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Where's the AI?

by Byron Hsu

AI is supposed to transform how we work, yet most legal search consultants see little change in their daily operations. What explains this gap? Is the AI revolution overstated, or is it simply not here yet?

Hurdles to the Revolution

- **Interfaces:** Chat interfaces like ChatGPT and Claude are powerful, but cumbersome for tasks that are smaller or require many pieces of information. Instead of copy-pasting into these separate tools, it would be better to use AI where you already work. Some apps from Google, Microsoft, or Notion have integrated AI features, while others may allow you to build your own add-ons or plugins (for those technically inclined). Check whether your tool has an API or plans to add AI features in the future.

- **Prompting:** Users often abandon AI after poor results from suboptimal prompts, not realizing that better outcomes are possible with refined prompting. While this barrier is decreasing, success still requires skill in writing and iterating prompts. Some basic education on "prompt engineering" can go a long way (and it's not just for engineers).

- **Workflows**: A common mistake is to stick with our existing workflows, using AI at most to accelerate one step of the process. Simply accelerating existing processes with AI typically yields minimal gains. Transformative improvements come rather from reimagining entire workflows to leverage an army of tireless assistants. Examine your daily routines and look for what you can do faster, do better, start doing, or delegate entirely.

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- **Trust:** Language models' tendency to hallucinate (make things up) remains a concern, especially in the legal industry. Solutions include better prompting, human verification, and monitoring guardrails. While models are improving, maintaining accuracy requires careful oversight where you can build trust incrementally over time. That said, even humans are not 100% accurate, so ultimately it boils down to knowing your allowable risk for a given task.

- **Beyond Text:** So far, text has been the primary way people interact with these AI systems, but in the past few months, speech, visual, and other "multi-modal" ways of interacting have started to be unlocked. This enables an AI to go beyond text to speaking on the phone, automating actions in your browser or computer, and working with files and their content.

- **Human Connection**: While recruiting remains relationship-driven, it is easy to underestimate how much user preferences evolve with technology. Just as younger generations prefer texting to phone calls, AI interactions may become preferred for their consistency, knowledge base, and availability. We should continue questioning what really needs to be done by a human.

- **Habits**: Our inertia often prevents the adoption of more efficient methods. While current processes may feel "good enough," mastering AI systems will become a competitive advantage. Investments in the space will compound so it's worth breaking out of our habits to see what is possible, and make informed decisions about what to adopt.

- **Competing Interests**: Legacy software providers need to support existing interfaces and processes. This hampers their ability to innovate and new AI features often feel "bolted-on." In addition, disruptive technologies can create tension between stakeholders that may not benefit equally. For example, search agencies heavily invested in human workforces may under-invest in automation due to workforce transition challenges. Firms with an agile culture or willing to undertake a painful adjustment may end up ahead in the long run.

- **Agency:** Current AI systems mainly react to requests rather than taking initiative. They provide information, but don't take action. This is changing with the emergence of AI "agents" that can act autonomously. As a search consultant, you can imagine an AI that will automatically update your CRM, handle emails, send follow-ups, submit applications, or ping you when an important task is overdue. This AI may feel less like a tool, and more like a colleague. We'll see more from AI agents in 2025.

Looking Ahead

The integration of AI into legal recruitment isn't happening in a single dramatic shift, but through incremental changes that are easy to overlook day-to-day. Success in this transition requires both understanding the current hurdles and actively experimenting with solutions. Legal search consultants who invest time now in learning AI tools, reimagining their workflows, and building trust with these systems will be better positioned to lead in an industry that increasingly blends human expertise with AI capabilities. The question isn't whether AI will transform legal recruitment, but how quickly we'll adapt our practices to make the most of these emerging technologies.

[To learn more about how you can make the most of AI today, click "Leveraging AI in Legal Recruiting: 10 Common Mistakes to Avoid".]

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