



2026 Legal Department Operations Report

As roles evolve, LDO leaders are looking to step up

Executive summary

Over the past decade, the role of the corporate legal operations professional has evolved. What was once viewed as specialist IT staff grew into a role that comprises technology evaluation and selection, training, legal project management, data collection and cleaning, daily operations, and so much more. Over that time, many large and midsize companies in the United States and increasingly worldwide have built in some type of legal operations function, with some functions comprised of dozens of personnel.

Today, the introduction of AI has caused legal operations to evolve even further. Now, it is not only the role itself that is changing, but also the function's stature within the legal department itself that is changing. Suddenly, legal operations is not just a helpful support function but is increasingly crucial to how corporate legal departments get their work done.

This year's iteration of the *Legal Department Operations Report* examines this evolution, the AI impetus behind it, and how legal ops professionals are approaching it, especially around areas of value and talent.

The proportion of general counsel (GCs) we interviewed who mentioned technology as one of their legal team's strategic priorities doubled between 2025 and 2026.

Particularly over the past year, technology and AI have become a central strategic tenet of legal department plans. Indeed, the proportion of general counsel (GCs) we interviewed who mentioned technology as one of their legal team's strategic priorities doubled between 2025 and 2026. At the same time, GCs are looking to integrate their legal function into the overall business and align the function with wider business priorities — priorities that often include the influence of AI and the need for enabling functions to drive business outcomes rather than simply cut costs.

Legal operations, then, finds itself within the perfect nexus of providing exactly what legal department leaders need at this crucial time. For instance, 86% of GCs see legal as a significant business contributor, but only 17% of other C-Suite executives agree. And it is legal operations that may be the function that's best positioned to close that perception gap through data and outcome-focused communication. Further, GCs report increasing pressure around AI's impact on financial results, outside stakeholder concerns, and talent crunches — and legal operations can provide crucial aid and data support to help ease those concerns. Moreover, legal ops leaders who spoke with the Thomson Reuters Institute (TRI) say their organizations are building out more business-focused metrics than ever before, providing legal leaders with the necessary backing to make decisions. And when legal leaders are looking for those who can communicate legal technology's value across the organization and train new staff to develop legal judgment more quickly, legal ops is a natural first call.

Of course, that is not to say that legal operations is operating without a hitch. Many legal ops functions face the same budget and personnel crises as the rest of the legal department, creating a lower ceiling for the true impact that technology and process change can create. These functions are also overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change brought upon by AI. For example, many worry that as technology becomes more of their core job function — one legal ops professional says it has climbed to 80% of their job, from 20% previously — other key pieces of the job could lag behind.

Legal operations is no longer a luxury only the most innovative departments can afford. It has now become the nexus of not only how legal department lawyers interface with technology, but how the rest of the business can interface with the legal department itself. With its crucial project and change management skills, legal operations has become a key piece of how legal departments will achieve wider business objectives. And because of AI, legal ops' prominence can only increase from here.

Key findings

- **Legal ops is shifting focus from daily work processes to setting strategy** — With 28% of GCs naming technology their top strategic priority for 2026 (twice the portion who said that in 2025), legal ops leaders describe their function evolving from an operational outlier into “its own practice area” that other groups now come to for direction.
- **AI pressure on GCs is landing squarely on legal ops** — With more than half of legal leaders saying they now face financial, talent, and stakeholder pressure tied to AI, legal ops has become the default first line of defense, owning governance and shadow AI risk while trying move the legal department away from being *the Department of No*.
- **AI is reshaping outside counsel relationships, and legal ops is driving it** — More than two-thirds (68%) of legal leaders say they’d consider switching firms that fail to deliver AI value within five years, and legal ops is increasingly the function that evaluates technology-enabled in-sourcing and rewrites outside counsel AI expectations.
- **Legal ops frees lawyers to reclaim their time, not just their tools** — Corporate legal respondents say the AI benefits they most want personally are freed-up time and work fulfillment. Legal ops leaders see their role as the engine that removes friction (like hunting down training opportunities or fumbling through new tools) so lawyers can focus on high-value legal work instead of administrative overhead.
- **Thin staffing is putting legal ops’ impact at risk** — Despite this increase in importance and scope, resourcing and staffing constraints stand as GCs’ top hurdles to delivering value. Some legal ops functions run lean in parallel, and without dedicated bandwidth, these teams are stuck reacting to fires rather than proactively building the data and automation that would let them prove their value.

Department strategy & organizational influence

Over the past several years, GCs have had one overarching goal: making their legal department's work visible and accountable to the rest of the business. By and large, they feel they have succeeded. According to the Thomson Reuters Institute's *2026 State of the Corporate Law Department Report*,¹ 86% of GCs view their legal department as a significant contributor to overall organizational objectives.

However, getting the rest of the business to recognize those efforts has remained a challenge. In fact, just 17% of other C-Suite executives agreed with this assessment, and 42% say the legal function contributes little or not at all.

Closing this perception gap is clearly a top priority for legal departments entering 2027 and beyond. The question for legal operations teams, then, should be what role they can play to help the legal department set that strategy and interface with the rest of the business.

"I don't know what I would do without a legal operations function, quite frankly," explains one general counsel at a technology company. "I view them as the business of the organization. We can't be efficient if we're not taking the time to figure out how to be efficient. They really drive that efficiency, budget management, and bringing the vision to life."

Enabling strategic growth

Legal ops personnel have historically focused on *efficiency* (making sure operations stay as quick and cost-effective as possible) and *effectiveness* (making sure lawyers have the right tools for the job) and to a lesser extent *business enablement*. However, as the role of the GC evolves, so too is what they are demanding of department personnel, including the legal ops department.

Adding to this evolution is that the definition of efficiency itself is shifting. Where efficiency once meant pure cost-cutting, GCs now expect advanced technology to drive both savings and business enablement at once. This has pushed legal ops to reframe its role as well, from being the one running between these core objectives to being the engine that keeps everything moving.

And many in the legal profession are noticing this change. Legal ops was "an outlier maybe 10 or 15 years ago" mainly doing efficiency and data cleanup, says one technology company legal ops leader. Now it's becoming "its own practice area" on par with employment or litigation — and in a few years, other practice areas will "come to us for the strategic vision."

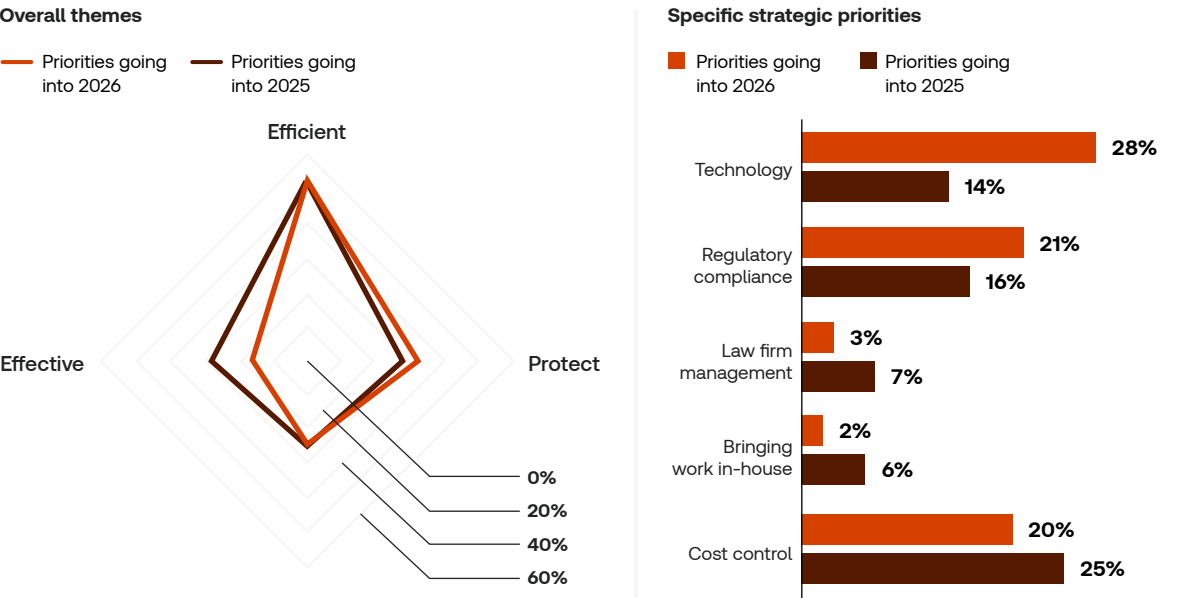
Another legal ops leader from an energy company also notes that by 2030, their goal was to make sure "our legal team is embedded in each of the individual organizations" and have legal ops acting as the connector between disparate groups.

"How are we getting the guidance from our attorneys into the right regulatory aspects without having a separation?" the legal ops leader asked. "Like, we need to reach out to legal and everybody's dreading it. But I got this guy sitting right next to me that can be legal, and that's just going to give us our guidance. Using the legal ops space as that driver of that, expanding that out enterprise wide, I would say is a lofty goal of mine."

¹ *2026 State of the Corporate Law Department Report*, Thomson Reuters Institute (March 2026), available at: <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/institute/reports/state-of-the-corporate-law-department-report-2026>.

Not surprisingly, technology helps drive a large proportion of legal ops’ value across the business. When asked about their top strategic priority for 2026, 28% of GCs mentioned technology, and more specifically, AI. That’s double the proportion who said the same entering 2025, making technology the top strategic priority across a number of different geographies and industries.

FIGURE 1:
Top GC strategic priorities for 2026



Region	2025 Specific strategic priorities	2026 Specific strategic priorities
United States	Cost control	Cost control
Canada	Cost control	Efficiency
United Kingdom	Cost control	Technology
Mainland Europe	Technology	Technology
Asia	Regulatory compliance and commercial support	Technology

Industry	2025 Specific strategic priorities	2026 Specific strategic priorities
Finance	Cost control	Technology
Energy/Utilities/Natural resources	Cost control	Technology
Technology/Media/Telecoms	Commercial support	Technology
Pharma/Bio/Health	Cost control	Cost control
Manufacturing/Automotive	Cost control	Regulatory compliance

Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Finding ways to measure success

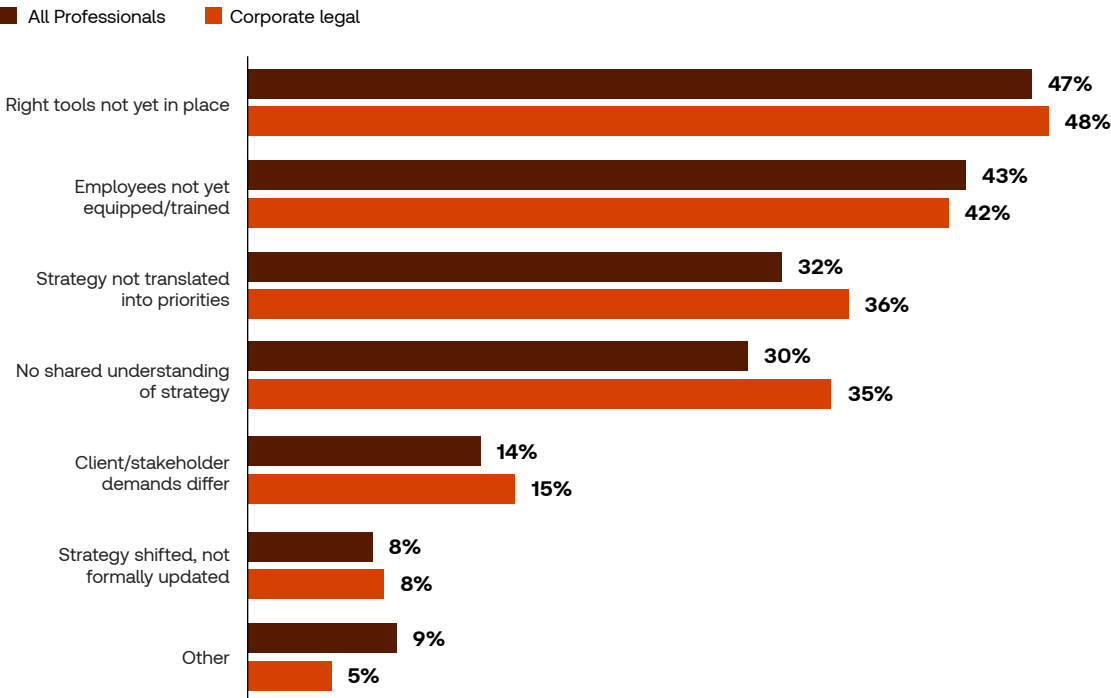
According to legal ops personnel, the biggest hurdle to having the rest of the organization recognize the importance of legal ops is the ability to assess and communicate that value. In fact, when legal ops personnel were asked their own primary strategic priorities for 2026, many say they wanted to better understand *how* their own legal department was operating.

For example, one legal ops leader at an energy company says their position was created just three years ago in order to explicitly tell the legal department’s story through metrics. “How do we show our value? How are we showing that we’re delivering? How are we showing that we’re achieving these goals and objectives? What goals and objectives are we setting that can be measured?” the legal ops leader asked. “At the cornerstone of those conversations was somebody who had to have the answers and figure out a way to get those answers — so that’s how legal ops came to be. It was a case of we need to understand the value we’re delivering. We need to understand what would happen if we weren’t there.”

However, this effort is hindered by a lack of data, which in turn is clearly impacting how legal departments can actualize their strategic initiatives. In fact, when department personnel were asked why there may be a gap between their organization’s strategic ambition for AI and its practical outcomes, many pointed to translation issues: Simply, there was no shared understanding of AI strategy, and thus, that strategy was not being translated into actualized priorities.

This dynamic isn’t lost on legal leadership either. One general counsel at a technology company points to data as the only real lever that the legal function has to prove its worth to the rest of the business. “Legal is a cost center in many organizations,” the GC says. “It’s how we show we bring value, through the data and the story that data can tell.”

FIGURE 2:
Reasons for a gap between strategic ambition and day-to-day practice on AI



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Indeed, this gap seems to be a perfect place for legal ops personnel to exercise increased influence within the organization, holding the potential to play a large role in setting and executing both legal department and organizational strategy. That role will not be assumed, however, unless legal ops professionals come armed with proof that they are needed to help close this gap.

Data will get legal ops professionals part of the way there, but they will need to learn how to effectively communicate this data in order to achieve a true seat at the table. Just as senior legal leaders need to communicate their department's value to the larger business, operations personnel should know how to answer the questions: *Why does what we do matter to the strategic objectives of the business? How are we helping the business achieve its preferred outcomes?*

The TR Institute's View:

Legal ops personnel are likely very familiar with explaining what they do on a daily basis in terms of specific tasks, such as spinning up new servers, collecting and cleaning financial data, helping an attorney execute on a discovery request, etc. And that shows department lawyers exactly how the legal ops team can aid them on a day-to-day basis.

What that sort of activity does not do, however, is explain the legal ops team's role in executing the key strategies of the wider legal department and the overall business. Harkening back to the gap between legal's perceived value of itself and the C-Suite's perception, GCs are increasingly tasked with speaking the language of business, not the language of legal outcomes. Critically, the legal ops teams hold the translation key in the form of data, technology enablement, and business outcomes — but only if they understand the language of the C-Suite.

TRI recommends that legal ops professionals talk less about what they do, and more about how they help. This means changing their communication from being task-based to being outcome-focused. Adopting this style of communication not only helps legal ops show its own role in executing department strategy, it helps explain how the whole legal function aids the organization's key business initiatives as well.

AI & technology direction

As the role of legal ops has expanded in recent years, AI has provided both a boon and a speedbump. AI has bolstered legal ops’ standing in that the technology is increasingly becoming an integral part of its daily legal work. Also, legal operations professionals are among the best situated to implement, train, and collect data on AI usage.

At the same time, however, the AI explosion has rapidly increased the pace of change within organizations at large, and legal ops professionals are experiencing that shift more acutely than many others.

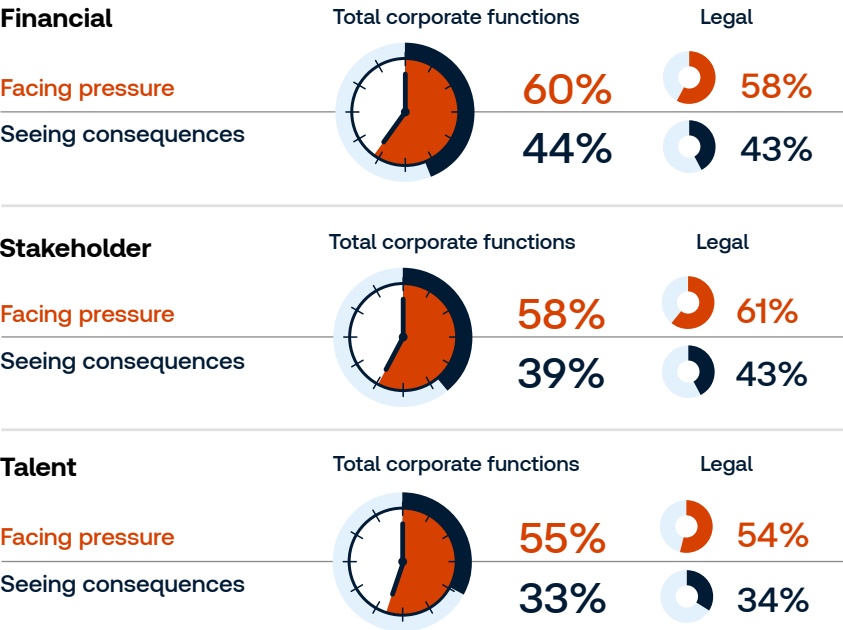
“It used to be that technology was maybe 20% of the job, and now it’s like 80% of the job,” says one legal ops professional. “Now it’s not every two years that you get a big update, it’s every two months.”

Increased corporate and governance pressure

Even less than four years since ChatGPT’s first public emergence, it’s clear that AI is not a passing trend. More than half of corporate lawyers say they use AI multiple times a day, according to TRI data, and only 2% say they never use AI tools at all.

Clearly, AI has had a quicker impact on legal operations than perhaps any legal technology before it. And as a result, GCs are placing pressure on the rest of the department to ensure AI has a real-world impact. Not surprisingly, more than half of corporate legal leaders report feeling pressure around financial, talent, and outside stakeholder issues as a result of AI, according to *Thomson Reuters Future of Professionals Report 2026*.² And more than one-third say they expect to see negative consequences if their organization does not move quickly enough on AI.

FIGURE 3:
Legal departments under AI pressure



Facing pressure = proportion of respondents reporting they face “some” or “significant” pressure currently.

Seeing consequences = proportion already seeing consequences, or expecting to do so within 12 months.

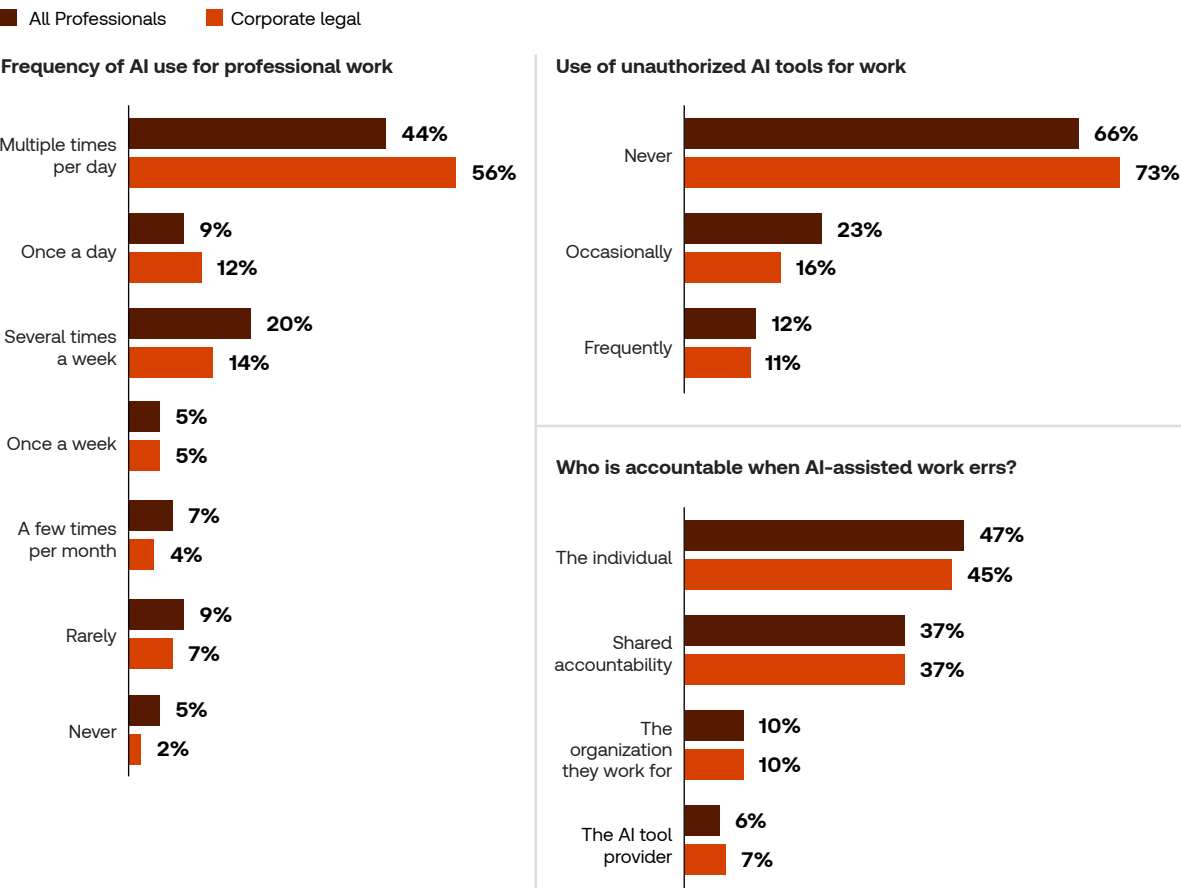
Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

2 *Future of Professionals Report 2026*, Thomson Reuters (June 2026), available at: <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/institute/future-of-professionals-2026/report>.

Legal ops, therefore, finds itself needing to take a prominent role in helping address those concerns. The exact role of legal ops functions varies based on the organization. Some ops leaders reported that they are generally empowered to make AI purchasing and operational decisions, as long as they’re accountable to the GC’s office. Others say their department’s AI use is closely tied to that of the larger business, and the overall legal department assumes procurement and operational concerns.

Regardless of empowerment for tool selection, however, one thing is explicitly clear: Legal ops functions are viewed as the first line of defense for proper governance. And this is a growing area of concern for many operations personnel, given the pervasiveness of shadow AI — AI usage that is not visible to or tracked by the organization — and the view that the organization is at least in part responsible for ensuring proper AI protocols.

FIGURE 4:
AI use rising, but shadow AI, accountability a concern



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

One technology industry legal ops leader touts the function’s role as providing transparency to the rest of the legal department, in order to protect against any unauthorized AI usage. “You have to have a good answer for why you are, or why you’re not using the latest tool,” the legal ops leader explains. Without a thought-through position, people “go off and do their own thing, which is an issue from a confidentiality, privacy, and security standpoint.”

Yet, what legal ops professionals need to protect against, another technology industry legal professional notes, is being too restrictive on AI matters. There’s a fine line to walk between enabling business functions and instituting proper risk management protocols.

“It’s totally a hard place to be,” the tech legal professional says, “Because I think it sets you up to be the person [seen as] the AI naysayer. It’s almost like a parallel to the legal department as a whole not wanting to be seen as a *Department of No*.”

AI’s impact on outside counsel

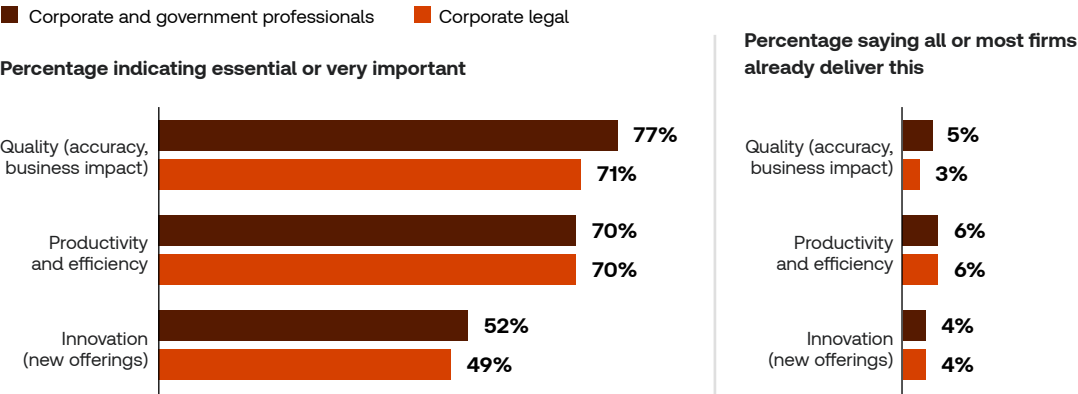
One of the continual top strategic priorities cited by GCs is evaluating outside counsel’s effectiveness, reliability, and of course, cost. Legal ops professionals have long held a role in developing and reporting outside counsel metrics; however, in an AI age, some professionals report that technology will have a more tangible impact on client-firm relationships. And that will have legal ops taking a more hands-on role given technology’s importance.

Already, some legal departments are approaching outside counsel governance from a more technology-centric perspective, with legal ops helping to directly code what the department wants to see. “We implemented an AI supplement in our outside counsel guidelines,” says one technology company legal ops director. “After that, we implemented an AI assessment to make sure that our law firms are using AI tools responsibly and following our risk tolerance.”

Other legal ops professionals say AI is enabling their department to bring much more legal work in-house, creating obvious downstream effects for the outside firms they hire. “We are focusing on trying to bring as much in-house as we can, from due diligence work in M&A to litigation review,” says one energy industry legal ops leader. “So, I think there’s going to be a little bit of a strain on some of those relationships where we’re trying to reduce outside spend, but I also think we’re going to empower them to get to the point where they’re leveraging their attorneys’ times for substantive matter rather than the menial type of work that we would expect.”

Despite legal departments moving rapidly on these expectations, however, few corporate legal professionals say their outside counsel are currently delivering on AI expectations.

FIGURE 5:
Do external firms deliver the AI value clients expect?

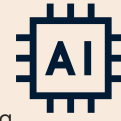


Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Unless corporate legal departments start to see that value, GCs will be re-thinking their outside counsel relationships. Among corporate legal leaders responsible for purchasing decisions, more than two-thirds (68%) say they would consider changing an outside law firm if it was not delivering clear AI value within the next five years. In fact, 11% say they are already reconsidering some outside firm relationships due to a lack of AI value.

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Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

The TR Institute's View:

Even though many legal departments are starting to think about what AI may mean to their outside counsel relationships, they are not yet having that conversation with their firms. In fact, according to TRI's *AI in Professional Services Report*³ from early 2026, more than half of corporate legal respondents want their law firms to be using AI on client matters, but about two-thirds had no insight into whether their firms were using AI or not.

Increasingly, however, AI will not only become a topic of conversation in terms of how client work is performed, but also — not surprisingly — how client work gets billed. And in these conversations, legal ops professionals can have an important voice to help set expectations and bring clarity to any negotiations. Is it reasonable, for example, to expect a contract review that previously took four hours to now take just two or even less? Does the legal department have the financial data to determine whether an alternative fee arrangement may be the best fit for a particular matter? In the near future, should AI agents be a part of the matter team alongside outside counsel?

Given its role in understanding and translating AI to the legal department, the legal ops function leaders should strive to play a lead role in answering these fundamental business questions in the near future.

³ 2026 *AI in Professional Services Report*, Thomson Reuters Institute (January 2026); available at: <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/reports/2026-ai-in-professional-services-report>.

Talent & personnel

Technology's growing influence has the potential to impact not only the practice and business of law, but the talent and personnel structure of the legal department as well. Given the rapid pace of AI advancement, some legal departments report hiring more technology-centric personnel than ever before, with a number of those hires given explicit legal operations roles. In fact, AI has caused some departments to establish a legal ops function for the first time, with specialized personnel needed to get a handle on all of the department's technology and data needs, according to TRI data.

At the same time, it's clear that technology will impact not just legal ops professionals, but all legal department personnel. Given AI's importance, legal ops will take a driving role in training the next generation of corporate lawyers and providing these professionals with the tools they need to succeed — or not, depending on if the legal ops function is empowered and its technology needs prioritized.

The evolving legal ops professional

Given the increased focus on AI and technology, some legal experts logically believe the role of the legal ops professional is becoming increasingly technical. However, legal ops leaders tell TRI that the opposite may in fact be true. Soft skills — those that allow the legal ops professional to explain technology, solicit feedback, and communicate changes as the ultimate project manager connecting legal to the rest of the business — are becoming critical.

A technology industry legal ops leader notes that legal ops should be viewed as a service profession, similar to the legal department itself. "The perfect legal ops professional thinks of themselves as a customer service individual on steroids — that bridge or that brain for the legal department," the legal ops leader says.

General counsel are looking for the same qualities. One technology company GC says they are looking for "a people person. interpersonal skills are super important, especially for legal ops leaders." And that starts with genuinely understanding the work that legal ops professionals are supporting, not just the tools: "If you don't know what lawyers do and what risk professionals do every day, I don't think you can bring the right tools or the right skills."

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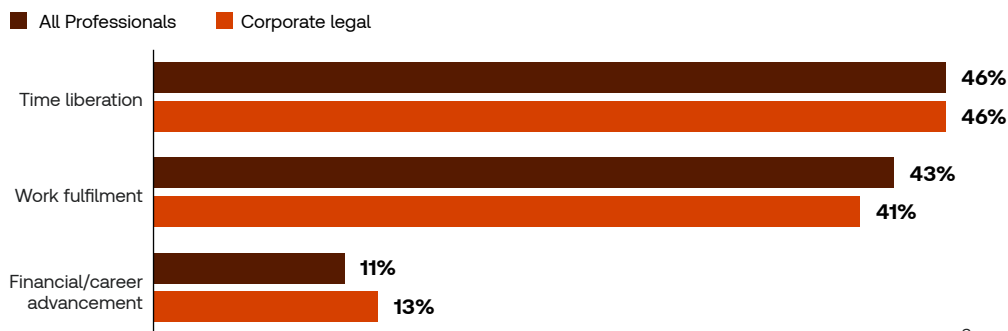
– Technology company GC

Indeed, when asked what benefits they hope to draw from AI, corporate legal respondents say they are primarily looking for both work fulfillment and time liberation. And that means, the more that legal ops professionals can act as the engine that frees the legal department's lawyers to do less technical or administrative work, the more successful those lawyers, and the overall department, will be.

"It shouldn't be, oh my gosh, I need to find training on Claude, how do I do it, and then spending an hour to try to figure it out," says the technology industry legal ops leader of corporate lawyers. "That's not what they should be doing — they need to do the high-value work."

FIGURE 6:

What matters most personally from AI?



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

In order to succeed, then, it's less important for legal ops professionals to have legal know-how than to *enable* legal know-how. Indeed, TRI's *GCO 2030* project⁴ sets out the legal department of the future based on five archetypes that combine new ways of working and technology to deliver better legal work, defining the legal department as focusing on advisory-plus, seamless integration, global leverage, empowering peers, and scaled enablement.

One common theme across this future legal department vision is that technology should be leveraged to enable the lawyers to do their best lawyering where it matters most.

If we take this vision and consider what role a future legal operations team would then play to enable this, there are some clear areas of support including:

- Delivering training for the legal department team in skills that will be more important in the future, such as communication, resilience, and critical thinking — alongside tech fluency.
- Building, monitoring, and maintaining systems that enable these archetypes to exist.
- Curating and maintaining the legal department's body of knowledge, including technical (the law), institutional (advice given before) and business (preferred terms, risk appetite, and business strategy).

Creating this type of optimized legal ops function also means understanding the overall goals of the department, what that *high-value work* entails, and how to best bolster it in an efficient manner.

One legal ops leader observes that getting this sort of education may be easier said than done, given the rising complexity of both legal work and the technology enabling it. "You need to understand the company's strategy, you need to understand how the legal department is going to support that, and then you need to understand how all the constituent parts of legal play into that," the legal ops leader explains. "It's a bigger, a deeper learning curve, I think."

⁴ *GCO 2030: How AI will transform how in-house teams work*, Thomson Reuters Institute (May 2026); available at: <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/insights/articles/the-2030-legal-department-5-ways-ai-will-transform-how-in-house-teams-work>.

Doing more with less

Today’s legal ops leaders, however, often need to figure out how to accomplish these tasks with fewer personnel. GCs on the whole point to staffing and resourcing constraints as the number one challenge facing corporate legal departments today, even more so than budget or time management constraints.

FIGURE 7:
Top constraints holding legal departments back from delivering value



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

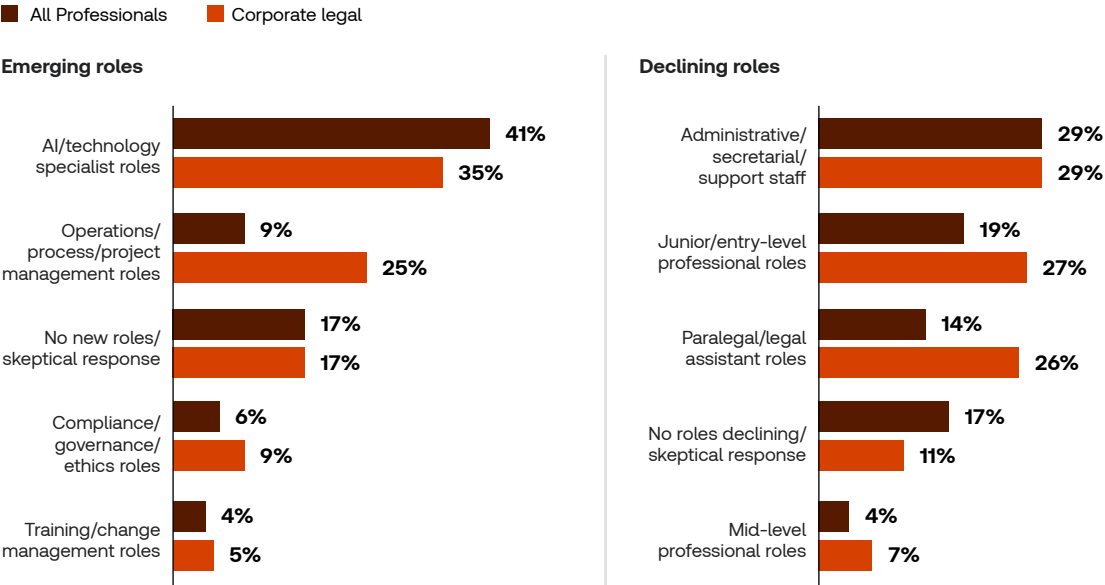
Even with the strategic emphasis placed on technology, legal ops is not immune to these pressures. One legal ops leader says their company’s legal ops function consists of 3.5 people covering 200-plus lawyers across 28 countries. Another legal ops leader, whose position was only recently created in the past few years, is the only full-time legal ops professional for their Fortune 500 company.

“I’ve been to the ACC [Association of Corporate Counsel] Legal Ops conference, and you’ve got people that say I’ve got like 10 or 12 legal ops people — and it’s just like, wow, I would love to have one-quarter of that,” the solo legal ops leader says.

Without the personnel to undertake new projects, some legal ops professionals are not seeing the results that they might have expected when coming into the role. “Things move slower because I don’t have a team that’s dedicated to it,” notes the solo legal ops leader. “So I have to rely on people when they have time to be able to dedicate to it. There is some patience involved with that for sure.”

Fortunately, some legal professionals are anticipating help on the horizon, particularly given the influence of AI. When asked what job roles they expect to emerge or increase in number due to AI, 25% of corporate legal respondents point specifically to legal ops or project management roles — and that’s 16 percentage points higher than the global professional services average. At the same time, however, 26% of corporate legal respondents say they expect paralegal or legal assistant roles to decrease — and that’s 12 percentage points greater than the global average. This data indicates that legal departments may not be hiring new personnel but rather *re-assigning* existing personnel to more ops-centric positions.

FIGURE 8:
Roles expected to emerge or decline due to AI



Source: Thomson Reuters 2026

Indeed, this technology focus could have positive — and necessary — ramifications. As noted in the GCO 2030 project, the future legal department will rely more on AI that’s embedded into workflows, data curation, and playbooks. In order to maximize its value, a future legal ops team must support this by working with subject matter experts to understand and map process around specific work types or workflows, design new AI-enabled workflow, and monitor and maintain it. This may involve new roles that call for engineers with some legal background.

Already, 16% of corporate legal respondents to TRI’s *Future of Professionals* survey say they are already considering leaving their position due to their organization’s AI efforts not meeting the value they expect. Meanwhile, 69% of legal professionals say that a lack of professional-grade AI access would be a factor in their decision whether to accept a job, with 18% saying they would not accept a job without such AI access.

The TR Institute's View:

Past versions of this report have asked whether legal ops leaders should be hiring technologists and teaching them legal know-how or hiring lawyers and teaching them operations and technology. However, in conversations this year around what they look for in hiring new professionals, many leaders note they were looking less at *background* and more at *skills* and what role the hire would play in the legal ops function.

For example, one energy industry legal ops leader says their organization was looking for a candidate who can “see a process through and understand that all those steps are important — not just the technology, not just the process change, not just the automation, but the full value chain of the decision all the way to reporting back. That’s what this role has become.”

Clearly, as the role of the legal ops professional evolves, so too should the function’s hiring strategy. It may no longer be enough to assume that because a legal professional shows some tech interest, or because a technologist has used a contract management system, they will automatically be a good fit for a specific role.

The legal ops world of the future is evolving to be more strategic, knowledgeable about the business, and good at communicating their department’s needs and goals to a wide variety of stakeholders. Hiring for legal ops positions should evolve in a similar fashion.

Bringing it forward

The legal operations function within corporate legal departments has remade itself in the past several years. Not only is it the primary driver of technology innovation within the legal department itself, but it also serves as a crucial hub of communication to help drive the legal function's impact on business initiatives across the organization.

And given that most businesses are focusing on change and innovation as a central tenet of their strategy moving forward, legal ops will continue in its central role as an enabler of this. In the near future, legal teams will be comprised of not only lawyers, paraprofessionals, and operations professionals themselves, but also AI agents that will be autonomously helping to complete legal tasks.

"If you told me three years ago that we would be dealing with AI agents who are redlining NDAs, I would say that's absolutely crazy," joked a technology industry legal ops leader. The fact is, however, that legal operations personnel will not only be responsible for implementing this change, but they'll also be tasked with communicating how these shifting ways of getting work done will contribute to overall legal department objectives.

Several legal ops professionals also anticipate the scope of their own roles to expand beyond the legal department specifically, in order to further the department's objectives in embedding with the rest of the business. One legal ops leader from an energy company anticipates legal ops professionals will expand their influence both inside and outside of the legal department, especially as legal judgment itself becomes more crucial to the wider organization.

Next steps: Five moves for legal ops professionals

The path forward does not have to seem daunting even for the leanest of teams, the key is to focus on what will best support and enable the legal department's ambition. Based on this year's research, here's where legal ops leaders can start:

1. **Talk outcomes, not tasks.** Reframe how you describe your own work, from "what we did" to "what it enabled." This is the fastest way to close the perception gap with the rest of the business.
2. **Pick three metrics and own them.** It's not about more metrics but the right metrics that demonstrate value. Choose the few that matter most to your GC and the C-suite and report them consistently.
3. **Get ahead of shadow AI.** Don't wait for a policy request but take proactive steps to bring your GC a clear point of view on AI governance before it becomes a crisis.
4. **Rewrite the outside counsel conversation.** Ask firms directly how they're using AI on your matters and build that expectation into engagement terms now. The answers will provide valuable insight and will help identify the relationships worth investing in.
5. **Invest in judgment, not just tools.** As AI becomes table stakes, the skills that differentiate your team are communication, prioritization, and business fluency — build training around those, not just software rollouts.

The legal departments that thrive won't be the ones with the most AI. They'll be the ones where legal ops turned AI into clarity, speed, and trust for lawyers and for the business.

“The role is growing in weird and unexpected ways,” the legal ops leader says. “And I think that as we go forward, one interesting thing that we’ll see within companies is how much of the law remains within the legal department and how much of it goes to other places. We always say the law department is the only place where the lawyers are... but that means that our reliance on our IT department and our reliance on our finance department and our reliance on our communications department will only intensify as well, because all those factors become critical.”

Today, corporate legal departments do not operate in a vacuum — and neither can legal operations. As technology becomes more complex, data governance becomes more crucial, and risk management is baked into all aspects of the business, these enabling functions need to work together rely on each other more than ever before.

Legal operations of the future, therefore, cannot just drive legal technology. Indeed, for legal operations to continue to succeed, it must serve the needs of all parts of the entire organization.

Methodology

The *2026 Legal Department Operations Report* draws from data collected over the past calendar year by the Thomson Reuters Institute. Large portions of the quantitative data were collected for the *2026 Future of Professionals Report*, which had a global sample of 1,816 professionals and 203 corporate legal professionals. About half of those corporate legal respondents identified themselves as GCs or an equivalent title. Other data sources include interviews with corporate counsel within the Institute’s Market Insights platform, and previous data surveys for this year’s *AI in Professional Services Report* and the *State of the Corporate Law Department Report*.

TRI also conducted interviews with corporate legal operations professionals for use within this report. Those interviews were conducted in July and August 2026, with professionals based in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The interviewees spanned a variety of industries including energy, manufacturing, retail, and technology, and all were leaders of their respective legal ops functions.

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