Bogdan Gecić:
The speed of acquiring new knowledge is the main criterion for future success

Bogdan Gecić graduated from the Faculty of Law in Belgrade and earned his LLM from Harvard Law School. In 2015, he founded Gecić Law, one of the fastest-growing and most innovative law firms in Belgrade, the Western Balkans, and beyond. The firm specializes in corporate law and the most complex international cases.

In addition to representing clients both domestically and internationally, Gecić Law's attorneys stand out

for their modern approach to legal services and use of the latest technology, including artificial intelligence. The team belongs to a new school of thought, viewing legal challenges differently and consistently providing forward-looking services to their clients.

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In 2020, Gecić Law was named Law Firm of the Year for Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and in 2021, for Southeast Europe, including Türkiye, at the prestigious The Lawyer European Awards in London. For 2024, the firm was nominated in three categories: European Team of the Year in Dispute Resolution, European Team of the Year in Finance, and Law Firm of the Year: Southeast Europe. Bogdan shares the fresh news from London that this year, the firm ranked among the top three for the law firm of the year in Southeast Europe.

Over the past decade, our legislation has significantly changed, introducing new areas and regulating fields where technology has drastically reshaped traditional concepts. Has this created new challenges in your profession?

The issue isn't the shift itself; it's education and the challenges that come with it. You can draft the best legislation in the world, but application is far more important. Western law schools have long placed greater emphasis on this aspect than we historically have. In other words, people matter more than the laws themselves. In tech terms, you can have great software, but it's useless if you don't have someone who knows how to implement and integrate it properly.

For us, the key is recognizing that law is a living system. The entire process depends on having a critical mass of competent, hardworking professionals who apply legal norms in practice every day, ensuring that the system functions effectively.

This marks a massive shift from how things worked under communism, where, quite frankly, it wasn't necessary. The system was much more straightforward. There was no pluralism of legal relations—we had a handful of fundamental institutions: state ownership, public companies, government-controlled foreign currency savings, and protected tenancy rights. That was the entire legal landscape. Today, we've moved into a creative social system where an infinite number of new legal concepts can be introduced—corporate bonds, digital tokens, pledging assets, using them as collateral, or even structuring a company that owns another company with a third company acting as its director. This kind of flexibility is fantastic for economic and social development. More freedom means more room for creativity and innovation.

At the same time, this demands more critical thinkers—people who understand these frameworks and can navigate their applications. I've seen and experienced abroad that in developed countries, intellectual work and legal systems are highly sophisticated. And when I talk about legal systems, I'm thinking primarily about people, not just regulations—because people are the real gatekeepers of the system. To use a simple analogy, they're like traffic police: they don't slow you down, but they ensure everything runs smoothly. A functioning legal system doesn't burden people with unnecessary obstacles—it enables them. To make that possible, we first need to educate people properly, teach them to think critically and shift their mindsets through education.

This is one of the biggest challenges for post-communist and post-socialist societies—not just here but across Central and Eastern Europe.

Where do we stand today?

We were the very last ones to board that train. We now find ourselves where Poland and the Czech Republic were in the early 2000s. There's a time lag, and it's visible—both in our education system and in the types of professionals entering the legal field. This is slowly improving, but we're still not at the level of the West, where physicists, engineers, and natural scientists are the ones most interested in law. They see it as a structured, logical system, much like programming.

We're not there yet. And I don't think this is any one person's fault—it's simply the social context of transitioning from a rigid, centrally controlled system (which in some ways resembled feudalism) to a pluralist society. This new system is far more complex, and it requires judges who think differently, legal professionals who have real-world exposure and aren't afraid of challenges, and regulators who are willing to take risks,

make mistakes, and learn from them. This isn't just about Serbia—it's the same story across the entire region, which was effectively a closed system until 2000.

A key difference is that we're not going through this transition at the same speed as EU member states—simply because we're not part of the EU. We used to call this "transition" in the 2000s, though we've stopped using that term. The reality is that our transition is taking much longer because we're not fully connected to the EU's "locomotive."

Right now, we're in limbo. We don't have strong internal capacities or formally attach ourselves to an external system with strong momentum. And this is something the entire region is feeling. At the same time, we're completely surrounded by the EU. You can't fly over, transport goods, or engage in trade without crossing the territory and interacting with EU regulations.

However, there is a "spillover effect." European rules apply here, even when they're not officially in force. Take plastic bottle caps, for example. Suddenly, all plastic bottles in Serbia now come with tethered caps. Why? No domestic regulation requires it, but since local manufacturers also export their products, and all imported water comes from the EU, where this regulation is in effect (Directive (EU) 2019/904), we also started using such caps.

It's an excellent metaphor for how legal regulations work in our environment. People often ask, "Why do we not have these regulations?" The problem is that they don't know which laws to follow or where to find them.
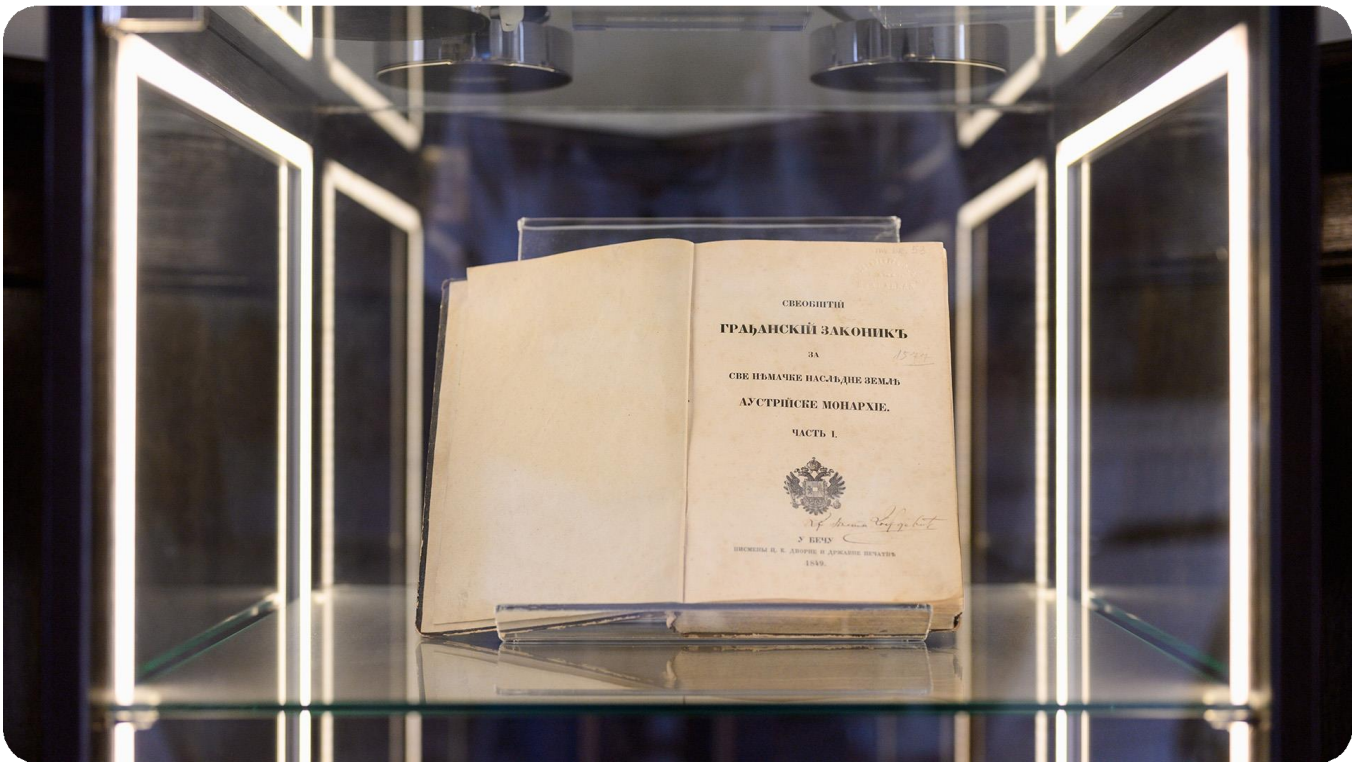
Are there any additional challenges?

A major one is the language barrier. Besides Croatian, which doesn't cover everything, most legal professionals in the region don't speak another language in which European law is published. Most people haven't had the opportunity to develop strong foreign language skills. Law schools in the region typically offer just one semester of English, and that's it.

This isn't just a legal profession problem—it affects nearly every field. Today, the world has three or four dominant languages and knowledge centers: English, Chinese, Spanish, and, potentially, Hindi.

If we can't connect to these knowledge centers, we're cut off from global innovation. As a relatively small country, we can't generate as many new ideas as, say, a country with 1.5 billion people.

That's why it would be transformative if our universities offered not just one but eight semesters of English or Chinese, giving students the tools to access the world's top knowledge and resources.

Let's reform education from the ground up, not just at the top. Right now, not all young people have equal opportunities. A brilliant student from a family that can't afford private education may never gain the high-level academic English skills necessary for working in an international legal environment.

Our region is deeply integrated into the global economy. Nearly everything we produce is meant for export because our domestic market is small. So these global languages— English, Chinese, Spanish—are just as much ours as anyone else's. Yet, we don't provide students with the tools to master them. Our system currently involves a lot of illogical thinking, but there's also massive potential for improvement. The real question isn't whether we can change—it's how quickly we're willing to make it happen.

How important is understanding the cultural context when adopting foreign legal systems?

I don't believe in a "one-size-fits-all" approach to regulation. Every system must be adapted to local needs. Historically, even when adopting laws from abroad, we've been tied to Europe since the early 1800s. Take Türkiye, for example— its civil code is based on the Swiss model. For centuries, countries in this region have been importing legal concepts, sometimes more creatively, sometimes less.

Is this good or bad?

It is not a simple answer. The key question is: what exactly is being regulated, and how well?

In the 19th century, we had an outstanding legal scholar,

Valtazar Bogišić, a Catholic Serb who wrote Montenegro's Civil Code. He didn't just translate foreign legal principles. Instead, he adapted them to local culture, rewriting them in the vernacular so that ordinary people could understand them. For example, instead of using the standard Latin legal principle that a contract void from the beginning cannot become valid over time, he translated it into a local proverb: "Time will not straighten what was born crooked."

Bogišić had a deep legal education and a thorough understanding of both the legal tradition he was drawing from and the culture of the people he was writing for. That kind of expertise and cultural sensibility is the ideal approach. Unfortunately, today, the Western Balkans lack the capacity for such a nuanced legal reform process.

In international comparative law, countries are typically classified into "rule givers" and "rule takers." Rule givers are nations with sufficient economic and political power to set not just trade and economic conditions but also legal norms. Rule takers are the countries that, due to limited economic strength, mainly adopt regulations set by others.

Small economies like those in the Balkans are naturally rule-takers, regardless of their level of development. Even Sweden, a highly developed country, adopts many external legal norms. The key difference is how these rules are adopted. A rule taker can either adapt the rules creatively, as Bogišić did, or unthinkingly copy-paste regulations they don't fully understand or know how to implement.

Unfortunately, in the past twenty years, the Western Balkans have seen more of the second approach—adopting rules without a clear idea of how to apply them.

How much freedom does a country like Serbia have to adapt these laws to its own needs?

It depends on the context. There are areas where we have little room to negotiate, especially when they are critical to the European Union. State aid law is a perfect example. The EU closely monitors subsidies, especially those that impact exports, because they directly affect the European market. This is why, in this area, we had minimal negotiating space when signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). The same goes for energy, civil aviation, and other transport.

However, there are other areas where the EU doesn't require immediate compliance. Some regulations are implemented gradually, in some cases, years after joining.

Countries with more substantial administrative capacities negotiate better deals and get more flexibility when adopting regulations. Those with weaker capabilities often accept what's handed to them.

Poland is a great example of a country that successfully negotiated terms during its EU accession. On the other hand, Croatia mostly followed a "copy-paste" approach, which is, partly because of language convenience, a role model. That's the easiest option for Western Balkan countries but not necessarily the best. Even within the region, we see differences in how EU regulations are adopted among the six countries currently negotiating membership.

Should we adopt EU regulations, create our own framework, or find a middle ground regarding artificial intelligence?

The easiest and most tempting path is to blindly follow European standards, assuming they're always the best. But the EU is not infallible. For example, after the EU AI Act was passed, an internal report ordered by the European Commission warned that the regulation hinders innovation and may need revision. Today, none of the world's 30 most innovative tech companies are based in the EU.

Meanwhile, the UK–no longer part of the EU–has taken a different approach to AI regulation. Instead of rigid laws, they've opted for "dynamic regulation," where authorities adopt rules based on real-world developments rather than

setting strict penalties upfront.

Looking at Serbia, with Belgrade and Novi Sad as growing tech hubs, our priority should be fostering innovation. Our regulatory framework should support this strategy. Why should we rush to adopt European AI regulations when they aren't necessary for our current IT sector?
AI products don't require physical transport across borders like goods. We can develop them for global markets, especially those that are currently more dynamic than Europe. Strategic and critical thinking about legislation is essential in supporting local innovation and development.

## But if we want to join the EU, don't we have to comply with their rules?

Yes, but there's flexibility. Much depends on negotiation. We've had the opportunity to work on diverse projects for sovereigns in the region and participate in parts of the negotiation process in Brussels.

For example, when signing the final EU accession agreement, countries can request "sunset clauses." These provisions allow them additional time—often several years—to implement specific regulations fully.

Currently, none of the Western Balkan countries are at that stage yet. So why would we preemptively adopt restrictive rules today that might limit our development? If we have 3-6 years to take a more flexible, innovative approach before full

EU compliance is required, that can make a massive difference in the value we create—especially in key industries like tech and AI.

We should use every regulatory opportunity to support innovation and economic growth in Serbia and the region. We must be strategic, not passive, to catch up with more developed economies.
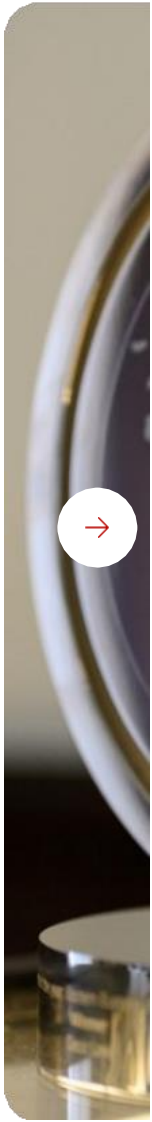
What happens if we develop a market and make it work, only to face regulatory changes that could jeopardize it?

In principle, that rarely happens. There have been cases in agriculture, but that's mainly because of the EU's long-standing policies on agricultural subsidies, which stem from the European Union's historical foundation. This can be traced back to the major agreement between West Germany and France—Germany accepted oversight of its steel and coal industries. At the same time, France, in turn, secured agricultural subsidies that became a massive part of the EU budget. To this day, those subsidies remain a significant factor in European politics.

For example, during Brexit, British fishermen were restricted from fishing in their own waters because another EU country had received subsidies for fishing there. That's an example of how existing regulations can create unintended market imbalances. However, there aren't cases where a country builds a booming industry, and the EU later forces them to dismantle it.

The real problem arises when countries blindly copy regulations without fully understanding the obligations they're taking on. A good example is Croatia's shipbuilding industry. Croatia accepted state aid rules without thoroughly analyzing the consequences when it entered the EU. As a result, it ended up mismanaging cases related to its shipyards, leading to the near-total collapse of its shipbuilding industry due to EU-imposed state aid restrictions.
Some people in Croatia still debate whether this could have been avoided, but I believe the issue primarily stemmed from

a lack of understanding of what was being signed. The EU, of course, responded by saying: "Well, you voluntarily agreed to these rules, so what's the problem now?"

Let's switch to artificial intelligence. What if we copied EU regulations without thinking critically, only to realize later that they hinder our own innovation? That's exactly the risk we face. Let's say we adopt the EU's AI regulations but don't fully implement them. Then, two years down the road, someone comes knocking and says, *'Dear Serbia, you have a booming AI sector, but you're not following the regulations you passed.'* At that point, we'd be in a difficult position—not because of external pressure, but because we created unnecessary barriers for ourselves. Again, this is a broader regional issue. When I say "we," I don't just mean Serbia—I mean the entire Western Balkans.

Serbia is arguably the most advanced country in the region in terms of negotiating capacity and administrative expertise. But in terms of formal EU accession progress, Montenegro has gone the furthest. They've opened and closed most negotiation chapters and are closest to being fully ready for membership.

Your firm was the first law firm—possibly even one of the first companies in Serbia—to advertise for a Chief AI Officer. Your internal structure also looks more like a corporation than a traditional law firm. Can you tell us more about that?

Let's start with our firm's internal organization. During the communist and socialist periods, criminal law was the dominant legal field because it was the most relevant to the state. Demand was for top-tier defense attorneys, but economic crime cases were rare. At that time, small law offices–two or three lawyers handling everything–were the norm.

We had a renaissance of criminal law with legendary figures like Veljko Guberina and Filota Fila, but corporate law never reached the same level of importance. Fast forward to today: If you're representing a modern company with 1,000 employees, 15,000 contracts, and a never-ending stream of legal issues, you can't

operate with just a couple of lawyers. You need a large, specialized team, much like a high-performance sports team where everyone has their own expertise.

Considering that nearly 98% of all societal interactions in Serbia are tied to the economy, it's clear that corporate law encompasses everything–from manufacturing to telecommunications and digital assets. Corporate law spans more areas than all other legal fields combined, further highlighting the need for specialized teams.

These changes started 200-300 years ago in the UK and US, particularly in New York's Wall Street firms and London's legal scene. Corporate law firms evolved into large, structured organizations employing hundreds or even thousands of lawyers. Today, the largest firms in the world have 4,000-5,000 lawyers, each working within carefully managed teams, using project management, specialized workflows, and clear promotion structures. It's an entirely different system compared to solo practice.

Importantly, we were among the first in the region and the first in Central and Eastern Europe to launch an Artificial Intelligence practice. For the past two years, our team has been exploring the legal implications of AI for domestic and international regulations, how AI is being regulated worldwide, with a focus on the US and UK, and how AI impacts our own legal practice and business model.

AI is the first technology that directly impacts "white-collar" jobs on a massive scale. Previous industrial revolutions mainly affected factory workers, automating physical labor. But AI is changing knowledge-based professions like law, finance, and consulting. According to Goldman Sachs, 40% of legal work could eventually be automated by AI.

That's why we decided to start adapting early. For two years, we've had a dedicated team testing almost every AI tool on the market. We're currently focusing on specialized legal AI tools designed for our field.

I find this fascinating, and it's not just excitement—it's a realistic recognition of future trends. Just as the typewriter replaced handwritten legal documents, AI is already transforming legal work, enhancing productivity, and freeing up time for strategic thinking. This technology is not optional—it's already changing how we work, and its impact will only grow.
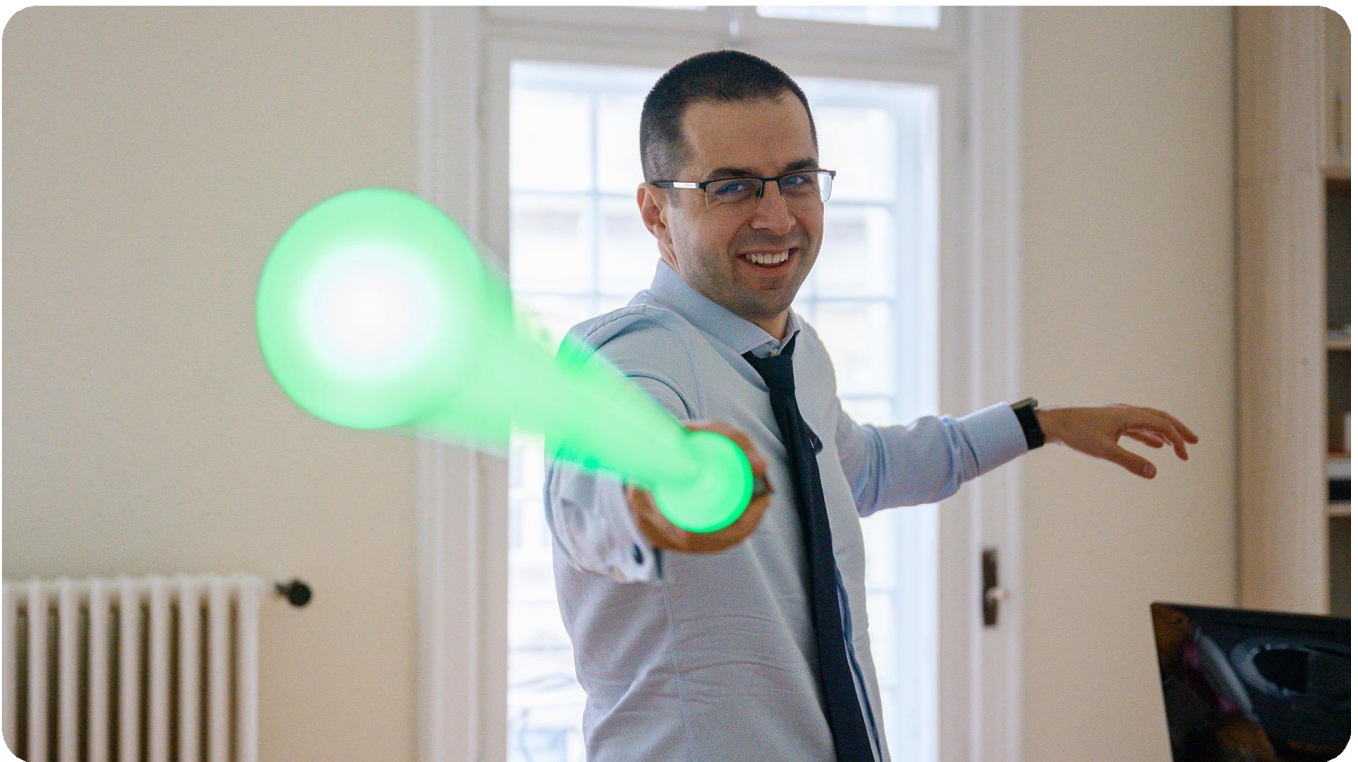
What about the ethical issues surrounding AI?

Of course, there are many ethical challenges. For example, in the US, some lawyers have already submitted legal documents generated by AI, only to discover that the AI fabricated court cases that never existed. The judges caught it, and the lawyers were penalized.

The California Bar Association has issued formal guidelines for using AI in legal work. One of the biggest concerns is attorney-client privilege. Imagine a client shares a trade secret, and a lawyer enters it into ChatGPT or another AI tool. If that data is stored externally, it could technically be considered a breach of confidentiality.

Even today, many lawyers in the region still use Gmail for legal work, even though Google's general counsel openly stated in 2009 that Google reads users' emails as part of its terms of

service. With AI, the risk of data breaches is even higher if legal professionals don't approach it with a structured, informed mindset.

Our firm has prioritized new technologies from the very beginning. We primarily handle multijurisdictional matters and cases related to international law, making artificial intelligence essential both for our legal work and the firm's overall growth. Additionally, AI is reshaping the way we work on an individual level.

To what extent has AI become important at your firm due to your personal interest?

That's a tough question. I could naively say that my interest has nothing to do with it, but the real question is what my colleagues would say. Many of them are now enthusiastically engaged with AI because they've seen its benefits and efficiency firsthand. AI isn't a tool that will do our work for us— it's not a replacement but a partner in our work.

With AI, you can test your ideas, check if something has slipped through the cracks, and ultimately focus on the essence of the problem. At the end of the day, it all comes down to how you frame your questions and what instructions you give AI. It pushes us to think more critically about the core of an issue and how to define it most effectively.

I remember a mentor once telling me: "Define the question, and you'll have the answer." That's the essence of legal work, and AI is now forcing us to refine our problem definitions even further. I firmly believe that, with this technology, no one will have the option to ignore it—everyone will have to elevate their

way of thinking. Those who fail to do so will be unable to leverage AI effectively, creating a massive productivity gap.

People who master AI will accomplish in one hour what would otherwise take twenty, freeing up time for strategic and creative work. Those who don't will fall significantly behind.

That's why it's crucial to adapt as soon as possible. Take Singapore, for example—its parliament recently discussed introducing subsidies to train people over 40 in AI usage. I think that's an excellent model.

What should a Chief AI Officer do at your firm?

We discussed this during interviews and with our HR team. The Chief AI Officer is an entirely new position—we're

defining it as we go. We're already using multiple AI tools, but we need a systematic approach.

This role will focus on educating employees to use legal AI tools effectively, developing AI usage standards for client services, and ensuring AI-driven processes comply with ethical and legal norms.

We're one of the first firms in Europe to introduce this role. Some US and UK firms have already appointed Chief AI Officers, but it's still a rare phenomenon globally. We see this as a bold, forward-thinking move. By integrating AI early, we position ourselves ahead of the curve and add value to our legal practice.