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AI threatens Big Law's talent pipeline



Russell Contreras



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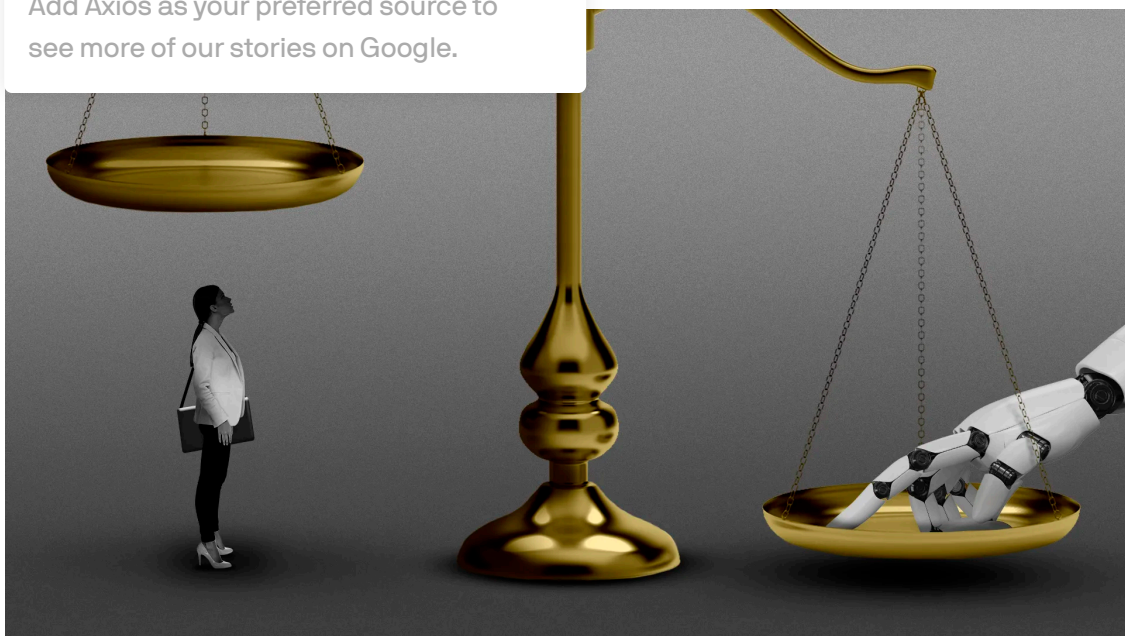


Illustration: Sarah Grillo/Axios. Stock: Getty Images

[Artificial intelligence](#) is wiping out some entry-level work that trains the next generation of elite lawyers.

Why it matters: Big Law's entire business model depends on armies of junior associates learning on the job. If AI erases that rung, the profession faces a long-term talent crisis.

The big picture: The legal profession's most important classroom, the early-career grind of junior and summer associates, is quietly reshaping, as the path to partnership is being rewritten in real time.

- Firms are racing to "extract the knowledge of their lawyers" and embed it in AI workflows, client portals and self-service tools, Stanford Law professor David Freeman Engstrom tells Axios.
- That could mean "getting ready for a world in which you need fewer human lawyers," he said.

Yes, but: Tiffany J. Tucker, assistant dean for career development at the University of Houston Law Center says AI may create new legal jobs rather than erase entry-level ones.

- Students with AI skills are becoming "the more attractive candidates," she said. "If you don't have prowess using AI, you're going to be left behind."
- Engstrom said AI also may allow for new legal business to emerge for needs not met currently.

State of play: Firms are not just experimenting with AI — they're restructuring around it.

- Major firms use AI for research, litigation prep, document review and case law.
- Judges themselves are beginning to use AI tools for drafting and summarizing opinions.

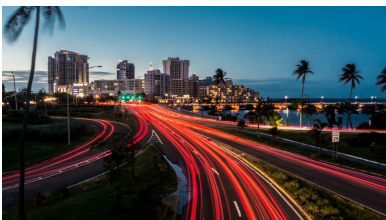
Zoom in: [A&O Shearman and Harvey](#) announced AI agents for complex legal workflows, to be used internally and sold to clients and other law firms.

- [Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison](#) began testing AI tools like Harvey across its lawyers in 2023 and has since embedded them into [everyday legal work](#), from drafting to document analysis.

Friction point: Some major firms are already adjusting their headcounts as the "efficiency paradox" takes hold. AI speeds up work, reducing the need for billable human hours.

- [Clifford Chance](#), one of the largest international law firms, announced last year it was cutting jobs, citing increased adoption of AI tools, per the [Financial Times](#).
- A major 2025 [legal market report](#) found firms have "reduced the pace" of associate hiring or cut the size of summer associate programs — the high-paid internships used to wine and dine potential associates later.

What they're saying: Nik Guggenberger, a University of Houston Law Center professor, tells Axios that junior work has always served two purposes: billing and training.



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- "If more and more of that work that trains junior associates is being automated, then there's no real material anymore for them to train on."
- Guggenberger said if the profession moves to partners and AI agents, it becomes very hard to break in.

Between the lines: If AI removes the low-level reps, firms must invent a new apprenticeship system or risk creating lawyers who can supervise AI outputs without having built the judgment to know when those outputs are wrong.

- Engstrom said the next year will be crucial as firms figure out how to use client data, build AI workflows and answer sticky consent questions.
- As AI automates some law firm work, the traditional "leverage model"— the pyramid system where a few partners sit atop a massive base of billing associates — is facing a structural threat.

The bottom line: The future lawyer isn't a document reviewer. They are a "symphony conductor" who pieces together AI outputs, data and legal scenarios, Engstrom said.

- Those who can't wield the baton — and the algorithm — will find themselves without an orchestra.

