doing work you care about and find meaningful, it can feel less taxing.

Delegate

Assess your daily tasks with an honest eye. Are you doing tasks that someone else could be doing? Whether delegating work to administrative staff, other solicitors, or outsourcing work, if you can ethically and securely delegate some tasks, that can free up hours in your day.

Work smarter

Using technology to streamline and automate administrative and non-billable tasks reduces your working hours while getting the same (or even better) work results. This allows solicitors to focus more on their core responsibilities, such as providing legal

advice.

Tracking time in real-time using software like Clio Manage's legal time and expense recording software, for example, saves time at work by making your daily processes more efficient.

Allow clients to access case information through aclient portal. This reduces the number of times a client will contact you to find out about their case and allows for communication to and from the client without breaking into your day.

Make your own hours

If you can't find a balance where you are, you might want to consider alternative ways to build your own vision of work-life balance, such as starting your own law firm.

Final notes on balancing solicitor working hours

There are only so many hours in a day, and the working hours of solicitors tend to take up most of them.

While the extent of how many hours solicitors work varies depending on factors like law firm size and practice area, most lawyers today work full-time, with many working well beyond that. Many solicitors in private practice find that their working hours are influenced by the demands of their clients and the nature of their practice.

Often, the drive to work extra hours comes from good intentions. Solicitors want to serve their clients as best they can, and they want to succeed and make a difference in a highly competitive field. Unfortunately, those good intentions, billable hour requirements, and heavy caseloads can make work unsustainable.

Because of this, solicitors are often prone to stress, a lack of balance, and burnout.

While slashing your working hours as a solicitor is likely unrealistic, there are steps you can take to support wellness and work-life balance.

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