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A Different Kind of Pilot: Deposition Simulator Emerges as a Training Tool for Big Law Associates

By Jon Campisi

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What You Need to Know

- DepoSim was developed through a partnership between legal training provider AltaClaro and legal transcription provider Verbit. The makers consider the training simulator to be the first of its kind in the legal market.
- The program's developers said they have been getting very positive feedback about the simulator, in which AI agents play the role of deposed witnesses, opposing counsel and court reporters.

As large law firms push to incorporate more AI tools into their workflow, associate training is getting revamped to simulate real-time litigation and courtroom interactions.

Law firms including Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe, Taft Stettinius & Hollister, Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck and Littler Mendelson have all incorporated an AI-powered deposition simulator for associate training. The tool, DepoSim from legal training provider AltaClaro, lets early-career associates interact with AI agents playing the roles of a real-time witness, opposing counsel and court reporter. It's also intended to let more seasoned attorneys brush up on their skills.

Orrick litigation partner Matthew LaBrie, who leads the firm's litigation training council, said it's important to make sure "what we're teaching is actually reflective of what we're seeing in the market."



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"One of the things that surprised me most about how we've implemented [DepoSim] is that using AI has actually caused greater interaction and greater peer-to-peer engagement," LaBrie said. "I would have thought that would be the exact opposite. But the way we've implemented it has actually resulted in a more engaging training process."

Kelly Cullen, an Orrick lawyer who heads up associate development and training, said, a few years back, the firm decided to put a greater emphasis on onboarding junior lawyers, eliminating their revenue-generating requirements for the first six months of employment in order to enable them to gain practical experience working on teams and focusing more heavily on training.

The firm said the change underscores Orrick's dedication to professional development, especially for the younger crop of lawyers who hope to become the next rainmakers at the firm. And the enhanced training focus goes right in line with AltaClaro's goals for DepoSim.

One thing LaBrie really likes about the program is that it serves as a more engaging type of training as opposed to theoretical instruction or lectures offered on video platforms like Zoom.

The deposition simulator has also been rolled out at Taft. Chasity Thompson Osborn, the firm's director of attorney learning and development, said in working with incoming associates, the firm wants to ensure it is providing consistency in its trainings.

"We want to make sure that we provide the opportunity for our attorneys to have relevant training and make sure that they have the development skills and foundational skills that they need in order to be successful," she said.

Osborn said Taft has a great relationship with AltaClaro, having worked with the company on numerous past initiatives, so it was already familiar with the legal tech provider before DepoSim came on the scene.

The simulator, she said, seemed like a great logical next step in the firm's training and development offerings for younger, tech-savvy attorneys.

"This gives them the opportunity to customize the experience that they have and at the various skill levels that they have," Osborn said.

Lyndsay Capeder, Taft's chief client and innovation officer, said the fact that the firm already had an established relationship with AltaClaro helped with the decision to roll out DepoSim.

Taft, she said, is not "in the business of just running around and collecting AI tools just for the sake of collecting AI tools," but rather the firm takes the time to evaluate which tools are expected to have the most meaningful impact on lawyers and their professional development.

Taft firmwide co-chair of commercial litigation Lynn Rowe Larsen called DepoSim one such tool in the toolkit that has aided younger litigators preparing for fruitful careers.

"They can adjust what they're doing throughout the course of a deposition," Larsen said. "And

sometimes clients don't really want you to practice on their legal matter in a live deposition."

But Larsen also noted that while the simulator is geared toward early-year associates, the program can also serve as a refresher for veteran attorneys.

"You can maybe use it for an hour or so and kind of get back into the habit and the rhythm of the evidentiary objections of the process of taking a deposition if maybe you haven't had any in your practice in a while," she said. "It's a great training tool and a reinforcement of skillsets that can go across the platform."

For labor and employment firm Littler Mendelson, DepoSim has thus far served as an invaluable tool to help train lawyers of all stripes—especially burgeoning ones—on the nature of dealing with different types of personalities during depositions, "because you absolutely never know what you're going to get," said Jeanine Conley Daves, office managing shareholder of Littler's New York office.

Deposed witnesses come in all shapes and sizes, Daves said, from someone who objects frequently to someone who hardly ever objects to someone "who's just very difficult and challenging and keeping you from sometimes asking questions that you need to ask."

Daves said the concept behind DepoSim is great because it prepares lawyers, especially junior level associates, on how to tailor their questioning style to match witness demeanor.

Littler already has a fairly robust training program, she said, but something like DepoSim allows the firm to turn the subject matter expertise into real, on-the-ground practice.

"It is really a supplement [to] training programs that we are already doing to give associates experience that they would not otherwise have," she said.

Depositions are a core part of litigation, Daves said, and oftentimes in real life young associates are not the ones taking the actual depositions. These junior lawyers may not even get to actually take depositions on their own until they're mid-year associates.

"They get this chance to, through the simulation, conduct their own depositions, get feedback on that deposition, and then work on ... well, how would I change this? How would I tweak that?" Daves said. "Because it's all about being confident, right?"

For government relations and lobbying law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, the tool has also been nothing but a positive when it comes to attorney training.

Margaux Trammell, Brownstein's chief talent officer, said DepoSim falls right in line with the firm's three-year strategic plan, which calls for increased adoption of AI programs. During the past couple of years, the firm has been working with a variety of companies, including AltaClaro, to learn about tech-driven products that can help with career development.

DepoSim, she said, succeeds because the simulator helps lawyers prepare for cases that they may actually come across in their daily work.

"I was a corporate partner for 16 years here at the firm, and so you know attorneys are always very skeptical about training because it's very theoretical and people get bored," said Trammell, who is in charge of attorney recruiting at Brownstein.

Trammell said attorneys using the simulator appreciate its interactive nature, since they're able to sit across from AI agents who take on the persona of different types of witnesses and opposing counsel. She said the firm initially tested DepoSim with three junior associates, three mid-to-senior associates and three partners, some younger and others more senior.

"This one was unanimously received [with] a very high mark," she said.

Attorneys offering feedback said they appreciate the confidence-building potential for those using the simulator.

"I can speak out loud, and if I fail, it's totally OK because there are no consequences," Trammell said on typical attorney response. "But just the fact that I can practice out loud is amazing."

The lawyers, she added, also appreciate the fact that DepoSim can offer constructive feedback on performance, and compare that with prior sessions.

Fertile Ground for Simulations

While DepoSim is one of a growing number of AI tools focused on helping lawyers prepare for

depositions, its focus on training rising attorneys is singular.

To AltaClaro leaders, the positive feedback received about the product is heartening, and it validates the early work the company did with law firm clients as it designed the tool.

AltaClaro had sat down with Cullen and her colleagues at Orrick to get feedback on design plans for DepoSim, proving the process was truly collaborative.

"We did the heavy lifting, but they gave us such good feedback before we even built it," said AltaClaro CEO and founder Abdi Shayesteh.

"We service over 100 Am Law 200 firms, and not every firm is innovative like this," he said. "Some firms are like, 'yeah, let others go first, work out the glitches, and then I'll buy it.'"

But other firms, like Orrick, are dedicated to partnering with companies like AltaClaro and rolling up their sleeves and helping design a product collaboratively using combined expertise.

While DepoSim has been used primarily for deposition training, Shayesteh said AltaClaro has a "laundry list" of tasks the program will likely offer in the future, including AI-assisted trainings for cross-examination, delivering opening and closing statements and other "human to human parts of a lawyer's job."

While AI is taking over certain aspects of the legal industry, lawyers will still always need to involve their human skills "for the thinking on your feet, the judgment skills," he said.

AltaClaro leaders said DepoSim can actually help firms save costs on training, since traditionally law firms have incurred substantial expenses in hiring actors for one-time deposition role-playing or sending associates to often costly off-site training programs.

In the future, the company plans to expand the platform to include additional simulations across commercial litigation, employment law, intellectual property, expert witness depositions, trial practice, oral arguments, client interviews and negotiation scenarios.