# Small legal firms double AI adoption to 53% amid workflow and ethical balancing act



In the rapidly evolving landscape of the legal profession, small firms are increasingly recognising the necessity of adopting artificial intelligence (AI) in their operations. Recent findings indicate that AI adoption among solo and small legal practices has surged dramatically, rising from 27% to a striking 53% within the past year, as noted in Smokeball’s 2025 State of Law report. This shift reflects a broader trend where these firms leverage AI not simply to keep pace with technological advancements, but to resolve pressing challenges such as overwhelming workloads and rising client expectations.

For many legal practices with fewer than 30 employees, the advantages of AI are irrefutable. By automating routine tasks, such as document creation, legal research, and time tracking, firms can redirect their focus toward more strategic aspects of their work and enhance client service. Rockwell & Kaufman, a civil litigation firm highlighted in the Smokeball report, exemplifies the positive impact of AI integration, noting a significant increase in billable hours and overall caseload without an increase in staff. This case underlines how strategic adoption of AI can unlock new possibilities for small firms.

Lawyers themselves are beginning to express optimism about the role AI can play in alleviating the burdens of their daily work. A recent survey found that nearly 80% of attorneys believe that AI will substantially influence legal research in the coming five years. Many practitioners view AI tools as essential allies, providing them with efficient solutions to the most time-consuming aspects of their practice, thus allowing for a more streamlined workflow. As a result, the ability to reclaim time typically lost to administrative tasks has become a coveted advantage in a highly competitive field.

The changing mindset regarding AI is also noteworthy. A powerful majority of 80% of surveyed attorneys are now familiar with AI tools, and 69% express a willingness to invest time in mastering them. Concerns about job displacement, once prevalent, are diminishing; lawyers are increasingly recognising AI as an augmentative tool rather than a threat. However, this newfound enthusiasm does not come without reservations. Approximately 25% of legal professionals still express hesitancy toward AI adoption, with resistance most pronounced among older practitioners.

Ethical considerations remain significant barriers to widespread AI acceptance in the legal sector. Over 50% of attorneys surveyed voice concerns regarding issues like bias, transparency, and the integrity of client confidentiality. A striking example to consider is the case in 2023 when a lawyer submitted a brief generated by AI containing fictitious citations—highlighting the potential pitfalls of automated legal practices. This situation illustrates that while AI can streamline processes, human oversight is crucial to maintain ethical standards and accurate legal representation.

Integrating AI into legal practice is not simply about adding new tools. Successful firms adopt a measured approach, beginning with isolated pain points—like automating billing or document management. By designating a "tech champion" within the firm to oversee trials of new software and to train colleagues, firms can gradually enhance their operations without overwhelming already stretched staff. This gradual integration allows teams to acclimatise to new technologies and maximises the benefits of strategic automation.

While the Smokeball report reveals the accelerating adoption of AI, it ultimately underscores how firms are utilising this technology to refine their operational methodologies, improve client service, and scale sustainably. The message for small firms is clear: diving headfirst into AI isn’t necessary, but disregarding its potential will leave them at a disadvantage in the modern legal landscape. The gradual, strategic implementation of AI will not only enhance efficiency but may also redefine what clients expect from their legal counsel in the years to come.

In a period marked by both opportunity and caution, small legal firms must navigate the AI landscape judiciously, balancing the pursuit of innovation with the foundational principles of ethics and client service that lie at the heart of the legal profession.

### Reference Map

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.legalreader.com/small-firms-smart-tech-why-strategic-ai-adoption-is-the-new-legal-advantage/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.smokeball.com/news/smokeball-state-of-law-report> - Smokeball's 2025 State of Law Report reveals a significant increase in AI adoption among small law firms, with usage rising from 27% to 53% over the past year. The report highlights that firms are leveraging AI to automate routine tasks, improve efficiency, and enhance client service. Key areas impacted include legal research, document creation, eDiscovery, and time tracking. The survey also indicates that nearly 80% of attorneys expect AI to significantly impact legal research in the next five years, with many viewing AI tools as a welcome relief to manage time-consuming aspects of their practice.
3. <https://www.americanbar.org/content/aba-cms-dotorg/en/groups/law_practice/resources/tech-report/2023/2023-artificial-intelligence-ai-techreport/> - The American Bar Association's 2023 Artificial Intelligence TechReport highlights a notable increase in AI adoption among solo and small law firms. In 2023, 20.7% of small firms and 14.6% of solo attorneys reported using or being interested in AI-based tools, up from just over 15% and 3.7%, respectively, in 2022. The report emphasizes that saving time and increasing efficiency are the most important benefits of AI-based technology tools, as identified by approximately 44% of respondents.
4. <https://www.lawnext.com/2025/03/aba-tech-survey-finds-growing-adoption-of-ai-in-legal-practice-with-efficiency-gains-as-primary-driver.html> - The 2024 edition of the American Bar Association’s Legal Technology Survey Report indicates a significant increase in AI adoption within the legal profession, with 30% of respondents now using AI technology compared to just 11% in 2023. The survey finds that time savings and increased efficiency remain the dominant perceived benefits of AI implementation in legal practice. However, concerns about the technology remain substantial, with accuracy, reliability, and data privacy and security being the top concerns among respondents.
5. <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/ai-and-lawtech/partner-content/ai-and-small-law-firms-innovation-and-its-impact> - The Law Society discusses the challenges small law firms face when integrating AI, including limited understanding of the technology, associated business risks, and ethical considerations. The article emphasizes the importance of clear guidance and training to effectively implement AI tools, ensuring that firms can leverage the technology to enhance their services while mitigating potential risks.
6. <https://www.thekadvisory.com/the-reality-of-ai-adoption-in-law-firms-harvard-study-findings> - A Harvard study examines the organizational barriers to AI integration in law firms, highlighting issues such as lack of standardized AI training programs, resource allocation challenges, and resistance from senior partners. The study underscores the need for proper training, clear governance structures, and leadership support to successfully adopt AI technologies in legal practices.
7. <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/legal/generative-ai-small-law-level-field/> - Thomson Reuters explores how generative AI is transforming small law firms by enhancing research, document review, and case analytics. The article highlights that AI-powered tools enable small firms to perform tasks more efficiently, allowing them to handle more cases without compromising quality. This technological advancement helps level the playing field between small and large firms, enabling smaller practices to compete more effectively.