Legal service delivery in the AI era

How client-law firm partnerships can thrive

Executive summary

The legal industry is undergoing a profound transformation. As generative AI redefines workflows and client expectations evolve, legal operations professionals are emerging as strategic architects of change.

Based on insights from legal operations leaders in multiple industries, this study reveals a legal market in flux — where efficiency, innovation, and collaboration are essential, rather than optional, for success. As self-service tools and AI pilots redefine law firm relationships, clients demand greater transparency, increased communication, and a more strategic focus.

Research as captured in this report offers a roadmap for legal departments and law firms to thrive in a new era of legal service delivery.

Legal operations progression
From support to strategy

A large majority of our respondents (83%) say the legal ops role has changed significantly, while a slightly higher number (84%) say it is expanding. The diversity of roles mentioned include data analytics, knowledge management, and strategic planning. As a result, legal ops professionals — now viewed as internal consultants and transformation leaders — are quickly becoming an engine of legal innovation, with many now acting as chief of staff or COO to the GC.

Building relationships with leaders outside of legal is cited as a crucial skill for legal operations. There is broad agreement that legal ops as a function has expanded and is more aligned with risk, ethics, compliance, finance, and HR than in the past. Some feel that legal ops professionals were previously more generalist overall and are now becoming more specialized as new roles and responsibilities accrue.

83%

Say the legal ops role has changed significantly

84%

Say it is expanding

Leadership Insight

Legal operations are no longer a back-office function.

Metrics, mindsets, and maturity

Measuring legal success

Cost savings are a critical success metric. Annual goals may include cost management, partnership with the business, program implementation, and feedback from stakeholders. Success is measured by how they deliver against those goals. Finance has a number associated with it, but for other goals, like technology implementation, success is measured through criteria such as adoption outcomes, organizational health, and stakeholder satisfaction.

While the progress is uneven, our research does indicate an upward trend in legal ops maturity. Many teams lack hard KPIs and rely on qualitative metrics like satisfaction and adoption. Cost savings, tech adoption, and efficiency are cited as the top indicators of success. This means there is an opportunity to build a metrics framework that ties legal performance to business outcomes.

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> Corporate legal departments empower trust, which is **our number one value.**
>
> Survey respondent

Leadership Insight

Research findings indicate an upward trend in legal ops maturity.

Reset the relationship

Curb the transactional mindset

Most respondents (71%) agree that the law firm or in-house relationship has changed. With fixed fees, ALSPs, and tech-enabled service delivery rising, the billable hour is under pressure. Clients increasingly demand greater transparency, more efficient processes, proactive insights, and value-based pricing. The relationship can also feel very transactional, especially around pricing, and that's not ideal.

Corporate leaders want law firms to share what they are doing or planning to do differently. They'd like to know how law firms evolve their practice to serve clients better. For example, how does the firm use new technologies like AI, and how do they align that usage with a client's tech strategy when working with the client's data? Other examples include consistency across geographies, providing premium service for premium rates, and developing a deep understanding of the client's business.

71%

Agree that the law firm or in-house relationship has changed

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Law firms must stop being transactional vendors and start acting like strategic partners.

94%

Believe automation and AI will change legal work

71%

Are exploring or using generative AI for specific tasks

90%

Are finding gen AI useful for tasks such as e-discovery, contract review, and summarization

Technology and AI

From hype to impact

Cautiously optimistic, legal teams are piloting AI as they build internal literacy. Nearly the entire field of respondents (94%) believe automation and AI will change legal work, but indicate it is early days; widespread adoption and significant impacts are not being asserted, yet. Legal operations leaders view generative AI as promising but not risk free.

A healthy number (71%) are exploring or using generative AI for specific tasks, but concerns around accuracy and compliance dictate a cautious approach to broader AI usage. That said, nearly all (90%) are finding gen AI useful for tasks such as e-discovery and contract review, as well as for summarization. Use cases for automation are focused on NDAs, intake, and contract workflows.

Leadership Insight

AI is like a research legal assistant — it doesn't replace us, but it helps us move faster.

Harness the data

Dashboards and decision-making

Law firm clients expect client-facing dashboards populated with ever-increasing amounts of data. But although data is everywhere, it is often siloed, unstructured, and underutilized. One respondent commented that, "The more technology we use, the harder it is to gather metrics and measure success. Success looks like a dashboard that can provide a holistic view of the legal department instantly."

More legal teams are using e-billing to monitor legal spend and tools like Power BI to analyze performance. They collect data that enables them to build general counsel dashboards and report their budgets to stakeholders. Clean, structured data is also essential for AI and automation.

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Organized data tracking is critical.

71%

Offer or plan to offer legal intake and self-service tools

Self-Service and automation
Empowering the business

The new paradigm for in-house legal teams is working toward organizational goals and delivering insights that contribute to corporate strategy. Legal intake and self-service tools such as FAQs and NDAs are gaining traction, with a solid majority (71%) of respondents either offering or planning to offer them in the foreseeable future.

Self-service systems work with minimal input to surface knowledge and content from legal documents, forms, contracts, and more. They enable lawyers to automate monotonous tasks and deliver more efficient, strategic, and valuable service at a lower cost, both in currency and in its toll on workers. And this is a concern to take seriously.

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Automation is a game changer: it helps legal operations scale their impact across the business.

Emphasize the human factor

Banish burnout with balance

When implemented correctly, technology can help raise the profile of legal operations, but when done wrong, you may just make people angry. Burnout is rising among legal ops professionals, in part due to the blurred boundaries that hybrid work creates. But hours are only part of the problem — and some say workload is the real culprit. To counter this trend, some legal ops leaders are investing in mental health services while trying to model a healthy work/life balance.

People are also more prone to burnout when they are forced into a mindset that they must continually expand their capabilities to preserve or enhance their value, to be better than AI. One respondent said AI has become as good as a first-year associate. Do first-year associates now have to prove they can do the work assigned to them better than agentic AI? Does their job depend on it? If so, that might be a short-sighted strategy for a business to embrace. Which asset will prove its greater adaptability and value over time, the human or the AI? Is that a gamble worth taking?

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Efficiency isn't just about tech — it's also about protecting your people.

Crystal ball

Skills tomorrow's legal professional must possess

Tools can support the value of legal operations, but people are its greatest assets. As the in-house legal department has shifted from a risk management focus to a business enablement model, relationships have evolved accordingly.

And as technology speeds forward at a blistering pace, the importance of legal professionals being grounded in data literacy, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and AI fluency grows ever more critical. Of-the-moment capabilities like prompt engineering and project management are ascendant now, but indispensable soft skills like communication and relationship-building will stand the test of time.

Leadership Insight

The future lawyer is part technologist, part strategist, and 100% human.

# Legal leaders and technology

> ❝❞
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> ## We are like the kitten chasing the laser pointer.
>
> **Survey respondent**

Leaders should automate workflows, build AI literacy across the department, prioritize data quality and governance and align with the overall business strategy, while never taking their eye off the ball on costs, productivity, or service. It's a lot to ask.

Data analytics are helpful for decision-making, cost control, and risk management. Some groups use Tableau to streamline reporting. Others use Power BI to understand costs, rates, and matters. ServiceNow and Veeva are mentioned for automated intake. Several find Copilot helpful for a variety of tasks.

Many who embrace legal ops as a strategic partner seek to redefine law firm relationships around value, not hours. The pace of this revolutionary shift is client-led and long in the making. Turning a blind eye won't reverse the trend.
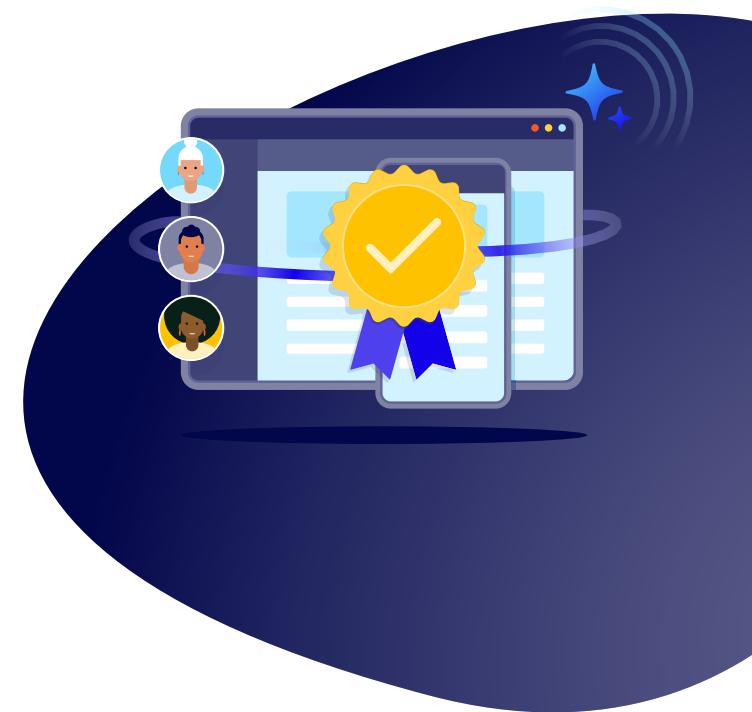
Leadership Insight

Invest in tools that empower — not replace — legal professionals.

The future is collaborative, tech-enabled, client-centric, and it's here

The 2025 Legal Operations Report is more than a snapshot — it's a call to action. Look forward, not back. Those who fall behind are likely to stay behind. As the legal market shifts from **reactive** to **proactive,** those who adapt are preparing to lead, while those who resist change are writing their professional obituary.

Legal operations teams look to law firms to be true partners who provide solutions and insights *without being asked,* including opportunities for automation and other creative strategies for working smarter.

Sharing knowledge is essential to leaders in this sector, especially given the rapid pace of change. They wish law firms would think creatively about costs, cost structures, and risk sharing, and offer value-based pricing over activity-based pricing that incentivizes inefficiency. And yes — provide alternative legal services where appropriate, as well.

In this collaborative, tech-enabled, client-centric world, legal ops professionals build long-term partnerships with law firms that proactively engage, share ideas, and take bold steps to enhance the trusted advisor dynamic. If these are your clients, that's your mission.

> **" "**
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> **Be thought leaders,** don't just play it safe.
>
> Leader and survey respondent

Leadership Insight
We're not just managing legal work. We're designing the future of legal.

Respondent demographics

Survey respondents represent leadership and operational roles in legal departments across a variety of organizations. Respondent roles and titles include: Director, Head of Legal Operations, and Chief of Staff.
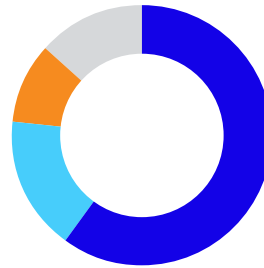
Industries represented include:

- **Technology – 26.67%** (e.g., Intel, Salesforce)
- **Pharmaceutical – 16.67%** (e.g., Bristol Myers Squibb)
- **Healthcare – 13.33%** (e.g., Providence St.Joseph Health)
- **Other – 43.33%** (e.g., financial services, insurance, consumer products)
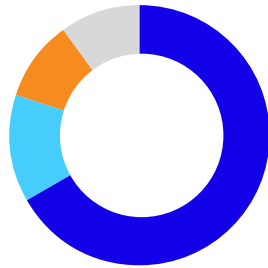
Respondents reported employees numbering:

- **10,000+ – 66.67%**
- **1,000 to 4,999 – 13.33%**
- **500 to 999 – 10%**
- **Non-respondents**

Revenue ranges reported include:

- **More than $10 billion – 60%**
- **$1 billion to $5 billion – 16.67%**
- **$500 million to $1 billion – 10%**
- **Non-respondents**

A trend toward larger legal ops teams suggests that organizational investment in legal ops capabilities is rising.

- **10+ legal ops professionals — 22.58%**
- **At least 3 legal ops professionals — 16.13%**
- **2 to 5 professionals — 12.90%**
- **Non-respondents**

Ready to see how iManage can help you shift the paradigm in your legal operations partnerships?

Check out [Ask iManage](#) and start your journey to better partnerships, today.

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Making knowledge work