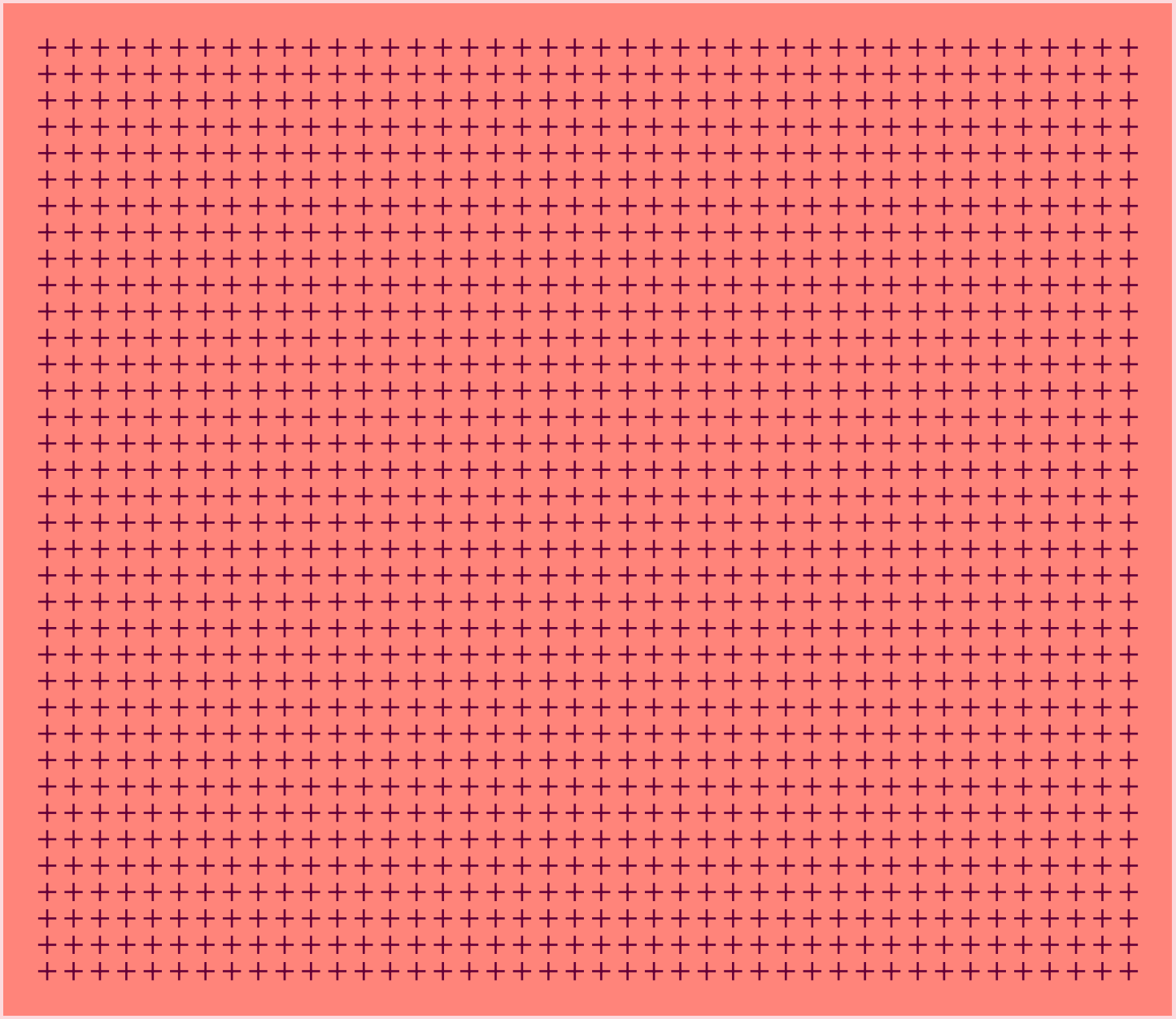
The Evolving Use of Generative AI: Findings from the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census

Dr Georgina Rychner and Prof Nigel J Balmer

Legal Services Research Centre

Victorian Legal Services BOARD + COMMISSIONER



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

VLSB+C – Legal Services Research Centre

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The VLSB+C aims to:
– protect and empower consumers
– maintain and enhance legal practice and ethics
– improve access to justice.

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Key findings

The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census considered several current issues facing the legal profession, including the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI). This report examines the evolving adoption of AI by the legal profession, changes in service and pricing that practitioners attribute to AI, and lawyers' observations of client use of AI. It builds on our *Generative AI Use in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census* report. Where similar questions were asked in both years, it also compares 2026 findings with those from 2025.

Use of AI in legal practice

Between 2025 and 2026, AI use in legal practice became both more widespread and more intensive. Fifty-five per cent of respondents reported using AI tools in their legal practice, up from 37% in the 2025 census. Among those using AI, 78% reported that their use of AI for legal work had increased.

Differences in AI use by age and career stage have largely disappeared. In 2025, use was highest among those aged under 30 and generally fell with age and years of practice. By 2026, this age gradient had largely disappeared. Use was broadly similar across all age groups under 60 (between 55% and 62%), and similarly, more than half of respondents in the every years-of-practice category used AI in their work. Use remained lower among those aged 60 and over.

Conversely, differences by practice setting have not narrowed. Use rose across every practising certificate and organisation type, but there was little evidence of the lowest using groups closing the gap on the highest in the past year. 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%). A distinct gap also remained between users who spoke another language other than English at home (64%) and those who did not (55%).

As in 2025, AI use was most common in commercial areas of law and least common in criminal and family law. There were particularly high rates of use in areas such as trade practices (85%), banking and finance (78%), information technology and telecommunications (78%), intellectual property (75%) and corporate law (75%). In contrast, use was far lower in criminal (29%), family (45%) and administrative law (46%). A new question on main type of legal work showed that use was most common among those doing predominantly transactional work (76%) and less common for those doing mainly advocacy (34%).

Looking at breakdown of types of clients of AI users and AI non-users indicated that large corporate clients made up a higher percentage of AI-user clients (15%) compared to AI non-user clients (5%). Conversely, AI non-users were more likely to have legal aid clients (14%) compared to AI users (3%).

Types of tool and workplace specification

General-purpose tools still dominate, with only a modest shift toward legal-specific tools 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 tools increased slightly from 46% to 51% of AI users, with use of legal-specific tools alone increasing from 17% to 22%.

The majority of AI users (71%) indicated that their organisation specified the AI 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 marginally higher (53% compared with 47%).

Changes to practice and pricing

Most AI users in fee-charging practice[1] 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. In 2025, 46% of respondents indicated that they saw AI's potential in enhancing affordability. In 2026, that potential had been realised for only a minority, with 26% of AI users in fee-charging practice reporting that their AI use had resulted in reduced fees for clients.

Reduced fees for clients because of 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 only), while organisation size was largely unrelated to reduced fees resulting from AI use.

1. For analysis, this involved those in law firms, sole practices, incorporated legal practices and barristers.

Client use of AI

Two-thirds of client-facing practitioners have noticed changes in how clients engage with them that they attribute to their 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%). Clients attempting legal tasks themselves before seeking help (38%) and questioning or challenging advice on the basis of AI output (37%) were also commonly reported. Only 10% of client-facing practitioners indicated that clients arrived with a better understanding of their legal issues due to their use of AI.

Respondents working at community legal centres reported the highest rates of clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information (59%), and questioning or challenging advice (50%) as a result of their use of AI. They 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.

While rare, where lawyers reported that clients were better informed as a result of their AI use, this was associated with a reduction in the time and effort required to deliver services (48% of practitioners reporting reduced time and effort, compared with 20% reporting an increase). All other changes in the ways in which clients engaged stemming from AI use were associated with increased time and effort, with the greatest increases where clients requested specific strategies or documents (63%), or questioned or challenged advice (60%).

Wide adoption, narrow gains and open questions

Taken together, the findings extend and, in some cases, revise issues raised in the 2025 report. AI is now part of mainstream legal practice, but practitioners' observations point to limited benefits to clients so far. Only a minority of practitioners reported reduced fees for clients, and their accounts of clients' own use of AI were largely negative.

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.

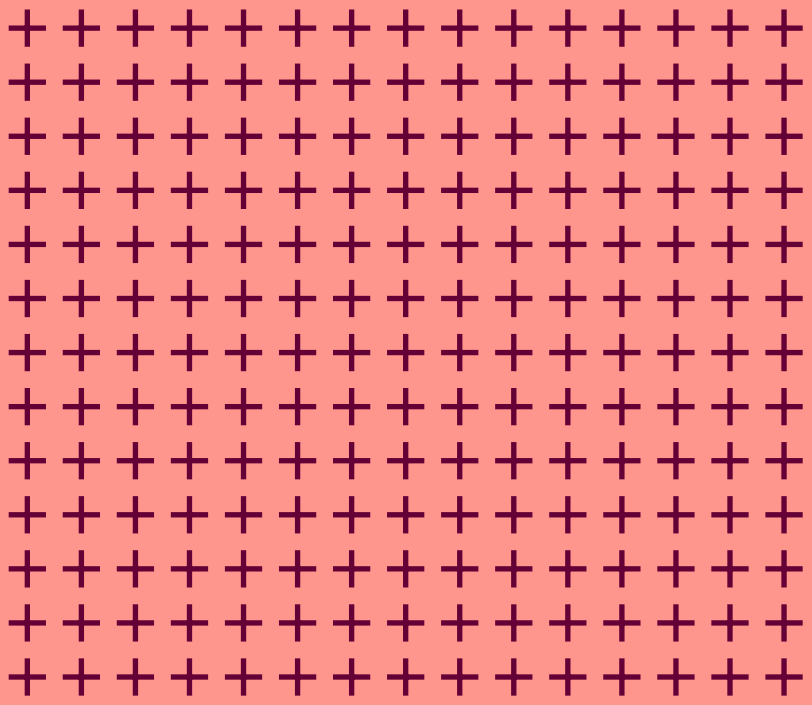
Who uses AI, and whose clients benefit, remains divided along some familiar lines. Use is higher among practitioners serving business and large corporate clients, and it appears to be these clients who are most likely to see lawyers' AI use reflected in lower fees. Use is lower among practitioners serving legal aid, community sector and pro bono clients, while perceived additional work (and fewest time savings) created by clients' own use of AI is also more common in community legal centres. Likely reflecting an inequality of resources and opportunities, the pattern echoes the uneven benefits observed in 2025, rather than pointing to AI as a route to more equitable justice.

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, and formed from their side of the lawyer–client relationship, though 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.

01

Introduction and methodology

This section provides background on generative AI in legal services, covering the current regulatory and professional landscape, the evidence on whether AI is broadening access to legal services, and what is currently known about client use of AI and its effect on the lawyer–client relationship. It then goes on to describe the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census, the module within it that this report draws on, and the methodology employed.



Literature review

AI use, regulation and guidance

Generative AI has progressed quickly to become a routine feature of legal work. Industry reports point to rapid uptake across Australian firms, including both general-purpose AI tools (such as Claude, Copilot and ChatGPT) as well as legal-specific tools (such as Harvey, Lexis+ AI and CoCounsel).[2] The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census found that practitioners were predominantly using general-purpose AI tools, and use was concentrated in information gathering, drafting and administrative tasks rather than legal decision making.

Going beyond use itself to the forms and perceived risks and benefits of AI, attitudes reflected narrow perceived benefits, with respondents identifying productivity as a benefit far more often than items regarding quality, affordability or accessibility.[3] The 2025 report concluded that the benefits of AI were both narrowly conceived and unevenly distributed. It noted that use was concentrated among younger and newer entrants to the profession, which in turn raised questions about the development and retention of core professional skills, and was comparatively low among sole practitioners and those working in the community sector – settings that may have less capacity, or less opportunity, to make use of tools. It also raised the concern that efficiency gains appeared to be accruing primarily to service providers rather than to clients.

Amidst the uptake of these emerging technologies, regulatory and professional bodies continue to caution legal professionals to balance opportunities against the risks, particularly to client confidentiality and the accuracy of legal work, and to stress that lawyers remain responsible for exercising their own judgment.[4]

2. LexisNexis, *Legal AI and the Future of the Legal Profession: Australia AI Sentiment Survey Findings* (LexisNexis, 2026).
3. Legal Services Research Centre, *Generative AI Use in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026).
4. "Risk Outlook 2024," Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, published 6 June 2024, https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/lawyers/risk-outlook/risk-outlook-2024.

In 2024, the Uniform Law regulatory bodies (the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner (VLSB+C), the Law Society of New South Wales and the Legal Practice Board of Western Australia) issued joint guidance on use of AI by the profession as a safeguard for legal consumers.[5] That same year the VLSB+C included the improper use of AI in its risk outlook for the profession.[6]

In 2026, several major regulatory developments followed. The Victorian Law Reform Commission tabled the report of Australia's first law reform inquiry into AI in courts and tribunals, producing 30 recommendations and 8 guiding principles.[7] Following these recommendations, the Supreme Court of Victoria issued Practice Note SC Gen 25, which superseded 2024 guidelines and extended coverage to lawyers and self-represented litigants, with other courts issuing similar practice notes.[8] In 2026, several cases of AI misuse came before Australian courts, particularly for hallucinated case law or other documentation.[9]

Regulation and guidance continue to develop reactively alongside adoption as the technology evolves. Much of the current discourse on pace and form of adoption derives from industry sources, sometimes with an established position and limited methodological transparency. The Victorian Lawyer Census tracks these changes annually from a position outside the market it observes.

The potential for AI to democratise access to legal services

AI is widely seen as having the potential to enhance access to justice, for example, by lowering barriers to legal information for underserved populations, through simplifying legal jargon, providing dynamic response to questions, referring users to relevant legislation or legal services, and drafting template documents (for example, an email to a landlord regarding rental repairs).[10] In theory, this can increase understanding of the law, empower individuals with relevant information, and assist them to understand and address their legal problems – all before making contact with a lawyer or legal service provider.

5. See "Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Australian Legal Practice," Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, published 6 December 2024, https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/news-updates/news/statement-use-artificial-intelligence-australian-legal-practice.
6. Generative AI was again identified as a risk to professional competency in "Risk Outlook 2026," Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, published 29 April 2026, https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/lawyers/risk-outlook/risk-outlook-2026.
7. Victorian Law Reform Commission, *Artificial Intelligence in Victoria's Courts and Tribunals* (VLRC, 2025), https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/publication/artificial-intelligence-in-victorias-courts-and-tribunals-report/.
8. "SC Gen 25 – The Use of Artificial Intelligence by Court Users," Supreme Court of Victoria, published 13 May 2026, https://www.supremecourt.vic.gov.au/areas/legal-resources/practice-notes/sc-gen-25-the-use-of-artificial-intelligence-by-court-users. In April 2026, the Federal Court of Australia followed with a similar Practice Note (GPN-AI), and in June Victoria's County Court followed in with PNCCV 1–2026.
9. See for example *EML (a pseudonym) v AFT (a pseudonym)* [2026] VCC 734, *Pham v Minister for Immigration and Citizenship* [2026] FedCFamC2G 694; *Oberoi v Douglas*. The watershed case in Victoria was that of *Dayal* [2024] FedCFamC2F 1166. See also "Statement on the 'Mr Dayal' Matter," Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, published 2 September 2025, https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/news-updates/news/statement-mr-dayal-matter.
10. See for example Antonio Lopo Martinez, "Democratizing Tax Law with AI: Enhancing Accessibility for Citizens and Efficiency for Tax Administrations," *Tax Administration Review* 52, (July 2025): 159–170; Samuel D. Hodge Jr, "Revolutionizing Justice: Unleashing the Power of Artificial Intelligence," *SMU Science and Technology Law Review* 26, no. 2 (2023): 229.

However, as Markovic (2026) and others have pointed out, even putting aside issues of model accuracy and hallucinations,[11] the efficacy of AI tools for legal problems is highly dependent on the legal capability of those using the tool.[12] Not only is a baseline digital capability required to access an AI tool and craft an effective prompt, but legal capability may determine whether someone can easily interpret the output (for example, whether the information applies to their legal jurisdiction[13]) or verify output through more reliable sources. Legal services are credence goods as 'consumers by and large do not know if they need legal services and cannot discern their quality'. [14] For this reason, the legal services market is highly regulated to protect consumers. The same difficulty applies to legal information generated by AI, which people without legal training are poorly placed to assess, but without equivalent oversight or verification to assist them.

Beyond access to information, AI is expected to increase efficiency and may move the profession toward alternative billing models.[15] Generative AI reduces the cost of drafting, summarising and explaining legal documents, which in turn threatens the billable hour model and the 'pyramid structure' of law firms in which junior associates and paralegals traditionally carry out the work that generative AI is most likely to replace.[16] Added to this are shifting client expectations, where clients increasingly expect law firms to leverage AI to deliver higher-value services with increased efficiency.[17]

11. Milan R Markovic, "Equal Justice and Generative AI," *Ohio State Law Journal* 87 (2026): 455–500; Bakht Munir et al., "Evaluating AI in Legal Operations: A Comparative Analysis of Accuracy, Completeness, and Hallucinations in ChatGPT 4, Copilot, DeepSeek, Lexis+ AI, and Llama 3," *International Journal of Legal Information* 1, no. 8 (2025); Varun Magesh et al., "Hallucination-free? Assessing the Reliability of Leading AI Legal Research Tools," *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 22 (2025): 216–217.
12. 'Legal capability' in this context refers to the skills, knowledge and attributes an individual requires to make an informed decision on whether and how to make use of the justice system, and may include external factors beyond an individual's control. See Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel J. Balmer, "Legal Capability and Access to Civil Justice," in ed. Anne Bloom et al., *Research Handbook on Civil Justice* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025): 213–231. See also Catherine Hastings et al., "Artificial Intelligence and Access to Justice at the 'Shop Front': The Potential and Limitations of Meeting Legal Need Through Technology," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* (2026), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ajs4.70115.
13. See Francine Ryan and Liz Hardie, "ChatGPT, I Have a Legal Question? The Impact of Gen AI Tools on Law Clinics and Access to Justice," *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 31, no.1 (2024): 188–189; Catherine Brown et al., "The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Duty and Standard of Care in Legal Practice: A 'Disrupting Moment' for Laws that Protect Consumers From Economic Harm?" *ANU Journal of Law and Technology* 6, no. 1 (2025): 90. On users omitting jurisdiction from their queries, see also Markovic, "Equal Justice & Generative AI," 475, or pre-AI Catrina Denvir, "Online and in the Know? Public Legal Education, Young People and the Internet," *Computers and Education* 92–93 (2016): 204, 218.
14. Markovic, "Equal Justice and Generative AI," 472; Richard A. Posner, "An Economic Approach to the Law of Evidence," *Stanford Law Review* 51 (1999): 1,489.
15. See Jerome Doraisamy, "Lessons from Clients' Use of AI," *Lawyers Weekly,* 6 August 2026, https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/sme-law/44793-lessons-from-clients-use-of-ai; Colleen V. Chien and Miriam Kim, "Generative AI and Legal Aid: Results From a Field Study and 100 Use Cases to Bridge the Access to Justice Gap," *Loyola L.A. Law Review* 57, no. 4 (2025); Lauren Martin et al., *Better Call GPT, Comparing Large Language Models Against Lawyers* (Onit AI Center of Excellence, 2024).
16. Nancy B. Rapoport and Joseph R. Tiano Jr, "Fighting the Hypothetical: Why Law Firms Should Rethink the Billable Hour in the Generative AI Era," *Washington Journal of Law, Technology and Arts* 20, no. 2 (2025): 55.
17. Rapoport and Tiano, "Fighting the Hypothetical," 89.

In the wake of these changes, fixed-fee or value-based pricing models – where cost is derived from conveyed value rather than hours worked – may become attractive alternatives to the billable hour.[18] Yuvaraj (2026), however, suggests that the efficiency and cost savings attributed to AI are 'overstated' and that the net value of AI tools in legal practice can only be assessed 'once the efficiency gain (for example, savings on time and salary costs) is offset by the corresponding verification cost (cost to manually verify AI outputs for accuracy, completeness, relevance)'.[19] In addition, the licence costs of AI tools (reported to be 'cutting into firms' margins'), raise the question of whether firms will pass costs on to clients in the form of a service fee.[20]

Whether any such gains are evenly shared is a further question. The capacity to procure, evaluate, implement and verify AI tools and outputs will vary across practice settings, with large law firms (and by extension, their clients) being better placed to harness the benefits of emerging technology.[21] Clients also differ in their ability to monitor and assess what their lawyers do. Using Galanter's terminology, 'repeat players' who buy legal services steadily and in volume will typically have better information about services and greater control than 'one-shotters' who use them only occasionally.[22] This has a bearing on who benefits from AI. 'Repeat players' are more likely to have a basis for knowing what that work usually involves and costs, providing a benchmark against which to question fees once their lawyers are using AI. Consequently, they may be better placed to seek a share of efficiencies.[23]

18. See "A Guide to Balancing AI-era Billing with the Australian Solicitor's Conduct Rules (ASCR)," College of Law, published 2 December 2025, https://www.collaw.edu.au/community/news/a-guide-to-balancing-ai-era-billing-with-the-legal-professional-conduct-rules/; Damien Riehl, "We Need to Talk About ChatGPT," *The Missouri Bar*, published 6 March 2023, https://news.mobar.org/we-need-to-talk-about-chatgpt/.
19. Yuraj refers to this as the 'verification-value paradox'. Joshua Ruvaraj, "The Verification-value Paradox: A Normative Critique of Gen AI Use in Legal Practice" *Monash University Law Review* 52 (2026): 10.
20. Jerome Doraisamy, "'Clients Will Get Annoyed' if Firms Pass on AI Costs, says Keypoint's CEO," *Lawyers Weekly,* 15 July 2026. https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/biglaw/44659-clients-will-get-annoyed-if-firms-pass-on-ai-costs-says-keypoint-s-ceo.
21. This is theorised as one way in which adoption of AI is moving us toward a 'two-tiered' justice system. See Drew Simshaw, "Access to AI Justice: Avoiding an Inequitable Two-Tiered System of Legal Services," *Yale Journal of Law & Technology* 24 (2022): 174–176.
22. Marc Galanter, "Why the 'Haves' Come Out Ahead: Speculations on the Limits of Legal Change," *Law & Society Review* 9, no. 1 (1974): 97, 114.
23. On the capacity of corporations and other sophisticated clients to monitor and assess their lawyers' performance, see Markovic, "Equal Justice & Generative AI," 473.

The changing lawyer–client relationship

On the client side, there is currently limited data available on the use of AI by help seekers in the Australian context, how they are using AI, and the way this might be changing the lawyer–client relationship.[24] Outside Australia, an early study from Stanford's Legal Design Lab examined how US adults used Google's Bard to search for legal information, finding distinct types of users, ranging from those who use AI to understand legal problems in the first instance, to those who use AI output as legal advice.[25] That typology describes how people use AI, but offers less insight on how it might influence the professional encounter that follows. On that question the closest evidence comes from medicine, where (now AI-assisted) self-research by patients (the 'Dr Google effect') has been studied for longer, and where there are parallels to legal practice, with an expert consulted by a lay person who may have already formed a (tech-enabled) view.[26]

The medical literature indicates that patients appreciate the way that online, and more recently AI, output cuts through the 'data smog',[27] though, as access to health information has increased, so has uncertainty around legitimacy and trustworthiness. Patients desire clarification and validation from medical experts on information they received from AI output or online, but international studies found that patients felt they were not afforded enough time for this kind of exchange in the standard time allocated for their appointments.[28] The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census asked lawyers a closely-related question on the effect of client AI use on the time and effort required to deliver services.

24. Regarding use/uptake, presently the closest approximations are online traffic for tools such as LawConnect, a purpose-built AI platform that connects Australian help seekers to (human) lawyers; the tool received 120,000 enquiries for legal problems in its first year.
25. Margaret Hagan, "Towards Human-centred Standards for Legal Help AI," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* (2024): 16–17.
26. See Liesbet Van Bulck and Philip Moons, "What if Your Patient Switched From Dr. Google to Dr. ChatGPT? A Vignette-based Survey of the Trustworthiness, Value and Danger of ChatGPT-generated Responses to Health Questions," *European Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing* 23 (2024): 95–98; Oluwatobilboa Ayo-Ajibola et al., "Characterizing the Adoption and Experiences of Users of Artificial Intelligence-Generated Health Information in the United States: Cross-Sectional Questionnaire Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 26 (2024): 7; Bradford W. Hesse, "The Patient, the Physician and Dr. Google," *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* 14, no. 5 (2012): 398–402.
27. Hesse, "The Patient, the Physician and Dr. Google."
28. Ricardo Moyses de Arruda et al., "Consulting 'Dr Google': How the Digital Search for Internet Health Information Influences the Doctor–Patient Relationship," *Cad Saude Publica* 8, no. 41 (2025): 7; Noor van Riel et al., "The Effect of Dr Google on Doctor–Patient Encounters in Primary Care: A Quantitative, Observational, Cross-sectional Study," *British Journal of General Practice Open* 1, no. 2 (2017).

This report

As the regulator of the legal profession within Victoria, the VLSB+C has a mandate that spans protecting and empowering consumers, enhancing legal practice, and improving access to justice. Each of these objectives stands to be affected by patterns of AI adoption across the profession.

The value of understanding these patterns is not confined to the regulator. Firms and practitioners also face decisions about which tools to use or permit and for what, what verification of output is required, how to price work as the time it takes evolves, and how to respond to clients who arrive having already consulted AI. Reliable evidence on what the profession is actually doing informs those decisions alongside broader regulation and guidance.

In light of this, the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census repeated core questions on lawyers' AI use from the 2025 questionnaire and added a new suite of questions on changes to pricing and service delivery attributed to AI, and on lawyers' observations of AI use by their clients.

This report examines the current state of AI adoption in Victorian legal practice. It sets out the proportion of lawyers using generative AI in practice, the extent of their use, the characteristics associated with use, and how these have changed since 2025. It looks at the types of tools used and the extent to which workplaces specify them. It then considers the changes in pricing practice and service delivery that practitioners attribute to AI, as well as lawyers' observations of client AI use and its perceived effect on the form and demands of the lawyer–client relationship. Through this analysis, the report explores the shifts to legal practice as experienced by legal practitioners.

Methodology

This report draws on data from the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census, which examines Victorian lawyers' perspectives on systemic issues affecting the profession. The census is conducted by the Legal Services Research Centre (LSRC), the independent research function of the VLSB+C.

The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census was a voluntary online survey distributed to all Victorian lawyers holding practising certificates, with a total of 2,221 lawyers responding.[29] The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Full details of the census methodology, including the questionnaire and development process, are available in the accompanying technical report.[30] Not all respondents completed every section of the survey, and some questions were asked only of relevant groups. Consequently, the number of respondents included varies between analyses.

The survey covered several key areas including generative AI use, responding to client needs, wellbeing, sexual harassment, workplace culture and professional boundaries. It also collected professional and personal demographic information to enable analysis of response patterns across different lawyer groups.

To improve how well the survey results represent the broader Victorian lawyer population, post-stratification weighting was applied based on age, gender and practising certificate type. This statistical adjustment corrects for potential biases from under or over-representation of certain groups in the sample, using benchmark data from the VLSB+C's certificate renewal records. All analyses in this report are weighted.

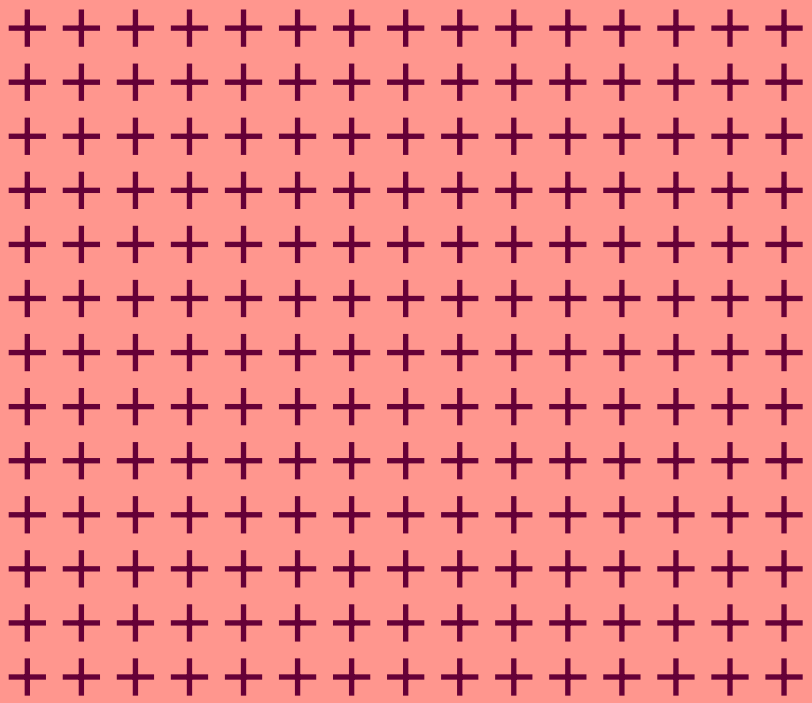
A number of limitations should be kept in mind. First, while all practising certificate holders were invited to take part, the response rate was low (and participation voluntary). Moreover, weighting does not attempt to adjust for differences between respondents and non-respondents that are unrelated to age, gender or practising certificate type. While some lawyers will have responded to both 2025 and 2026 exercises, they should be considered 2 separate samples. Findings on client use of AI are lawyers' perspectives rather than those of the clients themselves.[31]

29. Of a total of 30,957 current practising certificate holders, a response rate of 7.2%.
30. Legal Services Research Centre, *The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census: Technical Report* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026).
31. Though data on the client perspective will be collected through the LSRC's Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (LULU) survey.

02

Patterns of use

This section reports on current patterns of generative AI use across the profession. It sets out the proportion of practitioners using AI tools and how this has changed since 2025, the personal, professional and organisational characteristics associated with use, the types of tools used (general-purpose and/or legal-specific tools), and the extent to which workplaces specify which tools may be used.



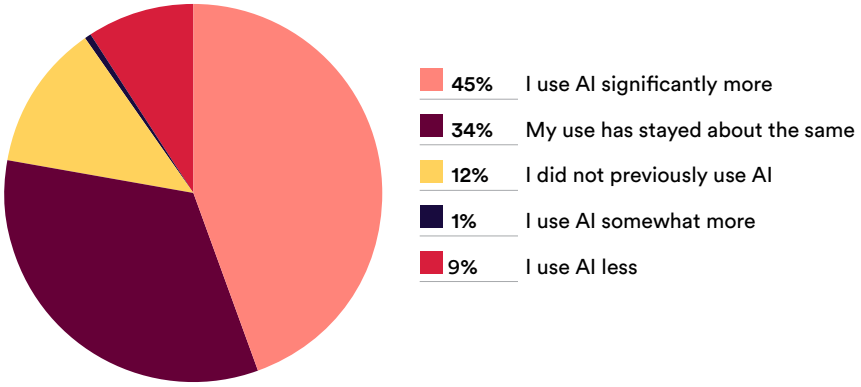
The evolving use of generative AI

AI adoption and changes in use

Of 1,665 respondents, 918 (55%) reported using AI tools in their practice, an increase from 37% who reported using AI in the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census.[32]

Among the 906 respondents who reported using AI tools in their legal practice and provided further information on their changing usage (see Figure 1), the majority (78%) reported that their use of AI tools for legal work had increased.

Figure 1 – Changes in use among those using AI in their legal work



Generic and bespoke AI tools

Of those using AI tools in their practice, Table 1 presents the type of AI tools used in 2026 (n = 1,153) compared to the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census (n = 638).

Table 1 – Types of tools being used in legal practice by AI users in 2025 and 2026

AI tools / platforms	2025	2026
	%	%
General-purpose tools (e.g. ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Microsoft and 365 Copilot)	75.4%[33]	78.5%
General-purpose tools only	45.9%	48.9%
Legal-specific AI tools (e.g. LEAP AI, Lexis+ AI, Jade Professional, Harvey and CoCounsel)	46.4%[34]	51.2%
Legal-specific tools only	16.9%	21.5%

32. It is worth noting that survey questions focused specifically on 'AI tools'. The percentage reporting use of AI would be significantly higher if it also included incidental use, for example, through search engines. However, it is also possible that some use is tacit, as AI becomes increasingly embedded in search engines and other software.
33. This figure differs from the 65% set out in the 2025 report since the previous report collected data on Microsoft 365 Copilot use separately from 'general-purpose tools', principally given its function is more as an interconnected ecosystem rather than a standalone tool. In the 2026 census, given that type of tool used comprised only 2 questions, it was included as an example of a general-purpose tool.
34. This figure is 38.2% if custom tools are excluded.

As can be seen in Table 1, general-purpose tools remained the most used by AI users, at broadly comparable rates to 2025. There was a small increase in use of legal-specific AI tools, though that finding does not evidence a large-scale shift toward legal-specific tools. The use of general-purpose AI tools alone remained common, and again largely unchanged since 2025, while the use of legal-specific AI tools alone was less common, though with a modest increase since 2025. The percentage of AI users employing both general *and* legal-specific tools was almost identical between 2025 and 2026 (29.5% and 29.7% respectively).

Seventy-one per cent of respondents (n = 643) using AI said that their organisation specified the AI tools they were permitted to use. However, looking at those whose organisations specified which tools they were allowed to use compared to those where they did not, there was no difference in the percentage using general-purpose tools (79% in each instance). Where organisations specified use, this was associated with a small increase in use of legal-specific AI tools (53%, versus 47%).

Factors associated with use

Personal and professional characteristics

Table 2 shows the relationship between AI use in legal practice and a range of personal and professional characteristics. Where possible, use is contrasted between the 2025 and 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census.

Table 2 – Personal and professional characteristics and use of AI tools in legal practice, 2025 and 2026

		2025		2026	
		Yes		Yes	
		Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Gender	Male	220	40.5%	355	55.6%
	Female	313	57.6%	547	55.6%
	Non-binary or other term	10	1.8%	8	27.1%
Age group	Under 30	155	48.7%	130	55.2%
	30–39	216	37.4%	308	54.5%
	40–49	114	30.9%	228	61.5%
	50–59	88	36.9%	147	58.9%
	60–69	45	31.1%	69	46.6%
	70+	16	21.3%	26	33.3%
Language spoken at home	English	517	36.7%	733	54.6%
	Other	28	47.7%	58	63.5%
Years of practice	Less than 5 years	188	41.7%	242	53.9%
	5–9	117	40.7%	185	58.5%
	10–19	118	32.8%	238	54.7%
	20+	117	30.7%	244	53.8%

		2025		2026	
		Yes		Yes	
		Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Practising certificate	Principal	52	33.7%	81	51.7%
	Principal with trust	79	38.6%	117	56.0%
	Employee	309	44.3%	381	58.8%
	Employee with trust	11	39.2%	18	71.0%
	Barrister	19	14.6%	48	38.3%
	Corporate legal practitioner	136	51.8%	192	77.2%
	Government legal practitioner	27	11.2%	71	31.3%
	Volunteer/community legal service	1	6.7%	3	25.1%
Partner	No	479	39.8%	632	57.1%
	Yes	72	40.0%	123	61.7%
	Not applicable	84	24.2%	156	45.4%
In-house	No	489	35.8%	652	55.0%
	Yes	144	40.6%	263	55.2%
Organisation type[35]	Law firm	325	46.0%	405	66.1%
	Solo practitioner	63	24.4%	111	43.5%
	Incorporated legal practice	55	48.3%	93	62.4%
	Government employer, excluding legal aid	31	11.6%	67	35.4%
	Non-legal employer	101	53.9%	157	78.8%
Number of employees (organisation)	1	60	28.0%	99	45.2%
	2–4	58	37.0%	60	50.4%
	5–19	111	43.2%	167	59.1%
	20–199	128	31.3%	182	44.9%
	200+	264	41.4%	382	66.9%

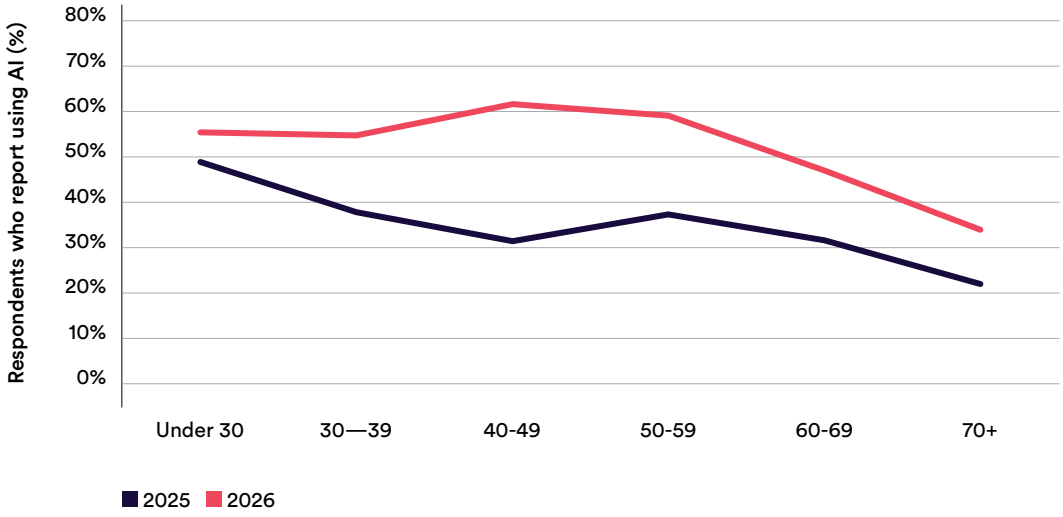
As shown in Table 2, rates of AI tool use rose across every category, though beyond the increase, the overall pattern of use changed relatively little for most variables. In general, the lowest-using groups did not close the gap on the highest. For example, looking at practising certificate and organisation type, lower rate AI users such as barristers, government legal practitioners and those working for government employers all rose by around 20 percentage points or more, but so did higher rate users such as corporate legal practitioners and those working for non-legal employers. The spread between the highest and lowest categories was therefore typically no narrower than in 2025.

35. In 2026 the census captured a range of additional organisation types that are not directly comparable to the previous year: Victoria Legal Aid (14%, n = 8), Community Legal Centre (15%, n = 17), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service (12%, n = 1) and multi-disciplinary practice (80%, n = 9).

Corporate legal practitioners maintained the highest rate of adoption with 77% reporting using AI, up from 52% in 2025. Barristers, government legal practitioners and volunteer/CLS certificate holders reported lower rates of use.[36] In terms of organisation type, non-legal employers demonstrated the highest use, followed by law firms, and incorporated legal practices. Use was highest in organisations with 200 or more employees (67%), though the relationship between AI use and organisation size was not linear, with, for example, those in organisations of 20 to 199 employees reported comparatively lower use than smaller organisations – a pattern also present in 2025. AI use was more common among those who spoke a language other than English at home (64%), compared to those who did not (55%), as it was in 2025.

Age is one characteristic on which the shape of AI use has changed between 2025 and 2026. Figure 2 shows the percentage of lawyers using AI tools in 2025 and 2026 by their age group.

Figure 2 – Lawyers use of AI tools by age in 2025 and 2026



In 2025, practitioners under 30 used AI at a considerably higher rate than any other group (for example, 49%, compared with 37% of those aged 30 to 39, and 31% of those aged 40 to 49). By 2026, that difference had largely disappeared, with percentage using AI broadly equivalent for all those aged under 60 years old (between 55% and 62%), and the single highest rate of use among 40 to 49-year-olds. Use remained somewhat lower among those aged 60 to 69 and particularly those aged 70 and over, though together these age groups made up less than 12% of respondents.

Similar results were seen for length of time lawyers had held practising certificates. In 2025, AI use fell with time certificates had been held (see Table 2). By 2026, more than half of respondents in every years-of-practice category reported using AI. For those who had held a practising certificate for 20 years or more, 54% used AI.

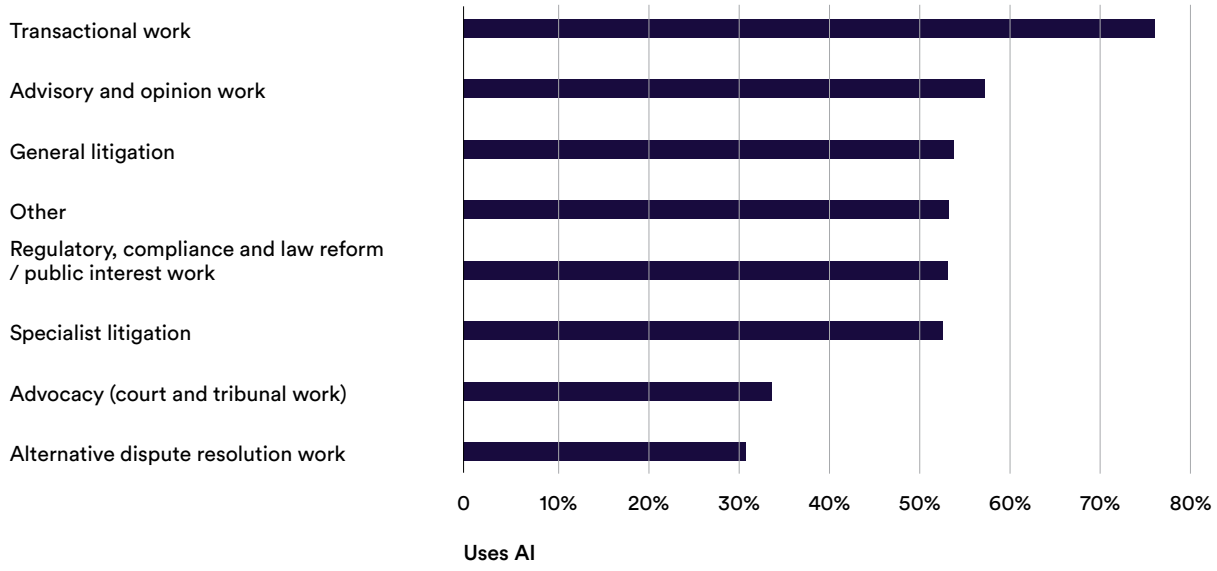
36. Though for the latter, the number of respondents was small.

Areas of practice, forms of legal work and types of client

Adoption of AI tools also varied by lawyers' areas of law. For example, particularly high rates of AI use were observed for those working in trade practices (85%), banking and finance (78%), information technology and telecommunications (75%), intellectual property (75%) and corporate law (75%). Conversely, those in criminal law (29%), family law (45%) and administrative law (46%) reported far lower rates using AI tools. AI tool adoption across all areas of law covered in the census is set out in Appendix A.

Respondents were asked to identify the main type of legal work involved in their practice, with these related to their use of AI tools. As shown in Figure 3, AI use was most common among those undertaking primarily transactional work (76%, n = 263), particularly compared to those mainly conducting advocacy (court or tribunal work) (34%, n = 97) or alternative dispute resolution (32%, n = 6), though numbers of observations were small for the latter group and should be interpreted with caution.

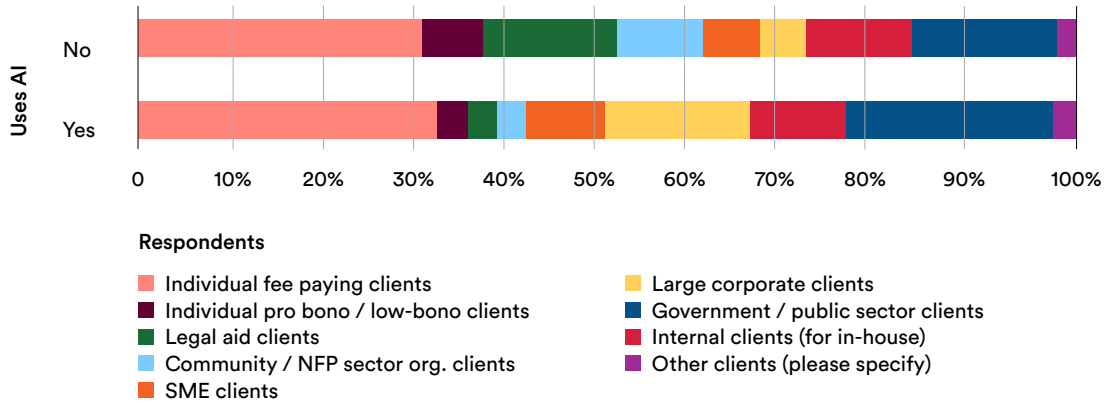
Figure 3 – AI use in legal practice by main type of legal work



Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of their individual workload undertaken for each of a range of client types. Figure 4 compares the mean percentage of workload accounted for by each client type among those who used AI tools in their practice and those who did not.[37]

37. Therefore, the comparison describes how the client mix of AI users differs from that of non-users, rather than the extent of AI use within any given client group.

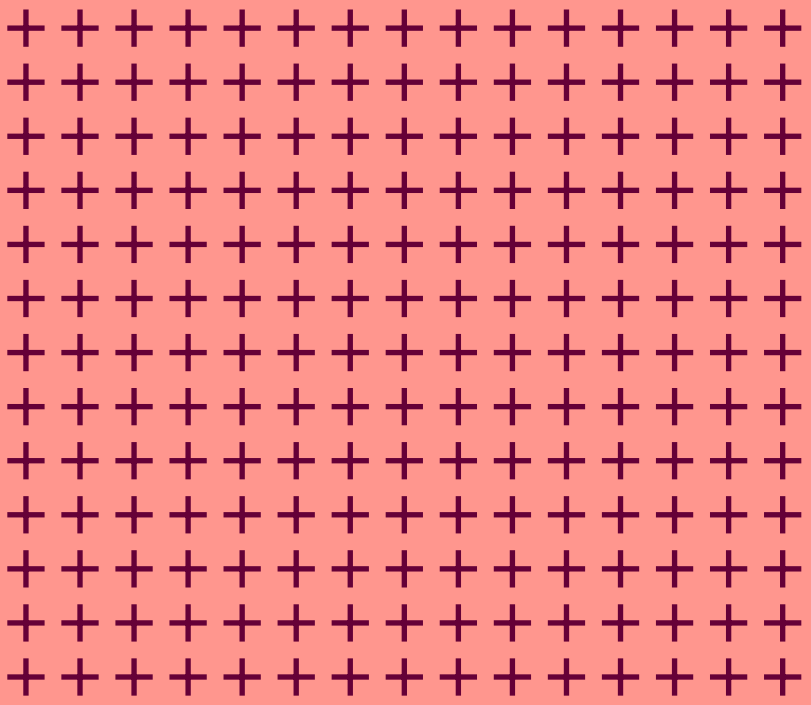
Figure 4 – Mean percentage of individual workload by client type, split by AI users and non-users



Two client types accounted for the largest differences, and in opposite directions. Legal aid clients accounted for a mean of 3% of workload among AI users, compared with 14% among non-users, while large corporate clients accounted for 15% among AI users compared with 5% among non-users. Community and not-for-profit sector (3% compared with 9%) and individual pro bono or low bono clients (3% compared with 6%) also made up a larger share of the clients of AI non-users, while internal (22% compared with 15%) and small and medium enterprise clients (8% compared with 6%) made up a somewhat larger share for AI users. Individual fee-paying clients and government or public sector clients made up a comparable percentage of both groups.[38]

Taken together, findings on area of law, main form of legal work undertaken, are complementary. Use of AI tools in practice is most common for those conducting transactional work, in commercial/corporate areas of law, and among lawyers whose workload tended towards large corporate and internal clients. It was lowest for court and tribunal work, in criminal and family law, and among lawyers working with legal aid, pro bono, and community sector clients.

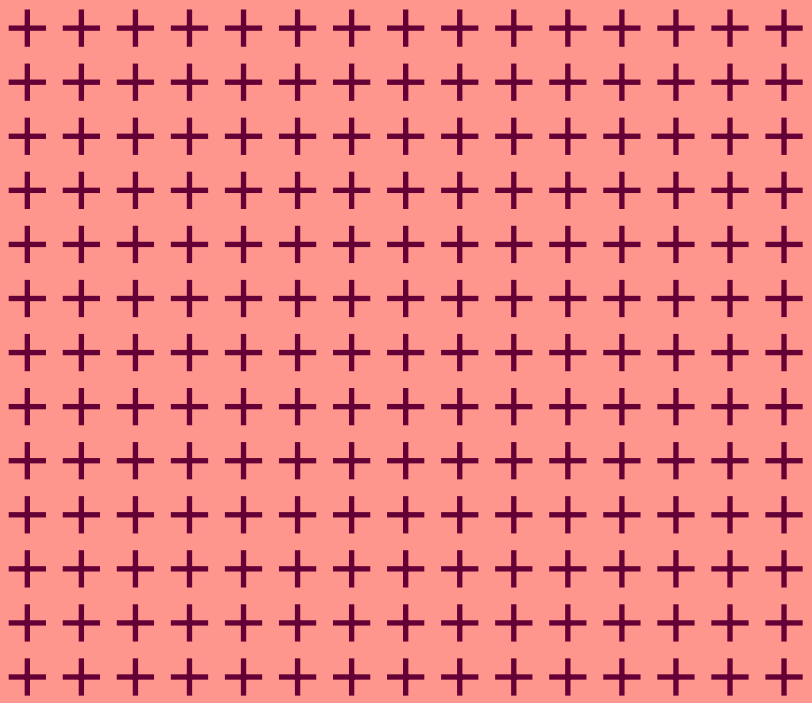
38. Another way to explore this data is to look at respondents whose workload was accounted for entirely by a single client type. Doing this, of those working exclusively for large corporate clients, 90% used AI (n = 51), with 64% of those working solely for internal clients (n = 276). In contrast, 9% of those working exclusively for legal aid clients used AI (n = 57), 16% of those working exclusively for community and not-for-profit sector clients (n = 58), and 19% of those working exclusively for individual pro bono or low bono clients (n = 26).



03

Changes to practice and pricing

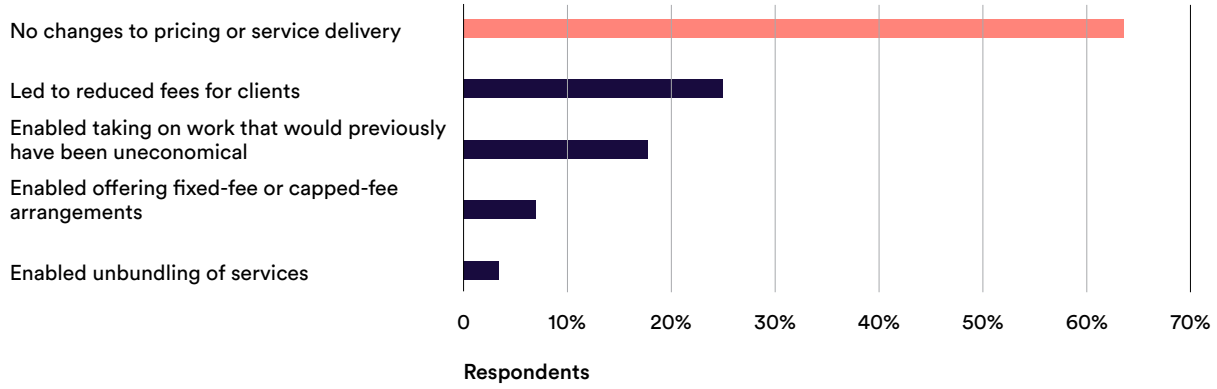
This section examines the changes to service delivery and pricing that practitioners attribute to their use of AI. Specifically, it details how often AI users in fee-charging practice reported their use of AI resulting in reduced fees for clients, fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements, unbundling of legal services, and taking on work that would previously have been uneconomical. It then examines whether reports of reduced fees stemming from AI use varied by client base, type of AI tool used and organisation size.



Changes to pricing and workload

Respondents who used AI in their legal practice were asked whether they had observed any of 4 changes to service delivery or pricing as a direct result of that use, or whether they had observed none of those changes. Respondents who indicated that the question did not apply to their role were also excluded. As most of the changes asked about concerned fees charged to clients, analysis was further restricted to practitioners working in law firms, sole practices, and incorporated and unincorporated legal practices, and to barristers, giving a base of 525.

Figure 5 – Overview of changes to practice and pricing questions, all respondents



As shown in Figure 5, the majority of respondents reported no changes to pricing or service delivery as a direct result of AI. Among those who had seen changes, just over a quarter of respondents reported that there had been reduced fees for clients as a direct result of AI, with just under 18% indicating that they were able to take on work that would previously have been uneconomical. Lower percentages reported AI resulting in other changes, such as fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements or unbundling of services.

Where one of the 4 changes was reported, most practitioners reported only one (73%). However, reporting a change did raise the likelihood of reporting others, with the 4 changes positively associated, as shown in Table 3. The strongest association was between fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements and unbundling of services,[39] though all pair-wise relationships were statistically significant.[40]

39. $\phi = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$
40. Fixed fees/capped fees versus reduced fees for clients; $\phi = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$. Fixed fees/capped fees versus taking on work that would previously have been uneconomical; $\phi = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$. Unbundling versus reduced fees for clients; $\phi = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$. Unbundling versus taking on work that would previously have been uneconomical; $\phi = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$. Reduced fees for clients versus taking on work that would previously have been uneconomical; $\phi = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 3 – Percentage of respondents reporting each change to pricing and service delivery who also reported each other change (row percentages)

	Count	Fixed/ capped fees	Unbundling	Reduced fees	Taking on new work
Enabled offering fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements	37	-	28.0%	56.8%	49.5%
Enabled unbundling of services	18	58.5%	-	59.8%	54.5%
Led to reduced fees for clients	137	15.4%	7.7%	-	27.8%
Enabled taking on work that would have been uneconomical	93	19.6%	10.3%	40.7%	-

Factors associated with reduced fees for clients

The remainder of this section focuses on the extent to which lawyers indicated that AI use resulted in reduced fees. This is the change most directly affecting clients, which was also discussed in the 2025 report.[41] Of practitioners in private practice and barristers who used AI, just over a quarter (26%, n = 137) reported that it had led to reduced fees for their clients.[42]

Client base was examined since some clients may be better placed to secure lower fees. For example, it may be expected that business or larger corporate clients may be more sophisticated repeat users, and more likely to expect AI efficiency gains to be passed on to them.

Tool type was examined since legal-specific tools may be expected to be more likely to produce gains that extend beyond simple efficiencies. Organisation size was included to serve as a proxy for a practice's capacity to take advantage of new technology, including the resources to procure tools, implement them, and reflect the gains in how work is priced.

Practitioners were classified as working mainly for individual fee-paying clients, or mainly for business clients (with small and medium-sized enterprises and large corporates combined), where that group accounted for at least half of their workload. All other respondents were classified as having a mixed or other client base.[43] Practitioners using any legal-specific AI tools (whether alone or in addition to general-purpose tools) were compared with those using general-purpose tools only.

41. In 2025, efficiency/productivity was the only potential benefit of AI that practitioners agreed with, with fewer seeing its potential in accessibility, quality or affordability, Legal Services Research Centre, Generative AI Use in the Legal Profession.
42. As 40% of practitioners in private practice and barristers did not use AI, this equates to roughly one in 7 across the group as a whole.
43. Workload shares were reported for 9 types of client and summed to 100% of work for all respondents who answered the items.

Lawyers whose work was mainly for business clients were most likely to report use of AI resulting in reduced fees for clients (34%, n = 57), compared with 23% (n = 56) for those working mainly for individual fee-paying clients and 20% (n = 21) for those with a mixed or other client base.[44] Reduced fees as a result of AI use was also more common for those using legal-specific AI tools (29%, n = 101) compared to those using only general-purpose tools (20%, n = 34).[45] While percentage indicating reduced fees for clients was lowest for sole practitioners (22%, n = 18) and highest for organisations with 200 employees or more (29%, n = 41), overall, there was little evidence of a relationship between reduced fees as a result of AI use and organisation size.[46]

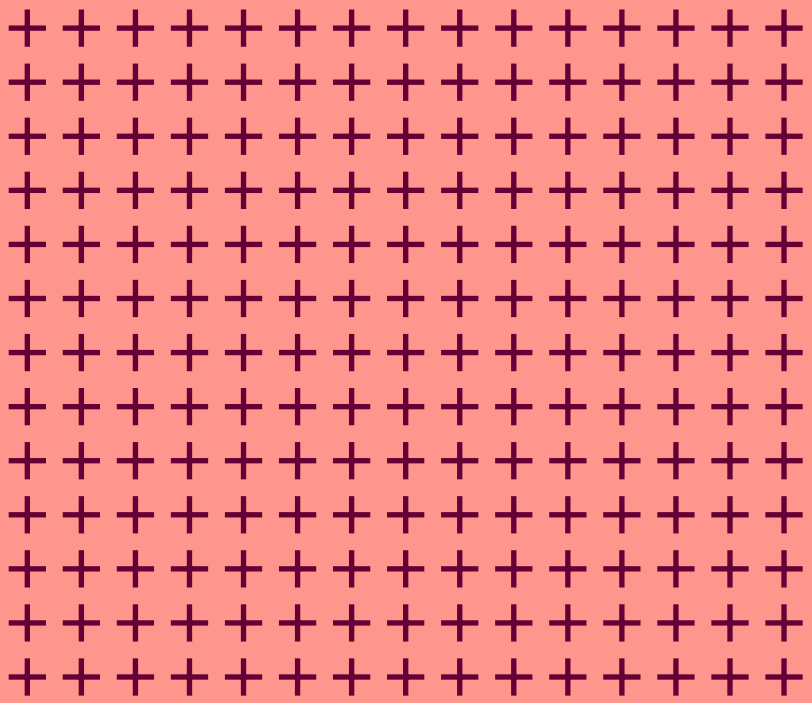
The characteristics explored overlap. For example, larger practices are more likely both to serve business clients and to use legal-specific tools. For that reason, a regression model was also fitted to examine their relationship to reduced fees simultaneously.[47] The difference by client base remained, and was of a similar size. The difference by tool type became smaller and fell short of statistical significance, suggesting it was at least in part accounted for by the other characteristics. Organisation size remained unrelated to reduced fees. Reported fee reductions therefore appear more closely linked to the clients lawyers serve than to the type of AI tool they use.

44. $X^2_2 = 8.10$, p = 0.017, indicating statistically significant differences between groups.
45. A statistically significant difference, $X^2_1 = 5.95$, p = 0.015. Reduced fees were slightly more common where legal-specific tools were used alongside general-purpose tools (32%, n = 60).
46. $X^2_5 = 2.93$, p = 0.71
47. This was a logistic regression of whether practitioners reported reduced fees as a result of AI, with client base, AI tool type and organisation size as predictors. Compared with practitioners working mainly for individual fee-paying clients, those working mainly for business clients had higher odds of reporting reduced fees (odds ratio = 1.73, p = 0.031), while those with a mixed or other client base did not differ (odds ratio = 0.83, p = 0.55). The odds ratio for legal-specific compared with general-purpose only tool use was 1.47 (p = 0.10). Organisation size was again not associated with reporting reduced fees (Wald $X^2_4 = 0.33$, p = 0.99).

04

Client use of AI

This section explores clients' use of AI from the perspective of legal practitioners. It sets out the changes in how clients engage with them that practitioners attribute to clients' use of AI, and how these vary by practice setting, area of law, and type of work. It then considers practitioners' perceptions of the effect of client AI use on the time and effort required to deliver services.

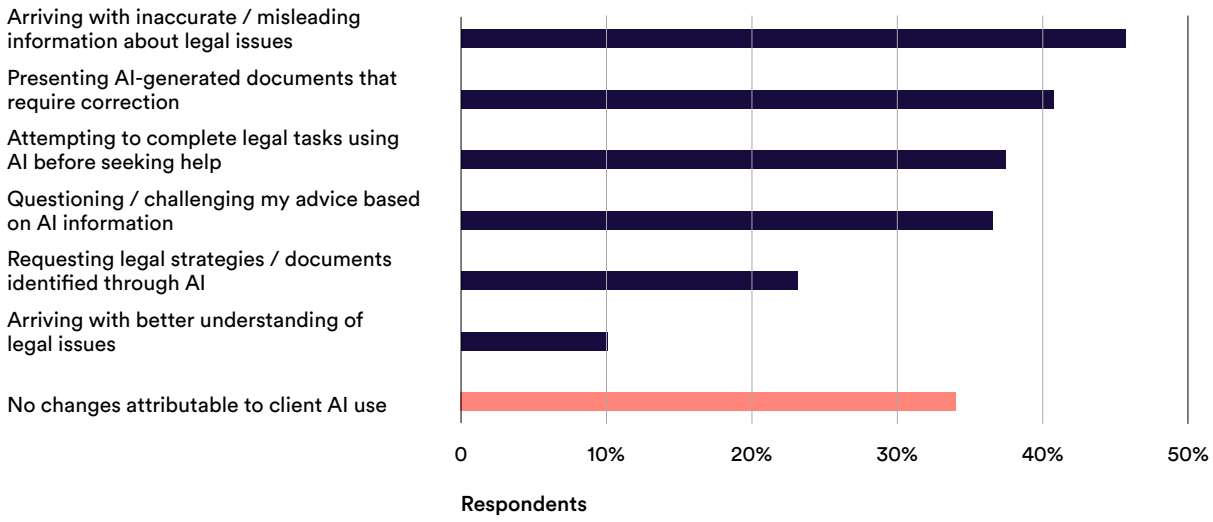


Changes in client engagement attributable to AI use

Client use of AI was captured through a single multiple-response question asking whether respondents had noticed changes in how clients engage with them that they attributed to clients' use of AI tools. Respondents could select any of 6 possible changes, or indicate that they had noticed none. The responses are set out in Figure 6.

Around a third of respondents (34%, n = 499) reported no changes attributable to client AI use. Among the 977 respondents who identified at least one change, most identified several, with 735 (75%) who selected 2 or more.[48]

Figure 6 – Overview of client use of AI as observed by practitioners[49]



48. Of those indicating there were changes attributable to client AI use, 242 (24.7%) indicated there had been a single change, 191 (19.6%) 2 types of change, 175 (17.9%) 3 types of change, 183 (18.7%) 4 types of change, 161 (16.5%) 5 types of change, and 25 (2.6%) all of the types of change shown in Figure 4.
49. Excluding those where the questions were not applicable (non-client facing roles).

Accuracy problems and shifts in client approach were reported far more often than improved client understanding stemming from clients' AI use. The 2 most commonly reported changes concerned accuracy, with 46% of respondents reporting clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information about their legal issues, and 41% indicating clients presenting AI-generated documents or correspondence that required correction. Changes in how clients approached the relationship, rather than the accuracy of material, were also common, with clients attempting legal tasks themselves before seeking professional help, and questioning or challenging advice on the basis of AI output, identified by 38% and 37% respectively. Twenty-three per cent indicated that clients requested specific strategies or documents through their AI use. The only change expressed in positive terms was, by some margin, the least frequently reported, with 10% indicating clients arrived with a better understanding of their legal issues.

Variation by practice area, setting and type of work

Reported changes were not evenly distributed across practice settings, with respondents who worked at community legal centres in particular observing changed behaviour and expectations on the part of clients who had used AI. Clients attempting legal tasks themselves before seeking professional help was reported most often by respondents at community legal centres (47%, n = 49), incorporated legal practices (46%, n = 66), non-legal employers (44%, n = 65) and law firms (42%, n = 242). Community legal centres also recorded the highest rate of clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information (59%, n = 63), followed by incorporated legal practices (55%, n = 79) and law firms (53%, n = 303), and the highest rate of clients questioning or challenging advice (50%, n = 53), again ahead of law firms (46%, n = 266). Conversely, while rates were low in every setting, a particularly low percentage of those in community legal centres (4%, n = 4) reported clients arriving with a better understanding of their legal issues, (for example, compared to 15% (n = 22) for those at incorporated legal practices and 12% (n = 70) of those at law firms).

Turning to areas of law, those working in family law, small business law, debts and insolvency, taxation, and wills and estates were consistently 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.[50] Small business practitioners were also the most likely to report clients attempting legal tasks themselves before seeking professional help (63%, n = 58), followed by intellectual property (55%, n = 65) and family law (54%, n = 146). Immigration law practitioners meanwhile reported a particularly high rate of clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information (63%, n = 40), with over half also reporting AI-generated documents that required correction (53%, n = 35). Personal injury (23%, n = 29) and administrative law (31%, n = 63) practitioners reported clients attempting tasks themselves at lower rates.

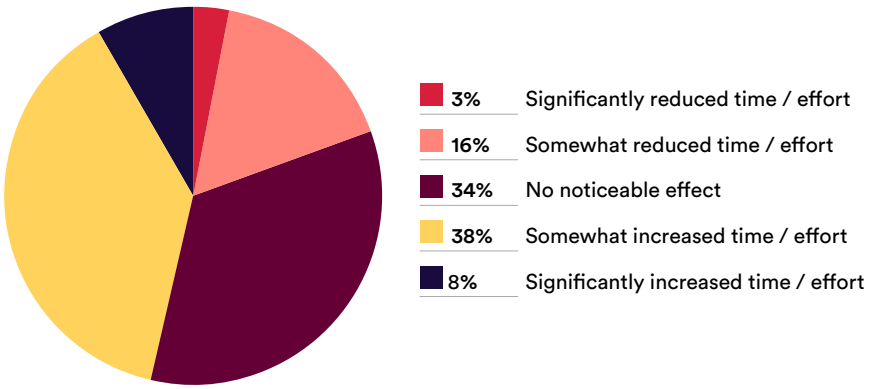
50. For requesting specific documents: taxation law (37%, n = 17), family law (34%, n = 93), debts and insolvency (34%, n = 35), small business (34%, n = 31), and wills and estates (32%, n = 85). For bringing documentation that required correction: taxation law (45%, n = 20), family law (54%, n = 146), debts and insolvency (49%, n = 50), small business (63%, n = 58), and wills and estates (47%, n = 124). For questioning or challenging advice: taxation law (44%, n = 20), family law (60%, n = 163), debts and insolvency (53%, n = 54), small business (57%, n = 53), and wills and estates (44%, n = 117).

Respondents were also asked to identify the main type of legal work in their practice, spanning advocacy, general and specialist litigation, advisory and opinion work, transactional work, alternative dispute resolution, and regulatory, compliance and law reform work. Differences across these categories were more modest than those by practice setting or area of law. As might be expected, respondents for whom providing legal services or advice directly to clients formed a significant part of their role reported clients using AI before seeking help at higher rates (39%, n = 510).[51] Beyond this, variation by type of work was limited and inconsistent. Clients attempting legal tasks themselves was reported more often by those mainly conducting transactional work (46%, n = 144) than, for example, by those conducting regulatory, compliance and law reform work (26%, n = 20). Clients arriving with a better understanding was reported somewhat more often in transactional work (14%, n = 44) and advisory and opinion work (13%, n = 27), though again, rates were relatively low throughout. Questioning or challenging advice was reported at broadly similar rates across advisory and opinion work, transactional work, general litigation and specialist litigation.[52]

Client AI use and changes in time and effort required to deliver services

The module also asked respondents how client use of AI tools affected the time and effort required to deliver services (see Figure 7). Overall, 46% of respondents (n = 446) agreed that client use of AI had increased the time and effort required to deliver services, with most describing some increase in time and effort rather than a significant increase. Thirty-four per cent (n = 327) stated that client use of AI had no noticeable effect on time and effort when it came to service delivery. A smaller percentage (19%, n = 189) stated that client use of AI had reduced their time and effort, again, with some exceeding significant change. Excluding 'no noticeable effect', overall reported time costs exceeded reported time gains by a factor of almost 2 and a half.

Figure 7 – Perceived impact of clients' use of AI tools on the time and effort required to deliver services



51. This compared to 26% (n = 30) who said client-facing work was a minor part of their role, and 20% (n = 8) who said this was not part of their current role.
52. Advisory and opinion work (41%, n = 87), transactional work (43%, n = 135), general litigation (47%, n = 98) and specialist litigation (43%, n = 93).

Variation by practice area, setting and type of work

A comparatively high percentage of respondents at community legal centres reported increased time and effort as a result of client AI use (58%, n = 47), followed by sole practitioners (51%, n = 65) and government employers (49%, n = 25), with those in law firms (45%, n = 188) and at non-legal employers (43%, n = 45) somewhat lower. Interestingly, reported reductions in time and effort varied more widely, with 29% (n = 30) among those working for non-legal employers and 23% (n = 97) at law firms, compared with 14% (n = 18) of sole practitioners and only 4% (n = 3) at community legal centres.

Turning to main type of legal work, those practising specialist litigation (52%, n = 71), general litigation (50%, n = 76) and advocacy (49%, n = 79) most often reported increased time and effort stemming from client AI use, with somewhat lower percentages for those in regulatory, compliance and law reform work (38%, n = 17), advisory and opinion work (41%, n = 57) and transactional work (43%, n = 95). Conversely, percentages reporting a reduction in time and effort were comparatively high for those in regulatory and compliance work (31%, n = 13) and those conducting mainly transactional work (26%, n = 56), compared with only 11% (n = 18) of those whose work primarily consisted of advocacy.

Practitioners in small business law (54%, n = 39) and family law (50%, n = 110) reported comparatively high percentages of increased time and effort resulting from client AI use (both areas with a relatively high percentage reporting clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information as discussed above). Those working in criminal law reported a similarly high percentage with increased time and effort (52%, n = 63).

Looking at practising certificates, reported increases in time and effort attributed to client AI use ranged from 41% (n = 53) among corporate legal practitioners to 54% (n = 38) among government legal practitioners, and varied little by years of practice. Again, variation in percentage reporting reductions in time and effort was greater than for increases, with 28% (n = 36) among corporate legal practitioners and 25% (n = 63) of principals, but only 10% (n = 7) of government legal practitioners and 8% (n = 4) of barristers. Partners were also more likely than non-partners to report reduced time and effort (31%, n = 47 compared with 18%, n = 113).

Forms of client AI use and their relationship to time and effort required

Bringing together the changes set out in Figure 6 and the time and effort ratings in Figure 7, Table 4 shows how each type of change related to the time and effort respondents reported.

Table 4 – Effect of client AI use on time and effort required to deliver services, by type of change attributed to client AI use

Change to client behaviour / relationship attributed to their use of AI	How lawyers felt clients' use of AI tools affected the time and effort required				
	Significantly reduced	Somewhat reduced	No effect	Somewhat increased	Significantly increased
Arriving with better preliminary understanding of their legal issues	11.9%	36.1%	32.4%	16.3%	3.3%
Arriving with inaccurate / misleading information about their legal issues	2.3%	12.8%	29.7%	44.2%	11.0%
Questioning / challenging advice based on information obtained from AI	2.1%	11.9%	25.9%	46.8%	13.4%
Requesting specific legal strategies / documents identified through AI	1.8%	14.0%	20.9%	48.4%	14.9%
Attempting to complete legal tasks using AI before seeking help	2.2%	16.3%	29.8%	41.9%	9.8%
Presenting AI-generated documents / correspondence requiring correction	1.5%	14.5%	29.8%	43.7%	10.4%

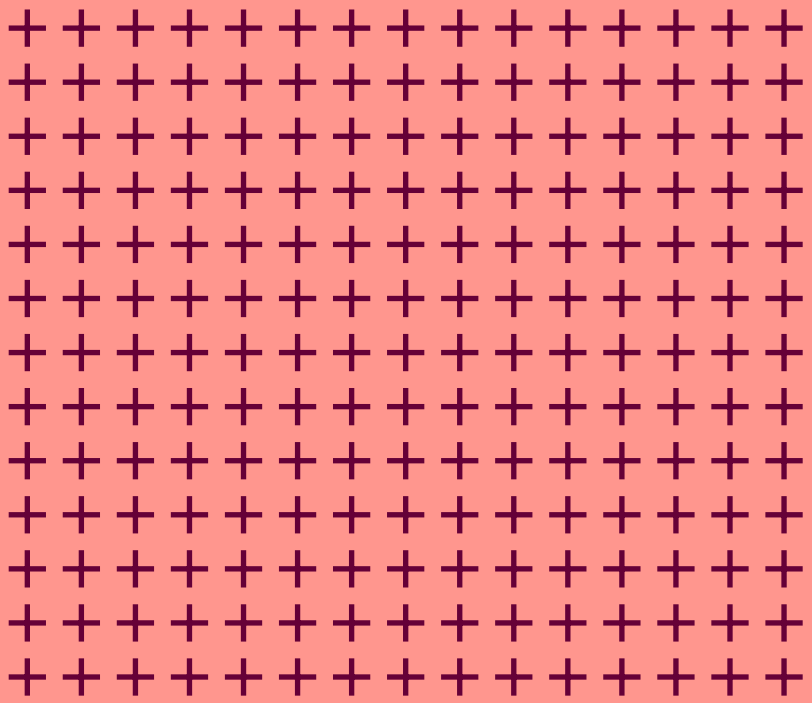
Clients arriving with a better preliminary understanding through their AI use was the only change associated with a net reduction in time or effort, with 48% reporting reduced time and effort compared to around 20% reporting an increase. However, as shown in Figure 6, it was by far the least commonly reported change.

For every other change in client behaviour or interaction attributed to their AI use, whether concerning accuracy or the way clients approached the relationship, the pattern was much the same, with between half and two-thirds of respondents reporting increased time and effort, and less than one in 5 reporting a reduction. Taken together, practitioners appeared to perceive client AI use less as a source of client knowledge or agency that smoothed interactions, and more as a source of friction requiring additional effort, whatever form the change took.

05

Discussion

This section provides further commentary on the results detailed in the preceding sections. It covers the interpretation of findings on patterns of AI adoption, perceptions of efficiency and observed changes to pricing attributed to AI use, and changes in the lawyer–client relationship.



Wide adoption and a flattening of differences by 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, and 78% of the 2026 respondents who did use AI reported that their use of AI for legal work had increased.

The results also indicate that the age and career-stage profile that previously characterised AI users in the legal workplace have 'flattened'. Where previously practitioners who used AI at higher rates were below 30 years of age and earlier in their careers, the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census indicated that these differences had largely disappeared among those aged under 60. The 2025 report linked the concentration of AI use among newer entrants to questions about the development and retention of core professional skills. With use now spread across career stages, that question is increasingly one of skill maintenance as well as development. Industries such as accounting have observed similar sector-wide increases in AI adoption, indicating that the legal profession may not be unique in this flattening effect, though other sectors still suggest age disparities in AI use.[53]

Disparities remained within the legal sector when it came to organisation type and client type, with corporate legal practitioners, non-legal employers and law firms showing higher rates of adoption compared to practitioners working in the legal assistance sector, for government employers, or as barristers. Use rose in every setting, though the lowest using groups did not close the gap on the highest. Those working for corporate clients used AI at much higher rates (90%) compared to those working exclusively for individual pro bono or low bono clients (19%), community and not-for-profit sector clients (16%), or for legal aid clients (9%).

53. See CPA Australia, "Why Accountants are Central to Responsible AI Adoption," *AccountantsDaily,* 29 July 2026, https://www.accountantsdaily.com.au/technology/22673-why-accountants-are-central-to-responsible-ai-adoption; Adel El Arab et al., "Artificial Intelligence in Nursing: A Systematic Review of Attitudes, Literacy, Readiness, and Adoption Intentions Among Nursing Students and Practicing Nurses," *Frontiers in Digital Health,* 7 (2025); Deloitte Australia, *Technology, Media, and Telecommunications Predictions 2026* (Deloitte, 2026), https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/assets-zone1/au/en/docs/industries/technology-media-telecommunications/2026/AU_TMT%20Predictions%202026_Report.pdf.

General-purpose AI tools and workplace specification

The census data suggests that there is still heavy dependence on general-use AI tools, which were used by 79% of users (a comparable figure to 2025), with only a modest increase in use of legal-specific AI tools (from 46% in 2025 to 51% in 2026). The risks associated with use of AI tools are well set out within the legal sector, including risk of hallucinated case law, with the majority of regulatory disciplinary action against lawyers resulting from misuse of generic tools.[54] While legal-specific tools have been developed as a response to the risks of general-purpose AI, emerging research also signals that legal-specific AI tools still have high rates of inaccuracy and hallucination, which some argue are a structural feature of large language models (LLMs), rather than an 'eliminable glitch'.[55] Managing privacy and security risk, relying on inaccurate or fabricated data, and leaking confidential information remained key concerns among legal practitioners.[56]

Overall, legal employers are specifying the AI tools that their employees may use, though 29% of AI-user respondents reported using AI tools despite specific tools not being endorsed organisationally. The census data suggests little changed from 2025 in that there is still heavy dependence on general-use AI tools, which were used by 79% of AI users.

Moreover, workplace specification was not associated with markedly lower use of general-purpose tools, or markedly higher use of legal-specific tools. Where tools were specified by organisations, use of general-purpose tools was no lower than where they were not specified (79% in each case), while use of legal-specific tools was somewhat higher (53% compared with 47%). The AI module did not ask which tasks general-purpose tools were permitted for or where legal-specific tools were required by organisations, how the 2 types of tools interact, or what level of detail is in workplace rules of use. Further research is needed on how workplaces specify use and monitor risk for both general-purpose and legal-specific tools, and on how this relates to what lawyers do in practice.

54. As of August 2026, of 21 recorded Australian legal decisions regarding misuse of AI by a lawyer, 16 explicitly name the tool used and 15 named generic AI tools, predominantly ChatGPT. While these cases include old models of large language models, all 3 2026 cases where the AI tool was specified found misuse of ChatGPT. See Damien Charlotin's international database that tracks legal decisions where generative AI produced hallucinated content: https://www.damiencharlotin.com/hallucinations/. See: "Risk Outlook 2024"; "Risk Outlook 2026"; Victorian Law Reform Commission, *Artificial Intelligence in Victoria's Courts and Tribunals*; Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, "Statement on the 'Mr Dyal' Matter," though in this case a legal-specific AI tool (LEAP) was also used
55. Magesh et al.'s study found a 33% hallucination rate for Westlaw AI-AR, 17% for Lexis+ AI and 17% for Ask Practical Law AI, compared to the 43% hallucination rate for Chat-GPT 4, and 'cutting-edge models specifically designed for research have higher rates of hallucinations than older, general-purpose models'. Markovic, "Equal Justice & Generative AI," 480; Yuvaraj, "The Verification-value Paradox," 4–8; Magesh et al., "Hallucination-Free?"
56. Legal Services Research Centre, *Generative AI Use in the Legal Profession*, 23; LexisNexis, *Legal AI and the Future of the Legal Profession*, 13.

Changes to pricing practices largely yet to occur

Seventy-one per cent of 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census respondents agreed that AI improved efficiency and productivity. To date, published statistics on efficiency gains remain mixed.[57]

The 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census did not measure perceived efficiency in the same way as in the 2025 census. Instead, it asked lawyers whether AI use had led to specific changes to pricing and service delivery; moving from perceptions to reported changes in practice. Changes attributed to AI use, which are perhaps most closely tied to efficiency, were modest. Eighteen per cent of respondents (n = 93) agreed that use of AI had enabled them to take on more work that would previously have been uneconomical.

Efficiency gains from AI have been theorised to compromise the profitability of the traditional billable hour model and spur changes to pricing practice that may also benefit legal consumers.[58] The 2025 report raised an alternative possibility, that gains may result in profits, but not necessarily in lower fees. Changes to pricing would shift billing models from time spent to value offered, and may include fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements, or 'unbundled' legal services – where lawyers are engaged for discrete tasks rather than end-to-end services.[59] Most AI users in fee-charging practice reported none of these changes as a result of AI use. Just over a quarter of respondents (26%, n = 137) reported reduced fees for clients as a direct result of AI, and a smaller percentage still reported the introduction of fixed-fee or capped-fee arrangements (7%, n = 37) or the unbundling of legal services (3%, n = 18) as a result of AI use. Reporting one of these changes did increase the probability of reporting others, however overall, AI facilitating newer pricing models remained rare.

57. See LexisNexis, *Legal AI and the Future of the Legal Profession,* 10; Jerome Doraisamy, "'Natural to Expect' Firm Costs Will Reflect AI-inspired Efficiency," *Lawyers Weekly,* 21 January 2025, accessed 12 August 2026, https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/corporate-counsel/41339-natural-to-expect-firm-costs-will-reflect-ai-inspired-efficiency; Lauren Croft, "AI Adoption in Mid-sized Firms Surges to 93%," *Lawyers Weekly,* 3 April 2025, accessed 12 August 2026, https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/sme-law/41829-ai-adoption-in-mid-size-firms-surges-to-93.
58. See Shelley Burger, "The Productivity Paradox: Rethinking Legal Billing in the Age of AI," *Lawyers Weekly,* 29 June 2026, https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/sme-law/44568-the-productivity-paradox-rethinking-legal-billing-in-the-age-of-ai/?+Weekly; Doraisamy, "Lessons from Clients' Use of AI."; Lauren Croft, "The Billable Hour in FY25–26": Lauren Croft, "A Reimagining of How Value is Defined, Delivered and Rewarded," *Lawyers Weekly*, 18 June 2025; Lauren Croft, "AI Highlights 'Critical Flaws' in Time-based Billing," *Lawyers Weekly,* 30 July 2025, https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/biglaw/42685-ai-highlights-critical-flaws-in-time-based-billing.
59. For more on these models in practice and observations from practitioners, see Catrina Denvir et al., *Pricing Practice: Exploring Costs in Victorian Legal Services: A Report for the VLSB+C* (Victoria Law Foundation, 2023).

Who benefits?

While the results offer some insight into where changes to pricing are occurring, they also begin to answer questions around which consumers are seeing benefits from AI, and pose more questions regarding whether the use of AI in legal work is being disclosed (or obfuscated) to the consumer.

Reduced fees as a result of lawyers' AI use were reported more often by those working mainly for business clients (34%), compared with 23% of those working mainly for individual fee-paying clients, and 20% of those with a mixed or other client base. It was a difference that persisted even having controlled for other factors, with fee reductions appearing more likely to follow the client than the type of AI tool or size of practice. This is consistent with Simshaw's 'two-tiered' scenario that theorised AI would be harnessed by stakeholders with 'the necessary resources, resilience and relationships' to the benefit of their client base (wealthy clients and corporations), whereas legal aid and pro bono clients would not see such benefits.[60] It may also be the case that this is not only the effect of resources, but the legal capability of clients themselves and their ability to advocate for lower prices. This aligns with Galanter's influential (and pre-AI) account of why 'repeat players' fare better than 'one-shotters' in their dealings with lawyers, with regular legal service users more aware of what work usually involves and costs, and with more purchasing power to negotiate.[61] The perceived additional time and effort created by clients' own use of AI was also more often reported by community legal sector lawyers. Rather than a democratisation of justice, the pattern seems to echo the uneven distribution of benefits alluded to by Simshaw and others, where existing inequalities are entrenched.[62]

Observations on client use of AI

Where practitioners observed client use of AI, whether to seek legal information in the first instance, or for guidance on what to expect from lawyers, respondents presented a broadly negative outlook. Accuracy problems and shifts in client approach were reported far more often than improved client understanding stemming from clients' AI use. Findings also indicated changes in how clients are approaching lawyers, with clients attempting legal tasks themselves before seeking professional help, and questioning or challenging advice on the basis of AI output, or requesting specific strategies or documents identified from AI output.

These changes were observed with higher frequency among respondents who worked at community legal centres, in incorporated legal practices, for non-legal employers and in law firms. Respondents working at community legal centres recorded the highest rate of clients arriving with inaccurate or misleading information (59%), and some of the lowest rates of clients arriving with a better understanding of their legal issues (4%).

When asked about the impact client use of AI had on time and effort to deliver legal services, 46% reported that client use of AI had increased the time and effort required to deliver services, 34% said it had no noticeable effect, and 19% that it had reduced time and effort taken. Lawyers at community legal centres reported that time and effort had increased at comparably high rates, as did practitioners working in small business law and family law.

60. Simshaw, "Access to AI Justice," 174–176.
61. Galanter, "Why the 'Haves' Come Out Ahead," 97, 114.
62. See Simshaw, "Access to AI Justice"; Markovic, "Equal Justice & Generative AI."

The results suggest that, at least from the perspective of practitioners, the democratising effect of AI has yet to be fully realised, and lawyers' reports indicate that this is to some extent due to inaccurate legal information produced by AI tools. However, as others have noted, that clients are sourcing legal information through AI tools, that they feel emboldened to question legal advice or that they request certain strategies are not inherently bad developments. Legal services are 'credence goods', which means it is difficult for consumers to know whether they need legal assistance, what 'good' advice looks like, and how much they should pay for it.[63]

Effective use of AI tools for legal problems requires levels of legal and digital capability that consumers, through intersecting skills, knowledge, experience and external factors, may not possess.[64] This may particularly affect consumers likely to engage in pro bono, legal aid or community legal services.

As technology evolves and the lawyer–client relationship is recalibrated, there may be increased opportunity for meaningful exchange that increases legal capability in the process of administering legal services. The areas of law where respondents were most likely to observe clients misinformed by AI output were in areas likely to involve high-stress life events: family law, immigration law, small business law, and debts and insolvency. As noted in the introduction, literature that examines the 'Dr Google' and 'Dr ChatGPT' effect suggests that patients want time with their doctor to clarify what they have found, and often do not get this exchange due to short appointment times.[65] The same constraint applies in a legal setting, since time discussing, correcting or explaining AI-generated output is time that fee-paying clients are likely billed for, or that publicly funded services would be hard pressed to absorb. With little evidence of evolving service delivery format, and an already significantly under-resourced legal assistance sector, there is little sign to date of opportunities being taken up to build client legal capability when it comes to AI.[66]

Conclusion and implications

Taken together, these findings offer a snapshot of AI use in the Victorian legal profession during a time of radical change, both in the advancement of AI tools and their uptake in the legal workplace. As workplaces embrace AI, more practitioners are using AI in the course of their legal work, to a greater extent, and across age groups and career stages. Legal workplaces are (for the most part) specifying which AI tools their employees are permitted to use, though general-purpose AI tools are still favoured.

Despite predictions of innovative changes to pricing practice, findings suggest that large-scale shifts toward fixed-fee arrangements, capped-fee arrangements or unbundled legal services as a direct result of AI have yet to occur. A quarter of AI users in fee-charging practice reported reduced fees for clients, most often those serving business clients. The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census pointed to the potential for AI to increase efficiency for practitioners, as well as to enhance quality, accessibility and affordability for clients. On affordability, one of these dimensions that the 2026 census focused on, that potential appears to have been realised for relatively few.

63. Gillian K. Hadfield, "The Price of Law: How the Market for Lawyers Distorts the Justice System," *Michigan Law Review* 98, no. 953 (2000): 969.
64. It should also be kept in mind that lawyers see only those who seek legal help, and the lawyer census asked specifically about 'clients'. There will be others who may resolve an issue solely using AI or in combination with other responses that are not captured in this data. The experience from a public perspective will be explored in detail in our forthcoming Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (LULU) Survey.
65. Ricardo Moyses de Arruda et al., "Consulting 'Dr Google'," 7; Noor van Riel et al., "The Effect of Dr Google on Doctor–Patient Encounters in Primary Care."
66. See Nigel J. Balmer and Hugh M. McDonald, *Access to Just This? Eligibility for Legal Aid in Australia and its Implications* (Victoria Law Foundation, 2025).

Practitioner observations on client use of AI suggest a shift in client expectations of legal practitioners, more often in their view, increasing rather than reducing the time and effort required to deliver services. Only a small percentage of practitioners observed that clients received a better understanding of legal issues from their use of generative AI.

These findings have implications for regulation and practice. First, with general-purpose tools remaining dominant, and no less common where workplaces specify AI tools to be used, the content and application of workplace AI policies appear more important than their existence. The Uniform Law regulators' joint statement recommends 'clear, risk-based policies' setting out which tools may be used and for what purposes, how use by junior and support staff is supervised, and how AI output is verified.[67] Future research would be useful to better understand how use is defined by task and tool, what workplace policies permit, and how compliance is checked.

Second, the joint statement expects lawyers to be transparent with clients about their use of AI, and, where requested, to explain how that use is reflected in costs.[68] That reduced fees were reported more often for business clients, rather than for individuals, suggests that this expectation is adhered to unevenly, depending perhaps on clients' experience with law and lawyers, and their wider legal capability, including the confidence to ask how AI has been used and whether its benefits are reflected in what they pay.[69]

Third, the settings in which AI is used least by lawyers, and where clients' own use is perceived to add most to lawyers' workload, are those serving legal aid, community sector and pro bono clients. If AI is to lead to any tangible improvements to access to justice, rather than embedding existing advantage, effort will be needed here first. This includes supporting services to identify where AI can genuinely help, ensuring that any tools offered to the public are useful and useable for those who need them, measuring what has and has not worked, and recognising where technology may not be the answer. For a client in crisis, facing a combination of health, social and legal issues, AI's limitations may be found quickly, and it is unlikely to replace a holistic, human response.

The picture these findings present is both incomplete and evolving. It is incomplete since the census (and other research) includes only a subset of the questions that need to be answered. Comparatively little is known, particularly from an access to justice perspective, about where generative AI is effectively improving the accessibility, quality and affordability of legal services, or for that matter how and when different tools are employed, and the risk this creates or avoids.

It is also incomplete since these findings are drawn from lawyers alone, and the public may perceive AI and their own use of it very differently. Where people use legal services to address justiciable issues, lawyers gain only a partial impression of how they employed AI along the way. Where they do not, which legal needs surveys show to be very common,[70] lawyers have no view of use at all. Lawyers' perspectives are invaluable, but an understanding of how AI bears on access to justice must also be informed from the 'bottom up', by the perspectives, needs and capabilities of the public.[71]

67. "Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Australian Legal Practice."
68. "Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Australian Legal Practice."
69. Pleasence and Balmer, "Legal Capability and Access to Civil Justice"; Hastings et al., "Artificial Intelligence and Access to Justice at the 'Shop Front'."
70. OECD/Open Society Foundations, *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice* (OECD Publishing, 2019); Pleasence and Balmer, *Report of the Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey*; Nigel J. Balmer et al., *The Public Understanding of Law Survey (PULS) Volume 1: Everyday Problems and Legal Need* (Victoria Law Foundation, 2023).
71. Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel J. Balmer, "Justice and the Capability to Function in Society," *Dædalus* 148, no. 1 (2019): 140–49.

It is an evolving picture because, as this report illustrates, AI and its use are shifting both quickly and continuously. This means a need for continuing monitoring, analysis and reassessment to ensure that AI does not simply perpetuate the advantages of the 'haves' over the 'have-nots',[72] or worse still, augment them. Alongside the LSRC's annual Victorian Lawyer Census, the longitudinal Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (LULU) Survey[73] will seek to do both, in bringing a 'bottom-up' public perspective and tracking how experience changes over the next 4 years.

Taken together, the 2025 and 2026 census findings indicate generative AI moving into legal practice faster than its gains are reaching clients, particularly when viewed through an access to justice lens. The legal profession is at a formative point in its use of generative AI, and is still establishing what this technology, could (or should) be used for. This report captures only a small part of that larger picture, though to date benefits appear to follow those best placed to secure them. Equitable access to the benefits of AI is unlikely to arrive simply as a function of adoption – it will have to be built.

72. Galanter, "Why the 'Haves' Come Out Ahead," 104.
73. See the pilot survey: Pleasence and Balmer, *Report of the Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey.*

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Appendix A

Table 5 – Area of practice and use of AI

	Uses AI			
	No		Yes	
Area of law	Count	%	Count	%
Trade practices law	8	15.3%	42	84.7%
Banking / finance	19	21.6%	67	78.4%
Information technology / telecommunications	19	22.2%	65	77.8%
Intellectual property	32	24.8%	97	75.2%
Corporate law	65	25.0%	196	75.0%
Commercial law	138	30.1%	320	69.9%
Planning / local government	21	33.8%	41	66.2%
Small business	33	34.9%	61	65.1%
Construction law	25	35.1%	46	64.9%
Environmental law	17	36.9%	30	63.1%
Conveyancing / real property	89	37.6%	148	62.4%
Employment / industrial law	78	39.4%	120	60.6%
Immigration law	28	40.1%	42	59.9%
Wills and estates	114	42.1%	156	57.9%
Taxation	22	42.6%	30	57.4%
Prefer not to say	7	43.1%	10	56.9%
Personal injury	63	44.5%	78	55.5%
Debts / insolvency	53	47.4%	59	52.6%
Civil litigation	188	48.1%	203	51.9%
Other (please specify)	112	53.1%	99	46.9%
Administrative law	135	54.4%	113	45.6%
Family law	157	55.1%	128	44.9%
Criminal law	181	71.3%	73	28.7%

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