the global voice of
the legal profession®

The International Bar Association (IBA) Legal Agenda 2026



Purpose

The International Bar Association (IBA), as the global voice of the legal profession, continues to identify and promote awareness of the most critical issues facing law firms, legal practitioners and the broader justice system.

This 2026 Legal Agenda reflects discussions among leaders of major international and national law firms and builds on prior iterations by prioritising those issues most frequently raised during the 2026 consultations. The Agenda addresses challenges from three perspectives: (i) the future of the legal profession; (ii) substantive legal and regulatory developments; and (iii) broader societal and institutional considerations.

The Agenda forms part of the IBA's five-year strategic focus for 2023–2028, building on consultations held in New York and London in 2023 and subsequent transatlantic consultations in 2024, 2025 and 2026.

The IBA will use this Agenda to guide initiatives, foster collaboration across jurisdictions and promote practical solutions to the challenges identified. While it 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, it is updated and given each year to the IBA's law society and bar association members, all individual members and group member law firms to assist them in focusing attention on these critical issues.

Artificial intelligence

The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to be vast, multi-faceted and difficult to predict, affecting all of human society. Its development and adoption are outpacing regulation and the adjustment of laws.

The IBA is taking a bifurcated approach in responding to this impact, with one strand addressing its effects on wider society and another strand addressing its effects on the legal profession, an effort on which the various constituencies of the Association have been working for more than three years.

Wider society

To address wider society, the IBA established its Artificial Intelligence Institute, which became operational in June 2026. The Institute is outward-looking, examining how the law and the legal profession can contribute to shaping responsible AI governance worldwide. It aims to bring the legal profession's expertise to bear on this governance, contributing to international and multi-stakeholder AI forums and surfacing emerging legal issues before they harden into problems. It is beginning its work with consultations with stakeholders including international bodies, governments, civil society, the corporate world, Big Tech and recognised experts within the legal profession, including lawyers working in: AI governance, compliance and risk; AI-related litigation, disputes and liability; or sector-specific work involving AI deployment (financial services, healthcare, employment and beyond). From these consultations it will identify its first priorities and contributions.

Divergent national and regional approaches to AI regulation continue to create complexity for global businesses and law firms. The EU's AI Act, the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on AI and evolving US federal policy illustrate the breadth of approaches already in place, with further divergence likely as other jurisdictions develop their own frameworks. The IBA is well placed, given its widely

recognised standing and the international reach of its membership, to support regulatory coherence.

The legal profession

AI is the most significant and frequently discussed issue affecting the legal profession. Its impact extends across legal service delivery, process, talent development, pricing, client expectations and access to justice.

These issues will continue to be debated and addressed through the work of the IBA's divisions and committees.

1. Training and skills transformation. Traditional methods of training lawyers are rapidly becoming outdated. Firms must rethink how they train lawyers to work effectively alongside AI, with a focus on practical usage, critical evaluation and technological fluency.

2. Impact on talent structure and career pathways. AI is reshaping the composition of legal teams. While some firms are reducing mid-level roles, others are increasing junior hiring with a view to developing AI-enabled lawyers from the outset. The long-term implications for career progression remain uncertain.

3. Client expectations and pricing pressures. Clients are increasingly questioning fee structures where AI is used, creating tension between efficiency gains and perceived value. The profession has yet to establish a consensus on pricing models in an AI-enabled environment.

4. Data strategy and infrastructure investment. Firms are investing heavily in structured data and proprietary knowledge systems to ensure flexibility across evolving AI platforms. Control and usability of firm data are emerging as critical competitive differentiators.

5. Uncertainty of technology platforms. There is no clear consensus on which AI tools or providers will dominate and this will depend also on geographical location and on whether the jurisdiction follows a civil law or common law tradition.

6. Access to justice and societal impact. AI has the potential to significantly improve access to legal services, but also raises questions about ethics, deontology, reliability, accountability and the role of lawyers in an automated environment.

7. Cybersecurity and data protection risks. The increasing use of AI heightens exposure to cyber threats. Disparities in security standards across firms – particularly in multi-party matters – pose material risks to client confidentiality.

8. Engagement of young lawyers. Young lawyers should be closely involved in shaping the profession's response to AI, given that they are likely to feel its impact on career development and daily practice most acutely.

The rule of law and the rules-based international order

There is a renewed urgency around the defence of the rule of law, both domestically and internationally. Discussions, such as those highlighted below, indicate that this issue should remain high on the Legal Agenda.

1. Erosion of the rule of law. Leaders of major international and national law firms highlighted increasing political and societal challenges to judicial independence and the legal profession in several jurisdictions.

2. International institutional fragility. The effectiveness of international law and international institutions in maintaining a rules-based global order is under strain, with implications for domestic legal systems and international trade and discourse.

3. Role of the IBA and the legal profession. The IBA is uniquely positioned to play a more active role globally, including advocacy, coordination across bar associations and strengthening institutional resilience.

4. Bridging the gap between law firms and bar associations. Greater alignment between the business of law firms and the institutional role of bars is needed to maximise collective influence.

5. Access to justice and pro bono efforts. While many firms support access to justice and pro bono initiatives, these efforts remain a small proportion of overall activity and could be expanded, including through more pro bono work in defence of the rule of law itself.

6. Public understanding and education. Public understanding of the rule of law remains limited and its promotion is under-resourced. The IBA continues to explore initiatives to build awareness among younger generations, including educational content designed for schools, building on early testing carried out with the Danish Bar and Law Society, and for selected small groups of young lawyers identified as potential future leaders among the profession, in a joint initiative with Salzburg Global.

7. Resilience of the rule of law narrative. Although the rule of law is often perceived and presented as under severe and repeated attack, these challenges, often successful, should not undermine an optimistic outlook, particularly among younger generations, about the ability of societies, political institutions and legal systems to respond appropriately and ultimately prevail.

8. Framing the rule of law for clients. Law firms are encouraged to present the rule of law as a concept fundamental to a well-functioning, democratic society, rather than as a political position, as an approach more likely to secure client understanding and support.

The future of the legal profession: talent, purpose and perception

The profession faces structural questions about its long-term attractiveness, sustainability and identity.

1. Changing perceptions of legal careers. Increasing competition from other sources of high-income careers such as finance, crypto, online enterprises, Big Tech and AI-driven narratives about automation are discouraging prospective lawyers, thereby raising concerns about future talent pipelines.
2. Evolving training models. There is growing recognition that traditional apprenticeship models are no longer fit for purpose in an AI-enabled profession.
3. Purpose and attractiveness of the profession. Maintaining the appeal of legal careers will require a renewed emphasis on purpose, impact and the societal role of lawyers.
4. Diversity and retention challenges. Despite longstanding focus, retention of women and diverse talent remains a persistent issue, often linked to work cultures and practices and often requiring firm-specific rather than universal solutions.
5. Generational and technological divide. Younger lawyers are generally more adaptable to technological change, while resistance among more senior practitioners may create internal disruption.
6. Recruitment transparency. Greater openness with prospective recruits about the demands and trade-offs of legal practice, alongside its rewards, may help manage expectations and improve long-term retention.

7. Non-equity partnership structures. The growing use of non-equity partnership as a retention and recruitment tool, particularly in North America and Europe, continues to divide opinion: some regard it as a pathway to full partnership, others as a distinct senior tier. Firms differ on the value and risk it carries for talent strategy and brand.

8. Retention of senior lawyers. A growing number of firms are extending or removing retirement ages, or finding other ways to retain experienced lawyers in an active capacity, reflecting a shift in how firms value senior expertise.

9. Public perception of the profession. The perception of lawyers as serving primarily the interests of the rich and powerful persists, despite the pro bono commitments of firms and public interest work. Law firms, bar associations and the IBA all have a role in improving this perception, including through more proactive public engagement about the profession's contribution to justice and society.

Ownership, investment and the business model of law firms

The increasing role of private capital in the legal sector is an emerging and strategically significant issue.

1. Private equity investment in law firms. External investment is growing, particularly outside top-tier firms, raising questions about independence, governance and professional values.
2. Law firms as businesses v professions. The entry of private capital intensifies the debate around whether law firms should prioritise commercial objectives or professional duties.
3. Investment in legal technology. Firms are allocating substantial resources to AI and related technologies, often requiring partner capital contributions and long-term strategic bets, which not only increases the appeal of external capital, but also, arguably, the competitive edge of larger firms.
4. Competition from legal technology providers. Investment in third-party AI providers may create future competitors, raising strategic concerns about dependency and market disruption.

Client relationships, reputation and ethical pressures

Client and mandate acceptance continues to present reputational and ethical challenges.

1. Ongoing scrutiny of client selection. Firms face increasing pressure – from clients, employees and the public – regarding the acceptability of certain mandates, placing strain on the principle of open legal access for all potential clients.
2. Internal tensions within firms. Younger lawyers, in particular, are more likely to question client choices, creating internal governance challenges.
3. Jurisdiction-specific and geopolitical exposure. Firms with practices in jurisdictions such as Russia and China face particular challenges arising from conflicting cultural and political sensitivities, as well as broader geopolitical tension. Differing moral and regulatory expectations across regions add further complexity for firms operating globally.
4. Internal disagreement over firm policy. Some lawyers have left firms over disagreements with decisions taken in response to government sanctions or political pressure, illustrating the link between mandate-related decisions and talent retention.
5. Sector-specific sensitivities. Industries such as energy remain focal points for reputational debate and external activism.

Cybersecurity, confidentiality and operational risk

Cybersecurity has emerged as a more prominent concern, particularly in the context of AI and cross-firm collaboration.

1. Rising sophistication of cyber threats. Law firms are increasingly targeted due to the sensitivity of their data.
2. Weak links in multi-party matters. Security disparities between firms create systemic vulnerabilities in litigation and transactional work – a particular issue in international work across more vulnerable jurisdictions.
3. Client expectations and minimum standards. Clients are imposing stricter requirements, though these may not fully mitigate evolving threats.

Diversity, inclusion and workplace evolution

Diversity and inclusion remain central within discussions of the legal profession, but the subject matter is shifting from policy to execution.

1. Persistent gender imbalance at senior levels. Despite progress, many firms continue to struggle with retaining women through to leadership positions.
2. Shift from policy to management responsibility. Effective inclusion is increasingly seen as a leadership and culture issue rather than a policy framework.
3. Variability across firms and regions. Experiences differ significantly, with some firms reporting meaningful progress and others continuing to face structural challenges.
4. Regional divergence on diversity and inclusion policy. Approaches to diversity and inclusion, as with wider ESG-related policy, vary significantly by region, with some measures compulsory in one jurisdiction, optional in another and restricted or discouraged in a third, creating ongoing challenges of compliance and consistency for firms operating across borders.
5. Institutional commitment. Notwithstanding adverse developments in some jurisdictions, the IBA remains committed to advancing diversity within the Association and the wider profession, with the IBA Diversity and Inclusion Council continuing to pursue this as a key priority.

Conclusion

The 2026 Legal Agenda reflects a profession in transition. AI is reshaping how legal services are delivered and how lawyers are trained, while the rule of law faces renewed global challenges and the business model of law firms is evolving under technological and financial pressures.

The IBA is uniquely positioned to convene, guide and influence the global legal community in responding to these developments. The priorities identified in this Agenda will inform the IBA's initiatives and collaborations over the coming years.



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