

GenAI-Driven Reconfiguration of Professional Expertise as Epistemic Expertise

*Atif Sarwar^a (atif.sarwar@liverpool.ac.uk)

Jingqi Zhu^a

Emma Forsgren^b

Emma Gritt^b

Shenghao Xie^a

a – University of Liverpool Management School, University of Liverpool, UK

b – Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, UK.

Introduction

Whilst Generative AI (GenAI) is significantly transforming professional work in various sectors, the existing dominant conceptual approaches to articulate this transformation, i.e. adoption, automation, and augmentation, fail to precisely capture the nuanced aspects of this transformation (ref). These existing conceptual approaches work under the assumptions that these new technologies are being incorporated into existing authority and expertise structures (Sergeeva, Leonardi and Faraj, 2026). However, we show through our research in the legal sector that the true impact of these technologies is more consequential; they not only alter the tasks performed by professionals but also disturb the epistemic foundations on which professional expertise is built (e.g. Webb, 2026).

Focusing on the legal sector, we propose in this paper a more precise theoretical argument that GenAI has not displaced legal expertise nor legal professionals merely defend their expertise against GenAI, rather they are increasingly operating as *epistemic arbiters*. They have become the authoritative voice that determines whether GenAI-generated outputs are true, reliable, and thus constitute actionable legal knowledge, or whether the outputs are hallucinated, misleading or legally indefensible.

This reconfiguration of professional expertise results from three interlinking forces/themes. Firstly, GenAI gives birth to complementary sources of knowledge and a basis of knowing that is in direct contradiction to historically established epistemic foundations of legal practice (Webb, 2026), resulting in competing epistemic regimes (Sergeeva et al., 2026). Secondly, as AI evolves in its capabilities from predictive to generative to agentic, it also significantly enhances the problem of artificial certainty, thus increasing the demand for human epistemic oversight (Chalmers et al., 2026; Leonardi & Leavell, 2026). Finally, epistemic arbitration is performed through hidden and often distributed labour, and thus runs the risk of gradual erosion as knowledge is externalised into technology (Van den Broek, 2025; Webb, 2026). Drawing on qualitative research in UK legal-sector organisations, we show how these dynamics manifest in professional practice and highlight their implications for professional authority and governance. In the next section, we present the relevant literature and introduce our novel concepts of *epistemic arbiter* and *epistemic arbitration* in professional service firm (PSF) settings to establish links between distinct strands of literature on AI and organising and highlight how GenAI is transforming professional work. This is followed by a brief empirical findings section that highlights our paper's contribution in more detail, and a brief conclusion section.

Literature Review

Competing epistemic regimes

Legal professional expertise has historically been a function of a specific epistemic regime that relies on reasoned argumentation, case-by-case and context-dependent interpretation of statutes and precedents, and situated judgment, enhanced and consolidated over time through credentialled practice (Abbott, 1988). This professional epistemic regime is not just about technical skills; it is a socially sanctioned way of identifying whose legitimacy matters, grounded in procedural and accountability structures, with further embedding in professional norms and institutional oversight.

This well-established epistemic regime has been challenged by GenAI, which introduces a competing epistemic regime in the legal profession, built on fundamental skills of corpus-level pattern recognition and statistical inference (Sergeeva et al., 2026:6). As GenAI produces a case citation, a regulatory analysis or produces a legal document, they present an alternative basis for what stands for credible legal knowledge. However, importantly, this alternative basis for credible legal knowledge is independent of the foundational accountability structures that underpin legal authority.

However, GenAI currently suffers from a lack of ‘epistemic soundness’ (Webb, 2026), that is, it cannot explain the rationale and reasons for its outputs, lacks the capacity to reason from first principles, and cannot reliably apply the secondary rules of legal interpretation. It is these secondary principles of precedent and statutory building that determine how legal sources are assessed and applied. This raises a fundamental issue of not about which intelligent technologies are being used by legal professionals, but rather who holds the authority and power to certify what constitutes true, reliable and actionable knowledge in the legal context, and on what epistemic grounds.

In this paper, we argue that how legal professionals respond to this issue signifies a reconfiguration of their expertise rather than either its displacement or its defence. We contend that this reconfiguration leads to a new kind of expertise that we call ‘*epistemic arbitration*’. Epistemic arbitration involves the capacity to (i) evaluate GenAI-generated content against the established norms and standards of legal validity, (ii) resist the embedded authority of seemingly plausible but unreliable content, and (iii) accept the responsibility and accountability for the knowledge claims delivered to clients. We suggest that this epistemic arbitration is increasingly becoming a core component of legal expertise. This has resulted in a transformative change not just in what lawyers do and how they do it, but also in the epistemic nature of what they are accountable for.

Artificial certainty and escalating demands on professionals

As Gen-AI improves its ability to produce knowledge content, it also escalates the demands placed on professionals. These new demands primarily centre around contextualising algorithmically produced probability-based outputs, thus representing an extension of existing interpretive skills of legal professionals. However, this also leads to the problem of ‘artificial certainty’ (Leonardi & Leavell, 2026). Whilst Gen-AI-generated outputs imitate the authoritative structure and style of expert discourse and narration, epistemically, they remain unreliable and potentially fabricated. A hallucinated citation appears to be genuine. A fabricated statutory interpretation comes across as soundly reasoned. This surface-level authenticity of GenAI-generated output undermines the epistemic expertise and perspective required for responsible professional practice.

Webb (2026) highlights three categories of hallucinations involved in professional practice, i.e. misrepresentation of training data; outputs ‘unfaithful’ to the prompted input; and misrepresentation of the true legal position. Furthermore, there are ‘correctness’ hallucinations (false propositions of law,

denial of correct ones, identification of real but irrelevant material) and ‘groundedness’ hallucinations (correct statement of a legal principle but misrepresentation of its source or precedential standing). Whilst GenAI tools are designed to facilitate and increase engagement (often referred to as engagement machines) through their engaging, intuitive interfaces and room for personalisation of features, this also cultivates a false sense of authority in users, who end up exhibiting overconfidence in the outputs (Webb, 2026). This makes epistemic evaluation harder when it is most needed. Recent research has shown specialist legal research tools produce error rates of 17-34% (Magesh et al., 2024).

The agentic AI further exacerbates the problem by autonomously sequencing and performing multi-step legal tasks without the need for any human oversight or step-by-step instructions. This further erodes the possibility of an epistemic intervention, as it hides the very moments when such an intervention might occur (Chalmers et al., 2026). This suggests that the ‘epistemic arbiter’s’ role is not a response to a single technological moment but to a trajectory of acceleration in which each successive AI iteration places an even higher demand on the human epistemic oversight. The seemingly appropriate organisational response is **epistemic pluralism** that demands a deliberate cultivation and institutionalisation of human professional expertise alongside GenAI or technology-generated and mediated knowledge claims (Levina, Gkeredakis and Fayard, 2026; Ganeri, 2019). Those organisations that allow and facilitate GenAI to erode the human/professional expertise run the risk of facing a setting in which, as AI autonomy increases, the capacity of professionals to detect false or reliable AI-generated content diminishes.

The Hidden Labour of Epistemic Arbitration and the Risk of Knowledge Externalisation

We further argue that the role of epistemic arbiter is not a function of a single act of expert judgment, rather it consists of multiple interrelated forms of labour. The three practically indistinguishable, yet analytically distinct categories of such work are data work, knowledge work, and values work as highlighted by van den Broek (2025). Data work involves data quality and audit trails, knowledge work includes evaluation, qualification, contextualisation, and alignment of AI outputs with professional judgment, and finally, values work is about negotiating what is appropriate, professionally defensible, and ethically sound in AI-assisted advice. Building on this classification, within the legal profession context, a fabricated citation is a representation of poor data quality, thus requiring knowledge work to detect it and values work to communicate it to clients to suggest its indefensibility. This further implies that any AI governance approach treating AI oversight as a single checkpoint exercise systematically ignores and underestimates the volume and character of epistemic labour involved in epistemic arbitration.

Furthermore, AI does not operate on legal work completely independently as it is relational in nature and its organising capability depends on this relational aspect (Stelmaszak, Joshi and Constantiou, 2025). Within the organisational settings, based on its defining properties of connectivity (AI capability is a result of active human engagement), codependence (quality of outputs depends on both human and algorithmic contribution), and emergence (the AI capability evolves as a function of human-algorithm relationship), we further suggest that organisations that ignore or reduce the extent of epistemic labour not only creates compliance risk for themselves, they also significantly decrease the organising capability of AI underpinning their legal practice.

Further adding to the risk of AI’s reduced organising capability, Webb (2026) also highlights the issue of knowledge externalisation. As more routine legal tasks are absorbed by AI, the experiential aspect of professional learning is lost, undermining the foundation on which professionals develop professional judgment and decision-making. This negatively affects professionals’ ability to understand

the outputs in context, thereby curtailing their **epistemic confidence**. This issue is more pronounced for junior lawyers, trainees, and paralegals who are disproportionately affected by the automation of lower-level diagnostic work. On one hand, less experienced professionals try to fill the competence gaps by relying on AI (Strich, Mayer and Fiedler, 2021), on the other hand, increasing outsourcing of professional judgment and epistemic labour itself to AI results in loss of the profession's capacity for valued judgment. Thus, it can be argued that in its current state, GenAI leads to diminution rather than augmentation (Zelny, 2025) of the practical and professional wisdom of legal professionals, thus undermining not only their ability to provide sound legal judgment but also their ethical accountability for the advice they give (Webb, 2026). *We thus argue that the epistemic arbiter's role carries normative, professional, and technical dimensions, as the legal profession seeks to maintain its claims to accountable professional expertise in the age of GenAI.*

Empirical Findings and Theoretical Contributions

We conducted semi-structured interviews with legal professionals across two law firms in the north of the UK. Drawing on these semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of AI governance documents in UK law firms, we found that the increasing use of GenAI, both within and outside legal firms, has given rise to particular knowledge-validation practices. These are the practices through which lawyers evaluate, moderate, and situate the GenAI-generated legal content in its true context. These practices range from citation verification to defensibility assessment to uncertainty calibration.

The range of these practices highlights the hidden epistemic labour performed by epistemic arbitrators during the performance of epistemic arbitration, and shows that this work is distributed across the life cycle of AI-enabled legal work rather than concentrated at a single oversight checkpoint. The content and nature of these routines vary with practice area and whether the law firms have formalised the support for such work, or it is still informal and individual, professional-led. Our findings showed that instances where such knowledge-validating routines are underdeveloped or informally carried out, or performed by less experienced professionals, the outcome is not just a compliance risk but also a degradation of the epistemic capability that sustains AI-enabled legal work.

Following on from the reviewed literature and empirical findings, our core contribution to the literature on AI and organising is the concept of '*epistemic arbiter*' that contends that AI neither leads to deskilling of professionals nor the augmentation narratives capture the essence of the impact of GenAI on professional legal work. This concept is constituted of three analytical observations. Firstly, it reconceives AI not as an autonomous tool but a relational organising capability dependent on the quality of human engagement with it (Stelmaszak et al., 2025). Secondly, it establishes a distinction between the epistemic demands associated with generative and agentic AI and those associated with predictive AI. This further conceives of artificial certainty as the defining challenge of the current era, and effective governance is one that is calibrated to a trajectory of acceleration rather than a single technological state (Chalmers et al., 2026; Leonardi and Leavell, 2026). Finally, as shown by Webb (2026), epistemic arbitration involves practical wisdom, i.e. the values work (van den Broek, 2025) and reason-giving accountability that GenAI is incapable of performing. This poses a further risk of progressive erosion of this aspect of epistemic arbitration due to knowledge externalisation. These three dimensions of epistemic arbitration show that professional oversight is not just a necessity for risk management but also a structural necessity to sustain the cognitive and ethical arrangements on which GenAI in law depends.

Conclusion

Our findings challenge dominant narratives of AI-driven deskilling or displacement, and show how legal expertise is being reconfigured around new and increasingly indispensable forms of epistemic labour. As GenAI continues to evolve toward agentic autonomy, the core question that needs answering is not whether AI will replace lawyers, but rather how the epistemic labour that ensures effective and accountable provision of GenAI-driven legal expertise can be appropriately recognised, governed, and sustained. More importantly, it is not clear whether the practical wisdom, core to legal provision and serving as its moral compass, can be preserved rather than externalised to a technology incapable of moral discernment (Webb, 2026). We argue that the lawyer as an epistemic arbiter is not a victim of GenAI, rather GenAI has rendered them as an irreplaceable constituent of the legal sector.

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