

Insights

THE FUTURE OF LAW FIRMS

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SUMMARY

The legal world that this year's trainees will be entering is likely to feel markedly different from the one that their predecessors knew five years ago.

The pace of change in legal services has accelerated, driven by technological innovation, shifting client expectations and fast-evolving business models. For lawyers at every stage – from fresh graduates to seasoned senior counsel – three questions are becoming increasingly urgent:

- What skills do lawyers in 2025 need to thrive in the profession today?
- What will the legal workplace look like in a decade?
- How can legal professionals upskill to meet the demands of a competitive, data-driven environment?

EFFICIENCY AS A CORE COMPETENCY

The traditional pillars of legal practice – deep legal knowledge, strong client relationships and deal-making prowess – are no longer sufficient on their own. In 2025, lawyers must also cultivate an efficiency mindset. This doesn't mean cutting corners, it means being strategic about how work gets done.

Efficiency begins with choosing the right tools. Legal tech is no longer a niche; it's a necessity. From contract review platforms to AI-powered research assistants, the modern lawyer must be adept at selecting and using technology that enhances productivity. Working smarter not harder is not a new phenomenon, but one that is more important today than it ever has been.

This shift also demands a new level of pricing and cost awareness. With so many tools available, both law firm management and fee-earning lawyers should understand the cost implications of their choices and how tools will be used in practice.

Sometimes tools will become a non-negotiable part of a lawyer's day-to-day work and sometimes there will be a need to communicate clearly with clients about the tools that are used and the implications for those choices, which could include timing, risk and cost-related considerations.

Moreover, the way legal information is presented is changing. Lawyers are beginning to move away from dense Word documents and lean instead towards data-driven reporting in formats that are more digestible and actionable for clients. This evolution reflects a broader trend: clients want clarity, speed and quality – and the most successful lawyers will be able to deliver all three of those.

AI LITERACY AND HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

One of the most transformative forces in the legal profession has been artificial intelligence and particularly generative AI. But contrary to popular belief, lawyers don't need to become data scientists to keep their jobs or thrive in the profession. What they do need is AI literacy – a working understanding of how AI tools function, what they can (and can't) do, and how best both to prompt them and to integrate them into legal workflows for optimum outputs.

In bigger firms, lawyers also need to nurture a close relationship with their innovation team and to know when to ask if a solution is out there to increase speed and efficiency of more manual tasks, such as document reading, due diligence and deal management. We've seen a seismic shift in the speed at which tools are developing, meaning that it is more challenging than ever to keep your finger on the pulse of legal tech.

The most successful law firms will already be curating teams with a good mix of AI-savvy individuals across all levels. The strongest candidates in 2025 will be efficient, curious and solutions oriented. These traits aren't exclusive to tech-savvy individuals, but technology will underpin much of their effectiveness.

Navigating the churn of legal work effectively is another key skill. Lawyers must know which tools to deploy for which tasks and how to balance speed with accuracy. AI has the ability to cut through the mundane and should be used in high-volume deals.

But even as technology becomes more central, traditional soft skills remain vital. Communicating with clients, learning by osmosis in the office and knowing when to take a stance versus when to seek guidance are human elements that will always be irreplaceable.

Similarly, a chatbot cannot substitute high-quality, personalised advice, based on years of experience and deep sector knowledge. Winning at tender or being referred by a client will remain an exercise rooted in human trust.

THE LAW FIRM OF 2035

Crystal-ball gazing at what a law firm might look like in a decade, it is likely we will see a very different picture. We can expect a wider choice of work models and pricing structures, even within the same firm and for the same clients. This flexibility could allow lawyers to tailor their services more precisely to client needs, offering bespoke legal products that align with their specific timing, budget and commercial goals.

Training and career development will need to pivot to both maximise the benefit and minimise the risk of AI. The 'co-pilot' analogy is much used across generative AI products – the intention being to emphasise the requirement for humans to work side by side machines for the best results. So junior lawyers who have historically cut their teeth on tasks AI is now carrying out will still need to work towards their own “licence” before they are qualified to pilot with the AI tool.

Once trained, lawyers may enjoy greater variety and autonomy in their work. The rigid hierarchies and standardised workflows of the past could give way to more dynamic, collaborative environments. This evolution could be mirrored by broader changes in the legal ecosystem. For instance, more sophisticated management of data by lawyers could open the door to more bespoke requirements from clients, including those in traditionally more risk averse, heavily prescribed areas, such as lending.

This shift would require law firms to embrace modernised ways of working – not just internally, but in how they interact with clients and partners. Firms that succeed will be those that foster adaptability, encourage innovation and support continuous learning.

BUILDING A FUTURE – READY LEGAL PROFESSION

The legal profession is at a crossroads. To thrive in the years ahead, lawyers must embrace an efficiency mindset, develop AI literacy and continue honing the soft skills that have always been central to legal practice. The firms that succeed will be those that offer flexibility, variety and tailored services that meet the evolving needs of clients.

Ultimately, future-proofing the legal profession isn't about predicting every twist and turn of technological change. It's about cultivating the adaptability and resilience to navigate whatever comes next. For today's trainees and tomorrow's leaders, that journey starts now.

This insight was co-written with Caroline Robinson, commercial real estate development, Search Acumen, and first published in Estates Gazette on 14 October 2025.

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