

BRIEFING NO. 01 · THE IN-FIRM AI FUNCTION

The AI Org Chart Comes to BigLaw

A new function is quietly forming inside every serious AmLaw firm. The firms that staff it first — with the right reporting line — are pulling structurally ahead. What managing partners need to know about the roles, the sequence, and the decisions that compound.

Executive Summary

Every AmLaw firm with a serious AI program is building out the same set of roles. Two years ago, none of these roles existed at scale. Today, the firms hiring them in the right order and placing them on the right reporting line are pulling structurally ahead of peers. The other firms are not behind on tools — they are behind on org chart. This briefing summarizes the new function, the sequence we recommend, and the structural decisions that compound.

5+

NET-NEW SENIOR ROLE
CATEGORIES CREATED
SINCE 2024

1 in 5

AMLAW 100 FIRMS WITH A
NAMED CHIEF AI OFFICER

12–18 mo

LEAD TIME TO STAFF A FULL
IN-FIRM AI PROGRAM

THE SHIFT IN PLAIN ENGLISH

Until recently, firms treated AI as a vendor decision routed through IT or an Innovation Committee. That posture is breaking. The work of AI inside a firm is now substantial enough — and visible enough to clients, partners, and laterals — that it requires its own function, its own leadership, and its own seat on the org chart. The firms that have made that shift are operating at a different cadence than the firms that have not.

THE STRUCTURAL TEST

If your firm's AI work is owned by a committee, an IT director, or the General Counsel's office, you do not have an AI function yet — you have AI activity. The two are not the same, and clients are starting to tell the difference.

THE FIVE ROLES THAT DEFINE THE NEW FUNCTION

- 01** Chief AI Officer or Director of Legal AI. The single accountable owner of the firm's AI program, reporting to the Managing Partner or ExCom. Without this role, the program runs at committee speed.
- 02** Legal Engineer. The first true builder — a lawyer with engineering instincts, or an engineer with deep legal-workflow exposure. The role most predictive of whether a firm moves from pilot to production.

- 03 Agentic AI Engineer. Designs and ships multi-step autonomous workflows. The next leverage curve after chat-style assistants. Very few qualified candidates exist in the legal market today.
- 04 AI Governance Counsel. Partner-level attorney owning AI policy, vendor risk review, client disclosure, and EU AI Act readiness. Cannot stay inside the GC's office once AI use is material.
- 05 Knowledge and Professional Support Lawyer leadership. The content backbone every AI system depends on. Firms still treating KM as a fractional responsibility are starving their AI investment of its most important input.

WHERE AI REPORTS — AND WHY IT MATTERS

The single most predictive structural decision is reporting line. Firms where the AI function sits inside IT consistently underperform firms where it sits as a standalone function reporting to the Managing Partner or ExCom. The reason is not technical. It is political. AI requires practice-group buy-in, partner-compensation conversations, and client-facing posture changes — none of which the IT function has the standing to drive on its own.

THREE FORCES RESHAPING THE FUNCTION

- 01 The AI program is graduating from Innovation Committee to operating function. The firms that move it off the committee and onto the org chart are roughly eighteen months ahead of peers on adoption, governance, and client posture.
- 02 The knowledge function is being absorbed. With CKO retirements and PSLs increasingly pushed into practice groups, AI leaders are inheriting libraries, knowledge solutions, and enterprise search. The talent profile required to run all of that is rare.
- 03 Lateral demand for these roles is structurally tight. The pool of senior leaders who have actually built an in-firm AI program at scale is small, and grows slowly. Firms that wait are hiring from the same shortlist their peers are already circling.



The firms still treating AI as a committee or an IT problem are losing the leadership talent war to the firms that have made it a named seat.

— Managing Partner, AmLaw 50 Firm

WHAT TO DO IN THE NEXT 90 DAYS

- 01** Audit the org chart. Who owns AI? Single name, single reporting line. If the answer is more than one name — or runs through IT, the GC's office, or a committee chair — that is the gap to close.
- 02** Decide whether you are promoting internally or hiring laterally. Internal promotion compresses time-to-trust but limits skill range. Lateral hiring brings the range but extends political onboarding. Both can work; doing neither is the failure mode.
- 03** Sequence the hires. Chief AI Officer first. Then a Legal Engineer. Then Governance Counsel. Then Agentic AI. Skipping steps costs more than it saves.
- 04** Engage a recruiter who has run this search. The candidate pool is small enough that generalist firms are calling the same shortlist on every engagement. Specialists reach the candidates who never respond to inbound.

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