

barbri

Envisioning Success: The 2026 BARBRI Career Aspirations Survey

How law firms and law schools can develop talent in the AI age.

June 2026

ABOVE THE LAW

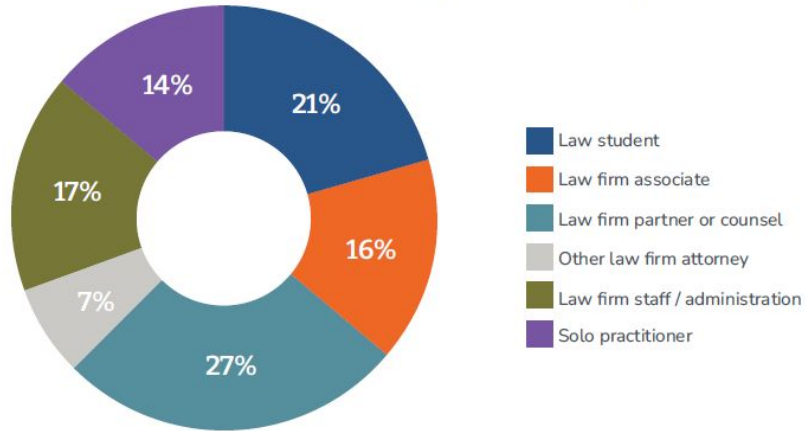
Key Survey Findings

In the spring of 2026, BARBRI and Above the Law surveyed 300+ law students, associates, partners, and staff to explore how legal professionals think about their career development alongside rapidly changing technology.

- **40% of associates see the availability of AI tools as reason for optimism** with regard to their career outlook.
 - **More law students (46%) worry about its impact** on their prospects.
 - **72% of students rate their school's support for leveraging technology as "fair" or "poor."**
 - **Conflicting messages complicate law schools' approach to AI technology** – even when schools provide students with access to AI tools, they often offer little guidance on how to use them appropriately or actively discourage their use.
- A majority of law students and lawyers agree that **AI tools make the development of soft skills particularly important** for professional advancement.
 - Yet **52% of students describe their schools' efforts to meet this need as "fair" or "poor."**
 - While law firms generally received higher marks, **smaller firms seem to do better with respect to soft skills** support than midsize and large firms.
 - **Lawyers wish** that in law school **they had learned more about day-to-day lawyering**, including mechanics of deals, the "nuts and bolts" of litigation, practice management, and client development.

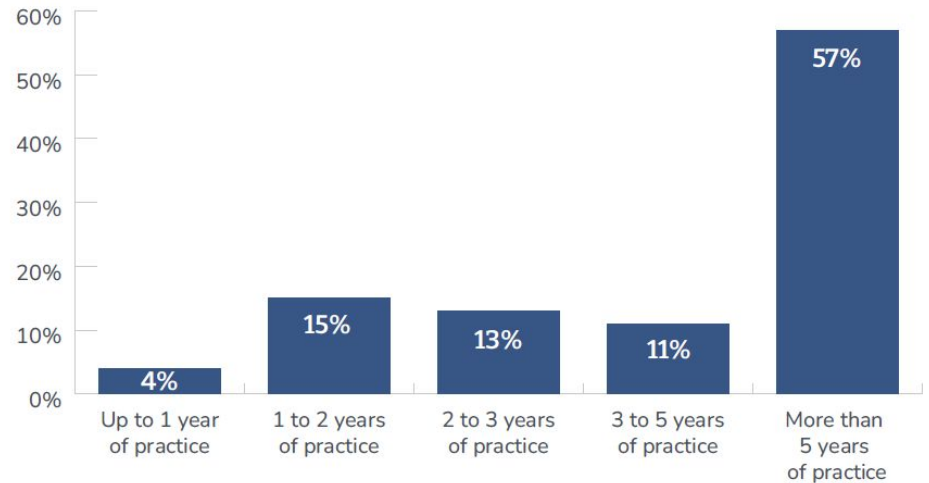
Survey Participants

Which of the following best describes you?



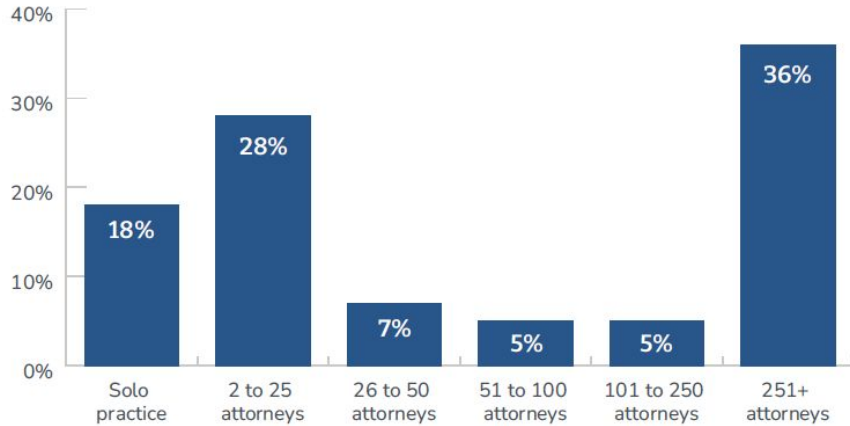
For associates:

Which of the following best describes your level of experience?



Law Firm Participants

How large is your firm?



Are you responsible for professional skills training at your firm?



Respondents have been grouped into the following firm sizes:

- Solo practices
- Small firms (2 to 25 attorneys)
- Midsized firms (26 to 250 attorneys)
- Large firms (251+ attorneys).

What Career Success Looks Like

What do you most hope to achieve in your career?

LAW STUDENTS

- 1 Do interesting work
- 2 Make good money
- 3 Maintain a long and successful career
- 4 Serve the public
- 5 Develop a broad range of professional skills

PARTNERS AND COUNSEL

- 1 Do interesting work
- 2 Make good money
- 3 Maintain a long and successful career
- 4 Work in a collaborative environment
- 5 Make enough money to retire early

ASSOCIATES

- 1 Do interesting work
- 1 Make good money
- 3 Maintain a long and successful career
- 4 Work in a collaborative environment
- 5 Make enough money to retire early

SOLO PRACTITIONERS

- 1 Do interesting work
- 2 Run my own practice
- 3 Maintain a long and successful career
- 3 Serve the public
- 5 Develop special expertise in a particular area of law

Top priorities

- Access to **interesting work**
- **Compensation** (for all but solo practitioners, for whom autonomy is more important)
- Maintain **long, successful career**
- **Collaborative environment** (for associates and partners)
- Earn enough to **retire early** (for associates and partners)
- **Serve the public** (for students and solos)
- **Develop broad range of skills** (for law students)

Visions of the Future

LAW STUDENTS		
	5-year goal	10-year goal
Associate at a large or midsize firm	52%	-
Partner at a large or midsize firm	0%	32%
Government	16%	16%
Nonprofit lawyer	10%	8%
Partner at a small firm	2%	6%
Open / run my own practice	3%	13%
Associate at a small firm	5%	-
Corporate law department	3%	6%
Other legal job	6%	6%
Non-legal job	0%	2%
Haven't yet decided	3%	10%

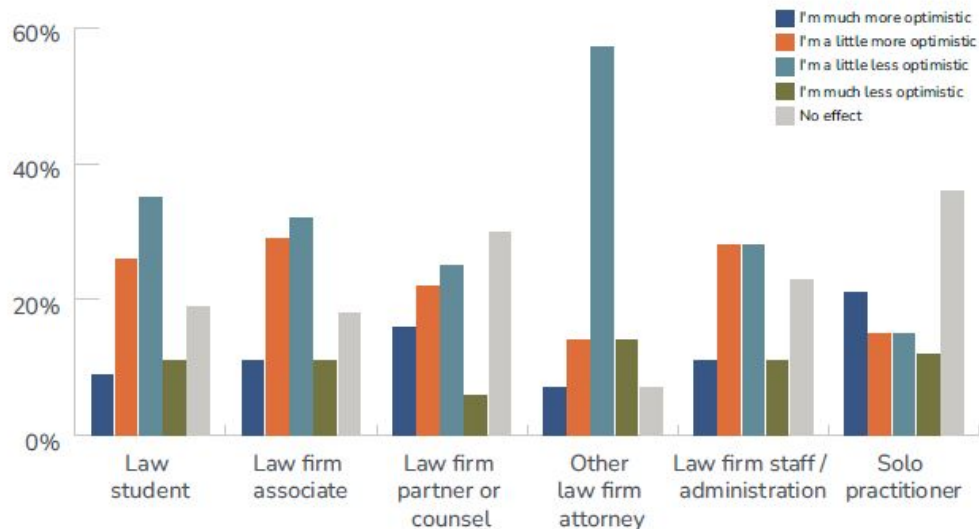
ASSOCIATES		
	5-year goal	10-year goal
Partner at my current firm	48%	52%
Associate at my current firm	12%	-
Corporate law department	12%	12%
Open / run my own practice	7%	7%
Government	7%	7%
Retirement	2%	7%
Non-legal job	2%	5%
Nonprofit lawyer	2%	2%
Partner at a large or midsize firm (not my current firm)	2%	5%
Partner at a small firm (not my current firm)	0%	2%
Associate at a large or midsize firm (not my current firm)	2%	-
Associate at a small firm (not my current firm)	2%	-

Which best describes your career goal?

- Most law students plan to join a law firm: 57% expect to be associates in 5 years, primarily at large or midsize firms.
- But just 32% said their 10-year goal is to be a partner at such a firm.
- 60% of associates expect to remain at their current firm in 5 years, either as associate or partner.
- Just over half hope to be partners there in 10 years.

The Effect of AI on Career Outlook

How has the availability of AI tools affected your career outlook?



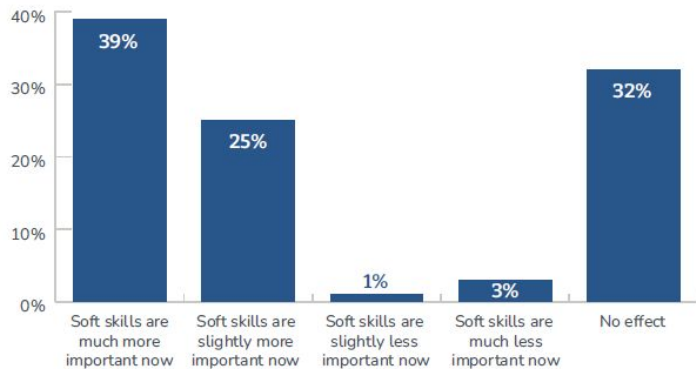
Many students and legal professionals are concerned about the impact of AI.

- Nearly half (46%) of law students reported that it makes them less optimistic about their career prospects, while 35% feel more optimistic.
- Among associates, optimism is a little higher, at 40%, though 43% are less optimistic.
- Partners and solo practitioners showed the least concern about AI's impact. Most either reported feeling optimistic or said that the availability of AI tools have no effect on their outlook.

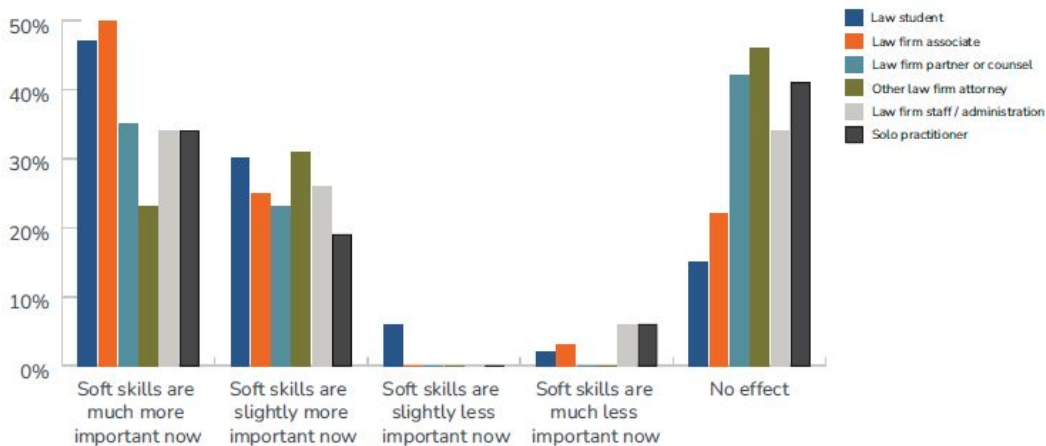
Increased Importance of Soft Skills

A majority of respondents surveyed – including 77% of law students, 75% of associates, and 58% of partners – agree that the availability of AI tools has increased the importance of developing soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, for professional advancement.

How has the availability of AI tools affected the importance of so-called soft skills like emotional intelligence when it comes to your professional advancement?



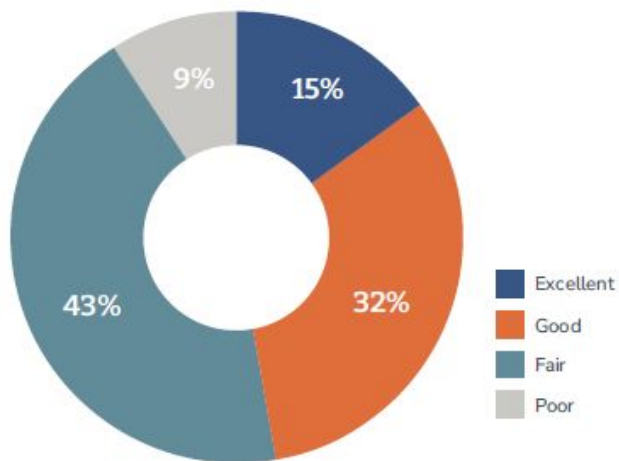
How has the availability of AI tools affected the importance of so-called soft skills like emotional intelligence when it comes to your professional advancement?



Law Schools' Development of Soft Skills

52% of students rate their school's development of soft skills as "fair" or "poor."

How would you rate your school's support in developing soft skills?



- The support schools offer often takes the form of clinics, moot court competitions, networking events, student clubs, or interview training.
- Many students would appreciate more direct guidance on topics such as effective networking, public speaking, interacting with clients, navigating office politics, boundary setting, negotiating, and leadership.

What topics would be most helpful for you in developing soft skills?

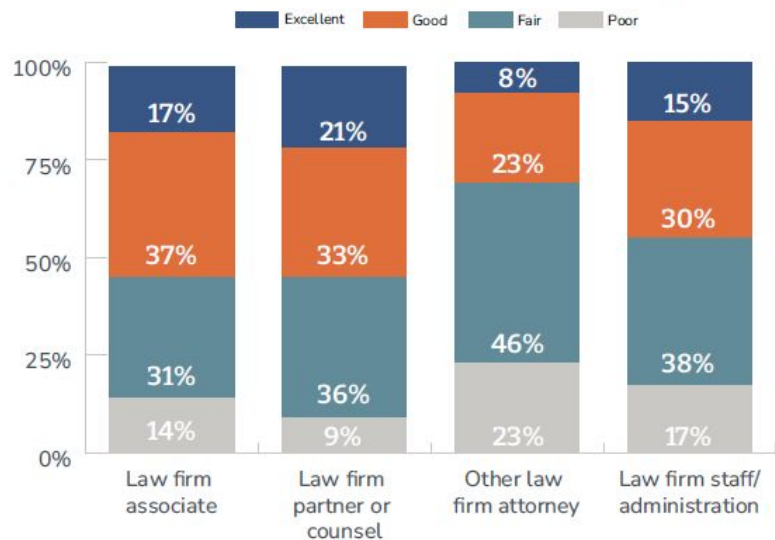
- "Coaching with hiring partners/law firm employees"
- "Courses on client interactions"
- "Emotional intelligence, navigating office politics, art of networking (within the firm and with potential clients)"
- "Leadership, collaboration, empathy"
- "Negotiation; crisis management; business development/sales training"
- "Learning how to speak and communicate with attorneys in the real world, especially the older, more traditional folks"

Law Firms' Support for Soft Skills

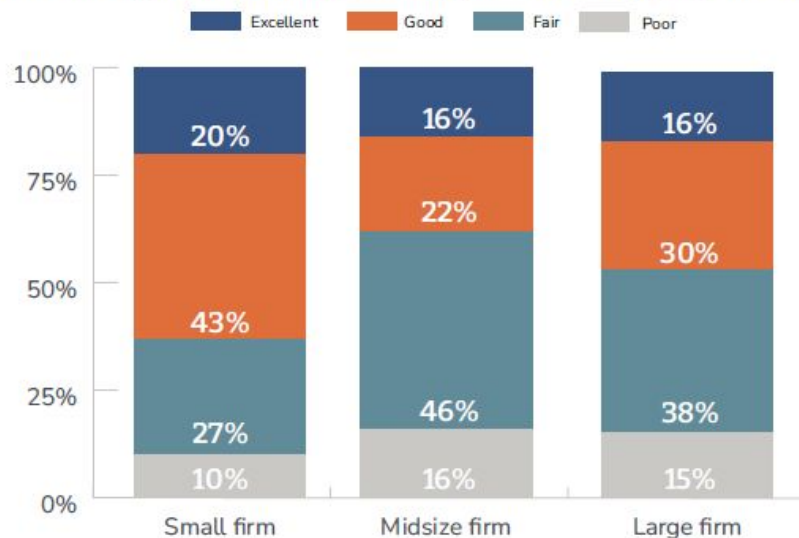
More than half of associates and partners describe their firm's support of soft skills as either "good" or "excellent."

Smaller firms earned higher ratings than midsize or large firms.

How would you rate your firm's support in developing soft skills?



How would you rate your firm's support in developing soft skills?



Soft Skills Training in Law Firms

Most examples cited by associates involve informal learning opportunities, such as:

- Mentoring programs
- Team retreats
- Networking events

Other, more formalized training options include:

- Communication workshops
- Professional individualized coaching

According to one associate:

“Associates are intermittently invited to listen in on partners’ calls with challenging clients or opposing parties. Partners will sit with us for a few minutes after to explain how they used various soft skills in the call.”

Asked what specific topics associates would find helpful to develop soft skills, the most common responses revolved around **strategies for working with others**, such as **managing clients** and developing **better collaboration**:

- “People management, project-oriented decision-making process, and building a long-time, trust-based relationships with clients”
- “How to have better staff collaboration; how to deal with troublesome clients”
- “Mentorship and feedback from superiors”
- “Understanding the market for a specific client/work and understanding how that shapes the client’s anxieties, worries, problems”

Leveraging AI in Law School

Conflicting messages complicate law schools' approach to use of AI tools:

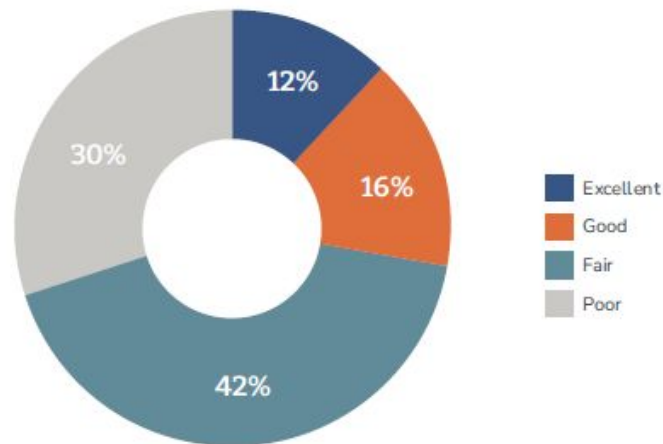
- Some schools offer specific training and courses on AI for legal research.
- Others provide access to AI subscriptions but offer little training or guidelines for appropriate use.
- Some schools make AI tools available but actively discourage or prohibit their use for studying or assignments.

As a result, many students can feel in the dark:
"Unfortunately, I am just part of the transition generation who will have to learn how to utilize AI on my own."

72% of law students rate their school's support for leveraging AI as "fair" or "poor."

For law students:

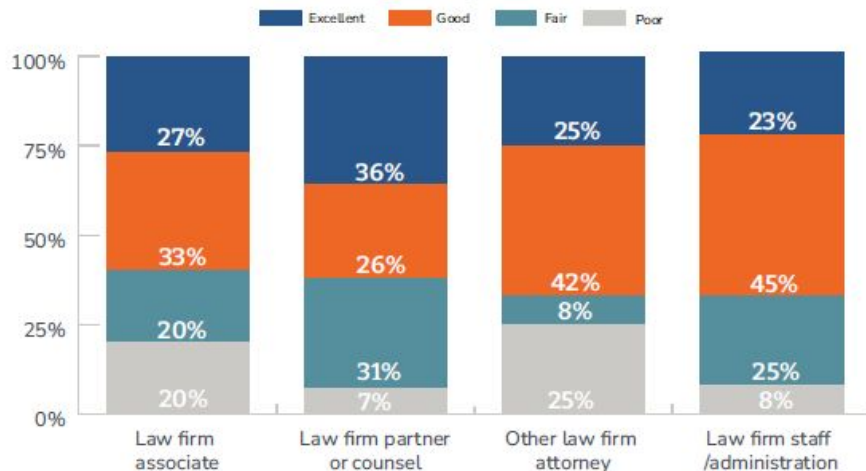
How would you rate your school's support when it comes to leveraging technology (including AI) in your work?



Law Firm Support for AI Use

For law firm attorneys and staff:

How would you rate your firm's support when it comes to leveraging technology (including AI) in your work?

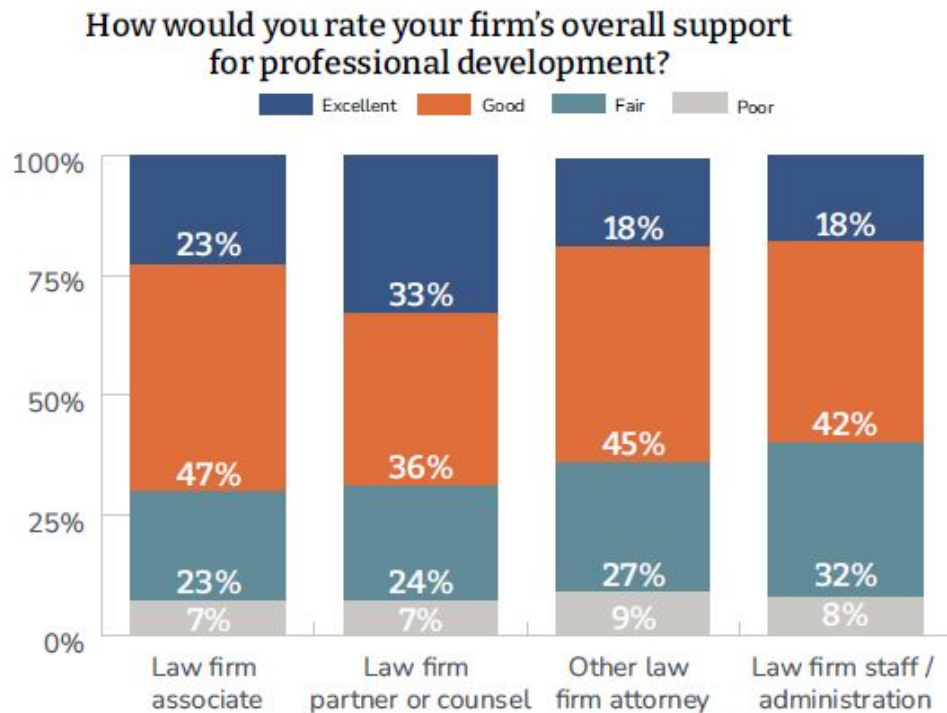


Most law firm respondents say their firm does a “good” or “excellent” job helping them leverage technology, including AI.

- Some firms provide access to AI platforms, offer training, and give guidance on appropriate use of AI.
- Others allow associates to use their own technology.
- Unlike soft skills development, where smaller firms seem to perform better, many of the highest ratings for technology training come from respondents in large law firms.

Law Firm Support for Professional Development

- Nearly 70% of attorneys described their firms' support for professional development as either "good" or "excellent."
- Non-attorney staff were less enthusiastic – 40% rated their firms as "fair" or "poor."



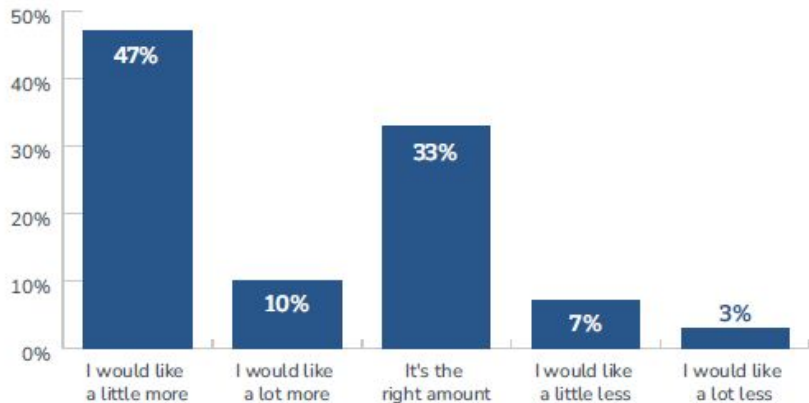
Associate Development

Despite general satisfaction with their firms' support for professional development, some associates note gaps.

- 57% of associates would like more client contact
- 33% would like more opportunities to build new skills
- 17% wish they had more guidance as they develop these skills

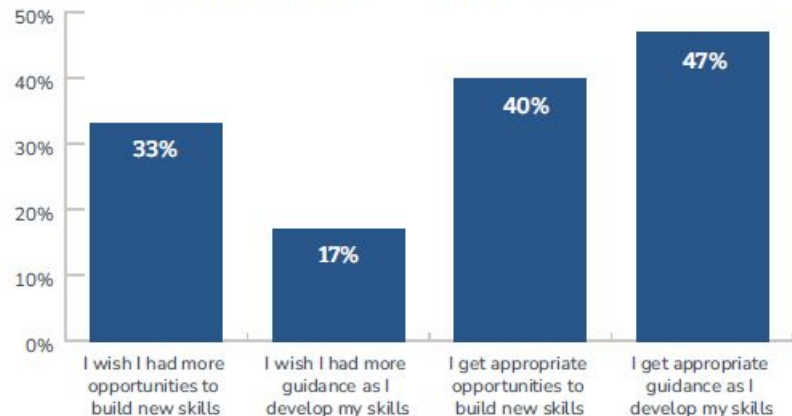
For Associates:

How do you feel about your current level of client contact?



For Associates:

How do you feel about the practical opportunities and guidance your firm provides to help you develop your legal skills?

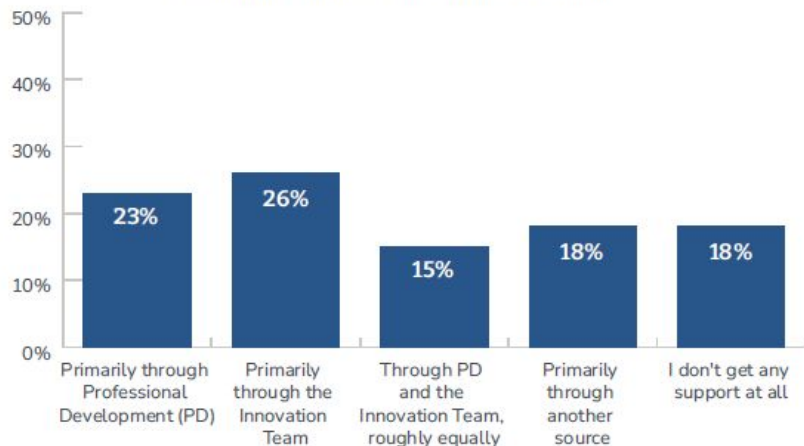


How Legal Professionals Obtain Training

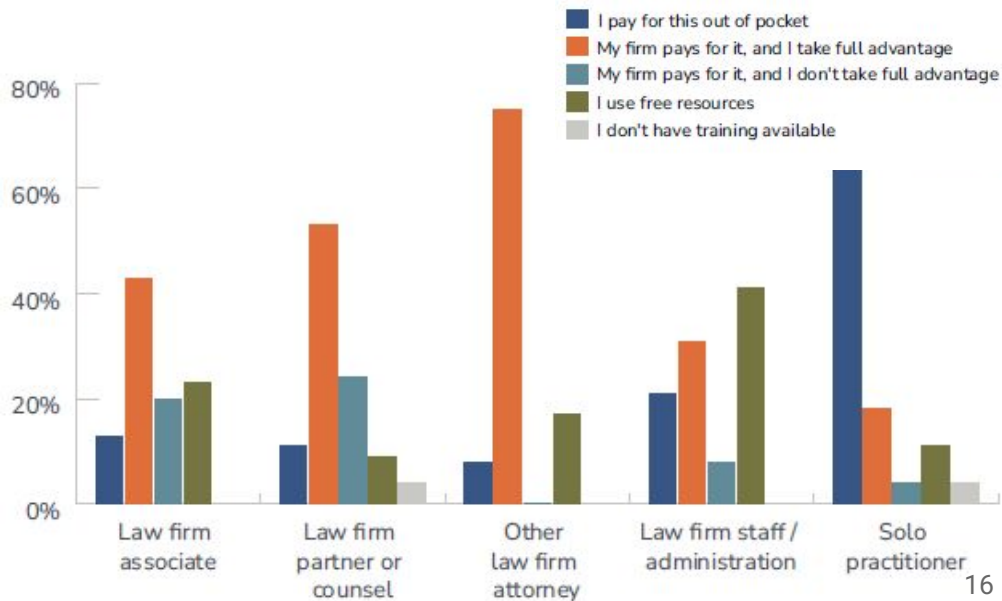
Where firms provide training, most lawyers and staff take full advantage. Where they don't, employees often seek it out on their own.

For law firm attorneys and staff:

Through which department or group does your firm provide support for developing AI-based and other tech skills?

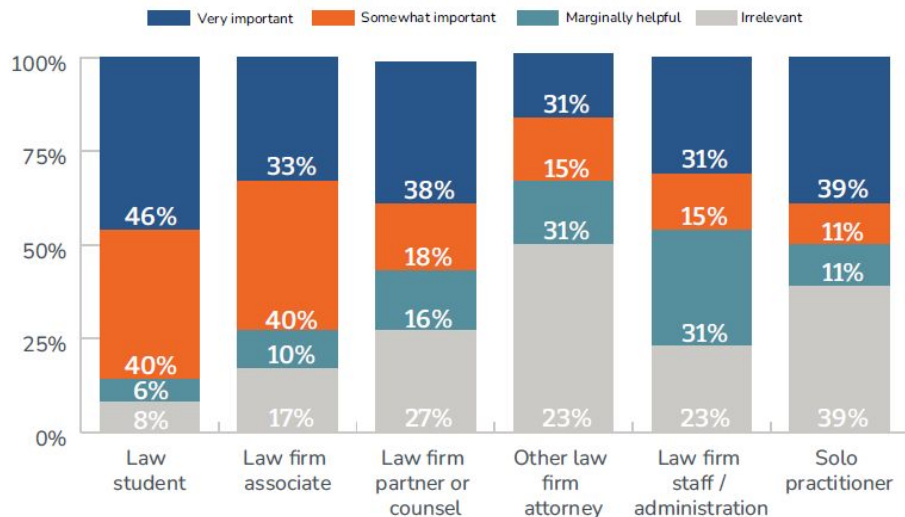


How do you pursue and fund your own professional skills training?



Importance of In-Office vs Remote Work

How important is working regularly in a law firm office when it comes to your professional development?



- 54% of law firm respondents believe that working regularly in the office is important for their professional development, with 34% describing it as “very important.”
- 18% consider it only “marginally helpful” (18%) and 28% say it is “irrelevant.”
- Associates see more value in working in the office regularly than partners: 73% of associates consider it important, compared to 56% of partners.
- Law students place the most importance on being in an office environment: 86% believe that working in the office is either “very important” (46%) or “somewhat important” (40%).

Role of the Office in Professional Development

The benefits of in-person work, especially for lawyers early in their careers, may carry more weight in the AI era.

On the relationship between in-office work and effective professional development:

- “The most important skills for a lawyer in the AI world are social skills. In-office work (and in-person client meetings) help develop those skills in ways that virtual connections cannot.” – Partner
- “In-office work is beneficial for maintaining legal work as a people-based business. Meetings and even simple coffee chats help reinforce the shared belief that everyone needs to deliver results for the team.” – Associate
- “In office requires you to use your soft skills and keep them sharp.” – Staff
- “In-office work teaches relationship skills crucial to professional development.” – Law student
- “In office work is essential for interacting with partners, coworkers, and clients, which could help develop soft skills. However, it is also important to have work at home days to retain work/life balance.” – Law student
- “All of my work could be done remotely. Being in the office reduces my work or personal time by two hours per day because of commuting.” – Associate

What Lawyers Wish They'd Learned in School

- Many responses, especially from partners, focused on elements of practice management, such as:
 - Client communication
 - Billing practices
 - Law firm operations
 - Time management
- Associates also would have liked more on day-to-day legal skills:
 - Contract drafting
 - Mechanics of corporate deals
 - How to draft and respond to discovery requests
 - How to prepare for a deposition
- Other gaps addressed softer skills:
 - Business development
 - “More practice translating legalese into simple, clear English”
 - “How to deal with difficult personalities”

What do you wish you had learned in law school that would have set you up for success during your first year at a firm?

- “More civil litigation practice, nuts and bolts of how the law actually works”
- “Practical matters, like how to form a corporation or LLC, knowing what a good standing certificate is”
- “How to navigate the billable hours regime”
- “Technology and e-discovery skills”
- “Practice management tools and time tracking”
- “The internecine politics of law firm management and control”
- “More soft skills, sales abilities, and use of technological tools to help with legal work”