

Saxton Bampfylde

The AI Advantage: Rethinking Legal Talent and Delivery

Partnering with THE LAWYER



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Foreword

“The future of law will not be decided by how fast you adopt AI – it will be decided by how boldly you lead through it”

Let’s be clear: AI isn’t knocking at the door of the legal profession – it’s already in the building. What happens next isn’t about technology. It’s about leadership.

We’re proud to partner with *The Lawyer* on this important piece of work. It looks beyond the melodrama and focuses on the practicalities: its perspective is not to think of AI as an existential threat to the legal sector, but rather how it faces up to the challenge and evolves so as to embrace it. That’s not a story of decline – quite the reverse. It’s a call to action for a bolder, better future. And the firms that respond with intent – not panic – will be the ones that define the future of legal services.

At Saxton Bampfylde, we see first-hand how the changing dynamic of the legal world is influencing leadership, talent, and strategy. There has been a profound shift in what leadership needs to look like. The old

model – linear progression, technical expertise, incremental change – is no longer enough. The leaders of tomorrow need to be digitally fluent, strategically bold and culturally aware. They need to be confident making the smart calls before everyone has access to the full playbook.

This report makes something else clear: firms cannot treat AI as a bolt-on to the existing model. It demands a rethink of how talent is hired, developed and led. If you’re still training junior lawyers the way you did a decade ago, you’re already behind. If innovation sits on the periphery of your strategy, you’ll struggle to retain the people who will shape what’s next.

But for those ready to move – this is a moment of serious opportunity. AI can sharpen legal thinking. It can challenge legacy structures. It can give firms a strategic edge – but only if they know how to align people and purpose with pace and progress.

That’s where we come in. Our role is to help legal organisations find the kind of leaders who don’t just understand this shift – they thrive on it. Because the future of law will not be decided by how fast you adopt AI: will be decided by how boldly you lead through it.

Kate Ludlow

CEO, Saxton Bampfylde

Methodology

In 2024, executive search firm Saxton Bampfylde became the exclusive sponsor of The Lawyer's Practice Analysis product. This report marks the second in a collaborative series between Saxton Bampfylde and The Lawyer, offering a deeper exploration into how legal talent and service delivery are evolving amid the rapid integration of AI.

Prior to data collection, The Lawyer conducted in-depth interviews with subject matter experts at the forefront of legal AI innovation in the UK. These insights informed the design and focus of the broader research, which combines both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The study draws on a survey of respondents and qualitative interviews with legal professionals, including managing partners, heads of innovation, and IT leads from top-tier firms within the UK 100. Research was carried out by analysts at The Lawyer across February, March, and early April 2025. Base sizes for each question ranged up to 32. Respondents were from a wide variety of firms, but primarily from those with annual revenues exceeding £80 million (72.4 per cent – 51.7 per cent of which sat at £300 million plus), ensuring a focus on well-resourced organisations likely to be early adopters of AI technologies. Of the 15 additional interviews, they were all leaders either within firms or within the AI and/or innovation function at firms.

The research investigated three core themes shaping the AI-augmented legal landscape:

- Adoption of AI tools, training, and skill development
- Emerging traits of the 'future lawyer'
- Shifts in firm culture, hierarchy, and operational structure

Of the survey respondents, a large majority were based in the UK, providing a strong national context while still offering a window into international trends.



Overview

Bold predictions about AI have stirred up a wave of fear and misinformation — especially when it comes to its role in the workforce. From doomsday visions of machine-dominated futures to anxieties over mass job displacement, the narrative veers into melodrama. In the legal sector, these concerns are particularly pointed. Many wonder whether lawyers risk being replaced by algorithms, or if automation will flood the industry with bland, cookie-cutter services. Is there a danger of practitioners becoming overly reliant on AI and sidelining their native legal talent in the process?

Another AI report? We know what you are thinking. But hear us out — this one's different. No jargon, no buzzwords — just insights that matter to the legal world. In it, we focus on:

Looking at AI with people in mind.

Instead of just geeking out over AI, we're asking: how's it really landing with lawyers? While many AI reports in the legal sector concentrate on technological capabilities, efficiency metrics, or product features, this report shifts the focus to the human element — how individuals feel,

react, and adapt to AI. Our research doesn't just track what law firms are implementing; it delves into how legal professionals position themselves amid this transformation. This emotional and cultural framing is distinct and essential to understanding AI's real impact.

Getting a read on the mood: the excitement, the doubts and everything in between.

Rather than painting a binary picture of acceptance or resistance, we uncover a spectrum of sentiment — from enthusiastic adoption to cautious optimism. Notably, there is little outright rejection of AI. This layered perspective offers a grounded, realistic snapshot of how prepared firms are for an AI-integrated future.

Everyone is jumping on the AI train, but who actually knows where they are headed?

This report challenges firms to think beyond simply integrating AI. It highlights strategic blind spots and urges leaders to consider: how will your firm stand apart in

an AI-enabled market? Adoption is no longer the endgame — differentiation is.

The law is changing fast – so why are we still training people like it's 2005?

AI literacy must begin well before lawyers enter practice. This report offers forward-thinking insights into training, skill development, and the 'future lawyer', which makes a compelling case for reimagining training models to equip future lawyers for an AI-transformed profession.

Shifts are disruptions. However, we must consider whether they are also opportunities to practise law in a way that's sharper, more thoughtful – and perhaps more human?

Going beyond tools and workflows, we examine how AI is poised to reshape firm hierarchies, operational models, and even brand identity. As AI redefines success in the legal world, firms must prepare for deeper structural evolution to remain competitive against others.

Taking a measured view: what's working, what's shifting, and where the friction sits.

AI is not a silver bullet. While AI brings clear operational gains, it also surfaces cultural frictions, regulatory

ambiguities, and ethical complexities, which shape the attitudes of lawyers on whether or not AI is something to embrace or fear. This report highlights AI's promise while acknowledging the real tensions that come with it.

Not just food for thought – real implications for how law firm leaders shape culture, talent and ways of working.

More than observation, this report delivers actionable insights. We explore how AI is reshaping expectations of the modern lawyer— who they are, how they'll be trained, and what capabilities will define competitiveness. Firms not ready to evolve risk being left behind.

Overall, the future of AI is not just a story of disruption but one of integration and opportunity, where lawyers are redefining their craft in partnership with AI, not in opposition to it.

Data Analysis / Trends

AI Tools & Skill Development

As stated by John Craske, Chief Innovation & Knowledge Officer at CMS, “The AI genie is out of the bottle — as a law firm, we need to think about our clients, business and our people. Keeping those central in consideration of service provision”. All interviewees acknowledged the increasing importance of law firms adopting AI tools and building technology-related competencies to effectively collaborate with these tools once precision reaches a reliable standard.

Unsurprisingly, the data matches interviewee sentiment, with 89.6 per cent of respondents citing that their firm was at least on some stage of AI adoption — whether that be pilot programs, partial implementation, or full-scale implementation. Such a strong level of adoption signals an industry-wide momentum toward integrating AI into core operations.

When thinking about attitudes towards AI, a strong majority (66.7 per cent) of respondents are actively enthusiastic and engaged in AI utilisation, signalling

a generally positive market outlook. 26.7 per cent are cautiously optimistic about AI utilisation with only 6.7 per cent feeling sceptical but open to evidence. On balance, there is a favourable attitude to AI utilisation with most people being ready and eager; even cautious respondents are not dismissive. In fact, these findings show that there’s almost no outright rejection of AI as a concept, with critics even being willing to reconsider their stance with enough evidence. We can view these results as a sign that there’s a cultural or organisational readiness for change. Thus, barriers to adoption may be more logistical or technical than attitudinal — contrary to mainstream discussions about AI in the legal space, which often assume significant resistance and struggle with the so-called AI revolution.

When self-evaluating where their firm is at in the AI adoption race, only 13.3 per cent felt that they have their finger on the pulse of AI adoption, meaning that they feel that they’re moving at the right pace. 63.3 per cent felt they were moving at a ‘reasonable pace’, with 13.3 per cent feeling that they’re lagging behind and 6.7 per cent thinking they are significantly lagging behind, suggesting some room for acceleration. There is a majority of respondents signalling comfort and satisfaction with their pacing in AI adoption. However, for firms with higher ambitions or better capabilities, this environment presents a window of opportunity to differentiate from others and lead. While others rest on perceived adequacy, the truly innovative players can leap ahead and shape industry norms.

“The AI genie is out of the bottle — as a law firm, we need to think about our clients, business and our people”

— John Craske,
Chief Innovation
& Knowledge Officer,
CMS

Although there is a general pro-AI sentiment among respondents, there are also a few key concerns. First, 81.5 per cent of respondents cited concerns with learning how to assess AI-generated outputs, such as accuracy or identification of “hallucinations”. This highlights a growing need for training and tools that can help legal professionals critically evaluate AI assistance rather than rely on it uncritically.

services in the long term. Lastly, 52 per cent are concerned about ethical or regulatory uncertainties relating to AI use and implementation, reinforcing the pressing need for clearer guidance, governance frameworks, and industry standards to ensure responsible use of AI technologies in legal practice. Without guidelines, firms risk compliance breaches or reputational damage as they navigate unknown territory alongside having their services guided by fear rather than by innovation.

It's no surprise that increased AI adoption would trigger a discussion on training needs. A person operating as Head of Knowledge puts it best when she states that “the interesting thing around the training element is that we're in a phase of transformation in law — it's about using technology to reshape ‘the business of law’”. Increased technology in the legal sector is clearly more about benefiting the business. Though in this discussion it is important to assess where each firm is at in training their lawyers, nearly all interviewees — except two — stated that their firm has at least some form of training available in the use of AI.

Next, 59.3 per cent of respondents are worried that AI may erode traditional legal skills, suggesting apprehension that the next generation of lawyers may become overly dependent on AI tools, potentially undermining the development of foundational legal reasoning and research capabilities. If not addressed, less junior lawyers could lead to a workforce with gaps in core competencies, which, logically, may impact the overall quality of legal

A key point derived from these conversations with firms is that trainings need to be practical and iterative, not theoretical: As stated by Sally Wokes, a Partner at Slaughter and May, “You cannot just have a





AI TASKS

LEGAL
RESEARCH

DOC
REVIEW

HUMAN TASKS

NEGOTIATION

CLIENT
MANAGEMENT

training program and expect seamless implementation – it is more of a hands-on approach that is needed for success”. Thus, firms could benefit more from using practical, experiential learning methods that go beyond theoretical instruction and foster real-world application through mentorship, active participation, and continuous feedback.

Teaching lawyers how to use AI technology by showing, doing, reviewing, and repeating the process until these individuals can lead on teaching others how to use AI technology aids them to work with technology. Rachel Broquard, a Service Excellence Partner at Eversheds Sutherland, gives the example that as they “implement[ed] tools, we found success with creating workshops and boot camps with third parties and internal teams [on AI]”. The key aspect being opportunities to interact with technology and learn from others. Other interviewees discussed having AI ambassadors and leaders that can help demystify the technology. Helder Santos, Head of Legal Tech and Innovation from Bird & Bird, states the importance of training in based on its result as “lawyers will need to work alongside these technologies, helping them do more, not less”. Ultimately, firms that prioritise practical, ongoing training approaches will likely be best positioned to realise the full value of AI, turning adoption into measurable business success.

Respondent data highlights a clear delineation between task types in the legal profession that are more susceptible to AI automation and those that remain reliant on human judgment and interpersonal skills. The highest AI adoption rates are in tasks that are structured, repetitive, and data intensive: legal research (66.7 per cent), document review (63.0 per cent), and discovery and e-discovery (59.3 per cent). These domains are where AI can efficiently process large volumes of information and generate initial outputs quickly.

In contrast, the tasks deemed least replicable by AI – client relationship management (81.5 per cent), ethical judgment (70.4 per cent), and negotiation (66.7 per cent) – are heavily dependent on human intuition, emotional intelligence, and context-specific discernment in decision

making. These findings suggest that while AI is becoming an integral tool in streamlining legal workflows, it is unlikely to replace the more nuanced human elements of legal practice. Instead, it appears that a more hybrid model is being considered, where AI increases efficiency in technical areas while lawyers continue to lead in complex, human-centred client delivery.

“AI might be able to crunch data or suggest outcomes, but it can’t connect with a worried client, navigate complex human dynamics, or come up with creative legal strategies”

Characteristics of the ‘future lawyer’ and training

Although law firms traditionally finalise the training of lawyers, there’s shift in belief that firms should not have to start from scratch when it comes to AI and digital skills. In terms of upskilling lawyers to be proficient in using AI, there’s a widely agreed sentiment (74.1 per cent) that AI literacy should be a core part of law school curricula rather than simply being the sole responsibility of firms to teach trainees. Therefore, AI is no longer seen as peripheral — it’s now considered essential to the practice of law, placing pressure on law schools to catch up with the realities of modern – and future – law. It’s likely that law firms might start recruiting differently, prioritising graduates from programmes that integrate AI or tech training in their curriculum.



The top required skill in an AI-dominated future was legal reasoning and critical thinking (51.9 per cent),

reaffirming that core legal expertise remains central. AI can crunch data, but it can’t yet replicate nuanced judgment or sophisticated legal strategy. The next skills required are client communication and relationship management (44.4 per cent) tied with empathy (44.4 per cent). AI literacy trails slightly behind at 40.7 per cent, reflecting a shift in the legal profession: tech-savviness is no longer optional, it’s necessary. Future lawyers won’t just work alongside AI, they’ll actively need to understand how to use, assess, and possibly even help shape AI tools. Even as technology takes over more technical tasks, human connection becomes a key differentiator.

From the interviews, one point remained quite clear: clients want more than just legal answers — they want trust, empathy, and reassurance from their lawyers, especially when AI is part of the process. This highlights a simple but important truth about legal work: it’s not just about knowing the law, it’s about how you apply it with care, strategy, and emotional intelligence. That said, Justine Reeves, Head of Knowledge at Clyde & Co, asserts that “the use of training is important in managing transformation in legal delivery – we need to educate our lawyers on how we can use technology to reshape the ‘business of law’, meaning that investing in continuous education equips legal professionals not just to adopt new technologies, but to strategically

leverage them to improve efficiency, client service, and competitiveness.

A Chief Operating Officer at a leading UK firm (ranked within the UK 200’s Top 15) captured this perfectly, saying, “From my perspective, the relationships with clients are so much of what we do. Our role is based on client relationships. In my mind, AI is a tool in the background, not in the front”. In other words, AI might help with the heavy lifting behind the scenes, but clients still look to their lawyers for guidance, support, and a human touch.

Since “it is about people and technology in partnership, delivering better quality services”, as argued by Broquard and echoed by all the interviewees, future lawyers will need to do more than just keep up with technology. Yes, they’ll need to understand AI and use it to streamline their work — but just as importantly, they’ll need to stay grounded in strong client relationships. Several interviewees pointed out that the real value lies in how lawyers interpret, refine, and communicate AI-generated insights to clients.

As Santos put it, “there’s a growing emphasis on strategic thinking, client interaction, and creative problem-solving”. These are skills that no algorithm can replace, as “humans are still better than the machine”. AI might be able to crunch data or suggest

outcomes, but it can't connect with a worried client, navigate complex human dynamics, or come up with creative legal strategies. However, lawyers need to make sure that the outputs they're using are precise based on their own experience and expertise – they still need to know what the output should look like, even if they lean on AI for repetitive tasks.

Khasawneh didn't sugarcoat it: AI "will replace lawyers who do not learn how to interact with AI. Success requires adaptability over traditional approaches". The takeaway? Lawyers who rely too heavily on old habits, as well as those who become overly dependent on AI, are likely to fall behind the curve. Dixon asserts that "everyone, to varying degrees, will need to upskill themselves to work with AI," which is true, not just in reference to technical capability but also on a bigger picture level. Those who embrace both the technological and human sides of law will thrive, but firms must ensure that current – and future – develop skills that align with the objectives of the firm in an AI future, specifically on how to add value to service delivery through creative problem solving, intuition, and analysis when working on delivering complex services.

In the end, the most successful lawyers won't just be tech-savvy, they'll be empathetic, strategic, and fluent in both legal and digital languages. Even in an AI-driven future, people still want

people. And that human connection? That's something no machine can replicate.

Firm hierarchy, culture, and operations

Hierarchy: Innovation and impact

There's a divided culture when it comes to whether innovation is a strategic priority or peripheral. 51.9 per cent of respondents' state that innovation is a core function with dedicated leadership and budget, whereas 33.3 per cent see innovation as growing but not a priority. 7.4 per cent of respondents say innovation is either minor or not formally recognised within their firm's objectives. Some firms are proactively evolving while others are lagging in institutionalising innovation; it's likely that a lack of embedding innovation could influence

a firm's agility, competitiveness, and talent attraction in an AI future.

As suspected, respondents expect that AI will disrupt traditional pyramidal structures, hollowing out the junior tier and elevating non-legal and technical roles. Specifically, 70.4 per cent of respondents predict that there will be fewer junior lawyer roles in the future, meaning that there will be fewer opportunities for training a junior lawyer into becoming a senior lawyer. Additionally, 66.7 per cent foresee a shift in leadership towards tech/innovation, meaning the traditional model of legal professionals taking on partner or c-suite responsibilities is likely to evolve with more non-lawyers moving up the legal hierarchy. Paired with that realisation, it makes sense then that 63.0 per cent anticipate growth in AI-specialist roles, as there will be more upward mobility and relevance in the future for individuals

who take on those AI specialist roles. Interviewees generally agreed with the data, with one exception: one interviewee suggested that AI could flatten organisational hierarchies by giving people more access to information since hierarchies often exist from knowledge asymmetry. However, this wasn't a widely shared view. Only 14.8 per cent of survey respondents expect hierarchies to flatten. More likely, AI will reshape existing structures into tech-integrated or hybrid models, creating new leadership tracks focused on data and innovation.

A Chief Operating Officer at a leading UK firm pointed to this shift, saying, "Smaller firms will buy off-the-shelf products. Large firms will need tech leadership at the top table to guide strategic direction", emphasising the role of technology in business growth and high-level planning once AI is fully embedded.

"Smaller firms will buy off-the-shelf products. Large firms will need tech leadership at the top table to guide strategic direction"

“Bridge roles — people existing in both legal and tech worlds — are helping move the company forward”

Reeves offered another angle, explaining that at their firm, “bridge roles — people existing in both legal and tech worlds — are helping move the company forward”. She believes these roles will become more common as a practical way to connect legal expertise with technical teams and improve communication across disciplines.

Wokes notes that “Skillsets in the hierarchy will change but the hierarchy (shape wise) is unlikely to change dramatically”, highlighting that while roles and required expertise will evolve, traditional organisational structures will largely remain intact. Even in an AI-enhanced environment, developing and retaining talent remains essential to effective service delivery.

Together, these perspectives point to a shift in how organisations are structured — not by eliminating hierarchies, but by reorganising them around new skills and areas of expertise. Rather than a top-down overhaul, what’s emerging is a more

flexible setup where technology, legal knowledge, and strategic thinking intersect. Leadership is expanding to include those who understand technology deeply, and new roles are helping connect people across traditional departmental lines. At the same time, there’s a clear recognition that people still matter. Investing in growth, development, and talent remains central. As companies adopt AI, success will likely depend on how well they balance technological tools with human judgment and collaboration.

Brand identity and culture

There’s concern about brand dilution as generative AI risks homogenising outputs across firms, especially if they are buying off-the-shelf-AI rather than developing their bespoke AI in-house.

22.2 per cent see that maintaining brand identity will be very challenging, signalling concern that AI might have a homogenising effect on the legal market. 44.4 per cent of respondents say it will be somewhat challenging to maintain brand identity in the future. This figure is notably high and reinforces the point that firms risk becoming generic, losing distinctiveness in their service delivery and competitive edge. 22.2 per cent are optimistic that AI will enhance brand identity, signalling disagreement among respondents about AI’s likely impact on firm brands. These results suggest that differentiation between firms may increase depending on how firms curate and train the AI tools utilised alongside how they integrate human expertise and storytelling into the client experience.

Interestingly, interviewees emphasised that firm culture — particularly how leadership treats employees and the degree of employee engagement — will play a significant role in a firm’s future success. As Mike McGlinchey, Head of Client Consulting at Pinsent Masons, put it, “People are just people — when operating in an organisation where they feel connected to and care about, that changes the way they operate on behalf of the organisation, which clients can see”. This internal dynamic not only shapes performance but also becomes visible to clients, directly influencing external perception and outcomes. Leadership, therefore,

must be “adaptive and responsive”, prioritising transparency and leading from the front, as asserted by Nasser Ali Khasawneh, Partner, Chairman, and Global Head of AI & TMT at Eversheds Sutherland. Personality and culture emerged repeatedly as pivotal, with Ben Williams, Head of Consulting at Pinsent Masons, noting, “Personality and culture are really important. Different firms will have different approaches. High-end law requires human relationships”. Similarly, a Magic Circle Partner emphasises that “[Law] is a people’s business — who is the face of the firm? It will become ever more important to not hide behind a screen”. This sentiment was echoed by other interviewees, who reinforced the idea that firms must prioritise their reputation and uphold high standards

“You can ask a machine to build a contract, but only a lawyer can understand the client’s needs and nuances — especially for more complex client matters”

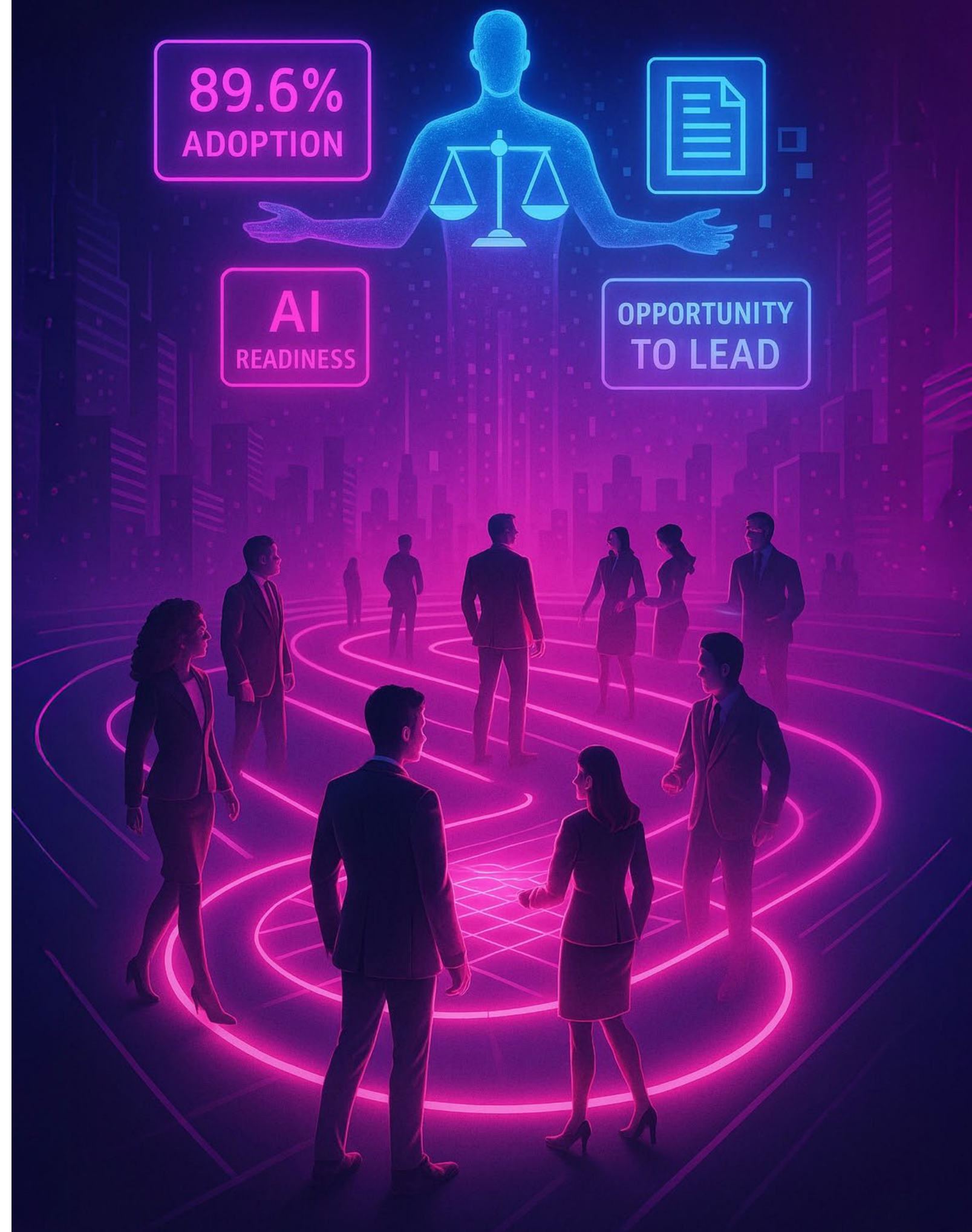
— Santos

“Firms risk becoming generic, losing distinctiveness in their service delivery and competitive edge”

for their lawyers. In particular, they highlighted the growing need for lawyers to continuously develop and adapt their client relationship management skills in an evolving professional landscape.

Another key point on client relationship management iterated by interviewees was its importance in preserving a firm's identity and competitiveness within the legal market. While already essential, this dimension is expected to become even more significant. As Santos observed, “You can ask a machine to build a contract, but only a lawyer can understand the client's needs and nuances — especially for more complex client matters”. Trust, emotional intelligence, and expertise remain central, with Khasawneh reinforcing that “the value of the lawyer is still about emotional intelligence, expert intuition, and critical thinking in client management”. Accordingly, to maintain strong client ties and uphold their firm's reputation,

lawyers must adopt a more outward-facing approach, where human connection and communication take centre stage. “Human interaction — lawyers who explain the models, explain their approach. [Their] personality still comes through in that relationship,” David Halliwell, a Partner at Pinsent Masons, explained. Even in the face of increasing AI integration, the human element remains crucial; as a Chief Operating Officer succinctly stated, “Clients will still want a human. They want trust and control”. Furthermore, Samuel Dixon, Chief Innovation Officer and Partner at Womble Bond Dickinson, further puts forth that “AI can't build relationships or provide reassurance — it can't understand what a client's really trying to achieve”. Ultimately, in a competitive field where “the top 50 firms look about the same externally”, as McGlinchey remarked, “the quality of the lawyer is assumed, but it is the multi-disciplinary collaboration in that organisation is what matters,” alongside the relationship they form with clients as an extension of the firm. In this evolving legal landscape, it is the human qualities — trust, empathy, interpersonal communication, and personal connection — that will continue to differentiate firms,



especially in an AI-dominated future.

Operations

AI is undoubtedly driving operational transformation, with the greatest changes being around collaboration and automation.

forward-thinking mindset. However, respondents acknowledging the rise of diverse, interdisciplinary teams sits at 48.1 per cent with those resisting such change sitting at 44.4 per cent, further highlighting a cultural divide. Although traditional lawyers remain wary of shifting dynamics, there is a recognition that more executive roles will open to non-legal professionals (51.9 per cent). Although 37.0 per cent did feel that there will be increased pressure on traditional legal career paths, the minimal expectation that lawyers will be replaced by tech professionals (7.4 per cent) suggests that while technology is seen as a powerful value-add, it is not yet perceived as a replacement for legal expertise. Overall, the legal industry is progressing – but not without tension between innovation and tradition. 51.9 per cent of respondents expect increased automation to reduce

The legal industry is at a crossroads – eager to embrace the benefits of AI and interdisciplinary collaboration yet with some still dealing with internal resistance to structural change. With 77.8 per cent expecting improved efficiency and automation in their workflow, it's clear that there is an open-mindedness and awareness in most around how AI technology is evolving to become more useful in practice. 70.4 per cent expect more collaboration between lawyers and technologists, signaling a

the need for physical presence. Meanwhile, 48.1 per cent anticipate the rise of AI-driven productivity monitoring, suggesting a shift toward a more modular, metric-focused work environment. Additionally, 33.3 per cent expect greater reliance on alternative legal service providers (ALSPs), reinforcing the broader trend of evolving legal structures – where outsourcing to temporary or specialised workers increasingly replaces maintaining a sizeable full-time staff headcount. Yet, 29.3 per cent still feel that traditional work structures will remain dominant, demonstrating that some respondents are holding on to tradition despite the majority believing changes to work structures will be impacted by an AI-driven future. Only 22.2 per cent believe AI will enhance flexibility in remote working arrangements, indicating that lawyers may still be expected to maintain a strong in-office presence even in an AI future. Consequently, AI's impact on work structures appears more aligned with increased operational control and strategic outsourcing. As traditional career pathways shift – with fewer junior roles and a growing presence of non-traditional legal professionals – competition for senior positions will intensify. In such an environment, data-driven performance metrics paired with the need to be more visible in the office may erode the professional autonomy that lawyers are historically afforded in legal practice.

In an AI-enabled legal environment, where physical presence is expected to diminish, and performance is increasingly measured through productivity metrics, traditional pathways to promotion – built on mentorship, visibility, and informal learning – risk being disrupted. With fewer junior roles and more reliance on ALSPs, the classic apprenticeship model that once groomed lawyers for leadership is eroding. This raises serious questions about how firms will identify and develop future partners in a more fragmented, data-driven workspace.

“Barriers to adoption may be more logistical or technical than attitudinal – contrary to mainstream discussions about AI in the legal space”

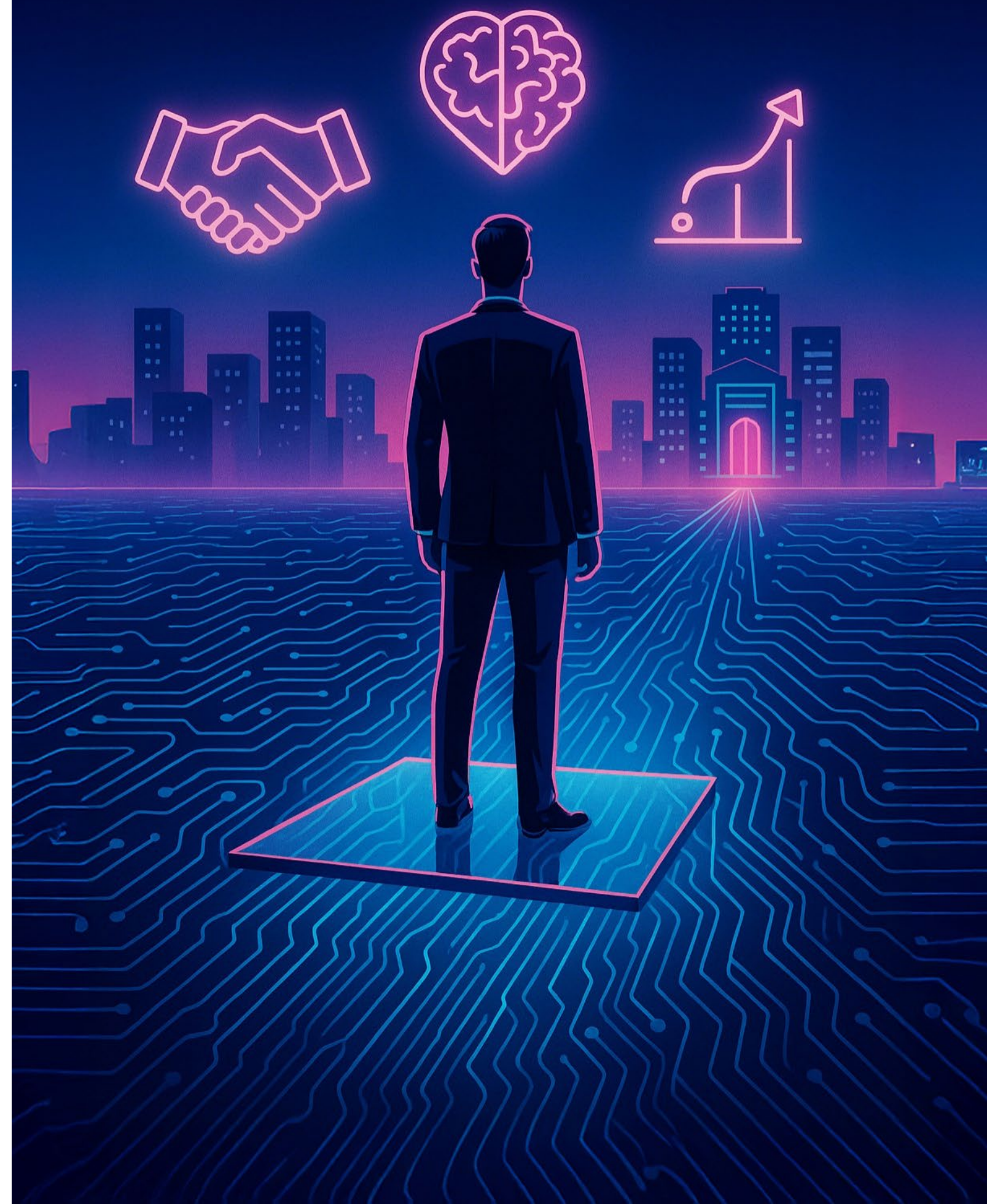
Moreover, if client engagement becomes a key differentiator for law firms, the expectation for lawyers to be more present — whether physically or through high-touch digital communication — may intensify. Despite automation, trust-building and nuanced client relationships often require emotional intelligence and real-time interaction, skills that cannot easily be automated. Therefore, while some operational tasks may move off-site or to AI systems, high-value client engagement may still demand a strong human presence.

Firms will need to rethink their talent development strategies. Rethinking could include redefining leadership potential beyond billable hours, investing in virtual mentorship programs, and creating clearer paths for progression in hybrid or modular work environments. If not addressed, the AI revolution could risk creating a leadership vacuum at the top, just as the profession needs the most strategic thinkers.

Law firms are standing at a pivotal moment. Some are moving decisively — embedding innovation and tech leadership into their core — while others lag, paralysed by legacy thinking. But one thing is clear: AI is no longer seen as just another tool. It's a catalyst for deep structural and cultural transformation. As AI reshapes the legal landscape, firms must confront challenges around identity,

cross-disciplinary integration, and internal resistance. Yet across the board, these concerns are matched by a growing recognition: the rewards of embracing AI far outweigh the risks of ignoring it.

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Featured Business Interview

Mary Few, Head of Scotland Office and Consultant at Saxton Bampfylde

You're in close contact with legal leadership across the board – what's the general mood you're picking up around AI? Is it excitement, nervousness, or a bit of both?

There's a definite sense of urgency – a recognition that AI isn't knocking on the front door; it's marched right into the front room. The mood is a mix of excitement and strategic concern. Leaders know AI can dramatically enhance productivity and unlock new value for clients. But they're also acutely aware of the operational and cultural shifts needed to realise that potential. The most forward-thinking firms aren't waiting for the definitive playbook – they're experimenting, learning in real time, and using that momentum to build competitive advantage.

One of the concerns is that a by-product of AI might be that junior roles could shrink over time. How do you think that affects the traditional route to partnership – and how are firms starting to rethink those pathways?

AI is fundamentally redrawing the map of legal careers. The linear route to partnership – built on years of document-heavy work – is being disrupted. That's forcing firms to reimagine how they nurture talent. That may see a pivot toward

early exposure to client strategy, innovation projects, and leadership development. In effect, future partners may be shaped more by their agility and mindset than by how long they've served in a particular role. That's a radical cultural shift.

The issue of culture comes up a lot in the report – especially the way in which leadership style and firm values can really shape how successfully firms adapt to AI. From what you've seen, what are the signs that a firm's culture is genuinely ready for this kind of change? Are there red or green flags you tend to notice early on?

Culture is the beating heart behind every successful transformation. Firms that are ready for change tend to have a few things in common: their leadership invites challenge, they reward curiosity, and they move fast on ideas that show promise. In particular, they aren't scared of trying new things. They don't just talk about innovation – they fund it, staff it, and give it strategic weight. On the flip side, where we see resistance, it's usually because risk aversion has become institutionalised. If change is seen as a threat to legacy power structures, that's a red flag – and it often shows up early in leadership behaviour.

There's a growing feeling that law schools need to start embedding AI and digital skills much earlier. Do you think that's going to change how firms think about hiring – maybe even what they're looking for in a standout candidate? Will firms start valuing tech-savvy mindsets as much as a stellar academic record?

The definition of 'top talent' is evolving. Academic excellence may earn you the passport, but thriving in today's legal world demands AI literacy as your compass. Firms are now actively looking for digital fluency, adaptability, and entrepreneurial thinking. The best candidates will be those who ask how technology can enhance outcomes, not just how to apply the law. As AI becomes more integrated into legal

work, we'll see firms valuing multidimensional skill sets – where legal, technical, and human intelligence intersect.

The data shows not every firm has embedded innovation deeply – some are still treating it like a side project. From your perspective, what sets the more forward-looking firms apart?

The difference is mindset. Progressive firms treat innovation as a strategic priority – not an initiative, but a core business function. It's visible in how they allocate capital, promote people, and structure teams. Their leaders don't just endorse innovation; they embody it. These firms are constantly scanning the horizon, engaging their people in the process, and moving quickly on insights. Innovation isn't on the edges – it's woven into the fabric.

There's a real concern about AI making legal services feel more samey. So when you think about brand identity and culture, especially from a talent point of view, how can firms stand out in this new AI-enabled world? Is leadership style part of what makes a firm feel truly different to work for and with?

Absolutely. In many ways leadership is becoming the brand. In a world where core services risk becoming commoditised, the firm's identity – how it leads, how it listens, how it innovates – becomes the real differentiator. Talented people want to work in places where they feel part of something future-facing and human. Clients want the same. The firms that will stand out are those where leadership is visible, values-driven, and unafraid to define a distinctive path forward. That's what makes a firm memorable – and magnetic.



Looking Toward the Future – Key Takeaways

“The big challenge is the knowledge sharing and access to knowledge in an organisation... The structural change – how people manage knowledge, how to get lawyers to share their experience, AI-enabled processes can take away the pain”

– Mike McGlinchey, Head of Client Consulting at Pinsent Masons.

The legal industry stands at a defining moment for reflection and reset – where the integration of AI is not just a technological upgrade but a strategic inflection point shaping the profession’s future. AI is no longer speculative or fringe – it is now a core component of legal operations, strategy, and competitiveness. Yet, while many firms believe they are moving at the right pace, a small percentage that view themselves as industry leaders suggests untapped potential for those bold enough to push the boundaries.

The data reveals a profession generally optimistic and open to AI’s possibilities, underpinned by a culture ready for innovation – even if not all firms are institutionally prepared for it. Concerns remain, especially around skill erosion, ethical clarity, and maintaining brand differentiation in a market potentially

flooded with standardised AI outputs. But these concerns do not reflect rejection – they highlight a profession that is actively asking the right questions and demanding better frameworks, training, and leadership.

There’s lots of speculation about what the future lawyer will look like. This research provides a sharper perspective on what leaders in top firms consider will be necessary to meet change with clarity and confidence. Looking ahead, the “future lawyer” will be defined not by their resistance to AI but by their ability to work alongside it – leveraging its efficiencies while doubling down on the irreplaceable human elements: critical reasoning, empathy, ethical judgment, and nuanced client relationships. With AI increasingly handling technical, repetitive tasks, the differentiator will be how lawyers interpret, apply, and communicate those outputs with strategic insight.

Firms that integrate AI into the very fabric of their culture – investing in in-house innovation, upskilling their workforce, and restructuring operations to embrace interdisciplinary collaboration – will define success not by the tech they use, but by how they align it with their people and purpose. The path forward demands rethinking traditional hierarchies, reevaluating recruitment pipelines, and reimagining how legal services are delivered and experienced by clients.

Ultimately, the future of law won’t hinge on a battle between humans and machines. It will be defined by the synergy between them. In that equation, the most forward-looking firms won’t just adapt to AI: they’ll harness it both as a catalyst and a collaborator, reshaping what legal excellence means in a rapidly evolving world.

“We are in the ‘Human + machine’ era – we get the best results when we think about how humans and machines can work together to maximise impact”

– John Craske, Chief Innovation & Knowledge Officer at CMS.

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