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New York Law Journal

AI's Real Promise for Law Firms: Transforming Associate Training Through Deliberate Practice and Data-Driven Feedback

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February 24, 2026

A New Paradigm for Legal Training in the Age of AI

As generative AI reshapes the legal landscape, conversations about technology often center on automation and efficiency—drafting contracts faster, reviewing documents more cheaply, or streamlining routine tasks. Yet the profession's most significant opportunity may lie elsewhere: using AI not to replace lawyers, but to train them better.

This perspective is particularly timely given growing concerns about AI's impact on professional development. A recent LexisNexis study surveying 873 legal professionals in the U.K. found that 72% believe younger lawyers using generative AI will have trouble developing reasoning and critical thinking skills. This concern is understandable—if associates rely on AI to draft arguments or analyze issues, will they ever develop the analytical muscles required to perform these tasks independently?

But this framing presents a false choice. The same technology that raises concerns about skill atrophy can be harnessed to accelerate skill development. Rather than viewing AI solely as a tool that does work for lawyers, we should also recognize its potential as a tool that helps lawyers learn to do work better. The key lies in how we deploy these technologies—not as shortcuts that bypass critical thinking, but as training environments that actively cultivate it.

Taking Gen AI Projects One Step at a Time

The legal industry has long faced a fundamental challenge in associate development. Traditional training models often fail to provide frequent, objective, and continual opportunities for practice as well as constructive and consistent feedback across core litigation competencies. Given the high-stakes nature of legal work, clients are understandably hesitant to allow junior associates to handle complex tasks on

active matters, which exacerbates the persistent skill gap and hinders associate readiness. This lack of practical exposure and measurable feedback increases both the time and expense associated with traditional development pathways.

A new generation of AI-powered training tools is changing that calculus. These technologies are designed to help lawyers develop both core practice skills—such as witness examination, oral advocacy, and negotiation—and substantive competencies including drafting motions, managing discovery, meet-and-confer communications, and comprehensive deposition practice. By providing structured feedback, simulating real-world scenarios, and fostering critical thinking through purposeful challenge, these tools offer a compelling response to the very concerns the LexisNexis study identified. AI need not dull the next generation's reasoning abilities—properly deployed, it can sharpen them.

Learning from Elite Performers: The Science of Deliberate Practice

Elite athletes and world-class musicians reach mastery through deliberate practice—a methodology that isolates specific skills, pushes performers beyond their comfort zones, and provides real-time, data-driven feedback to track progress.

This structured, intentional approach to skill development, first outlined in K. Anders Ericsson's PEAK: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise, has been the foundation of success for high performers across disciplines. Deliberate practice is not merely about repetition; it involves targeted, purposeful practice where performers break down complex tasks, identify gaps, and work on improving specific areas with precision.

In both sports and music, coaches leverage performance data to identify patterns, spot weaknesses, and prioritize where to spend their limited coaching time.

The legal profession, however, has historically been slow to adopt this model. Too often, associates are expected to develop professional excellence through passive exposure—learning by watching senior attorneys or by trial and error during high-stakes client matters. This approach leaves too much to chance and lacks the structured, data-informed methodology that produces consistent, measurable growth.

Three Pillars of Modern Legal Training

Ericsson's research on deliberate practice highlights three critical elements that drive skill development in any domain—elements that can and should be applied to legal training:

1. Simulated Experiences to Prepare for the Real Thing

In litigation training, simulated client matters serve as the equivalent of practice drills. Associates hone their skills in controlled, simulated environments where they can repeat tasks and receive immediate constructive feedback without the pressure of real-world consequences. Associates can engage in assignments such as drafting motions and discovery requests, preparing meet-and-confer communications, analyzing case law under time pressure, and—critically—preparing for and conducting depositions. These simulations should mimic the complexity and unpredictability of real legal work, introducing ambiguous facts, competing priorities, and unexpected challenges such as an aggressive opposing counsel or an evasive witness.

At Littler Mendelson, we have embraced this approach by partnering with AltaClaro to implement their experiential litigation training courses, which include real-world simulations and data-driven feedback reports. We also partnered with them to develop DepoSim, an AI-powered deposition simulation tool that allows attorneys to practice witness depositions in a realistic, interactive environment with real-time feedback. These tools provide our associates with low-risk, high-intensity practice environments, allowing them to refine their mental models and build confidence before facing the pressures of live client work.

2. Stretching Beyond Comfort Zones Through Purposeful Challenge

Deliberate practice involves pushing performers beyond their comfort zones—like a runner incorporating interval sprints or a chess player analyzing difficult positions. In legal training, simulations and structured challenges serve this same purpose. Assignments that introduce imperfect or incomplete information, conflicting client objectives, and ambiguous legal scenarios push associates to think critically, synthesize information, and adapt their decision-making strategies. This intentionally imposed discomfort cultivates resilience, adaptability, and mental agility —precisely the reasoning and critical thinking skills that the LexisNexis study's respondents feared AI might erode.

Deposition simulation technology is particularly effective in this respect regardless of how long an attorney has been practicing. Beginner attorneys can practice foundational skills and build confidence in a consequence-free environment—experiencing the discomfort of thinking on their feet without the stakes of a live proceeding. Intermediate attorneys can push beyond familiar territory, working through targeted skill weaknesses, attempting advanced techniques, and navigating deliberately challenging scenarios they rarely get to rehearse. Even experienced attorneys benefit by stepping outside their established routines—using simulations for critical deposition warm-ups, uncovering blind spots that years of practice may have reinforced, and preparing for unfamiliar witness types.

3. Data-Driven Feedback to Track Progress and Target Improvement

Perhaps the most critical pillar of deliberate practice is data-driven feedback. Elite performers do not rely on intuition alone to gauge progress; they track metrics and analyze performance data. The same principles should apply in legal training. Associates need objective, data-driven feedback to gauge their progress, identify gaps in their training, and understand where to focus their efforts. New AI-enhanced technologies can provide structured evaluations that assess performance across a range of critical competencies—issue-spotting, drafting clarity, strategic questioning, and client communication.

AI-powered rubrics ensure that evaluations are consistent and objective, while human reviewers who can serve as mentors can provide contextual feedback that adds qualitative nuance. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data gives associates a clear understanding of where they excel and where targeted improvement is needed—just like an athlete analyzing game footage to fine-tune technique.

Building Mental Models Through Iterative Practice

One of the most powerful outcomes of deliberate practice is the development of mental models—internal frameworks that allow experts to process complex information quickly and make effective decisions under pressure. By exposing associates to progressively complex legal scenarios and providing structured, data-backed feedback, firms can accelerate the development of these mental models. Associates begin to recognize patterns, anticipate opposing counsel's tactics, and craft solutions that align with broader case strategy and client objectives.

This is where AI-powered training directly addresses the critical thinking concerns raised in the LexisNexis study. When associates use AI to bypass analytical work, they miss the cognitive exercise that builds expertise. But when AI is used to create challenging scenarios, provide feedback on the associate's own reasoning, and track development over time, the technology becomes a catalyst for deeper learning rather than a crutch that prevents it.

AI as a Training Partner, Not Replacement

Framing AI as a partner in training rather than a substitute for human judgment is essential. These tools do not replace the mentorship of experienced practitioners. Rather, they augment traditional training by providing consistent, scalable opportunities for practice and feedback that simply weren't possible before.

This technology creates a virtuous cycle: associates get more repetitions, receive more feedback, build skills faster, and become ready for substantive client work sooner. This also addresses the economic realities facing modern law firms, as clients resist paying

for junior associate time on matters requiring experienced judgment. By accelerating associate development through AI-enhanced training, firms can deliver client-ready talent more quickly, allowing partners and senior associates to focus their limited mentoring time on higher-level strategic guidance rather than correcting basic **errors.**

A Practical Path Forward

- Start with foundational skills. Use simulationsand data-driven feedback to improve associate preparedness for drafting motions, discovery requests and responses, and meet-and-confer communications.
- Build progressively. Assess and target development areas in more complex skills—drafting dispositive motions, preparing for and taking depositions, managing discovery strategy—by offering associates a low-risk environment to practice advanced techniques and scenarios.
- Leverage objective data to support mentorship. Use performance analytics not to replace human feedback but to inform it. Partners can focus coaching time on the specific areas where each associate needs the most support.
- Measure outcomes. Track associate progress over time to demonstrate the value of training investments and to continuously refine the program based on what works.

Conclusion: A New Era in Legal Training

The legal profession is entering a new era where data-driven training, real-world simulations, and deliberate practice principles are redefining how lawyers develop expertise. Associate training should be treated as a performance discipline guided by the same principles that produce excellence in athletics, music, and other demanding fields.

By integrating simulated client scenarios, challenging assignments, and data-driven feedback loops into associate development programs, firms can transform legal training into a true performance discipline. Associates move beyond passive learning and instead engage in purposeful practice that stretches their abilities, accelerates growth, and builds the cognitive frameworks required for mastery.

The concerns reflected in the LexisNexis study are real, but they point to a problem of implementation, not an inherent flaw in the technology. AI that does lawyers' thinking for them may indeed produce a generation of attorneys who struggle with reasoning and critical analysis. But AI that challenges lawyers to think harder, practice more deliberately, and receive better feedback will produce the opposite result.

The conversation about AI in law need not be limited to fears about displacement or debates about skill atrophy. There is a more hopeful story to tell—one in which technology helps attorneys become better at what they do, more prepared for the challenges they face, and more capable of serving their clients with excellence. That story starts with recognizing that AI's greatest contribution to the legal profession may not be the work it does for attorneys, but rather the ways it helps attorneys learn to do that work better.

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