



What Makes a Competent Lawyer: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census

Research Brief

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

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Overview

The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census sought to understand key issues impacting the legal profession, including how lawyers understand professional competency. Lawyers were asked to rate the importance of a bank of 38 competencies to their own legal practice, spanning legal-specific and broader professional skills. Responses were analysed as a whole and then related to career stage and practice area.

The lawyer census was a voluntary online survey distributed to all Victorian lawyers holding practising certificates to which 1,887 lawyers responded. Each respondent was asked to rate a random selection of 10 of the 38 competencies, on a 4-point scale from ‘not that important’ to ‘critical’, or to indicate that a competency was ‘not applicable’ to their role.

The profession values a broad range of competencies

Victorian lawyers saw competency far more broadly than a narrow set of technical legal skills. The competencies they rated as important spanned every capability domain:

1. Legal knowledge and how to apply it
2. Ethics and professional responsibility
3. Interpersonal and communication skills
4. General professional skills
5. Maintaining your professional development and wellbeing
6. Practice management and managerial skills.

Twelve competencies were rated ‘critical’ by most lawyers, the most highly rated being: understanding of, and ability to, apply law relevant to lawyer’s practice area; clear and effective verbal and written communication; critical thinking and analysis; and being able to comply with professional conduct rules (e.g. maintaining client confidentiality and professional boundaries).

A majority rated all but 4 of the 38 as ‘very important’ or ‘critical’. This breadth points to a shared view of competent practice as resting on a wide range of capabilities, encompassing both legal-specific and more generic professional skills.

1. For the 4 substantive areas with the highest numbers of respondents in the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census: commercial law, criminal law, family law, and wills and estates.
2. For the full report, see Alice Catherine King et al., *What Makes a Competent Lawyer: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census*, (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026).

Variations by career stage and area of law

While a core set of competencies remained stable, others varied with career stage. Lawyers who were later in their career attached less importance to competencies associated with wellbeing and professional development, including maintaining an appropriate work–life balance, accessing support, supervision and mentoring when appropriate, and recognising and managing work-related stress.

Conversely, a smaller number of competencies increased in importance among more senior lawyers, such as negotiation, recognising and managing conflicts of interest, and understanding trust account obligations, which is consistent with advances in experience and greater responsibility.

Across the 4 areas of law with the largest numbers of respondents – commercial, criminal, family, and wills and estates law – a core of competencies was rated consistently. However, in many cases there was variation due to the nature of work associated with different areas. The widest variation of any competency was understanding of court processes, which was rated as ‘critical’ by 65% of criminal lawyers but only by 25% of commercial lawyers. Understanding trust account obligations was rated ‘critical’ by 48% of wills and estates lawyers but only by 13% of criminal lawyers, which reflects the routine handling of trust monies in deceased estates.

Distinct patterns of cultural awareness

Cultural awareness and sensitivity, particularly First Nations peoples’ cultural awareness and sensitivity, were rated as ‘critical’ by relatively few lawyers overall. First Nations peoples’ cultural awareness and sensitivity was the only competency not endorsed as ‘very important’ or ‘critical’ by a majority once ‘not applicable’ responses were excluded. However, this low baseline varied in important ways. Both were rated as ‘critical’ more often by criminal and family lawyers than by commercial or wills and estates practitioners, which is consistent with the greater exposure those lawyers have to marginalised, vulnerable client communities.

What the findings mean and why they matter

The findings indicate a Victorian profession with a clear and broadly shared understanding of what competent practice entails. Competency was viewed broadly, with a closely agreed, stable core, and differences in views are often attributable to the nature of different forms of work. This consensus provides a useful foundation as it identifies which competencies are understood to be universally important and where importance depends on role, career stage or practice area.

It also indicates where attention may be warranted. Competencies regarded as ‘critical’ across the profession are those any standard of legal competency must address. A lower rating, however, does not necessarily denote a lesser importance. The ratings provide a benchmark of how the profession currently values each competency, against which the profession, individual practitioners and firms, professional and peak bodies, educators and regulators may reasonably take the view that a given competency warrants greater emphasis. They may do this because the competency’s importance is expected to grow, because it matters more than practitioners presently recognise, or because a particular client group depends on it.

This report provides a useful means to understand perceptions of what is important. It checks assumptions, verifies models, and indicates where training and development could focus. Measuring proficiency alongside importance would sharpen the last of these research benefits. The gap between importance and proficiency is the most direct indicator of training need, and quantifying it is a priority for future research.

The significance of this shared understanding extends beyond the profession itself. Competence underpins the quality of legal services, the functioning of the legal system, and the public’s ability to obtain fair and effective outcomes through it. A profession that agrees on what competence demands has the foundation for delivering it. Ultimately, competence is not an abstract ideal or merely a professional aspiration. It is the means by which lawyers help people navigate legal problems and move toward their just resolution. In that sense, competence is not only a hallmark of professionalism, but a condition of access to justice itself.