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A GUIDE FOR FIRM LEADERSHIP

# A Law Firm Leader's Guide to AI

How to adopt AI responsibly — and use it to actually move your firm forward.

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# AI is a leadership decision — not an IT project.

Most conversations about AI in law firms start in the wrong place: with the tools. Which app, which plan, which button. But the firms that get real value from AI don't start there. They start with two leadership questions — **how do we adopt this without putting the firm at risk**, and **where does it actually move the business?**

This guide is built around those two questions. It's written for the people responsible for the firm, not the IT department. You can hand it to your partners, use it to frame a leadership conversation, or work through it section by section. It isn't a sales document, and it isn't a software manual — it's a way to think clearly about a decision every firm is now facing.

## The two halves of this guide

- **Part One — Adopting AI responsibly.** The confidentiality, governance, and policy decisions a firm has to make before AI touches client work.
- **Part Two — Using AI to move the business.** How to find the manual processes worth automating and roll them out without breaking what works.

## A note on how to read this

You don't have to act on every page. The goal is to leave you able to lead the conversation — to ask the right questions, make deliberate decisions, and know what “good” looks like. The practical pieces (a policy template, a data-sensitivity system, a settings reference) are there to use when you're ready, not to overwhelm.

**PART ONE**

# Adopting AI responsibly

Before AI touches client work, leadership has to make a handful of decisions. This part is about making them deliberately — not discovering them after something goes wrong.

## It's already in your firm

Your attorneys and staff are likely already using AI — whether the firm approved it or not. A paralegal pasting a client memo into a free chatbot to “summarize it faster” may have just sent privileged information to a third party with no agreement in place. The question isn't whether AI is in your firm. It's whether it's being used *on your terms*.

### The risks worth your attention

- **Confidentiality & privilege.** Client data in a public tool may be stored, reviewed, or used to train models — potentially waiving privilege or breaching your duty.
- **Data you don't control.** Free tools may keep your inputs indefinitely, with no way to delete them.
- **“Shadow AI.”** Staff quietly using personal accounts for firm work, outside any policy or oversight.
- **Unverified output.** AI can invent citations and misstate facts — a documented source of sanctions for attorneys who didn't check.

## The decisions leadership has to make

Responsible adoption isn't one big choice — it's a few clear ones. A firm that has answered these is in control of AI; a firm that hasn't is exposed to it.

The decision	What you're really deciding
<b>What's allowed</b>	Which tools the firm sanctions, and on which accounts — not whether people use AI, but how.
<b>What's off-limits</b>	What information must never go into a general AI tool. Your line on confidentiality.
<b>Who's accountable</b>	A named person or team who approves tools and answers “can I use this for that?”
<b>How you verify</b>	The rule that AI output in client work is checked by a human before it's relied on.
<b>How you stay current</b>	A cadence to revisit decisions as tools and risks change — quarterly works.

## A simple way to sort your data

Most of the confidentiality risk disappears when staff can instantly tell what's safe to put into AI and what isn't. A traffic light is something everyone remembers.

TIER	What belongs here	The rule for AI
<b>GREEN</b>	Public or non-sensitive: published content, general legal research, marketing drafts, internal how-tos with no client data.	<b>Fine to use in approved AI tools.</b>
<b>YELLOW</b>	Internal-sensitive: firm financials, employee info, redacted matter details, anything proprietary but not privileged.	<b>Only in firm-approved tools with the right protections in place.</b>
<b>RED</b>	Privileged / confidential: client identities tied to matters, privileged communications, PII, sealed or protected material.	<b>Never in a general AI tool. Only in a vetted system approved for this specific use.</b>

## Your firm's AI policy (a starting template)

A policy doesn't need to be long — it needs to be clear, enforceable, and known to everyone. Adapt the template below, then have counsel review it against your jurisdiction's ethics rules.

### 1. Purpose

This policy governs how [FIRM NAME] personnel may use AI tools in firm and client work, to protect client confidentiality, privilege, and the firm's obligations.

### 2. Approved tools

Only the following AI tools, on firm-managed accounts, are approved: [LIST]. Personal or free-tier accounts may not be used for firm or client information.

### 3. Prohibited inputs

Personnel must never enter client-identifying information tied to a matter, privileged communications, PII, or sealed/protected material into any tool not approved for that purpose. (See data tiers.)

### 4. Verification duty

Any AI-generated output used in client work — citations, facts, analysis — must be independently verified by a qualified person before it is relied upon or filed.

### 5. Accounts and access

Approved tools require firm-managed logins with multi-factor authentication. Passwords may not be shared. Access is granted and removed by [ROLE / NAME].

### 6. Questions and approval

Before using any new tool, or an approved tool for an unfamiliar purpose, personnel must contact [NAME / TEAM] for approval.

### 7. Reporting

If personnel believe they entered prohibited information into a tool, they must report it to [NAME / TEAM] immediately. Prompt good-faith reporting will not result in punishment.

### 8. Review

This policy is reviewed at least quarterly. Acknowledged: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Practical reference: tool settings that matter

When your firm does approve a tool, a few settings separate a safe deployment from a risky one. The labels differ by product — ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, Claude — but every serious tool has equivalents. Keep this as a checklist for whoever configures your accounts.

Setting to find	What you want	Why it matters
<b>Training / “improve the model” toggle</b>	Turned OFF	Stops your inputs from training the AI or being reviewed by staff.
<b>Chat history / data retention</b>	Off, or shortest	Limits how long client data sits on a third-party server.
<b>Account tier</b>	Business / Enterprise	Paid business tiers contractually exclude your data from training by default.
<b>Data Processing Agreement (DPA)</b>	Signed with vendor	A legal commitment on how data is handled, stored, and deleted.
<b>Admin / workspace controls</b>	Firm-managed	Enforce settings centrally instead of trusting each employee.
<b>Multi-factor authentication</b>	Required	Protects accounts if a password is leaked.

### If your firm uses ChatGPT specifically

- Use a **Team or Enterprise** plan, not free or personal — business plans exclude your data from training by default.
- In **Settings > Data Controls**, turn off “improve the model for everyone.”
- Limit **chat history** for sensitive work, and request the **DPA** for business accounts.
- Restrict **custom GPTs and plugins** that send data to outside services.

*Tool capabilities change frequently. Treat this as a starting framework and confirm current terms with each vendor.*

**PART TWO**

# Using AI to move the business

Security keeps you safe. It doesn't make you money. This part is about where AI actually creates leverage — by taking manual work off your people.

## Stop thinking “chatbot.” Start thinking “process.”

The biggest mistake firms make with AI is treating it as a smarter search box — something an individual opens, asks a question, and closes. That's useful, but it's small. The real value shows up when AI is pointed at a **repeatable process** the firm runs over and over: the same intake, the same review, the same document, every week.

A chatbot helps one person for one task. A workflow changes how the firm operates. The shift in thinking is from “*what can I ask AI?*” to “*which of our recurring processes is eating the most time — and how much of it doesn't actually require a lawyer?*”

### The question that finds the value

For any task your firm does repeatedly, ask: how many hours a week does it take, and how much of that is judgment vs. mechanical work? High-volume, low-judgment work is where AI returns the most — and where your people least want to spend their time anyway.

## How to prioritize what to automate

Not every process is worth automating, and doing the wrong one first is how firms lose faith in AI. Score candidate processes on three things and start with the highest:

Factor	Ask yourself
<b>Volume</b>	How often does this happen? Daily beats once a quarter — frequency multiplies the payoff.
<b>Time drain</b>	How many hours does it consume across the firm, and whose hours? Attorney time is the most expensive to waste.
<b>Low judgment</b>	How much is mechanical (sorting, summarizing, formatting) vs. real legal judgment? More mechanical = better fit.

**Low risk**

Can it run on green or yellow data, away from privileged material, at least to start? Safer first wins build trust.

## Where most firms find the first wins

These aren't recommendations for your firm specifically — every practice is different — but they're the processes that tend to score high on volume, time, and low judgment across firms:

- **Client intake & triage.** Turning inbound inquiries into structured, routed, ready-to-review records instead of manual data entry.
- **Document review & summarization.** First-pass review of long documents, with a human verifying — hours compressed into minutes.
- **Drafting from templates.** Generating first drafts of routine correspondence and standard documents for an attorney to refine.
- **Billing & time-entry narratives.** Turning shorthand into clean, client-ready descriptions consistently.
- **Internal knowledge search.** Letting staff find answers across the firm's own documents instead of asking around.
- **Onboarding & internal ops.** Standardizing repetitive internal processes that quietly consume staff time.

**Start with one. Make it visible.**

Resist the urge to automate five things at once. Pick the single highest-scoring process, prove the result against how long it used to take, and let that win do the convincing. One undeniable success earns you permission for the next five.

## Rolling it out without breaking things

You don't have to transform the firm in a month. This staged approach moves a firm from “we're not sure what people are using” to “we have AI working for us” — safely.

### First 30 days — See clearly

- Find out which AI tools staff are already using (no blame — you just need the truth).
- Make the responsible-adoption decisions from Part One: approved tools, off-limits data, who's accountable.
- Pick your first process to automate using the prioritization scorecard.

### Days 31–60 — Prove one thing

- Stand up your one chosen workflow on safe (green/yellow) data, with the right tool settings.
- Measure it against how long the manual version took — capture a real before-and-after.
- Adopt your AI policy and name the person who approves new uses.

### Days 61–90 — Make it stick

- Share the result with the firm — a visible win builds buy-in faster than any memo.
- Train staff on the policy and the “why” behind it.
- Choose the next process, and set a quarterly rhythm to review tools, settings, and what's next.

## A leader's checklist

If you can't check a box, that's simply where to look next — not a failing.

- We know which AI tools our people are actually using.
- We've decided what AI is approved for, and what data must never go into it.
- We have a written AI policy, and someone is accountable for it.
- AI output used in client work is verified by a human before it's relied on.
- We've identified our highest-value manual process to automate first.
- We're measuring at least one AI workflow against the manual version it replaced.
- We review our tools, settings, and priorities on a regular cadence.

## PLAIN-LANGUAGE GLOSSARY

<b>Training (model improvement)</b>	Using what you type into an AI tool to help build future versions of the model. You want this OFF for firm work.
<b>Data retention</b>	How long the tool keeps a copy of what you entered. Shorter is safer; “zero-retention” means it isn't kept.
<b>DPA (Data Processing Agreement)</b>	A contract with the vendor spelling out how your data is handled, stored, secured, and deleted.
<b>Business / Enterprise tier</b>	The paid, organization-level plan. Unlike free plans, it typically excludes your data from training and adds admin controls.
<b>Workflow</b>	A repeatable process the firm runs over and over — the unit of real AI value, vs. a one-off chatbot question.
<b>Shadow AI</b>	Staff using AI tools the firm hasn't approved or doesn't know about, usually on personal accounts.
<b>Hallucination</b>	When an AI confidently produces false information — fake citations, wrong facts. Why human verification is mandatory.
<b>MFA (multi-factor authentication)</b>	A second login step beyond a password that keeps accounts secure if a password leaks.

### Ready to put this into practice?

Simpatico is a business technology strategy partner. We help firm leaders adopt AI responsibly and turn manual processes into automated workflows — aligning AI, automation, and security with the business, not just the IT.

### Schedule an AI & Automation Strategy Meeting

Bring your team. We'll help you find your firm's highest-value starting point and map what it would take to get there — no obligation.

**Call 855-672-4800 · [simpatico.com](https://simpatico.com)**

This guide is provided for general informational purposes and does not constitute legal advice. AI tools and their settings change frequently — confirm current options with each vendor and consult qualified counsel on your firm's specific confidentiality and ethics obligations. © Simpatico.