

# 'The New Reality': Summer Associate Training Zeros In on Generative AI

By Andrew Maloney

July 30, 2024

## What You Need to Know

- Big firms like Seyfarth Shaw have implemented training programs for summers focused on generative AI.
- It comes as many, or perhaps most, firms are continuing to invest more resources and build new tools to leverage AI.
- 'This is the new reality of how lawyers are going to practice,' Seyfarth Shaw chair and managing partner Lorie Almon said.

More Am Law 100 law firms are training their summer associates in generative AI, seeing the potential in the technology for both legal education and business.

Among the latest is Seyfarth Shaw, which launched this year a 10-week program for summers with sessions geared around learning commercial and in-house AI tools, brainstorming new AI-enabled products and processes, and debating the limits, possibilities and ethics of AI usage.

Seyfarth joins several other large firms with summer associate AI training, including Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe, Dechert and K&L Gates.

The push to get the newest lawyers up-to-speed comes as many, or perhaps most, firms are continuing to invest more resources, build new tools, and create new technologist and C-suite roles to leverage artificial intelligence. It also comes as new critiques of the costs and benefits of the technology are circulating.

As AI becomes all the rage, Seyfarth is leaning into its history of innovation.

"As we started planning our summer 2024 program, we thought, 'This is the new reality of how law-



Credit: DC Studio/Adobe Stock

yers are going to practice," said Lorie Almon, chair and managing partner of the firm, in an interview. "And it's really important to think about generative AI as not just a tool that lawyers will use to do things the same way as they've always done them, but it really is fundamentally changing how we practice in many ways."

Law firms told *The American Lawyer* earlier this year that they were frequently using it to write, draft, and research. Increasing efficiency and cutting down on non-billable tasks was also a popular use case.

Seyfarth, in particular, has discussed using the technology for automated contract templates and resource tracking during the pandemic, for instance.

Firm leaders said the summer associates during the program have suggested ideas revolving around time and knowledge management. They've also suggested using generative AI to make their advocacy more persuasive, Almon said, by having it shape and adapt their writing style in legal briefs, for instance, for specific readers.

Some of the tools the firm has used include Microsoft Copilot and Doc Q&A, which was created by the firm's in-house innovation vertical, Seyfarth Labs.

Kevin Young, a labor and employment partner at Seyfarth based in Atlanta who is involved with the training program and also teaches AI and innovation as an adjunct at the University of Georgia Law School, said the training seminar and his class are similarly designed to be "very hands-on."

"The way to get better is to do it. Dive in. Learn what's out there. Have those conversations and get comfortable being in the mode of curiosity and teamwork," Young said, describing his approach to the material.

"The program at Seyfarth is similar. It's really trying to promote curiosity, collaboration, and the same sort of traits I think that serve to make someone really well-equipped to seize the opportunity that generative AI presents," he said.

### **Apprehension and Opportunity**

That opportunity may be up for debate a little more now than it was even a few months ago. Goldman Sachs published a report last month suggesting that, relative to the investments made in AI in Silicon Valley at least, the technology "has little to show for it so far." More recently, a survey from Bane Research found satisfaction with AI had suffered a steep drop since last fall.

Not only that, but Almon said one of the biggest surprises she learned from the group of summer associates in the program was that they were not just skeptical, but uneasy about artificial intelligence.

"Most of them were coming from law school environments where they were hearing generative AI is going to take their jobs, law firms need fewer lawyers. By-and-large, AI made them very nervous," she said. "It felt like a threat, whether or not it's what the law schools intended, that's what they were taking away from them."

However, she noted one of the aspects of the Seyfarth program was a "think tank" that allowed them to discuss their experience and ideas about the technology with Seyfarth lawyers and staff, and the summers "universally" came away with more nuanced feelings and more comfort about it.

Almon said she doesn't buy the skeptics' version of the AI trajectory.

"I think if you look at the amount of money being invested in technology, and how much change we've all seen in our lifetime around tech, it would be a mistake to believe that we've hit the end of the road and this is as good as it gets. Our own life experience should tell us that."

She noted that generative AI is just one of many uncertainties in the legal industry. But the summer program "has only reinforced for me that it's not a time for handwringing or catastrophizing about this. It's a time for leadership around technology and generative AI, and the that you earn trust and you build strongest relationships for even your most junior lawyers by having dialogue, by connecting and talking about things like generative AI."

Summer associates at several other Am Law 100 firms have also been knee-deep in AI training lately.

Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton, whose subsidiary ClearyX is designed to incubate tech-enabled solutions, said it's also focused on training associates on AI. In a statement, Michael Gerstenzang, Cleary's managing partner, said the firm is developing programming that teaches lawyers across levels of experience to work with AI as an interactive agent for learning and development

"AI transformation is not just about embedding technology into the way we work. It's about a holistic focus on how lawyers learn and develop. Our anchoring principle is teaching lawyers to use AI thoughtfully as a co-pilot and tool," said Gerstenzang. "AI can be an amazing tool for developing creative solutions, when it is deployed with the appropriate discretion and supervision."

Orrick this year renewed its training in prompt engineering for summer associates while also setting aside an "AI Day" early in this summer's program.

Dechert also has a history of summer associate input in AI. Law.com reported in March that Dechert's summers participated in more than 50 generative AI-related projects, supervised by attorneys, where they tested tools on legal work, provided feedback and supplied information on which prompts were successful.

And K&L Gates' summer associate program features generative AI training that includes an introduction to basic principles, theoretical learning and discussions on the technology's risks and benefits as well as why it matters to lawyers.