



ONLINE

AI to slash graduate law jobs over next decade

BY SAM MCKEITH - JUN 11, 2026 3:12 PM AEST

Prospective lawyers face a brutal reality over the next decade as next-gen AI cuts the need for junior talent. The heavy impact of artificial intelligence technology's impact on the legal industry's junior ranks is fast becoming clear, as major law firms start to reassess graduate intakes.

Top tier law firm MinterEllison this year became the first major Australian firm to cut its graduate cohort due to AI, trimming intake by almost a third.

Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer, Norton Rose Fulbright, Allens and Mallesons have also pulled back on their graduate cohorts, but deny generative AI tech is to blame.

The drop off in grad numbers is a sign of things to come, according to industry players, who say AI could replace thousands of junior roles over the next decade.

Some legal recruiters are already seeing a sharp drop in junior roles as AI is used to justify leaner teams inside some firms, while Deloitte warns that a large portion of legal work may soon no longer require traditional human labour at all.

Morris Misel, a business futurist, says it's possible that more than 10,000 legal roles, including many junior positions, could cease to exist in Australia by 2036.

"What we're already seeing across many industries is that AI doesn't eliminate professions overnight. It removes tasks, then compresses workflows, then changes how many people are required to deliver an outcome. Law won't be immune," Misel says.

He adds that the "real risk isn't that law firms suddenly stop hiring graduates. The risk is that firms need fewer graduates to perform the same volume of work".

This shift will ramp up, he expects, as firms switch from thinking about jobs "and start thinking about tasks" driven by AI.

"For most of modern business history, we bundled hundreds of tasks together and called it a role. AI is beginning to separate those things," he says.

"Once a task can be automated, augmented or delegated to a system, the profession has to ask a different question: which activities genuinely require human judgement, trust and accountability? That's where the future value of lawyers will increasingly sit."

In the opinion of Griffith University's Elizabeth Engelos, it's impossible to predict how many junior roles will go over the next 10 years. But she says it's likely that firms, especially those at the top end of town, will "naturally cut down on the numbers" as AI advances.

"I don't think there is any way to know the true impact of AI on graduate jobs," says the law academic, adding that "students are already worried about AI and how it might undermine the qualifications".

She says law schools are focusing on giving “students the essential skills of critical thinking and legal reasoning” to help bulwark them against AI.

“AI won’t change that,” she says. “AI can’t do that. And even if one day it can, it can’t appear in court.”

While lawyers and the legal profession are popular targets for criticism by “AI doomsayers, she notes the profession is “no more vulnerable than any other discipline – particularly given the importance of in-person appearance”.

Grim predictions about job prospects fits a common narrative on AI and law.

That’s according to Queensland University of Technology [research](#), which argues “at its heart” the usual story starts with tech leading to “more work being outsourced based on the relative low cost of labour”. It then proceeds to standardised, repetitive and linear tasks being conducted by technology instead of paralegals.

“The narrative would have us then believe that, because of this rise of technology, junior lawyers are no longer needed, experienced lawyers are no longer needed in the same volume, jobs will become scarce, career prospects become bleak, and society must then rethink what a lawyer is even supposed to ‘be’ in the aftermath,” it argues.

Recent industry [research](#) appears to endorse the view. One US-based study, for instance, suggests law grads should steer clear of back office areas like document review, legal research, and mediation as AI rapidly overtakes human workers.

It nominates family and criminal law, intellectual property and litigation—areas previously considered tough for AI to impact—as also likely to be hard hit.

It identifies corporate law as probably the most insulated area for juniors on the basis that it’s highly complex and involves interpersonal interactions at multiple levels across firms.

When it comes to grads, Laina Chan, CEO of legal AI risk firm MiAI Law, is more upbeat.

Chan, a barrister, says, for juniors, a future where AI is doing a lot of heavy lifting does not necessarily mean “a widespread collapse in graduate employment”.

“If firms continue relying on traditional leverage models and hourly billing structures, there will likely be pressure on junior headcount in some practice areas,” she says.

“But if firms embrace value-based pricing, scalable legal delivery, fixed-fee structures, and broader access to legal services, AI may actually expand the total legal market rather than shrink it. In that scenario, the profession may not need fewer graduates. It may simply deploy legal capability differently.”

Grads going into practice areas involving large amounts of “structured text”, repeatable workflows and document-heavy tasks are most at risk, she says.

Chan points to commercial litigation, insurance litigation, regulatory investigations, discovery, due diligence, employment law, insolvency, and high-volume commercial advisory work as at-risk areas.

“These practice areas contain substantial amounts of work that can be decomposed into structured reasoning tasks,” she says.

“AI systems are becoming increasingly capable of analysing legal structure, identifying deficiencies, mapping legal elements to facts for pleadings analysis, comparing documents, extracting propositions, and synthesising procedural information.”

By contrast, grads will remain safer in areas involving advocacy, negotiation, strategy, cross-examination, client management, and highly bespoke advisory work.

The reason, according to Chan, is these areas are more resistant to direct automation.

“That does not mean those areas will be untouched, but the substitution effect will be far more significant in process-heavy legal work.”

Grads should also be aware that AI impacts will likely differ across the industry.

At top-tier firms, Chan says management will probably adopt AI aggressively “because the economic incentives are strong and they possess the infrastructure, data, and scale necessary to integrate AI deeply

into workflow systems”.

“However, those firms also have large leverage models built around junior labour, which creates structural pressure,” she says.

“Firms are already experiencing growing pressure on leverage models, pricing structures, workflow efficiency, and assumptions about how junior legal work should be performed. “Many firms are actively experimenting with AI-assisted research, litigation analysis, drafting systems, discovery workflows, and procedural automation, which is already changing expectations around productivity.”

Young lawyers who will be valuable in years ahead will “be those who develop skills AI does not easily replicate: judgement, strategic thinking, advocacy, negotiation, factual analysis, procedural understanding, commercial reasoning, and client communication”.

Jo Winchester, a career futurist, echoes the conclusion. She suggests that “adaptability” is going to be the most important skill for junior lawyers going forward.

“Law firms are going to have to completely rebuild former training structures, which may take time to develop the right internal promotion pathways,” Winchester says, adding that “junior lawyers will need to be ready to grow their skills to the law firm’s needs”.

She urges law firms to redesign the junior lawyer role as AI replaces more functions.

Here, she sees scope to redirect juniors into “client meetings earlier, develop their stakeholder engagement skills earlier, or train them as AI supervisors or fact-checkers”.

“If they don’t continue to train and invest in graduate positions, law firms will find themselves with a dearth of talent in the future,” she says.

“I also think that universities have a key proactive role to play here and should be working closely with law firms to adapt the current degree structures and content to ensure that the degree the students are graduating with is fit for purpose.”

Ross Dawson, a business futurist who works with the likes of Boston Consulting Group, PwC and Citi, agrees. “Legal firms need to completely rethink the role of an entry level lawyer”.

According to Dawson, the intent on the part of firms should be to accelerate the ability of young staff to add real value and develop useful judgment for clients.

“Firms need to reorganise and apply AI to build fast learning loops. Young professionals are far better at driving useful AI adoption than their elders. Skewing firms to the more experienced means rooting themselves in old ways of working,” he says.

“The legal profession will be divided between those trying to re-engineer pyramids of hourly work and firms focused on delivering outcomes and value to clients using AI-augmented talent.”

Dawson is “highly sceptical” of pundits predicting entry level job devastation, arguing instead that “firms that bring in young dynamic talent as part of their necessary transition to Humans + AI work will be advantaged”.

“Law has always sold expert reasoning and billed it as time. AI is making reasoning abundant and time close to irrelevant. What stays scarce is judgment, trusted relationships, and accountability,” Dawson adds.

“Accountability cannot be delegated to AI, only abdicated. Developing the people who will hold that accountability is not a cost to minimise. It is the core of the business.

“This is absolutely not a story of AI taking jobs. We are in a phase where legal firms must shift to quite different Humans + AI working structures that can create more value for clients, not necessarily with fewer people.”

For Denise Farmer, General Manager APAC at cloud-based legal technology platform Clio, the goalposts have shifted on what makes a standout graduate in the age of AI.

In her view, when a “premier firm” like MinterEllison links AI to graduate intake, it signals a structural shift in the traditional law firm model, but not the elimination of junior talent.

“It is no longer judged by how many hours they spent drafting a document, but by how effectively they pressure-test the advice and cross-reference it against authoritative primary sources,” Farmer, a former

LexisNexis executive, says.

“The most successful junior lawyers will be those who treat AI as a highly capable but fallible colleague, freeing themselves from administrative exhaustion to focus on true, high-value legal strategy – the very reason they chose law in the first place.”

She says, in her opinion, the best firms aren’t cutting junior staff on the back of AI advances. Instead, in those firms, efficiency gains from AI allow grads to shift to higher level tasks.

“Agile mid-tier practices to tech-mature global firms are intentionally pivoting,” she says.

Similarly, in transactional and corporate work, grads are being moved away from repetitive drafting tasks and closer to commercial negotiations, where they can observe and contribute to client-facing judgment.

The “common thread” among these successful firms, Farmer says, is a focus on pressure-testing advice and understanding “what the client actually needs”.

“They recognise that by elevating lawyers into strategic work early, they are not only delivering higher-value insights to clients today but also actively cultivating the critical thinking and mentorship required to build the firm’s future leaders,” she says.

That may be easier said than done, according to business futurist Misel. He says while today’s AI systems simply assist, “tomorrow’s systems will increasingly orchestrate”.

“We’re moving from AI that answers questions to AI that manages entire workflows,” he says. “Instead of helping a lawyer draft a document, future systems will gather information, analyse precedents, prepare draft documentation, identify risks, recommend actions and continuously monitor matters.”

Human lawyers will still be responsible for judgement, ethics, negotiation, advocacy and accountability, but he says the amount of human effort required will continue to shrink.

Misel says the safest place for juniors in a decade from now will be the courtroom.

“I think we’ll see AI heavily supporting courtroom preparation, evidence analysis and strategy long before we see courts comfortable with AI acting autonomously as legal representatives,” he says.

“The legal system ultimately relies on responsibility and accountability. Somebody must own the outcome.”