

Barnes & Thornburg Taking 'Practical' Approach To AI Rollout

By Sarah Martinson

Law360 (March 2, 2026, 3:42 PM EST) -- Barnes & Thornburg LLP leaders say they are eschewing popular artificial intelligence programming like hackathons and broad policies requiring technology use in favor of a more "practical" approach.

Jared Applegate, chief legal operations officer at Barnes & Thornburg, recently told Law360 Pulse that AI programming can feel like more work for attorneys, so the firm has been trying to implement the technology by embedding it into attorneys' practices.

"We think it's been advantageous to go that route and kind of bake it into what we believe is the practice of law," he said.

Joan Holman, chief information officer at Barnes & Thornburg, added that instead of trying to force all the firm's attorneys to use AI, the firm has been focused on putting the technology in the hands of those who are enthusiastic and eager to use it.

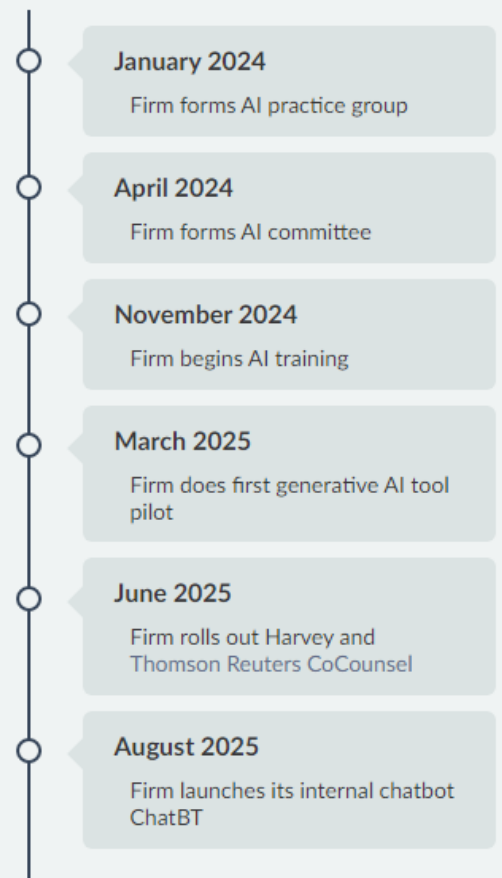
"I think by taking this approach, we'll be much better off in the long run, because we'll have people coming to us, as opposed to us forcing it," Holman said. "I have been in IT a long time [and] have never been able to get everybody doing anything."

In 2024, Barnes & Thornburg started training its lawyers on ethical use of generative AI tools after the American Bar Association ethics committee issued an opinion on the topic. The following year, the firm started testing and rolling out generative AI tools.

The firm is currently using more than 15 AI tools, including Harvey and Thomson Reuters CoCounsel. These tools are being used for such tasks as contract review, drafting and analysis.

About 70% of Barnes & Thornburg's litigators use AI on a daily basis, and about 45% of the firm's attorneys are leveraging the technology, according to Applegate.

Barnes & Thornburg's AI Journey



The firm differs from some of its BigLaw peers in that it doesn't have a dedicated innovations department to trial AI tools. The firm's information technology and legal operations departments test AI tools. The legal ops team, in particular, works closely with the firm's biggest clients and attorney teams to figure out practical uses for AI tools, according to Applegate and Holman.

"They're actually one of the few firms that have a dedicated practice that ... looks to use AI to streamline legal operations," said client Brett Crowell, general counsel at private investment firm Atar Capital. "A couple firms have created AI-focused groups that say that they're doing a lot, but in practice, I haven't actually seen them doing very much at all, at least not anything that's very practical or very useful from my perspective."

Last year, the firm helped Atar Capital, a client of private equity practice co-chair Ryan Barncastle, review thousands of contracts for one of its portfolio companies to make a business decision. Crowell said Barnes & Thornburg was one of the few law firms that told him they had the resources to help him with this project.

Applegate said the biggest benefits of leveraging AI for the firm are better attorney-client relationships, increased efficiency and predictable costs for clients.

He added that alternative fee arrangements are the only way to charge for services being augmented by AI. About 35% of the firm's overall revenue comes from alternative fee arrangements.

Applegate noted one of the biggest challenges for the firm when leveraging AI is betting on the right tech vendors.

"Part of it's just the vaporware being sold in the market," he said. "What happens is our attorneys find that in the market, they go, 'Oh, we think this would be helpful for our practice.' And then you find out it's not. Somebody's just trying to sell something or get you to build a product."

Holman added that the firm is continuing to try to help its lawyers see opportunities for using AI.

"The more they use it, the more they're going to see here's potential opportunities that we can investigate and evaluate and determine if that works forward," she said.

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.