



Why Law Firm Talent Leaders Should Lead AI Transformation

AI ADOPTION IS A HUMAN CHALLENGE, NOT JUST A TECHNOLOGICAL ONE

The Real Problem: AI Adoption is a Human Challenge

*The firms that lead AI transformation will be the ones that solve the behavior change barriers. These are not simply technology problems. They're **problems of time, fear, incentives, and trust**, which talent and professional development leaders are primed to solve. AI adoption was never IT's problem to own alone.*

Right now, no one owns the fix

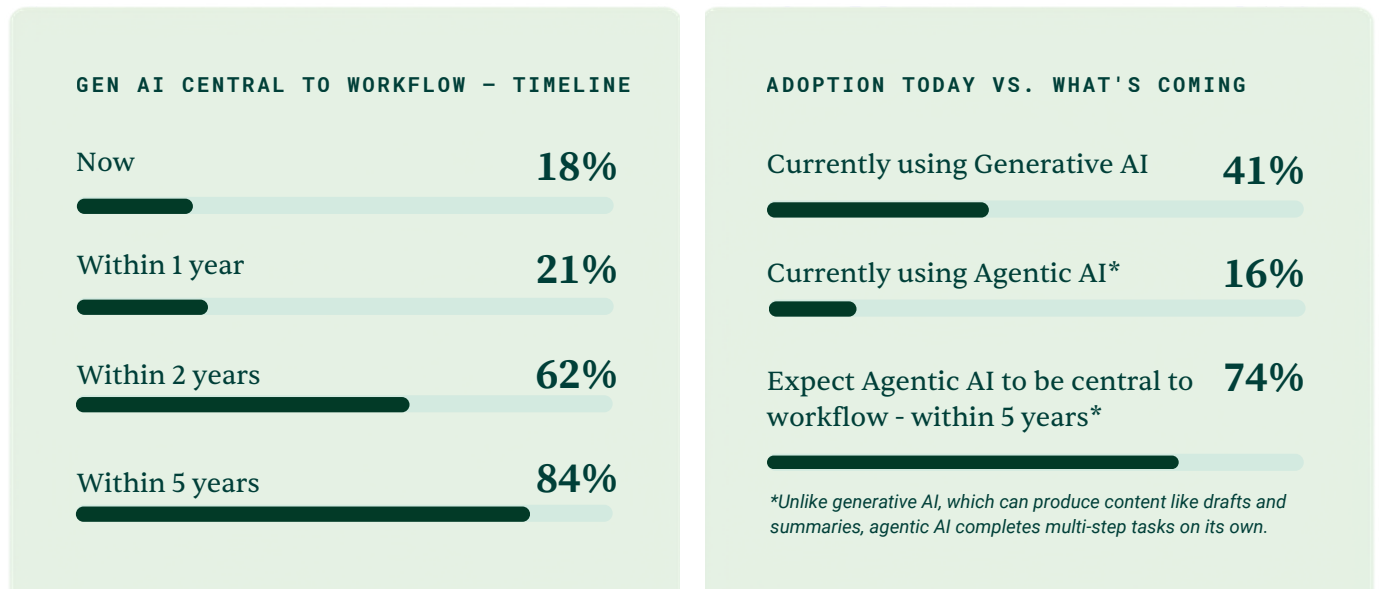
The great AI transformation era has arrived inside law firms. But adoption is wildly uneven, and the **emerging change management challenges are more human than technical**.

Law schools say practical AI training belongs at firms. Firms say new lawyers should arrive ready. Practice leaders point to innovation teams, while innovation teams say adoption will fail without partner engagement. In that gap, **lawyers are left to figure out tools that may reshape their work without a shared developmental model for using them effectively**.

In one office, a lawyer may be using generative AI daily to summarize documents, draft client emails, and conduct research. Down the hall, another may have barely touched the tools. That gap can look like resistance. But in reality, the industry hasn't yet built the habits, culture, and training that real human adoption requires.

No firm has figured this out with perfect clarity. But "new for everyone" isn't permission to wait. The firms that start building talent solutions now, even imperfectly, will develop **a more future-ready workforce sooner**.

High hopes and big gaps



Source: Thomson Reuters Institute's 2026 AI in Professional Services Report

The Thomson Reuters Institute's 2026 AI in Professional Services Report found that, among law firm professionals, 84% expect generative AI to be central to their workflow within five years, while only 18% say it is central today [p.5]. Agentic AI is on the same curve, with 74% of law firm professionals expecting it to be central to their workflow within 5 years, while **only 16%** use it today [both p.9].

The gap between today's adoption and tomorrow's expected reliance won't close through technology alone. Sustaining adoption at scale requires firms to change how lawyers learn, experiment, build confidence, share knowledge, and integrate new behaviors into their work. **Those are human systems — and talent and professional development leaders already know how to build them.**

*This moment is a chance to rethink how people and technology work together, and to **build the culture, training, and systems** that drive adoption and optimize for sustained performance.*

There's no billing code for experimenting.

Law firms are built around precision, precedent, supervision, hierarchy, and billable time. For generations, that meant a clear model: seniors supervise juniors, develop talent, and move a heavy workload through review.

But **fluency with AI asks for something more flexible and adaptive**. It asks lawyers to experiment, test, compare, verify, and iterate — to play with prompts, test workflows, push a tool until it fails, and learn where human judgment has to intervene.

Those behaviors take time, and they do not always fit neatly into a day measured in six-minute increments.

"Figuring out the tool" loses to the client deadline every time.

Existential fear hampers learning.

Nearly two-thirds — 65% — see AI as a genuine threat to their jobs (41% call it somewhat, 24% call it major, (p. 15)). For a junior lawyer, it isn't abstract: If a tool can research, draft, and summarize, what happens to the work that built confidence and taught you to become a lawyer?

No one gets curious about something they **experience as a threat** to who they are and their livelihood.

And the economics sharpen the anxiety. As the report puts it, "work that previously took hours can now be done in minutes," which for "business models such as law firms that still largely depend on hourly-based billing" could become "an existential threat to how they make money" (p. 16).

Source: Thomson Reuters Institute's 2026 AI in Professional Services Report

The Solution: Relationships are the Infrastructure

*The most innovative move law firm talent leaders can make on AI is investing in relationships, because behavioral change travels through people. And without **intentional relationship structures**, adoption stalls no matter what you deploy.*

For generations, judgment passed down through apprenticeship: juniors did the lower-level work, seniors reviewed it. **AI is now absorbing exactly the work that built those critical developmental reps.**

LEVEL

1

ROUTINE, RULE-BASED

Redlining against a standard playbook, cite-checking, organizing diligence, drafting standard NDAs, summarizing depositions.

LEVEL

2

ANALYTICAL, PATTERN-BASED

First-draft memos on settled law, case research across jurisdictions, issue-spotting against a checklist, routine motion sections.

LEVEL

3

JUDGMENT AND DISCERNMENT

Knowing what to trust and when, when to push and when to hold, reading what a client actually needs, owning the call. **No tool replicates it.**

Levels 1 and 2 were about the reps, not just the work product.

A junior lawyer who reads 200 contracts learns to spot what's missing on the 201st.

If AI absorbs the reps, firms need a more intentional way to build higher-level judgment.

Three kinds of relationships that build the higher-level judgment AI can't teach:

Traditional mentorship, made active.

This is the partner who **models curiosity over expertise**, willing to say "I don't know yet," which gives juniors permission to learn in the open. Senior lawyers help them read context, risk, client sensitivity, tone, and professional responsibility. They show where an AI-generated answer is technically plausible but strategically wrong, pinpoint errors in its legal analysis, and provide the oversight that protects against liability.

Peer learning, to normalize the confusion.

AI labs within firms make experimentation safer by giving people defined time and shared use cases. Rather than asking everyone to become an expert in the abstract, they gather lawyers around specific tasks: preparing deposition outlines, summarizing agreements, comparing clauses. People learn as a cohort, **being bad at something on the way to being good, together.**

Reverse mentoring runs two ways.

The point is not to make junior lawyers the firm's unofficial tech support. The stronger model is a genuine two-way transfer, and the dynamic is subtler than it looks. Junior lawyers often don't use AI at work (due to fear, and no clear use cases) but use it heavily in their personal lives. So senior lawyers teach judgment, context, and standards while junior lawyers bring comfort with experimentation and a wider sense of what the tools can actually do. That kind of **relationship-driven learning moves adoption faster than any formal memo.**

The Playbook: Build the Human Conditions for Adoption

Talent leaders do not need to wait for perfect consensus. They can start with these **seven practical moves** that address the real human barriers law firms face.



1. Provide billable credit to play.

Fluency doesn't come from a policy announcement. Give lawyers sanctioned, unbillable time to test tools against real work and compare outputs with experienced judgment. If it isn't on the clock, it won't happen.



2. Run AI labs around real tasks.

Not another product demo, but a working session where lawyers try a specific task, inspect the output with discernment, name the risks, and decide what they would and wouldn't trust.



3. Set the rules of the road.

People can't play without guardrails. Be explicit about which tools are approved, what data can go where, what "a human in the loop" actually requires, and where the hard lines are. Clear rules don't slow experimentation. They make it safe enough to happen.



4. Build reverse-mentoring pods.

Mix senior lawyers, mid-levels, associates, and professional staff around a learning goal, not a vague leadership mandate. One pod might focus on research. Another might test client alerts. Another might examine diligence workflows.



5. Make it safe to be wrong.

Lawyers are trained to avoid mistakes, but learning AI requires making some mistakes in a controlled setting. A healthy culture lets people say out loud: I don't understand this yet. I got a bad answer. I trusted it too fast. I need help seeing the risk.



6. Invest in human skills alongside AI.

As AI absorbs more routine work, deliberately build the skills lawyers will rely on more: judgment, listening, advising, framing, and managing ambiguity. **AI fluency and human capability should develop together.**



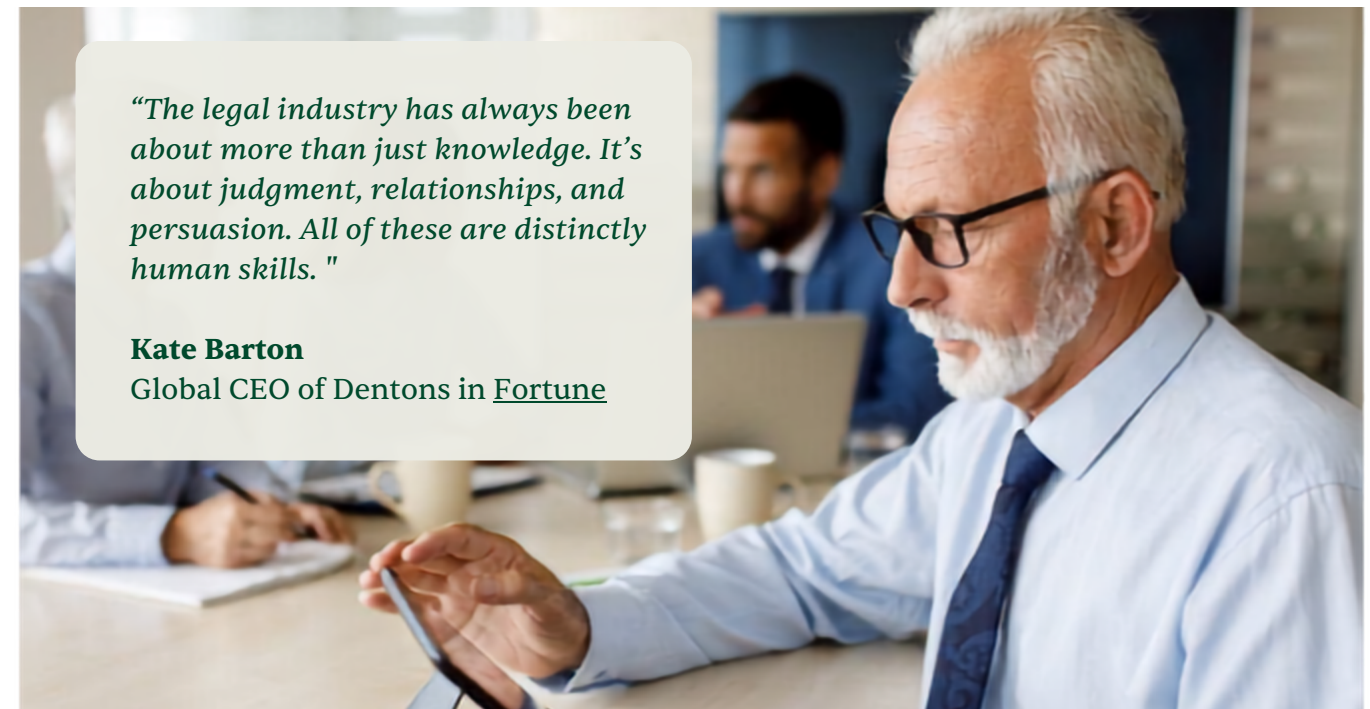
7. Create knowledge-sharing loops.

When one group finds a workflow that works, don't let it stay trapped with one enthusiastic partner. Turn scattered wins into institutional learning.

"The legal industry has always been about more than just knowledge. It's about judgment, relationships, and persuasion. All of these are distinctly human skills."

Kate Barton

Global CEO of Dentons in Fortune



The Payoff: Firms That Invest in People Will Lead

Firms that get this right gain far more than efficiency. They build the **human capital** that keeps paying out long after today's tools are obsolete.



Stronger relationships across levels.

Structured mentorship, peer learning, and reverse mentoring don't just speed adoption; they rebuild the cross-level trust that hybrid work and AI have been slowly eroding.



A change-management muscle for whatever comes next.

A firm that can move its people through this shift can move them through the next one.



The talent function becomes a strategic driver.

Lead AI adoption well and professional development stops being a support function and becomes a driver of firm performance.



Greater credibility with clients.

A majority of clients (54%) want their firms using AI, but only 29% know how theirs actually does (Thomson Reuters). As one general counsel put it, the ideal legal team of the future is "boldly digital-first, relentlessly innovative, and tightly woven into business priorities" (p. 12).

For talent leaders, the real work ahead is setting the environment that makes AI tools stick while cultivating the human capabilities they can't replace. It's building the conditions for responsible experimentation, faster judgment, and stronger relationships across levels.

Yes, AI will compress some work, strain the billing model, and unsettle lawyers who built their careers in a different system.



*But handled with intention, it forces the profession to get deliberate about the things it has always claimed to value most: **judgment, mentorship, trust, and human connection.***

Paradoxically, AI may be the strongest case the legal industry has ever had for being more human — and the firms that hear it, and build for it, are the ones that will lead.

Keep company.

THE PLATFORM FOR RELATIONSHIP-BASED DEVELOPMENT

Keep Company helps firms build and scale the developmental relationships their people need to thrive in the AI-transformed workplace. We combine expert-designed programs – like cohort coaching, mentoring, peer pods – with configurable technology and actionable data to help firms cultivate human skills, keep their best talent, and build organizational resilience.

