

Law Firms and Law Schools Must Address AI Readiness

By Jen Leonard

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For decades, top-ranked law schools and prestigious law firms have enjoyed a mutually reinforcing relationship. Law schools produce credentialed graduates, and firms provide the high-status jobs that help schools market their success.

Historically, clients subsidized the gap in practical skills by paying for junior associate hours, having little choice in the matter. But that dynamic is now under pressure.

Clients will soon have alternatives to paying for inexperienced talent, a disruption that should compel firms to reward schools that are actually market-responsive.

Facing market and client pressures, law firms are racing to adopt AI tools to improve efficiency and remain competitive. While the technology is not yet designed for high-precision legal work, it is improving quickly. As capabilities evolve, these tools will inevitably put pressure on junior attorneys, who are tasked with work that corporate clients would most like to automate. But so far, few of the law

schools who traditionally send their graduates to large law firms are fully integrating AI into their curricula.

This dynamic is creating a growing mismatch between firms' needs and graduates' readiness. The wider it becomes, the more serious the long-term consequences

could become. Firms risk serious errors and inefficiencies from associates who lack training in AI-assisted practice. Schools risk losing relevance. And students risk being caught in the gears of change, unprepared for the modern legal workplace and carrying enormous amounts of student debt for credentials that may no longer be as valuable as they once were.

Expectations vs. Reality

Signs of misalignment between schools and firms around AI are already visible. As law firms accelerate their AI adoption,



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they increasingly expect new associates to understand how to integrate AI into legal practice. One recent survey found that 80% of lawyers believe law students should be learning to use AI. This aligns with my own conversations with many law firm partners around the country, most of whom expect to welcome a crop of incoming AI-savvy associates to their ranks. When I spend time on law school campuses or speak with deans, the split screen could not be more different, with schools taking incremental steps toward integrating AI into their curriculum, where it is included at all.

Although the most recent graduating class was the first to have access to ChatGPT throughout law school, not enough students have been taught how to use generative AI for core tasks such as drafting memos, conducting due diligence, or analyzing contracts let alone how to leverage AI to augment their creative problem-solving and strategic capabilities.

For anyone familiar with the history of legal education, the slow rate of change is unsurprising. The longstanding debate over whether law schools should focus on teaching students to “think like lawyers” or equipping them with practical skills takes on urgent relevance in the AI era. Many of the foundational courses all students take, like torts, contracts, and civil procedure, are still often taught with a 19th-century academic orientation.

While some AI-related courses exist, they are neither comprehensive nor consistently practical. When law schools do address AI, it typically falls into one of three categories:

- Substantive law governing AI
 - Upper-level electives, reaching a small minority of self-selecting students and often taught by adjunct faculty
 - Legal writing and research skills, where AI skills compete with an already full syllabus dedicated to the complex task of teaching the pre-existing core skills in these courses
- Sparse offerings and crammed syllabi are only part of the problem. Messaging around AI use is also muddled. In many law schools, student use of AI remains taboo, is framed as cheating, or is left to each professor to frame as they choose. This stands in stark contrast to the increasingly public embrace that law firms have shown around AI. The result is a jarring transition for new graduates entering practice, and may leave them confused or disappointing law firms expecting more confidence and technological fluency.

A Framework for Bridging the Gap

Now is the time for law schools and law firms to align on the skills needed in the profession. Doing so requires a reassessment of what it takes to thrive today, clearly communicating expectations around how best to use AI, and collaborating meaningfully to serve the next generation of lawyers.

For law schools, a more practical mindset is needed to address the technological forces shaping their students’ employment prospects. That doesn’t mean schools should abandon their foundational mission to train students to think like lawyers. Indeed, frameworks for critical thought that transcend any individual technology

will be more essential than ever. At the same time, as professional schools, they have a responsibility to help students deeply understand the risks posed by AI and use the technology to their advantage.

Law firm leaders must also adapt. First, they should not assume incoming associates are already skilled AI users. Transformation within law schools will take time and will not be uniform. To close the gap in the meantime, firms will need to invest in training and upskilling programs for junior lawyers.

Second, firms must develop and communicate clear guidelines for AI use by defining where associates are encouraged to experiment responsibly and where AI is off limits. New lawyers should not be left to guess.

Stronger communication and collaboration between law firms and law schools is essential as well. Current interactions between firm talent teams and law school career services offices are valuable but insufficient for systemic change. Dialogue must occur at the highest levels—between those with real power to effect change, law firm executive committees and law school

deans and faculty who shape the core curriculum.

The most natural place to begin real collaboration is the summer associate program. With no billable-hour pressure, it offers a low-stakes environment for education and experimentation. AI-focused summer programs could differentiate firms seeking to attract top talent and simultaneously build the capabilities of future lawyers. Schools that help develop these programs also gain marketing advantages, signaling a commitment to preparing students for the profession's future.

Law firms and law schools have been separated by design since the late 1800s. Pulling them together will not be easy. But in a time of such rapid change and enormous investment on the part of the newest members of the profession, their shared focus must be on preparing new lawyers for an era in which the very idea of “lawyering” is changing by the minute.

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