



Confidential Legal Search · Practice Group Strategy · Lateral Partner Moves

BRIEFING NO. 02 · HIRING PLAYBOOK

# Hiring the AI Leadership Team

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A practical playbook for managing partners, executive committees, and COOs building the firm's AI function — from the Chief AI Officer seat down through the engineering and governance bench.

# Why This Playbook

Most firms are still hiring AI leaders against a job description that was written for an IT role or an Innovation Committee. The result is predictable: the wrong reporting line, the wrong evaluation criteria, and offers that fail to close against firms that have figured out the right framing. This playbook is the field manual we share with managing partners, ExCom members, and COOs running these searches for the first time.

## THE CORE IDEA

Hiring for the AI leadership function is not an IT hire. It is closer to hiring a practice group leader. The candidate has to operate with partners, set strategy, own a budget, and recruit a small but specialized team. Screen for that posture — not for vendor or tool fluency.

## THE FIVE ROLES, IN ORDER

We strongly recommend hiring these roles in sequence rather than in parallel. The Chief AI Officer defines the program; everything downstream is shaped by that first hire.

- 01** Chief AI Officer or Director of Legal AI. Hire this person first. Their job is the program — strategy, governance, partner buy-in, vendor decisions, and budget defense. Reports to the Managing Partner or ExCom, never through IT or the GC.
- 02** Legal Engineer. The first builder. A lawyer with engineering instincts, or an engineer with deep legal-workflow exposure. Hire one before you hire a team.
- 03** AI Governance Counsel. Partner-level attorney owning policy, client disclosure, vendor risk, and regulatory readiness. Cannot stay inside the GC's office once AI use is material to client work.
- 04** Agentic AI Engineer. The next leverage curve. Production multi-step workflows, not chatbots. Few candidates have shipped agents in a legal setting — start the search early.
- 05** Knowledge and PSL leadership with an AI mandate. The content backbone. Without it, AI tools degrade. Do not refill a legacy CKO seat — redesign the role around AI first.

## THE FOUR-LENS EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

We recommend evaluating every candidate for an AI leadership seat against four lenses. Strong candidates score well on at least three. Exceptional candidates score on all four.

- 01 Program ownership. Has the candidate run an AI program inside a firm or legal department — not just a tool rollout? Can they describe what they built, who they hired, and what they shut down?
- 02 Partner translation. Can they walk into a practice group meeting and earn partner trust in one conversation? AI inside a firm is a change-management problem; engineering candidates without this skill stall.
- 03 Vendor and build judgment. Do they know when to buy and when to build? Vendor capture is the most common failure mode at this seat.
- 04 Governance instincts. Do they think about client disclosure, ethical walls, and regulatory exposure unprompted — or only when asked?

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

Most AI interview questions invite candidates to recite vendor names. The questions below are designed to elicit specific, verifiable answers that separate operators from observers.

- Walk me through the AI program you built or led. What was the reporting line, the budget, the headcount — and what would you have done differently?
- Describe a workflow you decomposed for AI inside a practice group. Who was in the room, what did you change, and what did you measure?
- When did you decide to build something internally versus buy it from a vendor? What was the trade-off?
- How do you handle a partner who is openly skeptical of the AI program? Walk me through a specific case.
- What is your governance posture for client disclosure, vendor data use, and ethical walls? What policy did you write?
- If you joined our firm, what is the first hire you would make in the first 90 days — and why that one?

## RED FLAGS TO WATCH FOR

- The candidate cannot name a specific workflow they decomposed. Strategy talk without operator detail signals a committee background, not a builder.
- The candidate has only ever run AI inside IT. The political muscles required at this seat are different.
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The candidate describes AI strategy as a slide deck. The job is shipping production capability with partners.

- The candidate has never had a budget conversation with an ExCom. They will struggle to defend the program when economics tighten.
- The candidate has no view on PSL placement, KM ownership, or how knowledge relates to AI. These are the structural questions this seat owns.

## REPORTING LINE AND MANDATE

The most common reason an AI leadership hire fails has nothing to do with the candidate. It is the reporting line. We strongly recommend the role report to the Managing Partner or ExCom. Reporting through IT, the GC's office, or a committee chair effectively guarantees the program will move at committee speed — which is to say, not at all. Confirm the reporting line before the offer goes out, not after.

## ONBOARDING THAT DOESN'T WASTE THE HIRE

The single most common mistake firms make after this hire: handing the new leader the existing Innovation Committee and asking them to harmonize with it. The reason you hired them is precisely that the committee has not delivered. Give them the authority to dissolve, restructure, or absorb the committee — and budget the political capital to back the decision internally.



*We had a Chief AI Officer for nine months before we realized we had hired her to lead a function we had not yet authorized her to build.*

— Managing Partner, AmLaw 50 Firm

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