

RETHINKING LEGAL CAREERS IN THE AI ERA

Nguyen Quoc Bao

Acknowledgment: The author is grateful to Mr Bui Ngoc Hong (Partner at LNT & Partners) for his thoughtful comments and practical insights, which helped improve this article.

AI won't replace human lawyers, but it will redefine what makes lawyers valuable. And we must build our strategies to maximise where human lawyers are valued most, and ultimate providing clients more efficiently with robust, trusted, and sophisticated advice.

This is the argument that I want to make. Often, we see a concern that AI will soon replace lawyers in much of legal work, pushing lawyers to change or risk being gradually sidelined. I agree that lawyers must change. But change driven by unfounded fear of AI, or simply Fear-of-Missing-Out (FOMO) could be worse than no change at all.

It may not be realistic for lawyers to stop serving clients to rethink their practice or test every new approach. Change must happen while client work continues, like changing a wheel on a moving car. It is challenging, and therefore requires a strategy for adaption.

In this article, I first examine the core values that today's clients seek from today's lawyers, then consider the areas where AI can help. Based on that, I discuss how lawyers can adapt to the AI era proactively and strategically, rather than changing merely because everyone else is rushing to do so. As most of my career has been in law firms, this article focuses on law firm career development in the AI era.

What clients value from lawyers?

To shape our career path in the AI era, we must first understand what clients value in lawyers. In my opinion, clients value lawyers most for trust and efficiency.

There may be many reasons why clients engage lawyers, but one constant remains: **trust**. With access to client's most sensitive information, lawyers must first be trusted by their clients.

Traditionally, trust is understood to be built on competence, integrity, and benevolence.¹ But in today's world, where client experience has become a key part of service value², trust is no longer built only on technical quality or "letters and numbers". Trust now also requires an increasing

¹ Roger C Mayer, James H Davis and F David Schoorman, "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust" (1995) 20 *Academy of Management Review* 709

² Jack Newton, *The Client-Centered Law Firm: How to Succeed in an Experience-Driven World* (Blue Check Publishing 2020) 149

degree of interpersonal skills³ and empathy⁴ — what I would call the “personalised” part of legal work: understanding the client’s needs, circumstances, expectations, and decision-making style.

For example:

- Different clients may expect different approaches. For the same legal issue, a Japanese client may expect a style of advice different from a European client’s. A venture capital investor may have priorities different from a strategic investor. Technical accuracy alone does not address these gaps.
- Similarly, an AI-drafted memo may be grammatically correct, logically structured, and technically sound, yet still feel impersonal. Because AI-drafted memo is often too polished and frictionless, it may leave no obvious error to criticise, but also no distinctive human judgment, emphasis, or voice to remember. It can be difficult to fault, but equally difficult to feel truly advised by.

Interpersonal skills and empathy are not new concepts, but they have often been overlooked in legal practice. In one survey, 72% of lawyers believed they delivered caring service, but only 40% of clients agreed.⁵ This reflects a common misconception: lawyers may think they understand their clients, while clients may not feel truly understood. The gap persists possibly because lawyers are often overwhelmed by competing deadlines, while clients may be reluctant to challenge advice from someone perceived as the expert. Now, as client experience becomes a defining feature of professional services, clients will place greater value on advice tailored to their specific issues, rather than generic advice that AI may already be able to deliver well.

But trust alone is not enough now. Today’s client also expects **efficiency**.

For a long time, clients were generally happy to pay more for counsel they trusted, even where similar work was available at lower cost.⁶ Today, trust alone may not win the mandate. Clients use technology every day to access faster, cheaper services, from ride-hailing and food delivery to online shopping and instant digital tools. There is no reason to assume that they will not expect the same level of efficiency from their lawyers. This is the “more-for-less” challenge: clients expect more value, delivered faster and at lower cost.⁷

For a similar piece of legal work, client expectations on turnaround time have accelerated significantly: a client who once accepted a one-week timeline may now expect same-day or next-

³ David H Maister, Charles H Green and Robert M Galford, *The Trusted Advisor* (20th anniversary edn, Simon & Schuster 2021) 194

⁴ Newton (n 2) 38.

⁵ Reuters, “Redefining business development and client service in the AI era” (Reuters, 8 September 2025) <https://www.reuters.com/legal/legalindustry/redefining-business-development-client-service-ai-era--pracin-2025-09-08/> (accessed 27 April 2026)

⁶ Beaton Global, “When clients are willing to pay more” (Beaton Global, 2025) <https://beatonglobal.com/when-clients-are-prepared-to-pay-more/> (accessed 27 April 2026)

⁷ Richard Susskind, *Tomorrow’s Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future* (3rd edn, Oxford University Press 2023) 11-13.

day delivery.⁸ This expectation arises even before formal engagement. Clients increasingly expect proposals to include preliminary, tailored insights that demonstrate the lawyer's relevant experience and understanding of the matter. As a result, lawyers are now under pressure to provide tailored preliminary advice within a short timeframe to improve their chances of winning the mandate.

Lawyers may argue that legal services are different. That may be true. But client expectations are still shaped by the world around them. Law firms that ignore this shift risk moving away from what clients now value. We can manage expectations, but we cannot control them. If we put our own perspective above the client's needs, we risk becoming less relevant.

What AI can and cannot help?

AI can improve efficiency

Lawyers' value lie in personal judgment and empathy, but not every task requires them. In practice, some legal engagements involve routine work such as filings, reporting, and business-as-usual legal review. These tasks are repetitive and process-based. They require accuracy, consistency, and speed more than empathy.

Even in complex litigation or high-end transactions, where judgment and interpersonal skills play a more prominent role, many parts of the work remain standardised or process-based. These components are also important to the overall quality of legal service. In some cases, they form the foundation for judgment-driven work that follows, such as negotiation.

In the past, this standardised work absorbed significant resources and often took days, weeks, or even months to complete. Today, these tasks can be handled by AI with a level of speed, consistency, and accuracy that no individual lawyer, or even a full team of lawyers, can realistically match.⁹

Take legal due diligence (LDD) in an M&A transaction as an example. Before AI became widely available, LDD often required a heavy deployment of resources, especially in mega-deals with large virtual data rooms. Many tasks in the LDD process are not necessarily complex, but they are time-consuming. These include preparing document review lists, screening and categorising documents, summarising key contracts, extracting key terms, checking change-of-control provisions, and identifying missing or inconsistent documents. Traditionally, these tasks would require many lawyers, posing a real risk of fatigue, inconsistency, and human error. Now, AI can perform much of this first-level work faster and more systematically. According to Thomson Reuters, AI can reduce due diligence review time by up to 70% on average, while identifying critical provisions across thousands of documents in a matter of minutes.¹⁰

⁸ Arash Eskandari, *The AI Advantage: How Smart Law Firms Use Artificial Intelligence to Multiply Profits and Dominate Their Markets* (2023), 63.

⁹ Lauren Martin and others, "Better Call GPT, Comparing Large Language Models Against Lawyers" (2024) arXiv <https://arxiv.org/abs/2401.16212> (accessed 1 May 2026)

¹⁰ Chris O'Leary, "How AI and Document Intelligence Are Changing the Legal Tech Game" (Thomson Reuters, 16 April 2023) <https://legal.thomsonreuters.com/en/insights/articles/how-ai-and-document-intelligence-are-changing-the-legal-tech-game> (accessed 1 May 2026)

But trust is built by human lawyer, not AI

AI alone cannot build trust because it currently lacks interpersonal skills, intuition, and emotional judgment.¹¹ A decision-maker is unlikely to rely solely on AI for an important decision, even if AI can produce a technically sound deliverable. Clients still need someone with legal expertise, personal judgment and lived experience to explain what they should do and why. In many cases, especially for in-house lawyers, they also need a trusted external advisor to validate the legal position and help share the risk of the decision.

In practice, clients often decide under imperfect information, commercial pressure, and competing objectives. A “right” legal answer is rarely the end of their concern; what matters is how the legal position is interpreted and applied to their circumstances — and, above all, how it helps them achieve their real needs. Crucially, clients may not always be able to express those needs in spoken or written words, and in that regard a lawyer with empathy would be most valuable to pinpoint the needs.¹² This is where human judgment is critical: weighing risk, reading between the lines, and framing advice to support real decisions.

How should we build up our career path in AI era?

A simple answer would be to focus on what AI cannot do, and use AI for what it does best. But there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. Career development in the AI era is not only a personal question; it is also an organisational one. A lawyer’s career path does not develop in isolation. It must align with how the firm itself adapts, competes, and delivers value.

When considering career development, it is therefore important to look at both dimensions:

- the individual lawyer’s path; and
- the broader direction of the firm.

The two are closely linked. A strong personal strategy that does not fit within the firm’s operating model may not be sustainable in the long term.

For personal career path:

For junior lawyers, there is a real risk in over-relying on AI too early. Many of the routine and process-based tasks that AI now performs efficiently are the same tasks through which junior lawyers traditionally build their foundational skills: how to read contracts, spot issues, structure analysis, and develop legal judgment. Without this foundation, a lawyer may struggle to verify AI outputs, give proper instructions, or identify when something is wrong. At the early stage, therefore, AI should be used as a support tool, not a substitute. The priority should remain building core legal skills, while learning how to use AI critically and effectively.

¹¹ Carlos Montemayor, Jodi Halpern and Abrol Fairweather, “In Principle Obstacles for Empathic AI: Why We Can’t Replace Empathy” (2021) 36 *AI & Society* 1353

This does not mean junior lawyers should be discouraged from using AI. Some law firms may restrict junior lawyers' access to AI out of concern that they will become overly reliant on it. I do not think this is sustainable. AI is growing rapidly in capability, availability, and affordability; it is unrealistic to expect junior lawyers to avoid it altogether. A better approach is to encourage junior lawyers to use AI, but under proper guidance and supervision from senior lawyers. This guidance should cover which platforms may be used, how AI should be used, and which parts of AI-generated outputs must be verified before they can be relied on.

For mid-level lawyers, the focus should shift to integration. At this stage, lawyers are expected not only to execute, but also to manage workflows and deliver results efficiently. AI becomes a tool to enhance productivity, standardise processes, and reduce time spent on repetitive work. More importantly, lawyers at this level should develop the ability to break down legal work into components, identify which parts can be delegated to AI, and which require human judgment. This is where efficiency and judgment begin to converge.

For senior lawyers, the value proposition becomes clearer: trust, judgment, and client relationship. AI does not replace these; instead, it raises the baseline expectation for efficiency. Senior lawyers should focus on deepening client understanding, providing tailored and commercially grounded advice, and acting as a trusted advisor in decision-making. At the same time, they must lead the adoption of AI within their teams to ensure that efficiency gains are captured and translated into robust, trusted, and sophisticated advice.

For organisational development:

Leverage AI to lower fees without eroding reasonable profit margins

The “more-for-less” challenge is pushing law firms toward lower fees. While fee pressure is inevitable, simply reducing fees to match competitors risks creating a race to the bottom. A more sustainable approach is to reduce fees by improving efficiency through AI.

First, legal work should be decomposed into components, with AI deployed for routine and process-based tasks, and human lawyers focused on judgment-driven work.

Second, firms should select AI tools that are fit for purpose. The key is to match each tool's capabilities with the tasks that consume the most time in the relevant practice area.¹³

Not every firm can afford a bespoke AI system, and it is not always clear that the benefits would justify the cost. For many firms, the more practical approach is to adopt suitable existing AI tools, integrate them into specific parts of the workflow, and capture efficiency gains without the cost of building a fully customised system.

¹³ Eskandari (n 8) 40

If used properly, AI can take on the standardised work of several associates, freeing them to focus on higher-value tasks. This reduces the cost of delivering legal work and enables firms to lower fees while maintaining reasonable profit margins.

Transparency in AI use

Clients should be informed when AI is used in delivering legal services, and the extent to which it is relied upon.

First, transparency matters because it protects trust. If clients later discover that AI was used without disclosure, they may question the quality of the work or the fairness of the fees charged. It also helps explain why fees can be lower than under the traditional delivery model.

Second, transparency supports accountability. Legal advice ultimately remains the responsibility of the lawyer. Clearly communicating the role of AI ensures that clients understand that AI is a tool, not a decision-maker, and that the lawyer stands behind the final output.

Third, transparency allows clients to raise any confidentiality, data protection, or internal policy concerns before AI is used, especially some clients may still be reluctant to accept the use of AI.

Security and ethical compliance

Firms must implement robust policies on AI use and assess the data protection measures of each AI tool before adoption. This aligns with the concept “trust” as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, law firms are entrusted with sensitive information of the client, and therefore law firms must not be reckless in dealing with such information.

From an ethical perspective, client confidential information must not be used to train public generative AI tools. Human review of AI-generated outputs must also be maintained, unless otherwise specifically agreed with the client.

Think out of the box – deliver the work differently

Client expectations are increasing in the AI era, but adopting AI is not the only way to meet these expectations. While AI will inevitably play a central role, improving efficiency does not depend solely on technology. Firms can explore alternative ways of delivering legal services that achieve relatively similar outcomes, particularly where time, cost, or implementation constraints limit immediate AI adoption.

This requires a shift in mindset. Instead of asking only *what AI to adopt*, firms should also ask *how the work can be delivered differently*. In many cases, efficiency gains come from redesigning processes, reallocating resources, or involving clients more directly in the workflow.

For example, standardised tasks can be outsourced to lower-cost resources where appropriate. For routine processes such as reporting or completing standard forms, firms can develop guided templates or online tools that allow clients to complete parts of the work themselves. This can be

scaled across multiple clients, reducing lawyers' time on repetitive tasks while improving client engagement.¹⁴

AI should therefore be seen as part of a broader efficiency strategy, not the only solution.

Conclusion

AI may be a revolutionising factor that transforms the legal practice; nevertheless, lawyer profession deeply involves many human features. AI should not be seen as a replacement for lawyers, but as a tool to augment them. Used properly, AI can improve efficiency, reduce repetitive work, and help lawyers deliver services faster, and more creatively and intelligently. The use of AI must be done without compromising client confidentiality, professional accountability, or the trust that sits at the core of the legal practice.

The real opportunity is therefore not to make lawyers less human, but to allow them to focus more on what is uniquely human: judgment, empathy, context, strategy, and trusted advice. In the age of AI, the lawyers who thrive will be those who use technology not to replace, but to strengthen, their value.

¹⁴ Susskind (n 7) 55 and 69