Generative AI for legal professionals: What to know and what to do right now

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The revolution in generative AI is quickly transforming business as we know it, and legal is helping lead the charge.

Within the legal industry, AI now touches every role, both front- and back-office. New generative AI-based legal tools can support multiple roles within a law firm or legal context, including marketing departments, administrative departments, and legal support departments. While such tools will be implemented on different timelines for different uses — some extremely rapidly and some more slowly — there is no question that AI is here to stay as a feature of legal practice.

For the traditionally risk-averse legal profession, this can feel a bit uncomfortable. But the 2023 Thomson Reuters Future of Professionals Report found that legal professionals are beginning to recognize how generative AI can help their practices improve operations and increase efficiency, both of which are priorities for the profession. "For law firms," the report states, "professionals see the opportunity for AI to enable productivity in two ways: i) saving time by conducting large-scale data analysis; and ii) performing nonbillable administrative work with greater accuracy. Both productivity enhancements highlight the fact that these tasks can be done faster and better, allowing fee earners to make greater billings...."

The key to using generative AI to facilitate legal work is to use an industry-specific solution that is designed by legal insiders and trained on the highest-caliber legal content. Such best-in-class, industry-specific tools can substantially support law teams' daily workflows while significantly reducing the risk inherent in using this next-generation technology.
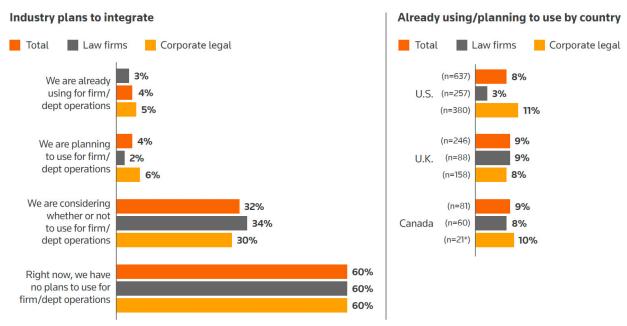
The current state of generative AI in the legal landscape

The rise of generative AI is upending aspects of legal work in a way that previous AI tools have not. For years, AI models have been used to streamline workflows and back-end processes, such as improving search functions and data mining. But new generative AI tools offer substantively enhanced capabilities.

Legal AI tools entering the market today aren't just for general use; they are industry-specific and trained using vetted, specialized, proprietary legal knowledge. These tools can rapidly respond to plain-text queries with extremely relevant outputs, including research, synthesis, and analysis. Additionally, their ability to generate plausible text can assist lawyers in delivering actual legal work product, including core output like contracts and legal summaries — an ability that will become increasingly useful as the capabilities of large language models improve.

Attitudes toward this evolution within the profession are mixed. While 82% of legal professionals believe generative AI can be applied to legal work, only 51% believe that it should be, according to the Thomson Reuters Institute's ChatGPT and Generative AI within Law Firms report. In practice, according to the report, only 5% of legal professionals state that their firms have plans to use generative AI, while 60% say their firms currently have no such plans. About one-third of firms are reportedly on the fence about whether to pursue the use of generative AI.

About one in ten corporate legal professionals report already using or planning the integration of ChatGPT/generative AI into their department operations. This is significantly higher compared to law firm legal professionals.
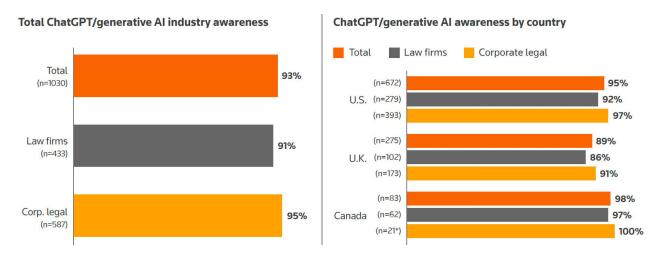
Industry plans to integrate

Total   Law firms   Corporate legal

We are already using for firm/dept operations
- 3%
- 4%
- 5%

We are planning to use for firm/dept operations
- 4%
- 2%
- 6%

We are considering whether or not to use for firm/dept operations
- 32%
- 34%
- 30%

Right now, we have no plans to use for firm/dept operations
- 60%
- 60%
- 60%

Already using/planning to use by country

Total   Law firms   Corporate legal

U.S.
- (n=637) 8%
- (n=257) 3%
- (n=380) 11%

U.K.
- (n=246) 9%
- (n=88) 9%
- (n=158) 8%

Canada
- (n=81) 9%
- (n=60) 8%
- (n=21*) 10%

Base: Aware of ChatGPT/generative AI OR use other forms of AI Total (n=964); Law Firms (n=405); Corp. Legal (n=559).
* Caution – small base size.

Source: Thomson Reuters 2023

Overall corporate legal professionals have significantly higher awareness of ChatGPT/generative AI compared to law firms.

Total ChatGPT/generative AI industry awareness

Total (n=1030)	93%
Law firms (n=433)	91%
Corp. legal (n=587)	95%

ChatGPT/generative AI awareness by country

Legend: ■ Total ■ Law firms ■ Corporate legal

U.S.	(n=672)	95%
	(n=279)	92%
	(n=393)	97%
U.K.	(n=275)	89%
	(n=102)	86%
	(n=173)	91%
Canada	(n=83)	98%
	(n=62)	97%
	(n=21*)	100%

Base: Total sample (n=1,030); Law firms (n=443); Corp. legal (n=587). * Caution – small base size.

Source: Thomson Reuters 2023

This hesitation is understandable. The top two concerns voiced by legal professionals in the ChatGPT report are that generative AI will take the place of professional legal judgment and replace lawyers, and that generative AI outputs are too error-prone and opaque to be helpful in practice.

There is indeed good reason for lawyers to be skeptical of large language models, illustrated most prominently by the May 2023 instance of lawyers citing fabricated cases in a court filing for a personal injury suit, a result of "hallucinations" produced by ChatGPT that were included in the filing without proper vetting. With such headlines shining a spotlight on the technology's shortcomings, it is little wonder the ChatGPT report found that 72% percent of legal professionals believe that the use of generative AI should be limited to non-legal work within their firms.

But the belief that generative AI is bound to be more problematic than helpful for the full range of legal work is based on an incomplete understanding of how AI can be best used by the legal profession. Since legal generative AI is intended to augment the work of legal professionals, it can vastly improve lawyers' efficiency, speed, and creativity if used in the right ways. The quality of legal AI tools is key — as is the practice of viewing such tools as assistants whose work always needs validation

As the ChatGPT "hallucination" story demonstrates, generative AI is not intended to be used to create presentation-ready legal outputs. Legal professionals should approach these tools as they would approach the work of a skilled legal assistant. Although AI can make the human-centered work of law more streamlined, lawyers will always need to apply their expert knowledge by fact-checking AI-produced assertions, building on generative AI research suggestions, rewriting its stilted content, and enhancing the legal arguments it constructs. Like professionals in other fields who are using these next-generation tools, legal professionals should think of generative AI as a research and ideating aide that works at the speed of light but doesn't possess even a fraction of a lawyer's knowledge.

Some positive misconceptions about generative AI are also common in the legal profession — and these can also impede the effective use of generative AI in legal work. For example, some professionals believe that training a large language model is simple and fast, such that these tools can deliver helpful results with minimal training. The truth is that it takes an extensive amount of work to train large language models to be helpful to legal professionals, requiring data scientists and large volumes of legal materials that provide context-specific language and concepts.

In considering the use of generative AI for legal work, it's important for law practices to note that there is a vast difference between free, public-access generative AI tools like ChatGPT and industry-specific, highly refined products like Thomson Reuters' AI-Assisted Research on Westlaw® Precision. Third-party providers like Thomson Reuters are taking on the work of training such tools on behalf of lawyers, putting their data scientists and legal experts to work on their extensive legal large language models.

"It's happening right now, so it's not a wait-and-see moment. This is the moment for people to lean in and figure out and start to use this technology. Thomson Reuters, for example, plans to use generative AI not only to support legal research, but to also move into supporting drafting applications, workflow applications, and applications that will seamlessly integrate into law firms' workflows, both with other Thomson Reuters solutions and other commonly used applications like Microsoft Word."

— Rawia Ashraf
VP, Product Management Legal Practice and Productivity for Thomson Reuters

Why legal professionals should embrace generative AI

Efficiency and speed. Generative AI uses the power of automation to help legal teams perform a range of tasks more efficiently and quickly. Examples of work that generative AI can help with include summarizing legal content, planning for depositions, synthesizing and reviewing content, and conducting contract analysis. Such tasks take a large amount of time when done manually, so the extreme speed of generative AI leaves lawyers more time to thoughtfully assess and build on what the large language model produces. More efficient legal research means minimized nonbillable time and reduced administrative burden.

Legal-specific support. Built-for-purpose generative AI is significantly different than general AI for wider use cases. It is trained, built, and optimized for legal use and is held to higher standards around data, privacy, training models, and content. For example, some generative AI-enabled tools not only contribute to legal research but also support a variety of applications that seamlessly integrate into law firms' workflows. Such integration allows teams to complete rote tasks specific to legal work far more quickly and with a high degree of confidence that the outputs will be helpful.

Satisfied clients. Legal professionals are facing client pressure to adopt new technology and deliver more value to automate rote back-office functions. Clients expect their lawyers to be on the cutting edge of technology and to be using the best tools available. Generative AI helps legal professionals deliver on those client expectations faster and more efficiently from a better starting point, thereby reducing friction, cost, and other impediments to providing optimal customer service. As a result, legal professionals who use generative AI-enabled tools strategically will be able to pass on the benefits of the resulting time and cost savings to clients.

Reduced outsourcing. In-house counsel can use generative AI-enabled tools to perform critical tasks faster, reducing the amount of work they need to outsource. Doing less outsourcing can bring down costs substantially and remove bottlenecks that slow down progress throughout an organization or government agency. Reducing costs helps in-house law departments move toward the goal of working as a revenue-driver instead of a cost center for their organizations.

Revenue generation. In-house counsel in the private sector can use this technology to help generate revenue on behalf of the organization, thereby helping their department shift away from being a cost center. One example is speeding up the contract analysis process to help the business close deals faster. Additionally, when highly skilled legal professionals are freed from rote tasks, they can spend more time on high-value activities that drive the business forward and make the best use of their training and knowledge.

"Legal generative AI is supposed to augment what a lawyer does. It's not going to do legal reasoning or case strategy. What it's supposed to do is do repeatable rote tasks much more quickly and efficiently."

— Zach Warren
 Manager, Enterprise Content-Technology and Innovation for Thomson Reuters Institute
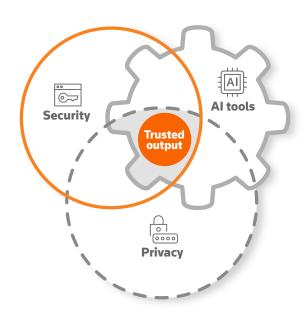
What drives your large language model?
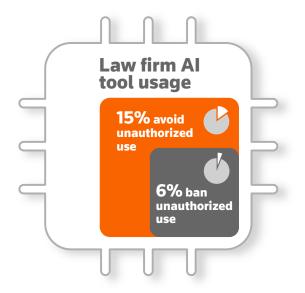
Why the right content matters

Lawyers have been reluctant to adopt generative AI tools due to lack of trust and fear of the increased risk that these tools might introduce. A majority of legal professionals (62%) say their firm has concerns around the risks of using generative AI in the workplace, and 80% of partners and managing partners believe there is concern around risk, according to the Thomson Reuters Institute's *ChatGPT and Generative AI within Law Firms* report. Only 2% say their firm has no risk-related concerns about the technology.

But much of the perception of generative AI's risk is based on misconceptions and lack of knowledge of the built-for-purpose tools available to the legal profession. While public-facing generative AI tools like ChatGPT use open-source, stale data with very few security and privacy controls, legal-specific generative AI tools use high-quality data in a safe and secure environment. Professional tools like those from Thomson Reuters use closed, secure data sets in an environment that maintains privacy, and models are trained on trusted content that is not freely available to the general public.

The only way for legal professionals to trust the output of the AI tools they use is for those large language models to be powered with trusted content specific to their professions — with robust security and privacy controls built in.

Law firms that want to leverage the massive advantage in efficiency and speed that AI provides need a best-in-class tool built on trusted data — and they need to mandate its exclusive use within their firms. Yet most legal teams today are doing little to counter the risk of employees using whatever generative AI tool they prefer.

Law firm AI tool usage

15% avoid unauthorized use

6% ban unauthorized use

According to the Thomson Reuters ChatGPT report, only 15% of survey respondents said their firms had advised employees to avoid unauthorized use of generative AI tools, and only 6% reported that their firms had banned unauthorized use.

How legal-focused generative AI tools help law firms and legal departments

More efficient legal research. Generative AI provides a jumpstart on legal research by reducing the time legal professionals must spend shifting through and summarizing content. These tools can produce in moments an informative version of research that would have previously taken hours or days. Lawyers can then apply their expertise to refining the results to ensure that the research output is high quality, thorough, and accurate. This jumpstart is like beginning a journey at its midway point, leaving the legal firm and its client far more time and energy to make it to the end successfully.

Faster synthetization and analysis. Legal professionals can use generative AI to produce a range of useful outputs, including content summaries, meeting agendas and transcripts, contract analysis, and document review. The synthesis and analysis required to create these products happens in the blink of an eye, leaving users time to check, enhance, refine, and rewrite where necessary. The range of assistance offered by legal-focused generative AI improves the legal firm's or department's output by facilitating the legal professional's ability to apply their higher-level expertise to the work at hand.

Improved knowledge management. Generative AI can help legal teams stay organized and share information via cross-functional tools. Better and faster methods of saving, indexing, identifying, and disseminating lawyers' prior work and collective expertise helps legal firms and departments solve legal and business problems more effectively. Legal teams can use these tools to rapidly draw upon the store of knowledge, allowing them to enhance their analysis without extensive or frustrating searching. The work that goes into knowledge management is typically not billable, so making it faster and easier helps the legal firm or department save costs and free up professionals' time for billable work.

Enhanced onboarding and learning. Legal organizations benefit from efficient onboarding and ongoing skills development, both of which can be enhanced with generative AI. Legal-focused generative AI tools help users get up to speed quickly without extensive training, whether they are new to a firm or gaining knowledge about an unfamiliar area of law. These tools also help users learn new skills in a hands-on way as they work, reducing the need for as many formalized skill-development interventions, saving time and money.

"For any of the tasks that lawyers do on a regular basis or that administrative professionals supporting the legal industry do on a regular basis, this technology allows them to do those things faster and to create a starting point much earlier in the process."

— Zena Applebaum
Global VP, Product Marketing for Research Products for Thomson Reuters

How legal-focused generative AI tools help law firms and legal departments

Plain-language prompting to navigate complexity.
Legal matters are often complex, which can make research, knowledge management, synthesis, and analysis difficult. Those unfamiliar with a given area of law may struggle to know where to start or which language is most applicable in searching for resources. Generative AI tools that can be prompted using plain-language queries allow users to access faster answers to complicated legal questions, and rapidly organize information and precedents that can help them develop successful arguments.

Trustworthy security and privacy. Data privacy and security are paramount concerns in the legal industry. A professional tool licensed to a particular institution or firm provides a far more secure work ecosystem than a public-facing tool with few or no data controls. While legal professionals must always use caution regarding what data they use with AI tools, they can input a range of proprietary data with far less risk in a professional, licensed tool. Additionally, since legal-specific generative AI tools are trained on high-quality legal content, legal organizations can be confident that their output will be more trustworthy and accurate than other large language models.

A successful field test leads to trust.

A legal customer decided to test the capabilities of a new generative AI-powered research tool from Thomson Reuters with a research question that they already knew the answer to. The customer was thrilled when the answer was 100% in line with their expectations. This assured the customer not only that the research tool returned trustworthy and verifiable answers, but that they could also take that generated research answer and use it to train associates in a fraction of the time that it would take an individual to train them.

Thomson Reuters has been a trusted resource within the legal industry for 150 years and is now a leader in legal AI.

Almost 4,500 law firms, corporate departments, and government agencies use Thomson Reuters tools, and our labs have been developing solutions driven by large language models since the early days of their development.

Thomson Reuters works hand in hand with partners and customers to build solutions iteratively, a method that ensures that those solutions most exactly meet their needs.

Thomson Reuters AI tools are trained on best-in-class content created by experts in law, which makes them far more useful and trustworthy to legal professionals than other generative AI tools on the market or those available to the public for free. This intensive training helps mitigate problems like hallucinations and missing content in responses and enhances users' trust in and experience with the tool.

"When we think about what's truly exciting and transformative in terms of the way that we work, it is that seamless handoff and integration between the experience in different products."

— Andrew Fletcher
Director, AI Strategy and Partnerships for Thomson Reuters Labs

Powerful tools for legal minds.

While generative AI is a powerful tool in any form, customizing its functionality to a particular context amplifies its usefulness.

Legal audiences need legal-specific generative AI to get the full benefit of this technology, which can help speed up research and analysis, better satisfy customers, reduce costs, and boost revenue.

Made-for-purpose generative AI tools can add tremendous value to legal work, but they won't replace legal professionals. Humans' legal expertise and judgement will remain the core driver of the profession. Generative AI technology can augment the efforts of legal professionals by increasing efficiency, jumpstarting research, facilitating synthesis, and augmenting analysis.

Generative AI is a powerful tool — but as with any tool, it's most useful when wielded by a skilled professional. As this technology develops, forward-looking legal teams will benefit from learning about its risks and benefits from an expert with a century and a half of legal industry experience.

Learn more about AI @ Thomson Reuters, and sign up for industry-leading insights and updates on this fast-developing topic.

Explore solutions

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