



Start Small, but Start Somewhere: How Corporate Legal Departments Can Start Their AI Journey

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



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As generative AI has become all the rage, companies large and small have faced pressure to adapt and adopt. Corporate legal departments are in the same boat. With the flood of so many new legal AI tools, and the fear of missing out, it may be tempting for in-house legal teams to snatch up expensive new AI tech, only to realize later that any upside was outweighed by the cost and learning curve.

To avoid this pitfall, legal departments exploring AI should take incremental steps. First, there are several simple tools, such as ChatGPT and Gemini, with free access to some of their services. These tools are not specific to legal needs, but they are based on large language models that have access to information relevant to many businesses and industries. Before using these or any AI tools, legal teams should ensure that the use is consistent with their company's confidentiality, data management, and AI policies, along with Rules of Professional Conduct governing client confidentiality and service standards. Attorneys must also avoid overreliance on AI. For example, AI can "hallucinate," such as by inventing legal precedent, and attorneys have been sanctioned for submitting non-existent precedent to courts. Attorneys should verify all AI-generated information before distributing it to others.

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For a quick demonstration of one of these readily available tools, a user should plug in a simple prompt, such as "I was sued. What should I do?" Although the answer might not be client ready, it may be a good start and may offer ideas the user would not have thought of. To some, that is the key value-add from generative AI — not producing a final product, but brainstorming, boosting creativity, and getting a head start on the writing process.

Second, legal departments may be able to leverage enterprise AI tools, like Copilot, that use the organization's data to draft documents, generate presentations, and complete other tasks specific to the organization. By using a tool available to all departments, the legal department does not need to build a business case for purchasing legal-specific AI tools. Users should be mindful, however, that free versions of certain enterprise tools may be less secure than paid versions.

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Third, instead of starting from scratch, legal teams may consider adding AI tools to their existing legal services subscriptions. Some mainstream legal research engines, for example, offer generative AI tools that can be integrated with their traditional research platforms. By expanding relationships with existing vendors, legal departments may be able to realize discounts or other economies of scale that would not be available from a new vendor. Using a product from an established, trusted vendor also avoids some of the risks of working with startups.

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Finally, if these other resources are insufficient, in-house legal teams may consider niche AI tools to address specific needs. For instance, some AI tools are geared towards transactional practices, offering contract drafting and review assistance that could help with a voluminous contracts docket. Other more research-focused tools could help teams with heavy litigation loads.

AI is here to stay, and corporate legal departments need to adapt. But they should not haphazardly purchase a heavy stack of expensive legal tech for the sake of checking a box. Instead, they should first explore simple — sometimes free — mainstream tools, consider tools already available to their organizations, or add generative AI services to their existing vendor engagements. By starting small, legal teams will avoid purchasing a solution in search of a problem.

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