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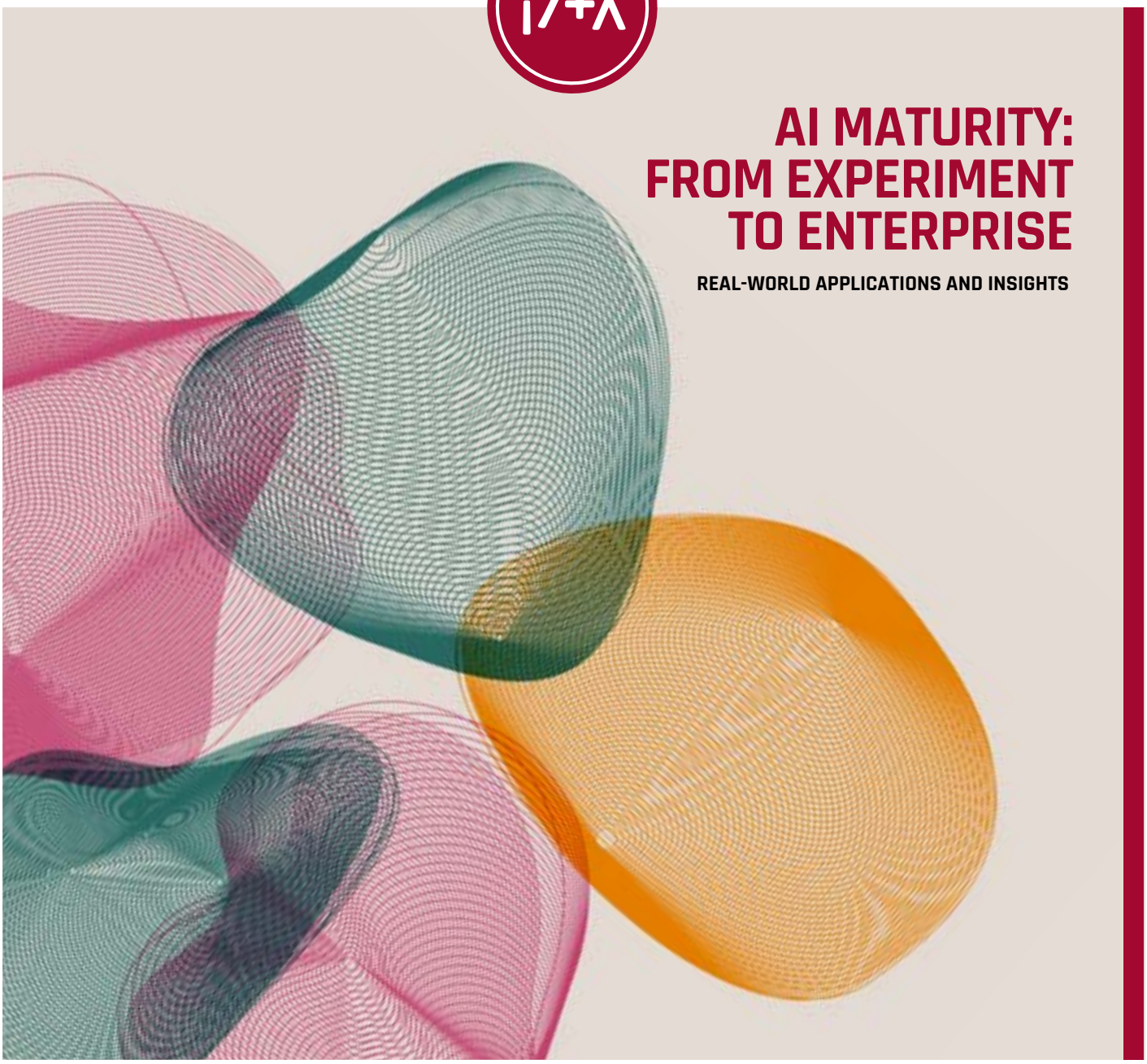

AI MATURITY: FROM EXPERIMENT TO ENTERPRISE

REAL-WORLD APPLICATIONS AND INSIGHTS

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by Abhijat Saras

Generative AI is common enough in legal circles that it can create a false sense of progress. A firm launches a pilot, buys licenses, and runs internal demos. Yet none of those, by themselves, tells us much about maturity.

AI maturity is not about how many tools a law firm has tested. It is not about how many pilots have been run, how many vendor meetings have been held, or how many lawyers have experimented with a general-purpose assistant. To assess maturity, we need to understand if the firm has built the institutional capability to turn falling intelligence costs into better legal work, better economics, and more defensible outcomes.

Three years after ChatGPT's release, the legal industry has moved past its initial surprise phase. The early debate focused on generative AI's credibility, its capabilities beyond superficial drafting, and the profession's response. Some lawyers were impressed immediately. Others dismissed it as another overhyped tool struggling with real legal complexity. Many assumed that any meaningful impact would take a long time.

AI adoption among legal professionals surged from 19% in 2023 to nearly 79% by 2025, a fourfold increase in two years. Among private law firms, the ABA reports adoption jumped from 11% to 30% over the same period, with larger firms showing faster uptake: 46% of firms with over 100 attorneys now use AI tools.

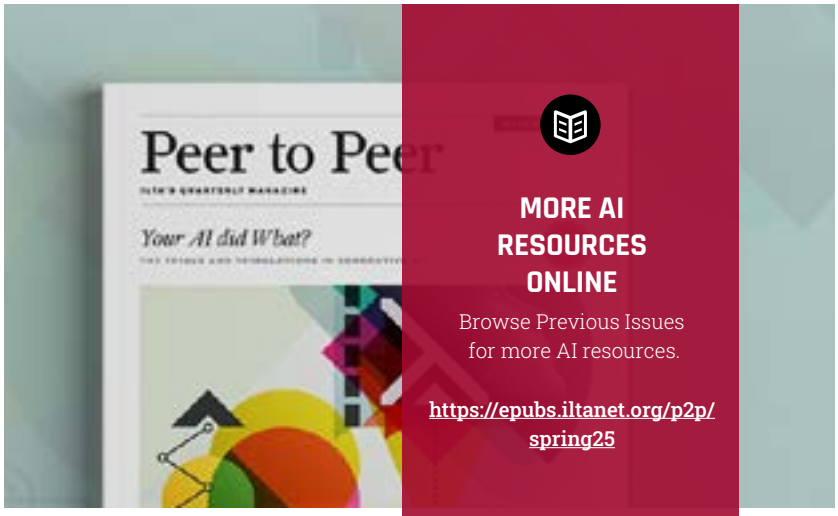
That is what makes this moment different from earlier waves of technology. Most legal technology improved coordination, storage, communication, or administration. AI changes the economics of intelligence. It lowers the cost of producing certain forms of analysis, synthesis, drafting, and structured reasoning. Judgment is still needed, and legal expertise is not flattened into a commodity, but the operating environment around it has changed.

For decades, law firms have depended on scarce cognitive labor. The profession has been built on highly trained people spending time reading, interpreting, comparing, drafting, assessing risk, and constructing arguments. Pricing, leverage models, staffing patterns, and client expectations developed around that scarcity. When a key input to professional work becomes cheaper and more abundant, the implications extend beyond productivity.

AI is challenging that equation.

When intelligence costs fall, the competitive advantage shifts. Success depends less on individual professionals' brilliance and more on organizations' systems to deploy intelligence effectively.

In an earlier essay, I described this dynamic as the "Moneyball effect" in law. When a critical input becomes cheaper and more abundant, advantage shifts to those who redesign their operating model around it. Yet a gap remains between individual adoption and institutional capability. 69% of legal professionals use generative AI tools in their individual work. Still, only 46% of firms report deploying general-purpose AI at an organizational level, and just 34% have implemented legal-specific AI systems.



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THE ILLUSION OF MATURITY

The strongest firms will not just have the smartest lawyers, though that still matters. They will be the firms that design better systems for deploying intelligence in real workflows. They will know where AI helps, where it does not, where human review must remain constant, where supervision can be risk-based, and where institutional knowledge can improve speed and consistency without sacrificing quality.

The gap between individual adoption and institutional capability matters. A firm can have many lawyers using AI weekly and remain at an early stage. A partner may use a consumer tool to summarize a document. An associate may use it to generate a first draft. A knowledge lawyer may pilot a product for a defined use case. All of that can happen while the institution lacks clear governance, reliable training, defensible workflows, curated knowledge infrastructure, and a way to measure if these efforts improve outcomes.

This is the illusion of maturity. AI is visible, so maturity is assumed. But visible activity is not the same as institutional capability.

A firm is not mature because lawyers can access AI tools. This is why AI maturity should be understood first as an operating model question, not a tooling question. The real issue is not whether a firm has access to impressive systems. It is whether the firm has built the institutional conditions for coherent use.

The organization can explain where AI is used, which data sources are involved, what standards govern use, who owns the process, how outputs are validated, how exceptions are handled, and whether the workflow is improving results for clients and for the business.

The task, then, is not simply to adopt AI. It is to distinguish visible motion from genuine maturity. That requires a more honest diagnosis, one that looks past the noise of licenses, pilots, and demos and asks a harder question:

> Has the firm begun to build the institutional capability required to make AI part of how legal work is actually delivered?

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A BETTER WAY TO MEASURE PROGRESS

Many firms are currently in a stage of fragmented experimentation. The interest is real, but progress is uneven and often hard to see clearly. One practice group may be finding genuine value while another is still at the stage of curiosity. Leadership may be enthusiastic while lawyers remain uncertain.

In some firms, knowledge teams are driving practical innovation, while governance lags behind actual behavior.

That is why linear stage models often fail to capture what is happening. Organizational change rarely moves in a straight line. A firm can be advanced in one respect and underdeveloped in another. It can have meaningful use cases without institutional coordination.

What leaders need instead is a clearer diagnostic tool. A way to evaluate the institutional capabilities that actually determine whether AI can be deployed effectively.

The following framework examines AI maturity across two dimensions: the clarity of real use cases and the level of institutional commitment to support them.

Together, these forces create a simple quadrant that explains why many firms appear further along than they are, and what it takes to move from experimentation to genuine integration.

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THE LEGAL AI MATURITY QUADRANT

A useful starting point is to examine two forces that shape technology transitions in professional services: the clarity of real use cases and the level of institutional commitment required to support them.

The first dimension concerns the maturity of use cases. At the earliest stage, AI is leveraged in a collection of isolated tasks. These experiments may be valuable, but they remain disconnected from the broader legal work. As maturity increases, AI supports defined workflows. Instead of accelerating individual tasks, it becomes embedded in repeatable processes that deliver measurable value.

The second dimension concerns institutional commitment. Some AI adoption emerges organically, driven by individual lawyers experimenting with new tools. Other efforts reflect deliberate organizational investment: leadership sponsorship, governance frameworks, training programs, and curated knowledge infrastructure. The difference between the two is often between isolated innovation and scalable capability.

- At the lower left sits the **Exploration Zone.** Here, individual experimentation drives AI adoption. Lawyers test tools on their own matters, discovering useful applications, but the activity remains invisible to the broader organization. Governance is limited, workflows remain unchanged, and promising ideas rarely scale beyond the original users.

- Above is **Innovation Signaling**. In this quadrant, leadership recognizes the importance of AI and invests visibly. Firms run pilots, purchase licenses, and host internal demonstrations. The organization appears active and forward-looking. Yet use cases remain vague, and the technology has not yet translated into meaningful operational change.

- In the lower right quadrant sits **Grassroots Innovation.** Valuable use cases are emerging within practice groups. Lawyers redesign parts of their workflow, integrating AI into specific tasks where it delivers clear advantages. However, institutional structures may lag behind. Without coordinated governance, knowledge infrastructure, or leadership alignment, these innovations remain localized.

- The upper right quadrant represents **Strategic Integration.** This is where AI maturity begins to produce real advantage. Leadership commitment and use case clarity reinforce each other. AI becomes embedded in defined workflows, supported by training, governance, and knowledge systems, enabling consistent deployment. At this stage, AI is part of the organization's legal work delivery.

> The quadrant's purpose is not to label firms for its own sake, but to force a more honest diagnosis. The question is not whether the firm is active, but where the actual bottleneck lies.

A PRACTICAL NOTE

Frameworks are useful only if they can be applied. A simple diagnostic has been developed to help firms assess where they sit on the maturity curve. It reflects the same dimensions outlined above and translates them into practical questions across governance, knowledge,

ACCESS *THE* ASSESSMENT

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THE REAL CONSTRAINTS ON AI MATURITY

If the maturity curve were solely about technology adoption, progress would be straightforward. The tools already exist and improve at an extraordinary pace. Yet most firms remain stuck in the early quadrants.

The bottleneck is often not a technological limitation, but an organizational constraint. Four common patterns emerge across most firms:

Coordination: Law firms are complex institutions in which meaningful change requires alignment among leadership, practice groups, knowledge teams, technologists, and sometimes clients themselves. A promising pilot may demonstrate real value in one practice area, but without clear ownership and incentives, it rarely spreads beyond the original team.

Knowledge Infrastructure: Legal work runs on precedent, institutional memory, and accumulated reasoning embedded in prior matters. AI systems can only work effectively when that knowledge is structured, accessible, and curated. When contracts, briefs, and playbooks are scattered across fragmented repositories across practice groups, AI does not magically resolve the problem. It often amplifies it. Without a reliable knowledge layer, even powerful models struggle to produce consistent results.

Observability: In many firms, it is still surprisingly difficult to answer basic questions about AI usage. Where exactly is it being used? Which data sources are being accessed? Who is responsible for validating the outputs? How are errors detected and corrected? Without visibility into these questions, leaders cannot meaningfully measure maturity or improve it.

Client Accountability: Law firm clients are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their understanding of technology and risk. They are not simply asking whether a firm uses AI. They want to understand how it is used, how outputs are validated, and how decisions are made. In other words, they want processes that are defensible and explainable. Firms that cannot provide that transparency will find it difficult to maintain credibility as AI becomes more deeply embedded in professional work.

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WHY WAITING IS THE WRONG STRATEGY

Faced with this complexity, some firms have adopted a cautious posture. They are watching developments closely but prefer to move slowly until the technology stabilizes.

That instinct is understandable. Legal work carries real risk, and large organizations rarely benefit from chasing every new technological trend. But waiting is not the right strategy.

Organizational capability does not appear overnight. Training programs must be designed. Knowledge infrastructure must be curated. Governance frameworks must be established. Lawyers must learn how to work effectively with new systems and integrate them into real workflows.

These capabilities develop gradually through experimentation, iteration, and experience.

Firms that build these capabilities earlier gain a learning advantage. Their lawyers become comfortable with AI. Their knowledge systems evolve to support retrieval and reasoning. Their governance models mature through real-world use rather than theoretical debate.

This learning advantage compounds over time. When useful applications become widely recognized, firms with mature capabilities can deploy them immediately.

There is a counterargument worth considering: early adopters might waste resources on ineffective approaches, while late movers can learn from their mistakes and adopt proven methods. This is true with immature technologies.

Two factors make that logic less compelling here.

- The underlying capabilities being built (governance frameworks, knowledge infrastructure, training programs) remain valuable regardless of which tools succeed. A firm that learns to curate its institutional knowledge for AI retrieval benefits from that investment, whether it uses Claude, GPT, or something not yet released.
- The rapid change means waiting for clarity may take too long. In the three years since ChatGPT's release, individual adoption among legal professionals has increased to 79%. By the time consensus emerges about "best practices," firms without institutional capability will be significantly behind.

The real risk is waiting too long while others learn to operate in the new environment, while you are still building the foundation.

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AI MATURITY AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

AI maturity is fundamentally a question of competitive positioning.

Firms that build real capability gain an economic edge. They deploy knowledge more effectively, reduce friction across workflows, and deliver more consistent work without diluting professional judgment. As the cost of certain forms of intelligence falls, the advantage shifts to those who can integrate it into how work is actually performed.

The client dimension is equally important. Buyers are becoming more exacting about outcomes and process. They want to understand how work is produced, how risk is managed, and where technology sits within that process. Firms that can offer clear, defensible answers will command greater confidence and stronger relationships.

There is also a talent implication. Lawyers entering the profession will expect access to modern systems that allow them to focus on higher-value work. Firms providing this environment will better attract, develop, and retain them.

These forces converge on a simple conclusion: AI maturity is not about adoption, but capability. It is the ability to translate cheaper, abundant intelligence into better legal outcomes. That capability will distinguish leading firms from followers.

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