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Artificial Intelligence: Why It Matters to Your Future Bankruptcy Practice

Robert J. Ambrogi, Moderator
Law Office of Robert J. Ambrogi; Boston

Owen Byrd
Lex Machina; Menlo Park, Calif.

Darby Green
Bloomberg Law; New York

Thomas J. Hamilton
ROSS Intelligence, Inc.; San Francisco

Shawnna Hoffman
IBM Global Cognitive Legal; Orlando, Fla.

Michael Mills
Neota Logic Inc.; New York

Edward J. Walters
Fastcase; Washington, D.C.

Read/Write Libraries

How Information Professionals Can Put AI Tools into Practice in the Library

by Ed Walters

Artificial intelligence has been around in some form for more than half a century. The term was coined at a conference of computer scientists at Dartmouth in 1956 – the scientists believed that, just as machines during the Industrial Revolution had replaced arduous physical labor, software could similarly replace cognitive labor of people.

For decades, computer scientists created software that could take on increasingly difficult discrete tasks, but a generalized artificial intelligence (so-called "strong AI") has proven elusive. Outside of controlled experiments, such as games of chess with carefully-defined rules, artificial intelligence has not yet proven generally useful. However, many computer scientists believe that we are on the cusp of a breakthrough of artificial intelligence, and that this new generation of AI will transform knowledge work every bit as much as the Industrial Revolution revolutionized industry.

Whether or not we are on the cusp of a revolution of strong AI, it seems clear that software increasingly will perform legal tasks that were previously reserved for lawyers, paralegals, and information professionals. And a great deal of the money paid by clients for those legal services will go to the architects of that software.

Will this be an information oligopoly, with the benefits of AI accruing to a small number of publishers and software companies, at the expense of law firms, law schools, and libraries? Or will the benefits be widespread, like the creation of electric power?

The answer, in part, lies with how broadly the providers of legal services and information participate in artificial intelligence. If information

professionals cede the "heavy lifting" work of AI to software companies, they will be unlikely to participate in the gains of the new economy. However, if information professionals themselves use AI tools, conduct their own

experiments in supervised learning, and learn how to gain new insights from legal data, there is great potential for a broad-based renaissance in legal services, in which everyone has the opportunity to participate.

What kind of insights?

What kinds of insights could law firms draw from AI tools? At the simplest end of the spectrum, AI tools can help lawyers draw important insights from in-house data. For example, law firms can use tools such as IBM's Watson Developer Cloud to convert documents from images to structured text, build chatbots that understand natural language to triage patron requests, or build search engines that run semantic searches over the firm's KM system.

Lawyers can use AI tools to help change the way that law school clinics deliver legal services. For example, the Georgetown University Law Center conducts the Iron Tech Lawyer competition, in which nontechnical law student teams work with clients to create apps for justice using Neota Logic. Expert systems such as Neota Logic or A2J Author may not solve every legal problem, but they can help address simple, recurring legal problems at scale. Indeed, one-to-many software tools may be one of the only scalable ways to address the access-to-justice problem. Information professionals in law schools could be the lynchpin to this kind of development.

Artificial intelligence tools also can offer key insights about the cost of different matters in a law firm, helping firms that want to offer fixed-fee

engagements compete more effectively for business. One problem that law firms face is that their client-matter billing data isn't structured enough to understand the distribution of costs for different types of matters.

AI tools offer the prospect of extracting insights even from unstructured data. This avoids tedious re-keying or data entry for past matters.

Sophisticated clients are increasingly demanding that their law firms provide alternative fee arrangements such as fixed-fee billing. But without structured data, law firms have faced the impossible task of combing through historical billings to add metadata such as the matter type, stage, lawyer, rate, time, and cost – all to understand how to price future matters. AI tools offer the prospect of extracting insights even from unstructured data. This avoids tedious re-keying or data entry for past matters.

Data mash-ups offer even more interesting possibilities. When firms can compare their own internal billing information with public information such as dockets or public law

collections, they can provide quantitative marketing materials to potential clients. Instead of touting the firm's expertise generally, firms can demonstrate that they achieve better results faster, and at lower costs.

The open-endedness of the possibilities is pretty thrilling. Law firms collect so many different kinds of information, it's hard to say ahead of time what cool insights they can derive with AI tools. Data scientists will tell you that it's often hard to know what insights are even possible until they get their hands dirty with the data sets.

Read Only, or Read/Write AI

These insights aren't guaranteed for everyone who uses AI tools in their library. But they aren't science fiction, either. The only way to see what kind of insights are possible is to use the tools yourself. Artificial intelligence generally can be amorphous and daunting – but specific tools are more manageable.

For example, the IBM Watson Developer Cloud toolkit (https://www.ibm.com/watson/developercloud/services-catalog.html) can be used by anyone. It includes tools such as natural language classification engines, tone analyzers, and document conversion tools. These are tools that lawyers can use today, in their own firms (not in some flying-car future, but now). Law firms don't have to be only consumers of search engines – they can build them for themselves.

A great shift is coming, as great as the industrial revolution or the invention of electricity. The most successful lawyers of the next ten years will be the ones that embrace the new tools of the trade. They will understand the law at a deeper level, see trends in litigation before anyone else, manage themselves more efficiently, give quantitative advice, and provide justice for more people at more competitive costs.

In short, we are on the cusp of a great era of cognitive computing for law – and it won't be just software companies and legal publishers wielding these tools, but law firms as well. The lawyers who embrace this opportunity will be more informed and more important in this new era, an important source of competitive advantage.

Ed Walters is the CEO of Fastcase, and he teaches The Law of Robots at the Georgetown University Law Center and at Cornell Tech in New York City.