



2026 International Client Seminar

March 5-7, 2026

Navigating the New: Minds, Machines, and the Next Generation
*The Legal Landscape of Autonomous Vehicles, AI Contracting, and
Generational Change in the Profession*

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The Convergence of Generational Transition, Artificial Intelligence, and Autonomous Mobility

The legal profession is confronting three (3) simultaneous structural shifts: the redistribution of the client relationship authority across generations, the integration of generative artificial intelligence (“GenAI”) into core contracting functions, and the rapid deployment of autonomous vehicle technologies into commercial environments. Each development independently alters risk allocation and professional responsibility. Separately, each is a trend. Together, they represent a redefinition of legal practice in real time.

Bridging Generations Through Curiosity and Open Collaboration

Shifting Relationship Ownership

Commentators have observed that client relationship responsibility is shifting earlier in attorneys’ careers.ⁱ This trend mirrors broader demographic changes among corporate decision-makers, many of whom now occupy General Counsel or senior in-house roles at younger ages than prior generations.

Younger attorneys often bring speed, technological fluency, and communication styles aligned with evolving client expectations. However, accelerated responsibility also increases exposure to strategic risk if institutional experience is not integrated into client management decisions.

Institutional Experience and Risk Calibration

Longitudinal studies on professional services retention demonstrate that perceived trustworthiness and depth of relationship are primary predictors of client loyalty.ⁱⁱ These traits correlate strongly with experience and pattern recognition developed over extended practice.

The transfer of institutional knowledge is therefore not merely cultural. It is risk mitigation.

Cross-Mentoring and Associate Retention

National attrition data indicate that lack of professional development remains a leading driver of associate departure from law firms.ⁱⁱⁱ Firms that create reciprocal mentoring structures reduce turnover while strengthening client service continuity.^{iv}

Artificial Intelligence and the Doctrine of Mutual Assent

The Intent Requirement in Contract Formation

Contract law requires mutual assent. Artificial intelligence lacks consciousness, volition, and legal capacity. It cannot form intent. Courts presently treat AI systems as tools acting through human agency.^v

However, increasing automation in drafting and negotiation challenges traditional assumptions underlying “meeting of the minds” doctrine.

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AI Drafting Risk and Professional Responsibility

The National Institute of Standards and Technology has identified GenAI hallucination and context misapplication as recognized system risks.^{vi} The American Bar Association has emphasized that lawyers remain responsible for competent supervision of AI tools used in practice.^{vii}

An attorney who fails to review AI-generated contractual provisions remains accountable under professional responsibility standards.

Liability Allocation in AI-Generated Agreements

Courts have not yet resolved whether reliance on AI-generated drafting will alter malpractice standards or breach defenses. At present, AI functions as sophisticated word processing. The attorney remains the responsible actor.

Autonomous Vehicles and Emerging Tort Frameworks

Levels of Automation

The Society of Automotive Engineers (“SAE”) is a global association of more than 128,000 engineers and related technical experts in the automotive industry. Standards from SAE are used to advance mobility engineering throughout the world.

The International Organization for Standardization (“ISO”) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies. The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out by ISO technical committees.

Under the Partnership Standards Development Organization, SAE and ISO jointly developed standard SAE J3016, which defines six (6) levels of vehicle automation.^{viii} Commercial deployment presently centers on Levels 2 through 4.

Commercial Deployment and Safety Metrics

As of February 2026, Waymo reported significant expansion of fully driverless services and published comparative safety data indicating materially reduced crash rates relative to human drivers.^{ix}

While early data suggests safety improvements within defined deployment zones, regulatory harmonization remains incomplete.

Federal and State Regulatory Patchwork

Federal proposals patterned on the prior SELF DRIVE Act would standardize safety, cybersecurity, and preemption frameworks for autonomous vehicles.^x

The central unresolved legal question is the allocation of liability when no human operator is present.

Conclusion

Across generational transition, AI contracting, and autonomous mobility, a common theme emerges: legal doctrine is adapting to systems it did not originally contemplate. Attorneys who understand both technological capability and doctrinal limitation will define the next decade of professional practice.

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- ⁱ See, e.g., Abramovitz, Louis C. “Changes in Marketing Legal Services: Millennials Rise to Positions of Authority” (blog post), Legal Marketing Association Connect (October 6, 2015).
- ⁱⁱ BTI Consulting Group, BTI Client Service A-Team 2024: Executive Summary (2024).
- ⁱⁱⁱ NALP Foundation, Update on Associate Attrition: Findings from a National Study of Law Firm Associate Hiring and Departures (Calendar Year 2025).
- ^{iv} See American Bar Association, Profile of the Legal Profession 2024.
- ^v Keith Paul Bishop, ‘If There Are No Minds, Can There Be A “Meeting Of The Minds”?’ JD Supra (Allen Matkins, Mar. 6, 2018).
- ^{vi} National Institute of Standards and Technology, Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework (AI RMF 1.0) (Jan. 26, 2023).
- ^{vii} ABA Standing Comm. on Ethics & Prof’l Responsibility, Formal Op. 512 (July 29, 2024).
- ^{viii} SAE International, Taxonomy and Definitions for Terms Related to Driving Automation Systems for On-Road Motor Vehicles, SAE Standard J3016.
- ^{ix} See, e.g., Waymo LLC, publicly released safety performance reports and updates (various years) reporting lower crash rates than human drivers in defined deployment zones.
- ^x See, e.g., SELF DRIVE Act, H.R. 3388, 115th Cong. (2017), and subsequent autonomous-vehicle safety proposals in the U.S. House Energy & Commerce Committee.