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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

Law Firm AI Rollouts Depend On Buy-In, Not Bigger Budgets

By **Cait Evans, Vivek Mohan and Meredith Williams-Range** (July 10, 2026, 11:22 AM EDT)

While the legal industry tends to tread cautiously and takes a measured approach to innovation, most law firm leaders acknowledge how central artificial intelligence will become to their operating models in the near future, and understand the need to develop a strong AI strategy to compete.

Cait Evans

What is less clear is how to ensure investment in AI tools translates into successful AI integration across the business.

Chambers and Partners' AI report — "AI is everywhere, associate confidence isn't" — surveyed 4,853 associates across 64 top U.S. firms and asked them to rate their experience of AI use in their day-to-day work.[1]

Vivek Mohan

The findings published in April indicate that there is a degree of broad, market-level skepticism toward AI across the general associate population. The pace of AI integration still lags behind technological progress, with many associates not yet feeling confident about using the new tools.

However, the survey results also revealed that some firms' approach to AI integration can serve as a blueprint for what works when it comes to successful use of AI and how firms can ensure that lawyers at all levels can confidently use the new technology.

Meredith Williams-Range

Preferred AI Tools

Across the market, the research found that there was a good spread of different tools being used by associates across different practice areas, including a mix of large language model chatbots, firm proprietary software and industry-specific tools.

There was no clear preference in terms of the chatbots. The most popular AI tool among associates was legal and professional services platform Harvey AI. Of the associates questioned, 33% considered it the most valuable tool in their day-to-day work. This was followed by Microsoft Copilot at 13% and ChatGPT at 11%.

It would be far too simple to say, however, that the firms that have bought Harvey AI have secured a competitive advantage over others in the market — indeed, the degree to which associates found Harvey AI valuable varied significantly between firms.

Some of the top performing firms did not use Harvey AI at all, instead turning to proprietary systems or other options such as WestLaw CoCounsel.

Not Just About Spending Power

The research showed that associate confidence in using AI was not strongly correlated with financial spend on AI tools. Simply investing more in AI did not move the dial. Instead, the firms with the most confident users were those that focused on both delivering high-quality training and ensuring practice leaders embraced the use of AI.

Confident associates did not necessarily come from the firms you might expect. Associates in firms deeply embedded in advising clients on technology and intellectual property, as well as conducting high-value transactional matters, were in fact more likely to report lower levels of confidence when using AI compared to other top 100 U.S. firms.

In several cases, these firms have so far treated AI more as a commercial story by building practices around advising AI clients and developing deep subject matter expertise externally, but perhaps not turning that knowledge inward into the conditions that produce associates confident to use the technology.

Those who instead treat the technology as integral to their own operations, focusing on training and leading from the top, are generally doing far better.

Meet People Where They Are

General AI education should be designed for every level of employee or partner and all levels competence. Training needs to meet people where they are, whether that's a very low level of knowledge where you need to cover everything, from ethics, risks and regulation to the skills needed to use AI tools, to advanced users who require support to enable them to develop their own applications.

Where a firm's attorneys have significant experience advising clients on AI development and deployment, it can be particularly helpful to partner with AI practice groups, allowing the firm to integrate and benefit from those insights and advice.

Arguably that's the easy part — AI training can't just be about one stand-alone training course. It should be ongoing, providing both a basic grounding and ongoing professional development.

We all know that it's actually through using technology that you learn, and lawyers need support throughout that process by creating continuous connection points. That might mean creating a 24/7 AI hotline, holding regular workshops, or providing opportunities to share experiences of AI use across the firm, including anonymously.

For early-career associates, there needs to be an acknowledgment that their on-the-job training will be very different from those who came into the workplace pre-AI. They will be using AI from Day 1 but still need to develop the same legal research skills as their predecessors — not least so they can understand where AI is getting it wrong and how to cross-check its outputs.

Learning to use AI also means experimenting and making mistakes. Associates building skills and applications need a controlled environment to do that, away from live client work. This can be achieved through AI lab programs where small groups work on synthetic case files based on fictional companies, evidence and investigation files, to test what the technology can do.

Leading From the Top

The Chambers and Partners AI report demonstrates the importance of partnership buy-in. Many firms will have skeptics in their midst, and not everyone will embrace the changes brought by AI.

For AI implementation to be a success, however, partners need to be comfortable using AI themselves, be clear on the benefits, be able to demonstrate confidence, and answer both associates' and clients' questions as AI use accelerates.

Firm leaders will need to understand where resistance is coming from, and that will be unique to each individual. Sometimes it may be a dislike of change, of ceasing to do the work the way it has been done successfully in the past. Others may lack the skills or the confidence or have concerns about accuracy and hallucinations.

Once individuals' issues with AI adoption are clear, they are easier to address. Running separate partner-only sessions can aid this process. In small groups, partners can talk more freely about their experiences with AI use and any concerns they may have. Skill gaps can be identified and, where beneficial, external AI experts can offer an industrywide view on the role AI is playing across the profession, as well as what to expect in the future.

By winning round partners and equipping them with the skills they need, they will be able to provide the leadership needed for successful AI integration.

The research data suggests that when AI integration is done properly, it is not just a bolted-on, stand-alone initiative sitting alongside everything else a firm does for its associates. It needs to weave into the fabric of the associate experience. Like all cultural change, this takes strong leadership. The AI mandate needs to come from the top, with management making it a strategic priority and sending the message that everyone in the firm must be educated in AI with no exceptions.

Being at the forefront means being prepared not only to invest in the tools, but also to devote resources to testing, implementing safeguards, training and creating a culture of support. Management must draw a clear link between AI and the provision of top quality client service so that partners and employees are left in no doubt as to the opportunity it presents. For firms that have a strong AI and technology practice, those expert lawyers should be closely involved in the firmwide effort.

The AI report shows that associates at firms performing best at AI integration were also more likely to score their firm positively in other areas of their working life, including work-life balance, training quality and leadership vision. When you examine what it takes to successfully integrate AI, this is perhaps unsurprising — the qualities that make for a good associate experience are also strengths that prove critical to successful AI implementation.

As AI adoption accelerates, AI integration is becoming part of the fabric of what a strong associate experience looks like. Firms that understand that earliest and build accordingly are the ones creating the strongest foundations for the future.

Cait Evans is the global head of talent research at Chambers and Partners Ltd.

Vivek Mohan is co-chair of the AI practice at Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP.

Meredith Williams-Range is chief legal operations officer at Gibson Dunn.

[1] https://crm.chambers.com/talent-ai-report.