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# Technology has Changed the Practice of Law - But it Cannot Replace Lawyers

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## Abstract

Technology has transformed the administration and practice of law, changing how lawyers conduct research, communicate with clients, prepare documents, manage information and participate in court proceedings. Artificial intelligence has accelerated that transformation by enabling rapid information processing, drafting assistance and analytical support. Yet technological capability is not equivalent to legal professional judgment. This article argues that the future of legal practice is not a contest between lawyers and machines, but a model of technologically augmented professional service in which lawyers retain responsibility for interpretation, advocacy, ethics, confidentiality, strategy and the protection of rights. Drawing on the Nigerian legal context and practical experience with virtual proceedings involving clients outside Nigeria, the article examines the expansion of access to justice through technology, the limits of artificial intelligence as a substitute for counsel, and the professional obligations that must govern its use. It concludes that technology should strengthen the lawyer's capacity to deliver justice rather than displace the human judgment on which justice ultimately depends.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Legal Practice, Lawyers, Legal Technology, Virtual Hearings, Access to Justice, Nigeria, Professional Ethics

## Introduction

The legal profession has never been static. Its institutions are rooted in continuity, precedent and professional tradition, but the methods through which legal services are delivered have always responded to changes in society. The present period of technological change is unusually rapid. Digital research platforms, electronic communication, remote collaboration, virtual hearings and artificial intelligence are altering tasks that were once performed almost entirely through physical files, face-to-face meetings and manual processes.

The central question is therefore not whether technology has changed legal practice. It plainly has. The more difficult question is whether increasingly capable technologies, particularly generative artificial intelligence, can replace lawyers. This article answers that question in the negative. Artificial intelligence can perform or accelerate important legal tasks, but legal practice is not merely the production of text or the retrieval of information. It involves judgment, accountability, ethical duties, factual interpretation, advocacy, negotiation and relationships of trust.

The argument developed here is that technology should be understood as an instrument of legal practice rather than as a substitute for the legal practitioner. Used responsibly, it can improve efficiency and widen access to justice. Used without adequate professional supervision, however, it can magnify error, compromise confidentiality, obscure accountability and create a false impression that automated output is equivalent to legal advice.

## From Traditional Practice to Digital Legal Service

For much of modern legal history, the ordinary image of practice was physical: clients attended chambers, lawyers

consulted printed reports and statutes, pleadings were prepared through labour-intensive processes, and advocates appeared before courts in person. Those practices have not disappeared, but they now coexist with digital systems that allow lawyers to work across distance and time.

Online legal databases have made authorities easier to locate and compare. Email and secure digital communication have reduced the delays associated with physical correspondence. Electronic document management enables legal teams to organise substantial volumes of material. Video-conferencing technology permits consultations between lawyers and clients who may be in different countries. Courts themselves increasingly recognise that some proceedings can be conducted virtually without abandoning the solemnity or procedural safeguards of adjudication.

Nigeria's regulatory institutions have also begun to address this transformation directly. In 2024, the Nigerian Bar Association Section on Legal Practice launched technology-related guidance covering artificial intelligence, information-technology implementation, privacy and cybersecurity for legal practitioners. The significance of these developments is not that technology has displaced professional rules, but that the profession is adapting those rules to new technological environments.

The proper description of this process is evolution. Technology has expanded the ways in which lawyers serve, advise and advocate. The tools may change, the professional mission of protecting rights and advancing justice remains.

### **Virtual Hearings and Access to Justice**

One of the clearest illustrations of technology's value is the virtual hearing. Geography has traditionally imposed real costs on participation in litigation. A client living abroad may face travel expenses, immigration constraints, work disruption and significant delay merely to participate in proceedings in Nigeria. Remote participation can reduce those barriers where the applicable rules and the court permit it.

In my own practice, I have represented a client resident in the United States in divorce proceedings in Nigeria. On the hearing date, the client participated from the United States through a virtual platform while the proceedings took place in Delta State. She was able to give evidence and be cross-examined without travelling to Nigeria. I have similarly acted in a child-custody matter involving a client resident in Australia, where technology enabled participation in Nigerian proceedings from abroad. These experiences demonstrate a practical point: distance need not automatically exclude a litigant from meaningful participation in the justice system.

Virtual proceedings are not simply an informal technological convenience. Nigeria's Supreme Court Rules 2024 expressly contemplate virtual hearings. Order 18 permits the Court, where appropriate, to conduct proceedings virtually through an approved audiovisual platform and requires observance of professional decorum and applicable procedural rules. This institutional recognition reinforces the proposition that technology can alter the mode of participation without altering the legal character of the proceeding.

The wider implication is important for access to justice. Technology can connect Nigerian lawyers and courts with litigants across continents, make consultations more accessible and reduce some transactional costs of participation. Nevertheless, technology alone does not deliver justice. A video platform cannot determine legal strategy, protect a vulnerable client's interests or ensure that evidence is properly presented. Those remain professional functions.

### **Artificial Intelligence as a Legal Tool**

Artificial intelligence represents a further stage in the digitisation of legal work. Modern AI systems can assist with legal research, organise and analyse large bodies of information, generate preliminary drafts, compare documents, summarise material and support routine aspects of legal administration. These capabilities can increase productivity, particularly when the lawyer remains responsible for verification and final professional judgment.

The attraction is obvious. Legal work often involves substantial volumes of text and repeated analytical processes. A tool that can rapidly identify patterns, propose structures or generate a first draft may allow a practitioner to devote more time to strategy, client counselling and complex legal analysis. For smaller practices, carefully deployed technology may also provide efficiencies that were previously available mainly to larger organisations.

But speed is not competence, and fluent language is not legal authority. An AI system may produce a plausible answer without understanding the client's circumstances, the evidential record, the hierarchy of authorities, procedural realities or the professional consequences of an error. Its output must therefore be treated as material for professional evaluation, not as an autonomous legal conclusion.

This distinction is fundamental. Artificial intelligence may assist legal research, the lawyer must determine whether the authority is genuine, current and applicable. AI may produce a draft contract or pleading, the lawyer must decide whether the document protects the client's interests and complies with the law. AI may identify competing arguments, the advocate must choose strategy, take responsibility for representations made to the court and exercise professional judgment.

## Why Artificial Intelligence Cannot Replace the Lawyer

The strongest case against replacement lies in the nature of legal practice itself. Lawyers do more than process information. They interpret facts in context, identify what a client has not said, assess credibility, weigh competing risks, negotiate under conditions of uncertainty and make judgments for which a human professional can be held accountable.

First, legal representation depends upon judgment. Two disputes with similar legal issues may require different strategies because the clients, evidence, commercial realities or human consequences differ. Judgment involves selecting among legally permissible options in circumstances where there may be no single mechanically correct answer.

Second, legal practice depends upon trust. Clients frequently disclose confidential, painful or commercially sensitive information because the lawyer owes professional duties and can be held accountable for breach. The lawyer-client relationship is therefore institutional as well as interpersonal. Technology may mediate that relationship, but it does not independently assume the professional status and obligations of counsel.

Third, advocacy is relational and contextual. Effective advocates respond to questions, evaluate the reactions of decision-makers, adapt submissions, negotiate settlements and understand the strategic significance of timing and tone. These are not reducible to text generation.

Fourth, the lawyer has ethical responsibilities. Nigerian legal practice is governed by professional rules that impose duties on practitioners and preserve the integrity of the profession. The Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners 2023 form part of the contemporary regulatory framework. Technology does not displace those obligations, its use must occur within them.

For these reasons, the better formulation is that artificial intelligence is an exceptional legal assistant, but it is not an advocate. It can strengthen the lawyer's work, it cannot assume the lawyer's complete professional role.

## Professional Responsibility in the Age of AI

The relevant policy challenge is not to prevent lawyers from using artificial intelligence. That approach would ignore the benefits of technology and would be difficult to sustain in a profession already dependent on digital tools. The more realistic task is to define responsible use.

At a minimum, lawyers using AI should remain responsible for the accuracy of work produced in their name. Authorities, quotations and factual propositions generated by an automated system should be independently checked. Confidential or privileged client information should not be placed into technological systems without appropriate consideration of privacy, security, contractual terms and professional duties. Lawyers should also understand enough about the limitations of the tools they use to recognise when automated assistance is inappropriate.

These concerns are already reflected in the direction of professional regulation in Nigeria. The NBA-SLP's technology guidance was developed against the background of the Rules of Professional Conduct and the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, and its published framework addresses AI, privacy, cybersecurity and implementation of IT solutions. This signals an important principle: technological competence and professional ethics must develop together.

Responsible AI use also requires preserving human oversight. A lawyer should be able to explain and defend the legal position advanced for a client. Professional responsibility cannot be outsourced to an algorithm. Where technology contributes to a mistake, the existence of the technology does not eliminate the need to identify who had the duty to verify, supervise and act competently.

## Technology and the Future of the Legal Profession

Predictions that technology will eliminate lawyers often assume that the profession consists mainly of tasks that can be automated. A more realistic view separates tasks from roles. Some tasks performed by lawyers will undoubtedly become faster, cheaper or partially automated. That does not necessarily eliminate the professional role, it changes the skills required to perform it well.

The lawyer of the future will need more than traditional doctrinal knowledge. Technological literacy, data awareness, cybersecurity consciousness and the ability to evaluate AI-generated material will increasingly form part of competent practice. At the same time, the qualities that are hardest to automate - judgment, integrity, empathy, strategic reasoning, advocacy and responsibility - may become more valuable precisely because routine production becomes easier.

The profession should therefore resist two extremes. The first is technological fear: the belief that innovation necessarily undermines legal practice. The second is technological determinism: the belief that because a machine can perform a legal task, it can therefore perform the role of a lawyer. Neither position captures the reality. The future is more likely to be a partnership in which technology handles appropriate tasks while qualified professionals remain responsible for legal judgment and justice.

## Conclusion

Technology has come to stay in legal practice. It has already changed how lawyers research, communicate, draft, manage cases and participate in proceedings. Virtual hearings demonstrate that technology can overcome geographical barriers and expand access to justice. Artificial intelligence can further improve research, analysis, drafting and productivity.

Yet the capacity to assist is not the capacity to replace. Justice depends upon wisdom, integrity, accountability and human judgment. Lawyers interpret the law in the context of real lives, accept professional obligations, advocate before institutions and bear responsibility for the consequences of their work. Those functions cannot responsibly be reduced to automated output.

The appropriate response is therefore neither resistance nor surrender. Lawyers must understand emerging technologies, use them intelligently, supervise them carefully and ensure that they strengthen rather than weaken professional standards. Technology should support the values of the legal system - not replace the people entrusted with upholding them [1-6].

## Author Note

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