

Sheppard Wants Attys To Treat AI Like A 2nd-Year Associate

By **Steven Lerner**

Law360 (July 23, 2026, 9:58 AM EDT) -- As some law firms are engrossed with adopting certain artificial intelligence tools, Sheppard believes greater gains can be achieved by focusing on a technology-based program that promotes behavioral changes in how attorneys and staff view AI tools.

Sheppard is no stranger to AI. The global law firm of over 1,200 attorneys integrated machine learning capabilities before the current wave of generative AI tools entered the legal field. Then in 2023, Sheppard adopted the AI tool CoCounsel and launched a 110-attorney global AI team. In 2025, the firm adopted the AI tool Legora. Sheppard has also developed an internal AI assistant called Pantheon.

But the issue that Sheppard has faced — as other law firms have as well — is that many practitioners operate AI chatbots as if they're a search engine, which often yields mixed results.

As Kate Cain, Sheppard's chief knowledge and innovation officer, explained, the firm is trying to shift that approach so that practitioners see AI chatbots more as collaborators capable of providing deeper context.

"Where we want to get people is to be using AI to help them work, like be an assistant," Cain told Law360 Pulse. "Get beyond that search engine and really into an assistant mode."

Cain said that most law firms are just "nibbling at the edge" of AI right now by focusing more on completing tasks faster rather than using AI to solve specific problems at scale. Sheppard now wants attorneys to treat AI chatbots like second-year associates who understand the issue at hand and require more in-depth exchange of information to produce better results.

"With AI, it's more interactive and iterative, and you've got to think about it differently," Cain said.

Changing people's behavior with AI is not a quick fix. Conor Grennan, CEO of the consulting and training company AI Mindset, said the challenge is that people are programmed to treat AI chatbots like a search engine because that's how human brains are wired.

"The human brain simply has a hard time looking at software and treating it like a person," Grennan said.

Grennan, the former chief AI architect at New York University Stern School of Business, was first introduced to Sheppard in 2025 when he delivered the keynote speech at the firm's partner retreat in

October. He is now helping Sheppard roll out his signature AI mindset program.

Leaders at organizations such as Google, Microsoft and OpenAI have taken the program to help them use AI as a thought partner.

Grennan said that law firms are tempted to focus on efficiency gains, that they treat AI chatbots like search engines and chase quick wins to show incremental progress, creating a "faster-horse mentality."

"Sometimes productivity can be the enemy of innovation," Grennan said. "Nobody is going to transform their company, let alone their industry and their practice, by having a better search engine at their fingertips."

Sheppard kicked off its AI mindset program at its leadership workshop in May. Dozens of firm leaders attended the workshop, including members of the executive committee, practice group leaders and business service executives. The workshop was conducted by Grennan, who led attendees through exercises to help them break free of their perception of AI chatbots.

Grennan credited Sheppard's leaders for brainstorming ideas to view AI differently.

"Sheppard has really been thinking about it in the same way we think about an AI mindset, which is this idea that this isn't a proficiency, this is a behavior change," Grennan said.

Sheppard is now focused on scaling the program across the firm by building on what the leaders did in the May workshop and having them lead by example with colleagues.

"This next phase is really about leveling up the entire organization," Cain said. "Helping shift that mindset so we can do the really cool, interesting, game-changing stuff going forward."

Sheppard is rolling out the AI mindset program with leaders across the firm getting early access to online materials in July. That early access group, whom the firm calls ambassadors, will also be trained to eventually facilitate discussions about AI in each practice group.

Cain said those discussions and workshops will hopefully surface ideas about how AI can be used for different tasks specific to each practice group.

The firm hopes to roll out the program to all attorneys by the time of Sheppard's partner retreat in early October and for all lawyers to complete the program by the end of 2026. This attorney training will happen in parallel with training for Sheppard's business services team.

Cain said that AI can be a "game changer" in legal because of its ability to process the nuance of language.

"If there's one profession that the nuance of language is key," Cain said, "it's the legal profession."

--Additional reporting by Tracey Read and Ashish Sareen. Editing by Robert Rudinger.