

AI in the Legal Industry: What's Actually Happening (and What's Just Hype)

Let's be honest: you've probably heard the same AI pitch a dozen times by now. "Transform your practice!" "Automate everything!" "Replace junior associates!"

Here's what we've actually seen working with UK law firms over the past few years.

The Reality Check

Yes, AI is changing legal work. But not in the way most vendors want you to believe.

We're not talking about robot lawyers or algorithms writing High Court submissions. We're talking about making the boring stuff less boring while freeing up your team to do actual legal work instead of admin.

Think about your typical day. How much time goes into:

- Chasing clients for basic information that should've been collected upfront?
- Manually copying data from intake forms into your case management system?
- Scheduling initial consultations and sending reminder emails?
- Reviewing 300 pages of discovery documents to find the 12 that matter?

That's where AI actually helps. Not the sexy stuff, unfortunately.

What Works Right Now

Client Intake (This One's Big)

Most firms lose potential clients between first contact and actual onboarding. Someone fills out a contact form at 9pm on a Sunday. Your team sees it Monday at 10am. They respond by lunch. Client's already called two other firms.

AI-powered intake systems can engage immediately, collect all the necessary information, and even perform initial conflict checks around the clock. We've seen firms increase their conversion rates by 30-40% just by being "available" outside office hours.

Real example: A personal injury firm in Manchester implemented automated intake last year. They went from losing roughly 1 in 3 evening enquiries to capturing nearly all of them. That's an extra £180K in instructions they would've missed.

Document Review (With Caveats)

AI document review works brilliantly for high-volume, pattern-based work. Disclosure in litigation? Yes. Contract analysis where you're looking for specific clauses across 50 agreements? Absolutely.

Nuanced legal analysis requiring judgment? Not really.

The tools have gotten good at finding needles in haystacks. They're rubbish at telling you whether the needle matters. You still need a human for that bit.

One litigation team told us they cut document review time by 60% on a recent case, but they didn't cut headcount. They just took on more cases with the same team.

Legal Research (Sort Of)

This one's controversial. AI research tools can surface relevant cases faster than manual searching. But this is important: they sometimes hallucinate citations that don't exist.

We've seen it happen. Someone asked an AI tool for case law on a specific employment issue. The AI confidently cited three cases. Two were real and relevant. One never existed.

So yes, use AI for research. But verify everything. Always.

Contract Drafting and Analysis

Here's where AI is surprisingly useful. Not for drafting complex bespoke agreements (though vendors will claim it can), but for:

- Spotting missing clauses in contracts you're reviewing
- Checking whether a contract deviates from your standard terms

- Extracting key dates, obligations, and parties from dozens of agreements at once

One commercial firm we work with uses AI to review every contract before it reaches a fee earner. The AI flags anything unusual or potentially problematic. Saves about 20 minutes per contract, and junior associates aren't doing the initial skim anymore.

What Doesn't Work (Yet)

Let's save you some money and disappointment.

AI won't replace your lawyers. Full stop. Anyone selling you that is lying.

AI won't solve poor processes. If your current intake process is chaotic, automating it will just give you chaotic automation. Fix the process first.

AI won't work with terrible data. If your case management system is full of incomplete records and inconsistent formatting, AI can't magically clean it up. Garbage in, garbage out.

AI won't eliminate risk. In fact, it introduces new ones (more on that below).

The Tricky Bits Nobody Talks About

The SRA Isn't Sure Either

Regulatory guidance on AI in legal practice is... evolving. The SRA has published some guidance, but it's fairly high-level. You're still responsible for:

- Confidentiality (where's your data going?)
- Competence (do you understand how the tool works?)
- Independence (are you blindly accepting AI output?)

If you get it wrong, "the AI made a mistake" isn't a defence.

Client Confidentiality Is Complicated

Most AI tools process data in the cloud. Often on US servers. Sometimes the vendor uses your data to train their models.

Read. The. Contract.

We've seen firms nearly implement tools that would've given the vendor a perpetual licence to use client data. That's not going to fly with the SRA or your clients.

The Cost Isn't Always Obvious

That £500/month SaaS tool looks cheap until you realise:

- You need to integrate it with your case management system (that's another £5K)
- Your team needs training (there's a week of billable time)
- It doesn't quite work the way you need, so you're paying for customisation
- Your IT support costs just went up because now you've got another system to maintain

We're not saying don't do it. Just budget properly.

Your Team Might Hate It

This one's the most underestimated. You implement a brilliant AI tool that saves hours of work. Your team... ignores it.

Why? Because change is hard. Because they don't trust it. Because it adds a step to their workflow. Because someone's worried it's the first step toward redundancy.

Technology is the easy part. Change management is the hard part.

What You Should Actually Do

If you're thinking about AI for your firm, here's what's worked for the firms we've seen succeed:

1. Start with a specific problem, not a technology

Don't start with "we need AI." Start with "we waste 10 hours a week on X, and it drives everyone mad."

Then find a solution. It might be AI. It might not be.

2. Run a proper pilot

Pick one use case. One team. Set clear metrics. Give it 3 months.

If it works, expand. If it doesn't, you've contained the damage.

3. Keep humans in the loop

AI should augment your team, not replace judgment. Make sure there's always a human reviewing the output before it goes to a client or a court.

4. Get your data house in order first

If your current systems are a mess, fix that before adding AI on top. Otherwise you're just making an expensive mess.

5. Take security and compliance seriously

Get your IT and compliance teams involved from day one. Make sure whatever you implement meets SRA requirements and client expectations.

The Next Few Years

Here's what we reckon is coming (and we've been right before, so we're fairly confident):

More sophisticated client-facing AI - The chatbots are getting better. Not just at answering questions, but at actually moving matters forward. We'll see more firms using AI to handle initial consultations, collect information, and even provide basic legal guidance.

Better integration - Right now, most AI tools are bolt-ons. In the next 2-3 years, expect them to be properly integrated into your case management, billing, and document systems.

Specialisation - The one-size-fits-all AI tools will lose out to specialist tools built for specific practice areas. An AI for conveyancing will look nothing like an AI for litigation.

Regulatory clarity - The SRA and other regulators will (hopefully) provide clearer guidance on what's acceptable and what's not.

Client expectations will shift - Clients are already experiencing AI in their consumer lives (banking apps, shopping, customer service). They'll expect their law firms to be similarly responsive and efficient.

Should Your Firm Jump In?

Maybe. Depends.

If you're a small high street firm, the ROI might not be there yet. The technology is still expensive relative to the time it saves.

If you're a mid-size firm with volume work (conveyancing, personal injury, employment), there's probably something that'll save you meaningful time and money.

If you're a large firm, you should already be experimenting. Your clients expect it, and your competitors definitely are.

But whatever you do, don't implement AI just because everyone else is. Do it because you've found a specific problem it solves, you've calculated the ROI, and you've got a plan for managing the risks.

About SlantedBox: We build AI automation for professional services firms, including our Caseflow product for UK accident management firms. We've implemented systems for firms ranging from 5 to 500 people, and we've seen what works and what doesn't.

If you'd like to chat about whether AI makes sense for your firm, get in touch: hi@slantedbox.com | slantedbox.com