

Big Law Embracing Generative AI: Firms Seek Top Talent to Harness the Power of AI



In recent months, leading law firms, including Latham & Watkins and Linklaters, have been actively recruiting software developers, analysts, programmers, and data engineers to bolster their generative AI capabilities. The legal industry, traditionally cautious about embracing new technology, feels competitive pressure to integrate AI into their daily operations.

The Shift Toward Generative AI

Historically, the legal profession has been hesitant to adopt technological advancements despite occasional proclamations to the contrary. However, job listings on platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed.com reveal a significant shift in this mindset. At least nine law firms from the US and the UK are now on the lookout for over two dozen non-lawyer professionals with AI expertise.

Davis Wright Tremaine partner Vidhya Prabhakaran, a member of the firm's AI steering committee, predicts that within a few years, nearly every top 100 law firm will have positions focused on harnessing the transformative capabilities of generative AI. These positions aim to explore numerous practical applications, such as assisting lawyers in research and brief drafting and streamlining marketing and business development efforts.

The Evolving Nature of AI Roles

Many of these job listings feature somewhat vague descriptions, reflecting the rapidly evolving landscape of generative AI and the legal industry's uncertainty about the extent of disruption. Linklaters, a venerable London-based firm, seeks an AI analyst to support its ongoing AI program. Similarly, Allen & Overy, Goodwin Procter, Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, Husch Blackwell, and Simpson Thacher & Bartlett have all posted openings for non-lawyer AI positions, emphasizing the importance of previous experience in cutting-edge AI projects.

David Wakeling, head of Allen & Overy's markets innovation group, explained how their firm recognized the disruptive potential of AI early on. They've already integrated "Harvey," an AI platform tailored for legal work. Wakeling believes that AI offers a new way of mastering words in the legal field, which revolves around language and textual data.

Goodwin Procter's Unique Approach

Rachel Dooley, the Chief Innovation Officer at Goodwin Procter, revealed that their firm hasn't developed its AI platform but is instead focused on assisting clients in making the most of AI technology. They aim to educate clients and help them avoid pitfalls, such as AI systems generating false or nonsensical information.

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To promote AI adoption, Goodwin Procter is actively recruiting for positions focused on AI, including data scientists. These roles will play a crucial part in the adoption and education of generative AI in legal and business research, a critical area of growth in the industry.

Salaries and Flexibility

The salaries listed for back-office AI positions in these law firms generally range from about \$85,000 to \$165,000 per year, depending on experience and location. However, some experts believe that the salaries may be on the lower side, and firms may need to be flexible and responsive to candidates who negotiate for higher compensation.

Fifteen of the 26 job listings specify that they are "hybrid" positions, allowing for some remote work. The others do not explicitly mention remote work, indicating that firms are still formulating their approach to this aspect of these roles.

Client Imperative and Proprietary AI Tools

Some law firms, like Davis Wright Tremaine, are expanding their AI-focused back-office positions to meet the growing demand from clients. While the firm has its own generative AI platform, it is primarily used for business development and administrative tasks, not legal work or access to client data.

Dentons, on the other hand, has introduced "fleetAI," a chatbot based on GPT-4, designed for legal research and content generation. The firm plans to expand its usage globally and is developing additional chatbots for legal services.

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AI: A Tool for Enhancement, Not Replacement

There are varying perspectives on how AI will impact the legal workforce. While some anticipate job displacement due to AI, others, like Rachel Dooley of Goodwin Procter, view AI as an "elevation tool" that enhances employees' roles rather than threatens them. The legal industry is at a crucial juncture, with AI's transformative potential paving the way for new possibilities in legal research, document drafting, and client services.

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