



# Next decade legal evolution: From technical excellence to ecosystem innovation

November

20  
24

A roundtable with leading General Counsel, Legal COOs, and Heads of Legal Operations, co-hosted by Norton Rose Fulbright Legal Operations Consulting team and Cognia in early November, explored how the legal function and its ecosystem might evolve over the next decade.

Overall, the below takeaways paint a picture of fundamental change in the legal function, spurred by technology, business needs, and evolving market conditions. The successful GC and their team of the near future must master this complexity while maintaining agility and fostering collaboration across a broader, developing ecosystem.

# Evolution and future of the GC role

## Legal leaders stride even further beyond law into strategic business vision

Standardised General legal advice is becoming commoditised through technology. One attendee, a GC at a multinational bank, took a provocative position regarding the future of legal capabilities. They said: "The price of basic advice will go to zero within five years," thanks to the growing maturity of AI.

While bespoke, client-specific advice will still be highly sought after – and command a hefty fee when delivered by law firms – the business-as-usual legal advice will no longer require large legal teams to be delivered. This direction of travel forces GCs to find new ways to stay relevant at the top table. "The value comes from giving strategic direction," the attendee continued.

"The future value of legal services won't just come from knowing the law, but from understanding how to apply it strategically to business challenges," agreed a GC at a major manufacturing firm.

This evolution requires GCs to develop new capabilities while maintaining their legal expertise. Key skills now include data literacy to leverage AI and analytics, strategic business acumen to shape market entry decisions, change management expertise to drive transformation, and relationship-building abilities to influence across the organisation. Traditional legal training provides little foundation for these competencies.

Therefore, GCs need to upskill or bring in experts to advise. One financial services GC noted that they're increasingly involved in strategic decisions about market entry, technological transformation, and organisational culture.

Worldwide political risks and ESG considerations have become central to the GC's remit. "They are not just looking at legal compliance anymore," observed a Legal Director and experienced media industry GC. "They are assessing geopolitical impacts, managing sustainability commitments, and helping shape our organisation's response to global challenges."

Additionally, the accelerating pace of digital transformation demands a new approach to legal leadership. GCs must understand and harness emerging technologies while ensuring their organisations navigate the associated risks effectively.

“ The price of basic advice will go to zero within five years.

*GC, Multinational bank*

# Transformation of skills and education

## Tomorrow's lawyers must master empathy alongside expertise

Empathy is becoming a hard skill," observed the aforementioned Legal Director. They added that taking up more of an "advisory" role "is now about selling trust as much as selling skills, capabilities, and expertise".

Due to technology democratising access to general legal advice, business and interpersonal skills have moved from 'nice-to-have' to essential competencies. "When I started, technical legal knowledge was enough," shared one Head of Legal in the financial services industry. "My team needs to understand business strategy, influence stakeholders, and build trust across the organisation." This shift requires fundamental changes in talent development.

Digital literacy and data science capabilities are becoming crucial differentiators. One Head of Legal from a global bank described how their team partners with universities to create placement programmes for data science students. "We need people who can understand both legal implications and data patterns," they explained.

Legal education must evolve to meet these new demands. Several participants highlighted the gap between traditional legal training and the skills needed in modern in-house teams.

Despite this need to revamp training, the next generation of lawyers brings different expectations and capabilities. "Our younger team members are naturally comfortable with technology and expect to work differently," shared a Chief Culture Officer from a financial services company. "They're helping us rethink everything from how we use AI to how we collaborate across teams."

# Changing team composition and structure

## Modern legal teams thrive on diverse talent beyond lawyers

"The GC function is not a lawyer-only function anymore – it's incredibly complex and sophisticated," observed a participant from a multinational technology firm. "We're seeing different skills being required."

The integration of a more diverse set of professionals is transforming how legal teams operate. A Legal COO described how their team now includes data scientists, project managers, and business analysts. They stressed how the diverse perspectives helped them to solve problems in ways they ever could with just lawyers. New roles are emerging that blend legal expertise with other disciplines. Participants discussed the rise of legal operations professionals, legal technologists, and innovation specialists. "These hybrid roles are crucial for modernising how we deliver legal services," noted a Chief Culture Officer. Further, traditional hierarchies are giving way to more flexible, collaborative structures.

The emphasis on diverse skill sets extends beyond professional capabilities to include cognitive diversity and different ways of thinking. The majority of roundtable guests agreed that people who challenge conventional legal thinking should be prized.

# Agility and continuous transformation

## Constant upheaval demands new agility from legal leaders

"Perpetual crisis is now the norm," reflected a CEO from an alternative legal service provider (ALSP). "It's about having the agility to respond to that. You'll have to course correct."

Constant adaptation has become a core competency for legal teams. One participant described how they've restructured their team to respond more quickly to emerging challenges. They have created flexible pools of expertise that can be rapidly deployed as needs change. This approach allows them to maintain core services while addressing new priorities.

The balance between stability and change presents a particular challenge. Flexible operating models are becoming essential. Several participants described how they're leveraging the whole legal ecosystem, combining internal legal team capabilities with other department capabilities in their organisations and external support in new ways.

# Ecosystem collaboration

## Building bridges as legal services break free of silos

The roundtable discussion culminated in discussing the benefits of an ecosystem – including law firms, in-house legal teams, and ALSPs. What would "good" look like for the ecosystem, and how could solutions be co-created? "'Good' looks like coming to you with a holistic solution that we've co-developed together," echoed both the Cognia and Norton Rose Fulbright Legal Operations Consulting team. "The ecosystem isn't just about legal providers – it's about bringing together all the capabilities needed to solve problems."

Collaborative solution development is replacing traditional service-provider relationships. However, the integration of multiple service providers requires new ways of working. This includes aligning incentives, establishing clear communication channels, and fostering a collaborative culture.

Breaking down traditional silos extends beyond external relationships to internal ones. Further, a client-centric approach to problem-solving is essential for success, attendees agreed.

“ The ecosystem isn't just about legal providers – it's about bringing together all the capabilities needed to solve problems.

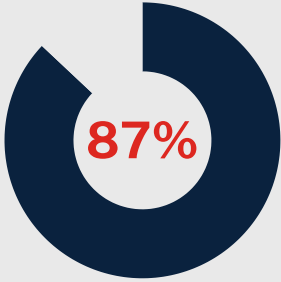
*Cognia and Norton Rose Fulbright Legal Operations Consulting team*

# Legal evolution in numbers: AI, skills and the quest for value

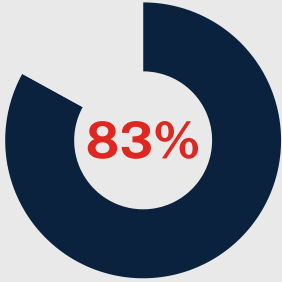
A survey of attendees at a roundtable in early November, 2024 – featuring leading General Counsel, Legal COOs, and Heads of Legal Operations – reveals mounting pressures on in-house legal teams while highlighting their strategic priorities for transformation.

## External pressures

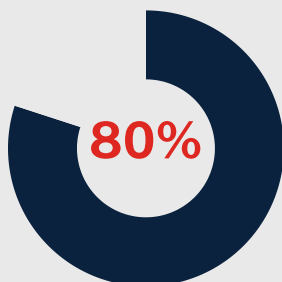
Legal departments face significant challenges across three key dimensions in particular, with respondents rating pressures on a scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest):



Global regulatory complexity



Geopolitical challenges

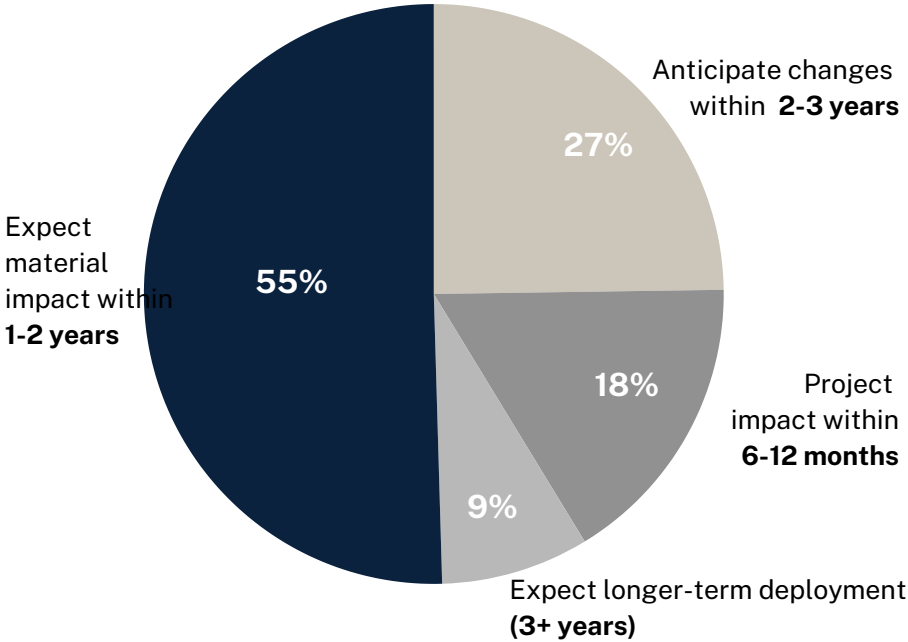


Business transformation/reorganisation

These consistently high scores – **above 80%** – underscore modern legal functions' multi-faceted pressures.

## Generative AI adoption

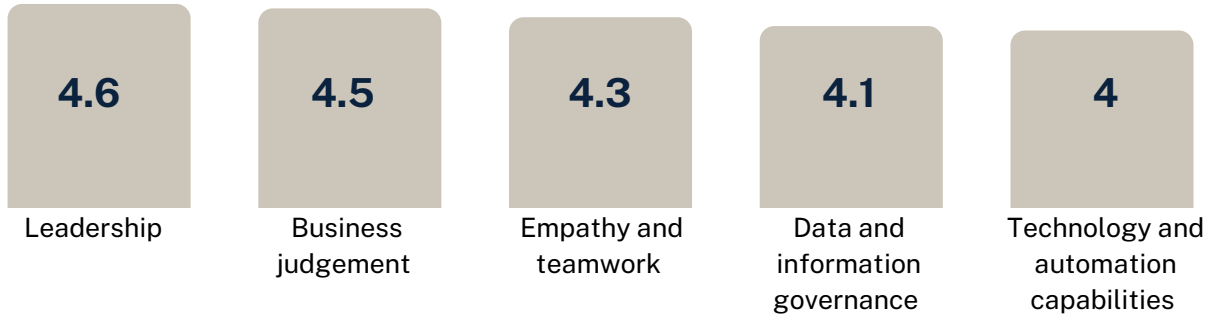
What is the expected timeframe for generative AI deployment?



Notably, law firms and legal service providers are expected to move more swiftly, with 55% of respondents expecting their advisers to incorporate generative AI within 6-12 months.

# Critical future skills

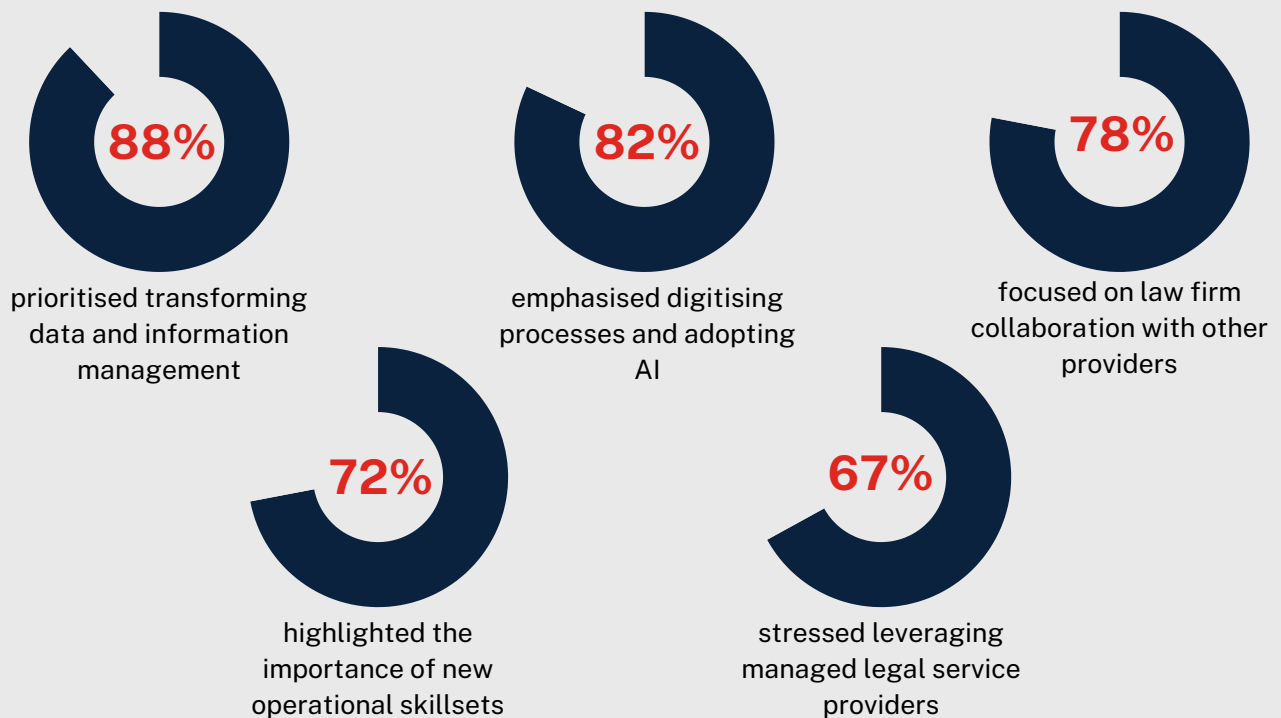
The survey highlighted five essential capabilities for legal teams over the next 24 months (rated 1-5):



The high rating for leadership, cognitive skills, and technical capabilities reflects the evolving nature of in-house legal roles.

# External pressures

When asked about maximising value from the legal ecosystem:



Interestingly, only 62% of respondents felt their key law firms fully understand and align with their most critical needs and challenges, suggesting room for improved service provider integration.

Overall, these findings paint a picture of legal departments navigating complex external pressures whilst pursuing ambitious internal transformation. The data suggests a clear focus on technology adoption, particularly AI, balanced with a strong emphasis on leadership and collaboration skills to drive change.



## Questions to consider for legal leaders:

Which areas of your legal function would benefit most from ecosystem collaboration, and why?

How can you effectively measure and reward empathy as a core skill within your team?

Where will you create the most value for your organisation when basic legal advice becomes commoditised?

What skill gaps in your current team pose the most significant risk to future success?

How might you structure your team differently to enable greater agility while maintaining stability?

### Let's talk

Stephanie Hamon  
Head of Legal Operations Consulting  
Norton Rose Fulbright LLP  
[stephanie.hamon@nortonrosefulbright.com](mailto:stephanie.hamon@nortonrosefulbright.com)

Janet Taylor-Hall  
Chief Executive Officer  
Cognia  
[janet.taylor-hall@cognialaw.com](mailto:janet.taylor-hall@cognialaw.com)