Featured Article

# Why AI Success Depends on Leadership, Not Software

by

Vikki Bentwood
Edge International

powered by

TheRemsenGroup.com

# Why AI Success Depends on Leadership, Not Software

Vikki Bentwood | January 27, 2026 Artificial Intelligence

Ninety-five percent of legal professionals believe generative AI will be central to their organisation's workflow within five years. Yet according to the same Thomson Reuters report more than half have no policy, nearly two thirds had no training and few have a coherent leadership stance.

This is not a technology gap. It is a leadership gap and it is already undermining client trust, talent retention and competitive positioning.

Across our work with firms in the UK, US and Europe, a clear pattern has emerged: widespread experimentation with tools but very little preparation for the strategic, cultural and commercial consequences of operating in an AI-driven market.

The firms that lead the next decade will not be those with the most advanced software, but those with the effective leadership response.

**Six Blind Spots Holding Firms Back**

**Blind Spot 1: Treating AI as a project and not a strategic shift.**

Too many firms still treat AI as an IT project; they install a tool, run a pilot, hold a training session, then move on. This mindset dramatically underestimates the scale of change ahead.

AI is not a product. It is a new layer of infrastructure that will influence every major function: client delivery, pricing, profitability, recruitment, training, knowledge systems, business development and culture.

With tools evolving weekly, strategy cannot be built around individual platforms. It must be built around how AI reshapes the organisation itself.

AI cannot sit with IT alone. It requires leadership ownership and alignment across strategy, cultural development, operating models and the client experience.

---

**Blind Spot 2: Ignoring the Cultural Challenge**

The greatest barriers to AI adoption are cultural, not technical. AI unsettles traditional expertise, compresses junior work, changes role expectations and reduces the glue within the partnership.

This creates understandable anxiety: *If AI can do this task, where do I add value?* Left unaddressed, uncertainty drives disengagement as well as “shadow AI”, the quiet, unsupervised use of tools outside policy or oversight.

The most effective response is leadership-led learning. When leaders take part in AI sessions, ask questions openly and build alongside their teams, they signal that curiosity is expected and shared learning is the norm.

AI capability is not built through a single workshop. It develops through continuous learning, transparency and a culture where experimentation is encouraged and recognised. This is how firms move from fear to confidence and turn AI into a collective capability rather than an individual risk.

---

**Blind Spot 3: Missing the Business Case Beyond Legal Work**

When asked how their firms use AI, most Managing Partners refer to legal research or drafting. These applications are key, but only a fraction of the opportunity.

Some of the most immediate gains lie in the business of law where firms currently lose margin through manual effort in business development, marketing, reporting, HR, knowledge and operations. These processes still consume significant senior time and slow decision-making.

AI can already retrieve and combine internal knowledge instantly, undertake deep research and strategy, generate client-ready materials and streamline reporting with far greater speed and accuracy. These use cases carry lower risk than most legal applications and deliver faster, more measurable returns.

Firms that focus only on legal workflows overlook some of the largest and most accessible commercial advantages.

---

**Blind Spot 4: Confusing Risk Management with Avoidance**

Caution around confidentiality, accuracy and regulation is necessary. But in many firms, risk management has become risk avoidance and is slowing progress rather than enabling safe adoption.

Most firms still lack considered AI policies or training programmes, even though clients assume their advisers are already using AI. The result is inconsistent practice, unclear safeguards and rising client concern.

Inaction is not prudent. It is a strategic risk that exposes firms to compliance, quality and reputational issues.

---

**Blind Spot 5: Avoiding the Client Conversation**

Clients increasingly expect firms to use AI — yet most have no visibility of when, where or how it is applied. This disconnect is already influencing trust and buying decisions.

Clients want clarity: which workflows involve AI, how outputs are checked and where efficiencies are being delivered without compromising judgement.

Many partners do not yet feel confident discussing these issues. But silence creates unnecessary risk and leaves clients to make their own assumptions.

Proactive communication is now part of competitive positioning.

---

**Blind Spot 6: Waiting for Certainty**

Law firms are accustomed to acting once certainty is established — when the risk is clear, the policy is completed and the process defined. AI moves too quickly for that approach.

Models evolve continuously. Tools change monthly. Staff experiment regardless of policy. Clients benchmark performance against firms already integrating AI.

Waiting for perfect clarity is no longer a neutral stance. It is a competitive disadvantage.

---

**What Leadership Teams Must Do**

Successful firms focus on three interconnected domains, each requiring leadership ownership and alignment:

**People and Culture**

- Leadership-led AI literacy
- Evolving capability and career models
- Intentional structures for collaboration and shared learning
- Talent retention in low-collaboration environments
- Transparency to reduce shadow AI risk

**BD, Strategy and Client Value**

- AI-enabled BD and marketing workflows
- Better pricing, forecasting and reporting
- Clear firm-wide AI value proposition
- Structured client conversations

**Operations, Governance and Risk**

- Practical, enabling policies
- ROI measurement aligned to profitability
- Modern knowledge systems
- Controlled experimentation

These cannot be tackled in isolation. They require coordination and shared leadership accountability.

---

**The Choice facing leadership**

AI is reshaping how law firms operate, compete and create value. The question is no longer which tools to buy, but how to redesign the business for an AI-driven market.

Leadership is now the determining factor. Firms that act with clarity and direction will strengthen client relationships, improve margins and retain talent. Firms that wait for certainty will fall behind those already integrating AI into their business models.

The strategic risk today is not moving too fast. It is moving too slowly.