



the global voice of  
the legal profession™

# The International Bar Association (IBA) Legal Agenda 2025





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# Purpose

The International Bar Association (IBA), as the global voice of the legal profession, seeks to provide up-to-date information on the most critical legal issues for its members, for the broader legal community and for society generally. The IBA is uniquely placed to provide thought leadership, raise awareness and create or improve best practices on legal matters.

For these reasons, the IBA – as one of the Presidential Priorities for the term 2023-2024 and continuing for the term 2025-2026 – has sought to identify the most important issues facing the legal profession in the next five years. This IBA Legal Agenda has selected the most pressing legal challenges from three perspectives: substantive law developments; issues faced by the legal profession; and legal issues affecting the entire society. Having identified these primary concerns, the IBA will work to develop and promote common solutions to the challenges. The IBA also provides this Legal Agenda to its law society and bar association members, its individual members and its group member law firms to assist them in focusing attention on these critical issues.

The initial IBA Legal Agenda was constructed based on the discussions held with representatives of leading international and national law firms in in-person meetings and in individual consultations, including meetings held concurrently in New York and London in June 2023. A second transatlantic consultation in April 2024 and a third in June 2025 have enabled some updates. The topics below form the IBA Legal Agenda for the five-year term from 2023-2028.

This draft is not inclusive of other relevant legal issues for the IBA and its members, nor does it refer to ongoing projects or other activities covering different matters.

The IBA intends to review the IBA Legal Agenda on a yearly basis to ensure that it is up to date.

**1. The legal profession, especially law firms, should take a more active role in the promotion and defence of the rule of law.**

- a) There is a growing sense that after decades of considerable advances for the rule of law, it is now becoming less understood and accepted in public discourse, and more at risk, even in places which used to champion it globally such as Europe and the US. These recent developments are considered to be of sufficient concern to elevate the issue of defending and explaining the rule of law to the very top of the legal agenda. Lawyers can show leadership in engaging with wider society – and also within the profession, including with new young recruits – to deepen understanding of the rule of law as a bedrock for fairness, prosperity and progress in societies and economies.
- b) Within this, the concepts of the independence of the judiciary and of the profession are likely to be fundamental ‘red lines’ for lawyers to explain, champion and defend, which will require much greater collective energy in the new environment.
- c) The rule of law is in place for only a minority of the world’s population. Public understanding of the concept remains limited and the advocacy of it is under-resourced. Being aware of the above, the IBA will launch a series of videos aimed at explaining to young generations how preserving the rule of law may have an impact on their day-to-day lives. It is our aim to disseminate these videos in high/secondary schools, and the Danish Bar and Law Society is helping the IBA to conduct a test in the Danish education system.

- d) Law firms should depoliticise the rule of law and describe it as a concept that is fundamental to a democratic society. Clients will accept and support that approach.
- e) The role of lawyers is to make the law work for the good of society. In too many countries, the law does not function effectively. Bar associations and law firms can better promote best practices and applications of the law and provide examples to improve the law in other jurisdictions.
- f) Lawyers could do more pro bono work defending the rule of law.
- g) Defending the rule of law includes supporting public international law, which is vital to world public order. However, international organisations like the UN are no longer as active or effective as they should be.

**2. Artificial intelligence (AI) continues to be identified as one of the most important issues, both in terms of the substantive law developments and in terms of the challenges posed to the legal profession and to society as a whole. AI development and adoption will likely outpace any regulation; its impact will be vast, multi-faceted and difficult to predict; its data summaries and conclusions can have an unreliable relationship with the truth; and its deployment can too easily send confidential data into the public domain.**

- a) There will be a disparity of regulations applicable to AI across the world. The OECD issued its *AI Principles* and its *Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence* in 2019. The use of AI in the EU is regulated by the AI Act, the world's first comprehensive AI law, adopted in March 2024 and entered in force on 1 August 2024. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on AI opened to ratification on 5 September 2024, and it was well received by many countries. In the US, the White House issued a blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights in October 2022, and an Executive Order in 2023 to set a framework for a federal approach, while a number of its states are already considering bills to regulate use of AI in the private sector. More recently, the US appears to have adopted a deregulatory approach. The potential implications of this shift for the fundamental values of the legal profession remain uncertain. In July 2025 The White House released '*Winning the AI Race: America's AI Action Plan*', in accordance with President Trump's January executive order on Removing Barriers to American Leadership in AI. The Plan identifies over 90 Federal policy actions across three pillars – Accelerating Innovation, Building American AI Infrastructure, and Leading in International Diplomacy and Security – that the Trump Administration will take in the coming weeks and months.

Other jurisdictions have similar regulatory ambitions. There may be convergence or alignment in some places – for example the BRICS countries announced plans in October 2023 for a collaborative AI Study Group.

- b) Given the broad number of initiatives and the speed at which such regulations are expected to need modification, international regulatory cooperation is essential. The IBA can assist this process – as it has done in antitrust and other fields – by bringing together regulators from many jurisdictions and creating a mechanism for continuing consultation.
- c) The IBA can also assist by identifying and advocating for common principles and best practices or guidelines, including thought leadership on the many ethical questions raised by AI’s application.
- d) Awareness of the different AI regulations affecting different sectors across the world is essential. Given the global nature of many businesses and legal practices, easy identification of legislation and regulations enacted by different countries will prove necessary. Therefore, the IBA will carefully assess the possibility of setting up an accessible repository of AI regulations. Given the breadth and experience of the IBA’s membership, it is well-placed to create such a database.
- e) Clients are beginning to ask for AI-based services that are not yet within the scope of regulation, so law firms may experience a tension between what the client wants and what the firm’s policy or the regulator will permit or not expressly forbid. Clients may also have differing views about the uses of AI in the law firm in providing them with a service.

- f) AI will have a significant impact on the legal profession itself. Further assessment is needed on the effect of AI on the business model, types of work, staffing structure, training and development, pricing and other issues impacting law firms, as AI reshapes these practices. Technologists will become a more integral part of client service teams (whether internal or external to the law firm). International fora encouraging the exchange of experiences in this new and rapidly changing field would be useful.
- g) Firms develop bespoke AI systems or license from providers: the former may add risk, needing greater ongoing investment than a firm can afford without changing business model. The billing system based on hourly rates will have to be revisited in a significant way.
- h) Each sector will have to manage the specific AI impacts on it. The IBA provides a forum for sector-related debates within its committees, while also serving broader issues centrally.
- i) Young lawyers should be actively involved in all these projects, as they will feel the greatest impact of AI on their careers and their lives.

### **3. Talent attraction and retention is a continuing challenge to the current law business model because of different life priorities and the search for purpose by the younger generation.**

- a) While law firms are not currently suffering any shortage in the number of lawyers forming their workforce – and there is in 2025 perhaps an employers’ market – bright and talented people, especially in the younger generation, have different priorities, including greater emphasis on work-life balance.
- b) Because of these issues, further reflection is needed on whether the law firms’ business model needs to be adjusted. More transparency and honesty at recruitment about the challenges of legal practice and the pros and cons of life in private practice at medium to large firms is needed.
- c) Competition between law firms for exceptional talent both at the outset of a career and once established is raising costs and fees in a way which may risk a backlash from clients and have a negative impact on the reputation of the profession (discussed in part 5 below).
- d) AI, if the forecasts of reduced future numbers of recruits are correct, may make a positive contribution to reducing some of this pressure (while also raising environmental costs). AI is opening up a new line of recruitment: for technologists, who will work alongside lawyers.
- e) The younger generation looks more for a sense of purpose in work alongside monetary reward. Recruitment and retention can be improved by greater explanation of and attention to the superb purpose of the rule of law that is at the legal profession’s core. The ethics of the independent profession may be at the core of what will enable it to survive, when, eventually, AI within in-house legal teams may supply so much of the work required.

- f) Opportunities for retention of lawyers over 60 are growing, with numerous firms extending or abolishing their retirement age, or finding creative ways to keep retired lawyers within the firm's active network and available to partner with on particular work.
- g) Talent development needs as much focus as attraction and retention, to maximise the potential of loyal workforces and the full integration of, and contribution of, diversity.
- h) Non-equity partnerships have increasingly become a part of talent retention efforts, and of attracting senior associates from other firms, perhaps especially in North America and Europe. They can be seen as a pathway towards partnership, or as the peak of certain types of law firm career. In some firms they can be as involved as the partners in some decisions or regarded as second rank. The title may be seen as assisting with client recruitment, or as carrying an element of risk of diluting the firm's brand value. In short, the profession contains mixed views on their role and value.
- i) Talent retention has also been affected some of the decisions taken by law firms in the US in connection with sanctions imposed by the government, whereby lawyers have left when they do not agree with their firms' policies in this respect.

**4. Client and mandate acceptance poses increasing risk to law firms in terms of reputation, regulatory scrutiny and recruiting. This risk is especially significant for global firms practising in different jurisdictions. Pressure not to represent clients viewed as unacceptable has diminished the independence of the legal profession.**

- a) The role of the profession in representing and advising all manner of clients is now generating increased public scrutiny, with real implications for reputation management, for potential increased regulatory scrutiny and for diminished independence.
- b) Firms with practices in particular countries, such as Russia and China, face greater challenges because of heightened and conflicting cultural sensitivities as well as from geopolitical realities and rising tensions. Variations in moral viewpoints in different regions present challenges for global firms especially.
- c) A new generation of lawyers wanting to be more selective of the clients that they represent adds to this challenge for law firms.

**5. The perception of the profession needs to be enhanced by all stakeholders, including international legal associations such as the IBA, bars and law societies.**

- a) Despite the profession's great expertise, strong client service culture, commitments to pro bono work and other contributions to society, the public too often perceives lawyers as self-interested professionals acting only for the rich and powerful.
- b) Law firms – especially perhaps those in 'Big Law' – need to assess the reputation implications of being seen more as commercially-focused and less as a part of a profession serving a role in the checks and balances of justice and democracy.
- c) Law firms do not sufficiently reach out to the wider public about the law and the profession due to a variety of reasons, including the need for neutrality and caution because of client sensitivities. They should do a better job of educating the public about the importance of the rule of law, their role in protecting it and their work on behalf of pro bono and underrepresented clients.
- d) International legal associations, as well as national bars and law societies, should also play an increased role in enhancing the perception of the legal profession, including by publicising their efforts to preserve the rule of law. This includes speaking out when governments undermine the rule of law and when public officials attack the legal profession.

**6. Delivering legal advice across multiple jurisdictions is challenging due to the substantial number of divergent regulations applicable to the legal profession across the globe.**

- a) Firms with cross-border practices have substantial expertise in delivering cross-border service to increasing numbers of more globalised clients. Yet some challenges and tensions develop because of the profession's framework of qualification and governance organised by jurisdiction.
- b) National bar associations and law societies, as well as the IBA, should focus on whether and how ethical standards need to be adapted to the current practice of law, both within their jurisdictions and globally. Law firms should work more closely with them to ensure that ethical standards are reasonable and also that they are enforced.
- c) At the same time, law firms may be able to do a better job focusing their lawyers on how ethical rules impact their daily practices.

**7. Environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues have a substantial impact on law firms' work for clients and also on many firms' own internal policies and structures. The social side in terms of female inclusion at senior roles and ethnic diversity remain challenges. The divergence of views in different regions about the roles of ESG and inclusion adds to the complexity of serving clients and staff well.**

- a) ESG ambitions and concerns have grown strongly in people's consciousness over recent years, and the phrase has become a common aspect of dialogue between law firms and clients. Its overarching nature extends over many themes and all practice areas, so that it is difficult to define, measure and monetise. Law firms have approached this practice in many different ways, some by setting up separate practice groups, some by integrating the issues into many different practice areas.
- b) Monetising ESG advice to clients has been a challenge, as it often involves advice connected to other work. Regulatory advice, governance and compliance are likely to be at the centre of monetising ESG for law firms. The next five years will help determine if ESG develops into a broad practice from its current mix of so-called hard and soft law, in the same manner that white collar practice developed from similar origins.
- c) Regulatory advice arising from ESG concerns is frequently a critical aspect of high value transactional work. While that advice may determine whether the transaction is successful or not, it involves many fewer hours than the work done by the transactional lawyers. Measuring the value of that advice – in charging clients and in internal compensation arrangements – is a challenge that law firms will need to resolve in coming years.

- d) Many clients and law firms working across different regions are now experiencing an environment in which ESG policies and measures are compulsory in one region, optional in another and forbidden in a third, providing challenges of compliance and legitimacy which may be difficult to resolve.
- e) Climate change and legal redress remain high on the agenda of politicians and regulators, and green enterprises continue to attract exceptional investment. This will be an important aspect of any ESG practice. Law firms must also do a better job of measuring and reducing their own climate impacts.
- f) The focus by some clients on ESG increases pressure on law firms to improve their own performance on ESG issues. Third parties and clients are developing ways to measure law firms' compliance with these goals. Foremost among those priorities is increasing female and diverse leadership in law firms, as well as recruiting and retaining female and diverse young lawyers.
- g) Law firms' commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion should also include improving access to justice, engaging with law schools, and breaking down silos and protectionism in certain jurisdictions.
- h) Despite recent adverse developments in certain jurisdictions, the IBA remains firmly committed to advancing and strengthening diversity, both within the Association and more broadly. The IBA Diversity Council continues to pursue these objectives as key priorities of the Association.



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