

Analysis

# UK Firms Risk Losing Talent By Cutting Back Flexibility

By [Marialuisa Taddia](#) · [Listen to article](#)



Law360 (March 20, 2026, 4:03 PM EDT) -- Six years after the COVID-19 crisis, experts warn that U.K. firms scaling back flexible working face risks to their hiring and gender-diversity efforts, as U.S. competitors add pressure with higher pay and firmer expectations about office attendance.

That shift is already visible. U.S. law firm [White & Case LLP](#) has said it was moving all 43 of its global offices, including London, to an attendance requirement of **four days a week** from March 2. The requirement had been three days.



A universal return to a five-day office requirement is unlikely, according to James Lavan of Buchanan Law, who added that "those days are dead." (iStock.com/mapo)

Other U.S. firms, such as [Reed Smith](#), [Goodwin Procter LLP](#) and [Kirkland & Ellis LLP](#), have recently moved to four days. They [join American peers](#) including [Ropes & Gray LLP](#), [Sidley Austin LLP](#), [Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP](#) and [Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP](#).

A split is emerging between U.S. and British firms. None of the Magic Circle or Silver Circle or other U.K. firms contacted by Law360 said they had introduced a four-day requirement. Many say their flexible-working policies are unchanged since COVID-19 broke out in 2020.

[Linklaters LLP](#) said its policy "flexes" to meet the needs of its people and clients: its lawyers are in the office between 50% and 80% of the time. [Freshfields LLP](#) still requires three days a week, while Allen Overy [Shearman Sterling](#) asks its lawyers to spend 60% of their time in an office — similar to [Clifford Chance LLP's](#) 50% requirement.

[Eversheds Sutherland](#) also requires its people to spend three days in the office under a policy that has not changed since 2021. [Ashurst LLP](#) operates a 60/40 hybrid model introduced in 2022.

Most firms contacted by Law360 declined to say how, or whether, they enforce attendance policies.

[Kennedys'](#) chief people officer, Alan Demirkaya, said the firm encourages its workers to spend three days in the office, adding that "there is no rigid, one-size-fits-all requirement." [Addleshaw Goddard](#), which stipulates a minimum of three days, said it could refer to attendance data "as one of the many factors discussed during performance reviews."

James Lavan, executive director at Buchanan Law, said he sees an even clearer stratification emerging in the domestic market. The "super-elite" have settled on a norm of four days in the office, although enforcement can vary by partner despite the central policy. A wider set of U.S. firms in London have landed on between three and four days, and U.K. firms based in London — including the Magic Circle — offer more flexibility, typically requiring three days and in some cases two.

But Lavan said that a universal return to a five-day requirement is unlikely, adding that "those days are dead."

Lavan added that flexible-working policies have become a major point of distinction in the recruitment market. "Nine out of 10 candidates ask about the in-office requirement," he said, describing it as one of the first questions the recruiter receives. "That's why, outside the super-elite, flexibility is becoming a tool firms can use to attract talent."

He warned that non-elite firms risk losing lawyers if they tighten office requirements: many candidates would move to competitors that offer higher pay and greater prestige. For U.K. firms unable to match those enticements, Lavan said, flexibility is becoming a "unique selling point" that helps them recruit strong lawyers they might not have attracted before.

Lavan said the tension is largely a question of seniority. Junior lawyers still value being in the office in their first few years, but mid-level and senior associates, who are more autonomous and often juggling wider life pressures, are less willing to give up flexibility.

"That's when we're seeing a pinch point," he said.

That pattern is not repeated in the segment of the market dominated by elite U.S. firms.

Adam Stocker, managing director at [Major Lindsey & Africa](#), said he never raises expectations about office attendance when recruiting for U.S. firms.

"Salaries are extremely high, with correspondingly demanding expectations, and candidates who are well-suited to these roles are unlikely to be influenced either way by office attendance," Stocker said. "Those interested in U.S. firms generally understand what they are signing up for."

This includes high-quality work, a reputable platform and a good and fair salary. "Everything else is peripheral," Stocker said.

Hannah Lyons, co-founder and executive coach at parental-coaching platform BlueSky, said she is seeing a shift back toward pre-pandemic expectations at the firms she works with.

"I am not hearing two [days] anymore; I am now hearing three or four for non-U.S. law firms and U.S. law firms four to five," Lyons said.

New in-office mandates are not leading to departures among staff yet, according to Lyons, but it would be something asked at the recruitment stage. "And that would definitely be a barrier for women with childcare responsibilities going to a firm that says we have a four-day-a-week mandate," she said.

Hannah Bradshaw, founder and coach alongside Lyons, said many of the women she coaches returned from maternity leave during or just after the COVID-19 pandemic, when homeworking made the transition back to practice far smoother. Those women are returning to work again as law firms expect them to spend much more time in the office, and they are finding the shift harder.

"It was much less obvious when they were leaving to do a pickup, whereas now they have to do the walk of shame past all the partners in their team at 4:50 p.m. when no one else is leaving," Bradshaw said. "So they felt the impact of being a new mom was much easier when they were able to work from home more."

Bradshaw is also seeing signs that women are struggling more.

"The women I speak to tend to be more burnt out than the women I spoke to three years ago, when they could work from home more," she said.

Alison Eddy, a partner at [Irwin Mitchell LLP](#), said that "flexible working has been transformative for women" as men shoulder more childcare than before. But, she added, "for a lot of women, they do still bear the main responsibility for childcare." And that includes school runs.

Eddy, who is Irwin Mitchell's partner ambassador for inclusion and a former London managing partner, said the benefits of flexible working for women are tangible. Even before the pandemic, around 43% of the firm's lawyers were working flexibly, although this was measured more in hours at work than days in the office.

"We had looked at barriers to women's career progression and flexible working was pretty much top of the list," she said.

The firm has left it to leaders since the return to the office to decide what works for their team and their clients. Most encourage lawyers to come in at least two days a week, although many teams go to the office three days.

Some 29% of Irwin Mitchell's partners were women in 2013; that figure had risen to 43% by 2019, just before the pandemic. It is now at 58%, according to Eddy. "Flexible working has contributed hugely to that," she added.

This is well above the level in the wider sector. Women make up 55% of the profession but only 35% of full equity partners, the latest statistics from the [Solicitors Regulation Authority](#) show. The proportion falls to 31% in larger law firms with more than 50 partners, data from 2025 published earlier in March showed.

Eddy said she believes that working flexibly should not be a barrier to career progress. But she added that there is a caveat at a certain level.

"I personally do think that leaders need to be visible to their teams," she said. "So there does need to be a balance. Being visible is important for those spontaneous conversations [and] collaboration, for training and supervision, for teams to feel connected and for role modeling behaviors that we want to see to create a workplace culture."

Eddy said that "visibility definitely helps drive inclusion." She said that was why she believes that leaders should probably be in the office for a minimum of three days a week.

Stocker said he has not seen evidence of office moves driven by attendance mandates. Relocations and upgrades among the U.S. firms he advises are typically tied to growth rather than efforts to enforce requirements to be present.

"That said, where firms are expanding and expecting lawyers to be in the office more frequently, it is logical that they would require larger or upgraded office space to accommodate them," Stocker said.

But some observers argue that competitive pressure among U.S. firms could make mandates more widespread. "Where one American law firm leads, the rest will follow, so we're going to see more firms mandating four days a week," Eddy said.

But Lavan, of Buchanan Law, urged firms to resist that trend. They could even move in the opposite direction by becoming "far more flexible than the norm. It will be interesting over the next few years to see whether certain firms really lean into that, because I genuinely think it's an underutilized tool."

Employers could cut salary and office space costs while attracting high-caliber lawyers by offering greater flexibility until "somebody fixes the talent crisis in law, Lavan argued.

Ultimately, he said, the issue comes down to what lawyers value. Some prioritize higher salaries, while others would trade pay for flexibility — a question that law firms will have to confront as pay rates for newly qualified lawyers climb.

"There's definitely a market there, because if they did that they would find themselves quite popular," Lavan said. "But it requires someone to be brave, and the first one through the door often gets a little bit bloody."

--Editing by Ed Harris.