

# 7 AI Training Tips For Law Firm Summer Associate Programs

By **Zeynep Ersin** (May 19, 2026)

Artificial intelligence training for summer associates isn't really about AI: It's about teaching a way of thinking that will still be relevant when the tools change — which they will and already have.

Every year law firms assess what they want to do with their summer associate programs to differentiate themselves. In the last few years, that has also included asking "What AI training should we add to the summer program?"

My view is simple and intentionally holistic. Build a program that teaches how to think about using AI. The goal isn't mastering a tool — it's to build judgment, understand implications and to level up in a way that's repeatable.

We are all well aware that the tools keep shifting — features, vendors, security requirements, client expectations and beyond. The constant should revolve around the underlying capability you want in your summer associates and junior lawyers. In essence, the ability to approach ambiguity, solve problems and use emerging technology responsibly to get to better outcomes.

If you're a firm trying to weave AI into your summer associate program, my best advice is to treat it like you would treat AI itself: as an iterative system that improves through feedback, experimentation and constant refinement. It should never be a static plug and play that doesn't provide an opportunity to reflect and evolve.

Below are seven guideposts to consider in order to build an impactful, scalable and repeatable program.

## **1. Don't focus on sessions — focus on a mindset.**

Focus on trying to develop professionals who have and lead with judgment, all the while preparing them for success in the long term by harnessing AI as a supplemental tool, not a replacement or default.

A strong AI-incorporated summer program incorporates four things in parallel:

- Judgment: When is AI appropriate, and when is it not?
- Workflow thinking: Where does this fit in how legal work actually gets done, and where does it fall short?
- Verification checks: How do we validate, measure and learn from outputs before they become client-ready or deliverable work product?



Zeynep Ersin

- Cumulative and iterative: The program flows from one session to the next with each building off of the former — the learning compounds.

When those are in place, the program will stay relevant even when the tech stack changes.

## **2. Make ethics, responsible use and governance the foundation of the program.**

If there's anything that should be consistent year to year, it's this: the ethical implications, responsible use and governance/security guardrails for AI in legal work.

You cannot and should not build confidence in AI without boundaries. If summer associates and associates don't know what the rules are as far as what's permitted, what's risky and what requires human review, they might freeze or potentially experiment in ways that create risk.

For example, using tools that are outside of a firm's approval tech stack, uploading client-specific documents without verifying security protocols and standards, or having a false confidence in outputs without verification are absolute risks that need to be addressed.

The messaging for this portion of any program is critical.

However, it needs to be framed in the right way. If not, and if the governance piece is delivered like compliance or required training, you'll get low engagement, minimal curiosity and a check-the-box mindset.

Alternatively, if governance is taught as an enabling framework that clearly demonstrates a firm's willingness, engagement and support of AI, that will lead to something much more valuable: associates who can be curious and responsible at the same time.

That specific combination is also imperative and important for clients.

## **3. Teach AI through real legal workflows, not feature or capability demos.**

If summer associates only ever see AI through capability demos, they'll likely walk away only knowing what a tool can do — but not when, why, how or whether it should be used at all. The most effective way to teach AI is to anchor it in the real legal work junior lawyers actually do, and then explore how and whether AI fits into that workflow.

Instead of structuring training as "here's what this tool can do," consider:

- "Here's a task or assignment you'll do constantly as a junior lawyer — how might we layer AI on top of it?"
- "In this case, do you think AI can help you think, structure and draft more effectively?"
- "Where is AI inappropriate or risky?"

- "How would you verify this output?"
- "Can you communicate what you did, why you approached it that way, and what worked, what surprised you and what you would do differently next time?"

Leverage training assignments grounded in typical junior associate workflows where AI may or may not add value. Allow for experimentation. This is an approach that creates proactive conversations related to the workflow, the deliverable itself, and lessons learned with the technology as part of the dialogue.

#### **4. The biggest mistake firms make is building the program as if it's finished.**

The fastest way to make AI training ineffective is to treat it as fixed. AI moves fast, so if you build an AI summer program, you need to build its own operating model and key performance indicators — not sessions planned in a vacuum.

In my experience, two things matter more than any individual module.

##### ***Flexibility***

Every year, you should assume you'll adjust topics, exercises, pacing and especially speakers. Some sessions will age out. Some will need a complete refresh. New issues will surface that weren't visible the year before. And perhaps most importantly, your AI super users will also change and find new ways to embrace and teach AI to others.

##### ***Multifaceted Feedback Loops***

Most firms collect feedback from summer associates. Less common are those who collect feedback from the people leading the sessions and module leaders. That second loop is essential, because your faculty will notice different things: confusion points, recurring questions, what didn't land, and what needs to be clarified for safety or quality.

If you want this to be effective, feedback can't be optional or ad hoc, it needs to be built in.

Consider the following.

- A wrap-up debrief after each module from both summer associates and faculty. This should be baked in as a default.
- An entire session at the end of the program to collect takeaways and lessons learned from the summer class, together. Rather than one-off interviews or surveys, offer a group sharing module instead. Consider it a show-and-tell of AI experiences from the summer associates.
- A reflective debrief with module leaders to redesign for the next year.

Consider how best to embed feedback as part of the learning process with AI adoption. It's a huge opportunity for further learning, idea-sharing, brainstorming and continuous process improvement, in a way that adds value and impact.

## **5. Use design thinking to build the muscle you actually want to stay solution-focused.**

I think one of the most compelling things about AI is that it is a perfect vehicle for design thinking, all on its own. You go through an exercise of brainstorming how you might use it, you test out a few use cases, you iterate or refine your prompts and approach to improve, and then you come out with an output that you personally finalize based on the opportunity or need you identified in the first place.

Being able to teach and foster the facets of design thinking present a significant opportunity for law students. Design thinking teaches habits that junior lawyers don't always get explicit permission to practice early in their careers, including:

- Framing the real problem before racing to a solution;
- Brainstorming possibilities out loud;
- Testing ideas quickly; and
- Learning through iteration rather than trying to be perfect on the first pass.

We know that AI itself is pretty confident, which can trickle over to its users becoming overly confident in outputs simply because the AI said it was so, or conversely, make people feel reluctant or dismiss it entirely in that they consider AI use cheating.

When you consider weaving in a design-thinking approach, that approach fosters something much more impactful: curiosity and relevant judgment.

## **6. Keep humans in the loop.**

Creating sessions that promote collaboration, conversation and curiosity should be part of the focus.

I believe in using the AI summer program to bring summer associates together in ways that encourage them to share ideas with each other, alongside one another, and to form bonds.

Consider how you might create new pipelines of connections for your summer class that go beyond which office they sit in or which department they might be aligned to. Are there assignments or activities where you can group them and have them work on more creative ways to ideate through hackathons, AI debates, solution-specific activities, and beyond?

Your summer associates are, broadly speaking, AI natives, and while how they think about AI may slightly vary based on what law school they go to, their personal experiences and their own curiosity levels, law firms can create an environment for them to grow, learn and share experiences together.

No matter what the tool or the tech, stickiness still happens first with the people and the experiences they share.

## **7. Focus on the big-picture goal and get junior talent ready for the future.**

If a summer associate leaves training thinking "AI is a shortcut," or "AI is going to replace me," you've missed the mark.

If they leave thinking "AI is one, of many, supplemental tools in a broader problem-solving tool kit, and I'm responsible for judgment, verification and outcomes," then you've taught a professional skill set that will scale with their career.

The North Star in any training program, AI or otherwise, should be focused on the skills, competencies and mindset you want to embed. The tools, exercises, materials and speakers will inevitably evolve.

This is your moment to assess: Is your approach to embedding AI training into your summer program structured in a way that is designed to be relevant, responsible and results-focused no matter what happens next?

---

*Zeynep Ersin is the chief innovation and strategic design officer at Seyfarth Shaw LLP.*

*The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of their employer, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.*