

WHEN AI COMPRESSES TIME:

Rethinking Associate Value in Louisiana Practice

by Kaylan R. Richardson

For most Louisiana firms, the billable hour still does a lot of heavy lifting. It shapes staffing decisions, associate development and how fees are explained to clients who want work done well and efficiently. But the profession is living through a quiet shift: generative artificial intelligence, AI, is compressing the time it takes to do legal work without compressing the lawyer's responsibility for the result. That distinction matters most to associates, because it changes what makes their value visible.

Most firms already use systems that include AI features by default, spanning document management (ndMAX), research (Westlaw Precision AI), email (Microsoft Copilot for M365) and drafting tools that can search, summarize, compare and generate first cuts (Harvey AI). The practical consequence is not replacement, but acceleration. Routine work arrives faster and in greater volume. Associates feel this first, because they are drafting ancillary documents, building closing sets, scrubbing disclosure schedules, triaging data rooms, preparing chronologies and turning markups into clean work product. Used carefully, AI speeds the mechanics. Used carelessly, it manufactures risk. Either way, the lawyer stays on the hook.



The Compression of Time

I have felt this shift as an associate in more than one practice setting. The quickest gains are unglamorous but real. On the transactional side, AI can help generate an initial closing checklist from a purchase agreement, compile signature packet instructions, compare drafts, spot defined term inconsistencies and build diligence issue lists from data rooms. On the disputes side, including bankruptcy matters that orbit deals, the same dynamic appears in first cut timelines, draft discovery responses and exhibit lists. The work does not disappear; the associate's job shifts from starting at zero to starting with a draft and verifying it.

Empirical work tracks what many practitioners already see: AI can accelerate foundational tasks such as drafting, summarization, comparison and review, while still requiring attorney oversight. One experiment in the *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* reported roughly a 30% reduction in task time with AI assisted highlighting without a corresponding drop in measured quality.¹ Another randomized trial reported productivity improvements that varied by task and tool, but consistently moved in the direction clients will notice: faster first drafts and faster first pass review, followed by human editing and verification.² The trend line is consistent even if the settings differ from our day-to-day practice.

This creates a practical tension for associates: if a task takes less time, but still demands the same legal judgment and ethical verification, how should the work be measured? As AI shrinks the “doing,” the value of the “thinking” becomes easier to see and more important.

“System Error”

Speed brings a predictable tradeoff: these systems can be confidently wrong. Research has shown that language models frequently hallucinate, producing legally incorrect statements even when responding to verifiable questions.³ In practice, that risk shows up in familiar places: a summary that skips the no assignment clause that drives the deal, a citation that looks plausible until you

pull the case, a definition pulled from the wrong agreement version, or a diligence chart that misses a consent requirement because the source document was scanned poorly or mislabeled.

For that reason, AI does not shift risk; instead, it concentrates it. *ABA Formal Opinion 512*⁴ makes clear that lawyers may use these tools only with adequate supervision, verification and client-specific judgment. Louisiana's Rules of Professional Conduct reach the same result. Competence under Rule 1.1 includes understanding what the tool does and does not do. Rule 1.5 requires billing for lawyer judgment, not machine output. Supervisory duties under Rules 5.1 and 5.3 cannot be delegated to software. If an AI-generated draft is filed, sent or signed, the lawyer owns it.

This mix of speed and risk does not reduce an attorney's responsibility. It changes where lawyers add the most value. For associates, the job becomes less about producing volume and more about quality control, issue spotting and judgment, especially in practice environments where associates are expected to engage early in strategy, client communication and execution.

How Do We Move Forward?

My perspective is not theoretical. I have practiced as an associate in both large firm and regional settings. In each, I have worked directly on real estate and corporate transactions, including closing packets, ancillary documents, disclosure schedules, signature page logistics and data room review, as well as the litigation and bankruptcy matters that follow when deals fracture. Across those contexts, the pattern is consistent: hours still matter, but ownership, judgment and error spotting matter more, and AI makes that easier to see.

The economics of practice reinforces the point. The *2024 Report on the State of the U.S. Legal Market* describes increasing client sensitivity to efficiency and value across many segments of the profession.⁵ Louisiana firms experience similar pressure. Clients expect quality work to be delivered promptly and reasonably, and they are often less focused

on how much time a task should take than on whether the analysis is clear, accurate and useful.

AI accelerates this shift by reducing time spent on mechanics while raising the importance of professional judgment. Louisiana's Rules of Professional Conduct make the boundaries clear. Rule 1.1 requires competence, Rule 1.5 requires reasonable fees and Rules 5.1 and 5.3 impose supervisory obligations that cannot be delegated to software. AI can help generate language or identify patterns, but it cannot supply an attorney's understanding of Louisiana law, procedural posture, evidentiary nuance or the practical realities of client service.

Actionable Tip: Add an “AI Review & Responsibility Note” to Time Entries

The most practical step firms can take, without changing billing structures or abandoning the billable hour, is to memorialize judgment when AI is used. An internal AI Review and Responsibility Note added to the time entry narrative or an internal matter log can do exactly that. This is not about justifying a shorter bill. It documents supervision, protects the firm and makes the associate's contribution visible when the first draft happens quickly.

The note should capture three things:

1. What the AI tool generated (e.g., initial draft, comparison chart, issue summary)
2. What the attorney reviewed or verified (e.g., citations, factual accuracy, Louisiana authorities, client constraints)
3. What legal judgment the attorney added (e.g., analysis, restructuring an argument, correcting inaccuracies, strategy)

In practice, this note is rarely elegant and rarely uniform, but even a brief reference can prevent confusion later. For example:

Litigation Sample: “Reviewed AI-generated motion outline; validated record citations; replaced non Louisiana authorities; revised argument structure and edited for posture.”

Transactional Sample: “Used AI to generate an initial ancillary document list from the PSA or LOI; cross-checked against deal terms and lender requirements; reconciled defined terms across the closing set; flagged consent and assignment issues from diligence for partner and client discussion.”

Support Staff Sample: “Used AI to prepare an initial index of closing deliverables and organize signature pages; confirmed document names, dates, parties, and version control against the source files; routed discrepancies, missing items, and unclear instructions to the responsible attorney for review before circulation.”

This simple practice yields several benefits:

- It documents attorney supervision and independent judgment, consistent with Louisiana’s professional responsibilities.

- It provides transparency under Rule 1.5 by clarifying how the billed time was spent and why attorney involvement remained necessary.

- It makes the associate’s substantive contribution visible, especially when the drafting took less time than before.

- It protects the firm in the event of billing questions, malpractice concerns or client misunderstandings about the role of AI.

Aligning AI With the Realities of Louisiana Practice

The most important takeaway is that AI’s impact is not primarily technologi-

cal. It is structural. It accelerates the parts of practice that used to signal value while magnifying the parts that require mature legal judgment. For firms built on relationships, trust and quality, this is an opportunity if we train to it and supervise it.

Clients are placing greater emphasis on responsiveness, accuracy and practical guidance. AI can shorten turnaround time, but it does not ensure correctness, and it does not supply context. Associates who learn to use these tools responsibly, while maintaining the profession’s standards, will make more meaningful and more visible contributions.

Firm leaders should also broaden evaluation beyond hours billed and focus instead on judgment, risk management and analytical strength. Those criteria capture what associates increasingly contribute in an AI-shaped workflow.

Tying It All Together

Generative AI is not eliminating the billable hour in Louisiana. It is changing assumptions that once made time a reliable stand-in for value. As routine tasks become faster, the measure of an associate’s worth is increasingly found in work only an attorney can perform: supervising automated output, applying legal judgment, contextualizing analysis and ensuring accuracy consistent with professional obligations.

By adopting simple adjustments such as the AI Review and Responsibility Note, and by evaluating associates based on judgment as well as output, Louisiana

firms can meet client demands for efficiency without surrendering quality or ethics. AI may compress the hours. It does not compress accountability. The lawyers who thrive will be the ones who move faster and still catch what the tools miss.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Aileen Nielsen et al., *Building a Better Lawyer: Experimental Evidence that Artificial Intelligence Can Increase Legal Work Efficiency*, 21 J. Empirical Legal Stud. 979 (2024).

2. See Daniel Schwarcz et al., *AI-Powered Lawyering: AI Reasoning Models, Retrieval Augmented Generation, and the Future of Legal Practice* (Working Paper, Univ. of Cal. Berkeley Sch. of Law, 2025), <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/AI-Powered-Lawyering.pdf>.

3. See Matthew Dahl et al., *Large Legal Fictions: Profiling Legal Hallucinations in Large Language Models*, 16 J. Legal Analysis 64 (2024).

4. See ABA Comm. on Ethics & Prof’l Responsibility, Formal Op. 512 (2024).

5. See Thomson Reuters Institute, *2024 Report on the State of the U.S. Legal Market* (2024), <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/01/State-of-US-Legal-Market-2024.pdf>

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