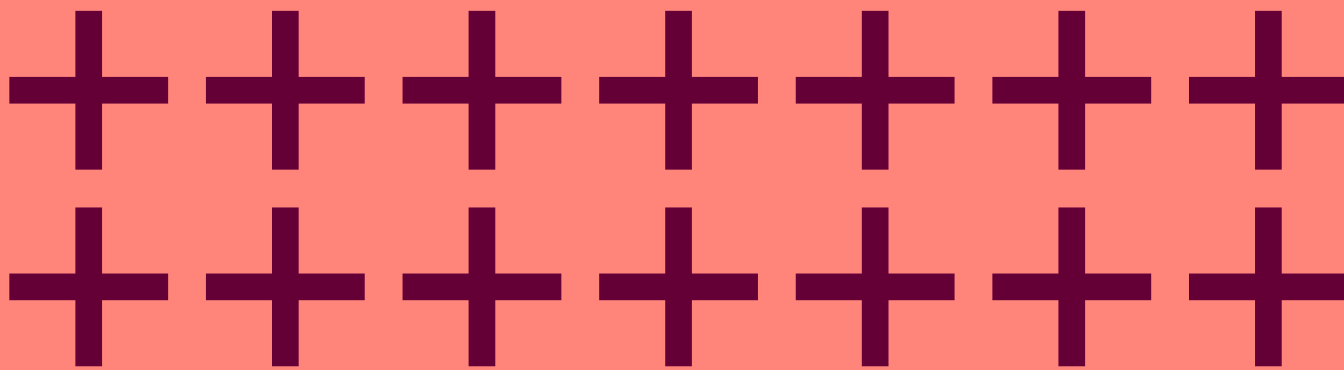




The Evolving Use of Generative AI: Findings from the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census

Research Brief

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

Dr Georgina Rychner and Prof Nigel J Balmer

Legal Services
Research Centre

Overview

The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census was a voluntary online survey distributed to all Victorian lawyers holding practising certificates, with 2,221 lawyers responding. It sought to explore systemic issues affecting the legal profession, including the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI). This brief and accompanying report examine legal practitioner use of AI, changes to pricing and practice due to AI, and lawyers' observations of client use of AI.

Wide uptake across age and career stage

The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census confirms that use of generative AI by legal practitioners has increased: from 37% in 2025 to 55% in 2026, with 78% of the 2026 respondents who did use AI reporting that their use of AI for legal work has increased.

The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census found that use of AI was higher among younger practitioners and those earlier in their careers. The 2026 results suggest that these differences have largely disappeared among those under the age of 60. AI use was broadly similar across all age groups under 60 (between 55% and 62%), and similarly, more than half of respondents in every years-of-practice category used AI in their work.

Disparities remained when it came to practising certificate type, organisation type and client base. Corporate legal practitioners (77%) and those working for non-legal employers (79%) had among the highest rates of AI use. In contrast, use was far less common among barristers (38%), government legal practitioners (31%), sole practitioners (44%), and those working for government employers (35%). The typical client base of AI users also differed from that of non-users. For example, large corporate clients made up 15% on average among AI users compared to 5% for non-users, while legal aid clients made up 3% on average compared to 14%.

General-purpose AI tools and workplace specification

General-purpose AI tools still dominate in legal workplaces, with only a modest shift toward legal-specific tools seen since 2025. General-purpose tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Copilot were used by 79% of AI users, compared with 75% in 2025. Use of legal-specific AI tools increased slightly from 46% to 51% of AI users, with the use of legal-specific tools alone increasing from 17% to 22%.

The majority of AI users (71%) indicated that their organisation specified the tools they were permitted to use. Interestingly, where tools were specified, general-purpose tool use was no different (79% of users regardless of workplace specification), while legal-specific tool use was only somewhat higher (53% compared with 47%).

1. For analysis this involved those in law firms, sole practices, incorporated legal practices and barristers.
2. Though this difference was no longer statistically significant once client base and organisation size were accounted for.

Changes to pricing practices largely yet to occur

Most AI users in fee-charging practice¹ indicated that they had seen no change to pricing or service delivery as a result of AI. However, 18% reported that AI had enabled them to take on work that would previously have been uneconomical, 7% that it had enabled fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements, and 3% that it enabled unbundling of services. Twenty-six per cent of AI users in fee-charging practice reported that their AI use had resulted in reduced fees for clients.

Reduced fees for clients resulting from AI use was more commonly reported by those working mainly for business clients (34%), compared with those working mainly for individual fee-paying clients (23%) or those with a mixed or other client base (20%). Reduced fees were somewhat more common among users of legal-specific tools (29% compared with 20% of those using general-purpose tools only²), while organisation size was largely unrelated to reduced fees resulting from AI use.

Observations on client use of AI

Two-thirds of client-facing practitioners noticed changes in how clients engaged with them, which they attributed to client use of AI. Most commonly, lawyers reported that clients were arriving with inaccurate or misleading information (46%) and presenting AI-generated documents or correspondence that required correction (41%). They also commonly reported clients attempting legal tasks themselves before seeking help (38%) and questioning or challenging advice on the basis of AI output (37%). Only 10% of client-facing practitioners indicated that clients arrived with a better understanding of their legal issues due to their use of AI.

This was observed at high rates by respondents who worked at community legal centres; 59% reported clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information, and 50% reported clients questioning or challenging advice as a result of client use of AI. Respondents at community legal centres also reported among the lowest rates of clients arriving with a better understanding of their legal issues (4%).

By area of law, those working in family law, small business law, debts and insolvency, taxation, and wills and estates were among the areas most likely to report clients requesting specific strategies or documents identified through AI, presenting AI-generated material that required correction, and questioning or challenging advice on the basis of their AI use.

Overall, lawyers were more likely to indicate that client AI use added to the time and effort required to deliver services rather than reduced it. Forty-six per cent reported an increase in time and effort, 19% a reduction, and 34% no noticeable effect. Increases in time and effort were reported most often at community legal centres (58%), where only 4% reported a reduction.

Looking ahead

Taken together, the findings build on, and extend, our understanding of the evolving use of AI in the legal profession.

The concentration of AI use among newer entrants or younger lawyers identified in 2025 has largely disappeared. The question raised then about AI-assisted practice and core professional skills is therefore increasingly one of maintenance, not solely development. General-purpose AI tools still dominate, with only a modest shift toward legal-specific tools since 2025.

Who uses AI, and whose clients benefit, remains divided along some familiar lines. AI use is higher among practitioners whose work is weighted towards large corporate clients, while reduced fees are reported more often by those serving business clients. AI use is lower among practitioners serving legal aid, community sector and pro bono clients, while perceived additional work attributed to clients' own use of AI is higher. Likely reflecting an inequality of resources and opportunities, the pattern echoes the uneven benefits observed in 2025, rather than pointing to AI as enabling more equitable justice at this stage.

Similarly, at least from practitioners' perspective, the potential identified in 2025 for AI to make the law more accessible to the public through their own use of AI has yet to be realised. Few report clients arriving better informed, and more find that client AI use adds to the work of delivering services than eases it. These are the views of practitioners, formed from their side of the lawyer–client relationship.

The 2026 Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (LULU) Survey and the Law and Justice Foundation's forthcoming LAW+ survey will help to complete the picture with the public's perspective, including that of people who use AI to deal with legal problems without ever turning to law. For now, however, widespread use should not be mistaken for widespread benefit.