



AI is not removing the need for lawyers, says the writer. What it is doing is testing some of the conditions that historically allowed society to treat law as a prestige profession. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

As AI takes on legal work, what happens to the prestige of being a lawyer?

Artificial intelligence is transforming the profession, but it won't diminish it.

Ben Chester Cheong

When I studied law, legal education still reflected an earlier model of expertise. Undergraduate examinations were often closed book. Students spent long hours memorising cases and statutes because access to knowledge itself formed part of professional value.

In practice, that translated into labour-intensive processes. As a trainee in 2015, I spent weeks reviewing documents in physical data rooms during due diligence exercises – work that was both a training ground and an economic foundation of legal services.

In Singapore, when students are asked what they hope to become, certain answers have long carried particular weight. “Doctor” and “lawyer” have traditionally been seen not just as occupations, but also as markers of achievement, stability and entry into a respected professional class.

That prestige is often linked to income. But that cannot fully explain why some roles command

admiration even when they are not the highest-paying, or why others with strong earnings do not carry the same cultural standing.

A more useful way to understand prestige in Singapore is to see it as a combination of factors: selectivity of entry, visible responsibility, structured career pathways, economic security and broad social recognition.

A profession that brings these elements together tends to be viewed as desirable, difficult to access and socially validated.

For decades, the legal profession has aligned with these signals. That alignment explains why, when I was an A-level student, it was a common aspiration for academically strong students.

In recent times, as artificial intelligence (AI) begins to reshape how work is performed across industries, these traditional markers of prestige have come under closer scrutiny.

Digitalisation had already begun reshaping professional work by thinning processes and removing

inefficiencies.

AI is now going further by absorbing routine and analytical tasks that once served as the apprenticeship of the profession – the proving ground of the junior lawyer.

The reality has become stark enough that law – along with accountancy – was mentioned in Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's Budget 2026 speech as among the first sectors to receive support in identifying key AI training needs and competencies.

Is the legal profession at risk of losing its long-held prestige?

A BASELINE OF PRESTIGE

Prestige is not produced by a single variable. It emerges when difficulty of entry, recognised responsibility, economic prospects and social trust reinforce one another.

Law – like medicine – historically combined these elements in a particularly durable way. Both required long, structured training, were regulated through licensing, carried clear authority over consequential matters and were widely understood across generations as stable professional pathways.

In medicine, a neighbourhood

general practitioner and a highly specialised surgeon may have very different scopes of practice and earnings. Yet both are generally regarded by society as belonging to the same trusted professional class. The title itself signals years of training, regulatory oversight and responsibility for consequential decisions.

A similar baseline perception has long attached to the legal profession. Whether a lawyer practises in a large commercial firm, a small neighbourhood practice or a community setting, the public often views the profession as a whole through a single lens of expertise and authority, even though the work within it is highly diverse.

Within the profession, lawyers know that legal work spans a wide spectrum – from bespoke advisory and complex disputes to process-driven services built around documentation and compliance. But that internal variation has not historically altered the broader societal perception of law as a prestige field.

Even as AI takes over many tasks, the core purpose of legal work has not changed. Lawyers are still asked to interpret rules, structure transactions and resolve

disputes. But the way value is generated around that work is evolving.

This shift has economic implications. When routine legal processes become faster and more accessible, longstanding assumptions about billing models, training structures and career pathways naturally come under reconsideration.

For example, processes that were historically paper-heavy and lawyer-mediated – such as standardised contract generation or basic compliance reviews – are increasingly supported by automated workflows that allow clients to complete parts of the process more directly, with lawyers stepping in at key decision points rather than managing every stage.

THE AI TEST FOR THE LEGAL PROFESSION

The impact is likely to be felt most acutely at the entry level of the profession. Traditionally, junior lawyers developed their skills through such labour-intensive work which formed the apprenticeship that gradually built legal judgment.

As technology takes on a larger share of these structured tasks, firms may rely less on large cohorts of junior lawyers to perform them.

This does not eliminate the need for new lawyers, but it may change how they are trained, how quickly they assume higher-value responsibilities and how legal teams are structured.

Importantly, recent graduate employment surveys continue to show strong employment outcomes and competitive starting salaries for law graduates in Singapore, indicating that the profession remains economically attractive even as its working methods evolve.

The question, therefore, is less about immediate decline and more about how the traditional

training model may adapt over time.

For all the talk about displacement, AI is not removing the need for lawyers.

What it is doing is testing some of the conditions that historically allowed society to treat law as a prestige profession in the first place – particularly the sense that legal expertise was scarce, labour-intensive and therefore commanded a clear economic premium.

Medicine, too, is encountering early versions of this shift. Diagnostic technologies, decision-support systems and AI-assisted triage are beginning to change how certain medical tasks are performed, raising similar questions about how expertise is exercised even as the central role of the doctor remains unquestioned.

Past waves of technology – from digital research databases to modern diagnostic tools – did not diminish these professions. They enhanced productivity while leaving intact the public understanding that legal and medical judgment ultimately rests with trained professionals.

The present moment may therefore be less about displacement than about how far new tools alter the visibility of expertise itself.

The question is not whether lawyers or doctors remain necessary – they clearly do – but whether technology changes how the public perceives the effort and expertise behind their work when some of its mechanics become less visible.

Prestige has always been shaped not only by what professionals do, but also by how difficult that work appears to be from the outside.

A REASSESSMENT, NOT DISPLACEMENT

Legal systems still depend on individuals who can exercise judgment, assume responsibility and stand behind decisions that affect rights, businesses and lives. Prestige is ultimately shaped by how society understands the work performed, rather than by how professions describe themselves. As technological and economic conditions evolve, so too may the signals through which society recognises professional status.

For students considering law today, it is less about relying on inherited assumptions of prestige, and more about understanding how one wishes to practise within a profession that is evolving.

The core functions of lawyers remain essential: interpreting legal frameworks, exercising judgment in complex situations and taking responsibility for outcomes that technology itself cannot bear.

What AI is doing is prompting a re-examination of how professional worth is demonstrated – shifting attention from the labour involved in producing legal work to the judgment required in applying it.

That evolution does not diminish the role of lawyers.

It highlights that the profession's standing rests on responsibility and trust – foundations that remain constant even as methods and technologies change.

• Ben Chester Cheong is a law lecturer and MOE-Start Scholar at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. He is also an associate academic fellow at NUS Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law.