

BECOMING AN AI-POWERED LAWYER

Practical Skill, Responsible Use and the Future of Legal Practice

Guest address to the Law Students of Enugu State University of Science and Technology

Good day, everyone. It is a pleasure to speak with you. Our topic is becoming an AI-powered lawyer, and I want to begin with something that makes me smile. These days, almost everything is described as AI-powered. An application reminds you of an appointment, and it is AI. A website generates a receipt, and that too is AI. At this rate, someone will advertise an AI-powered electric kettle and expect us to congratulate it for boiling water! But jokes aside, not everything a machine does is artificial intelligence, and not every problem requires a sophisticated technological solution. A calendar can send reminders; AI may help analyse complicated information. The skill lies in understanding what you are trying to achieve before deciding which tool, if any, will help.

Let me show you why that matters in law. Imagine a man walking into your office, visibly upset. He says, ‘Counsel, my younger brother withdrew fifteen million naira from our family business account without my permission. I want him arrested!’ If you simply give that complaint to a chatbot and request a petition, you may receive a very impressive draft within seconds. But suppose you put the laptop aside and ask the man to tell you what happened. As he speaks, you discover that his brother used the money to pay for emergency medical treatment for their mother. Now, doesn't that change how you understand the situation? There was a family emergency. That does not automatically make the withdrawal lawful; ownership, authority and the full circumstances still matter. But it certainly changes what you need to ask. Then the man admits, ‘I don't actually want him imprisoned. I just want him to stop making decisions with our money without consulting us.’ What initially appeared to be a demand for punishment may really be a concern about accountability and control of the business.

That example illustrates what I mean by learning to formulate a problem before attempting to solve it. Real clients do not arrive like examination questions, with every material fact helpfully arranged for you. They arrive as people. They may be angry about how they have been treated, frightened about losing a job, or confused about a business disagreement. Their first account may be incomplete. Your job is to listen, ask sensible questions and separate established facts from assumptions. The same

discipline improves how you use AI. Instead of rushing to ask, 'What is the legal solution?', you could ask, 'What information is missing, and what should I investigate before forming a view?' AI may suggest useful lines of enquiry, but you remain responsible for establishing the facts and evaluating the law.

Once you understand the problem, the next danger is assuming that technology will automatically get the answer right. Picture a lawyer who enters an incorrect filing deadline into a reminder application. Every notification arrives exactly as scheduled, yet the true deadline passes. It has followed a defective instruction. An AI system can create a similar problem if it applies an inappropriate procedural rule with great confidence. This is why independent research and verification matter. If you have never learnt to examine statutes, read judgments and distinguish relevant authorities, how will you recognise a plausible answer resting on the wrong law? AI may help organise research, but it cannot replace your duty to understand what you are relying upon.

That duty begins while you are still students. Imagine receiving an assignment and asking AI to prepare the answer. Seconds later, there it is: excellent structure, elegant language, persuasive arguments. You might think, 'I didn't even know I was this brilliant!' But if a classmate asks why a particular principle applies and you cannot explain it, the brilliance belongs to the document, not necessarily to you. I suggest what I call the closed-laptop test. After using AI to study a legal issue, shut the laptop and explain the argument in your own words. Can you identify the key facts, explain the authorities you have checked and reconsider your conclusion when a fact changes? If not, keep learning. Using AI to deepen your understanding can be valuable; submitting work that misrepresents your contribution is another matter, and your university's academic rules must be respected.

There is a more enjoyable way to practise this independence. Suppose you have developed an argument for a moot and are rather pleased with yourself. Instead of inviting the chatbot to praise it, ask it to argue the opposite position. Let it identify assumptions, possible objections and alternative interpretations. Then check those objections yourself, because the chatbot can be wrong when criticising you too. You are testing your understanding, not borrowing confidence. That habit becomes just as useful when advising a client. You may establish that a commercial agreement can legally be terminated, but what if termination would cost the client the supplier

keeping the business afloat? A correct legal answer may still be incomplete advice unless you consider the client's actual objective and the consequences of the available choices.

And because the consequences matter, so does the way we communicate them. Imagine a client who sits through a consultation filled with Latin expressions and elaborate explanations, only to leave wondering, 'So what am I actually supposed to do?' A lawyer who can explain the same position plainly, without hiding the important qualifications, gives the client something more useful than impressive vocabulary: understanding. The same ability helps with prompt engineering. Despite the grand-sounding name, a useful foundation is straightforward communication. Tell the AI what you want to accomplish, supply relevant context, explain the limits and say what kind of response you need. Simplicity does not mean ignoring complexity; it means understanding the issue well enough to express what matters clearly. And clarity includes knowing what must not be shared: confidential client information should not be uploaded into a service without considering authorisation, privacy arrangements and professional obligations.

I want to end our discussion of skills with one that looks beyond the individual legal task: recognising opportunities and creating value. Every year, thousands of new lawyers enter a competitive professional environment. Some of you may pursue litigation or commercial practice; others may find that your careers take a very different direction. Look through LinkedIn and you will encounter legally trained people describing their work as legal virtual assistants, compliance professionals, contract managers and legal operations specialists. These examples remind us that legal knowledge has uses beyond traditional practice. Meanwhile, AI allows some clients to attempt their own preliminary documents, even where they still need expert advice. Rather than treating that development only as a threat, why not ask what new needs it reveals?

Perhaps a small business struggles with compliance, or an entrepreneur signs agreements without understanding them. Could your knowledge help make those problems easier to understand or manage? Could technology help you deliver a useful educational resource or service, within the rules governing professional practice? You need not all establish companies; start noticing where your training could create value. That is the connection I find exciting: the same skills that help you ask better legal questions can also help you recognise opportunities in an unpredictable economy. It is

one reason I wrote *Human Advantage in the AI Economy: Beyond the Hype — Creating Value in an AI-Driven World*. I would be delighted to share a complimentary digital copy with you after this session, to explore those possibilities further.

So let me return to the man who came into our imaginary office wanting his brother arrested. A machine might have produced a petition in seconds, but the real progress began when someone listened long enough to understand his concern. That, to me, captures what it means to become genuinely AI-powered. Not everything a machine does is AI; not every confident answer is correct; and not every correct answer addresses the real problem. Learn how to use these tools, certainly, but also learn to question, verify, simplify, explain and recognise opportunities. Those are the abilities that will help you remain useful to people, whichever direction your professional lives eventually take. Thank you very much.