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International
Trademark
Association

IP Law Firms of the Future

THINK TANK REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Law Firms of the Future: Introduction

In May of 2019, Etienne Sanz de Acedo, Chief Executive Officer of the International Trademark Association (INTA), commissioned a new project called The IP Law Firm of the Future Think Tank, with a mandate to produce a proactive and thought-provoking report on how an IP law firm of the future would operate. The idea behind the report was a recognition that INTA member law firms were increasingly involved in matters beyond traditional trademark protection and enforcement issues. Specifically, in-house legal and business teams were looking to their outside IP law firms for advice on a variety of strategic issues beyond traditional IP matters. Advising these clients requires IP attorneys to have a working understanding of IP-adjacent topics such as regulatory issues, public relations, policy, and data privacy. Consequently, law firms needed to be prepared with the knowledge and flexibility to support business clients across a wide range of industries and issues. Law firms were also facing their own challenges and opportunities, including new technologies impacting firm operations and driven by evolving client needs and expectations, as well as the changing landscape of IP law and increasing competition.

The IP Law Firms of the Future Think Tank (the “IPLF Think Tank”) was launched to nurture a proactive, thought-provoking, and holistic reflection on where IP firms were at the outset and what they may look like in the mid-term future (2030), identifying trends in the roles of IP firms across the globe, and potential obstacles in an evolving international landscape. The team for the 2019 project consisted of a small and independent expert group, composed of members with diverse years of experience, from varied geographies and different types of law firms, whose knowledge and achievements are globally recognized. The IPLF Think Tank was tasked with discussing these issues and providing a written report by March 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic intervened and delayed publication of the report until November 2020. In the meantime, the IPLF Think Tank grappled with the effects of the pandemic and was able to tailor its report to reflect the impact COVID-19 had on the ways law firms operate and deliver services to clients in real time. With much of the world in lockdown, most members of the IPLF Think Tank worked on the project from home as they periodically met virtually and exchanged drafts by email of what would become the 2020 Report. Certain sections of the 2020 Report, such as the chapter on the role of technology, took on new meaning and importance as business shifted to virtual environments.

We are now halfway to the “mid-term future” INTA considered when it enlisted the IPLF Think Tank to prepare the 2020 Report. With the publication of this updated Report for 2025, we take the opportunity to look back and assess whether some of the earlier Report’s prognostications came to fruition. In short, and maybe not surprisingly, some of the predictions in the 2020 Report have come about, others did not pan out, and it is too early to tell about the remainder.

So, what did the Report get right? The Executive Summary of the 2020 Report stated that recent worldwide events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, served to further accelerate the need for change through preparation and adaptation. The past five years have seen a continued need for brand professionals at law firms to keep up with increasingly changing times by staying flexible. The emergence of artificial intelligence (“AI”) as part of the legal practice and the business of law is but one example of an acceleration that threatens to catch law firms flatfooted unless they consider its implications—implications that are considered throughout the key topics of this 2025 Report.

Chapter 1 of the 2020 Report (“The State of the Legal Market in General”) examined the extent to which clients were in control of the key decisions influencing legal hiring and procurement. Not much has changed since. As noted in the current Report, in-house legal departments continue to grow and exert leverage over outside counsel when hiring law firms, negotiating fees, and maintaining relationships. The 2020 Report further posited that clients have also increasingly come to regard their relationships with outside counsel in a much more ad hoc and transactional way, including a perspective that every new representation is unique and subject to competition. It appears that the transactional nature of client relationship remains mostly true and is now apparently a fixed feature of the landscape.

Since it was written in the midst of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, it was prescient to predict in Chapter 2 of the 2020 Report (“The State of the IP Market”) that since law firms generally weather downturns better than the economy in general, IP firms would do well and probably emerge with lower costs and the same or increased revenues. Indeed, the legal market bounced back quickly after the pandemic, and many law firms have reached new heights of productivity and profitability. That said, Chapter 2 of the 2025 Report addresses challenges faced in the market today, including geopolitical and economic uncertainty that are changing client expectations and influencing technological innovation.

Chapter 2 of the 2020 Report also speculated that remote working was here to stay. Five years later, remote work has become a fixture for nearly all legal professionals around the world. Although some firms have mandated a return to office, very few require professionals to have a presence in the office five days a week. Most firms now operate under hybrid arrangements where attorneys and staff can work at least one day a week, if not more, from home. While the paperless practice undoubtedly contributed to the ability to work remotely, the pandemic accelerated the shift and normalized the arrangement.

New in the 2025 Report is the IPLF Think Tank’s assessment on the role of AI on legal practices. Chapter 2 of the 2025 Report identifies the current trends, opportunities, and challenges, with AI clearly the center of attention as it reshapes the legal market faster than any previous technological shift. Chapter 6 of the 2025 Report goes deeper to describe how IP law firms are using generative AI tools to increase efficiencies for legal tasks, education, business development, marketing, and client communications. A key part of this new discussion is the impact AI will have on the legal practice, including the integration and training of junior staff members, as well as the challenges posed by the use of AI and how law firms are addressing them.

Chapter 3 of the 2020 Report (“Different Types of IP Practices”) indicated that when corporate IP departments were asked what they would expect from a great law firm, the following were identified at the top of their list: realistic advice, commercial understanding, and strategic thinking. In-house legal departments continue to expect their outside attorneys to be their trusted business counsel and to demonstrate the skills that one would expect from sophisticated specialists, tailoring their advice and recommendations to the client’s particular industry and specific needs. Chapter 3 of the 2025 Report identifies additional areas where clients desire to see improvements in IP law firm services, including responsiveness, transparency in pricing, data-driven insights, proactive risk management, and customized solutions. The 2025 Report also includes a discussion in several Chapters about areas where AI can help IP law firms meet their clients’ evolving needs. Clients expect their trusted counsel to use these tools, not just to do more for less, but to assist in addressing the clients’ needs quickly, effectively, and in ways specifically tailored to particular business directives. Chapter 3 of the 2025 Report identifies practical steps for IP law firms to implement AI tools.

Chapter 4 of the 2025 Report (“Competitive Landscape and Market Dynamics”) includes a discussion regarding new entrants and market pressures, along with additional comments on how IP law firms can leverage AI to create a competitive advantage. Although the 2020 Report touched on the entrance of the “Big Four” accounting firms into the legal field, it did not contemplate nonlawyer ownership interests in law firms. Chapter 4 of the

2025 Report discusses the jurisdictions that now permit nonlawyers to invest in law firms and the impact that private equity is having in some jurisdictions. Chapter 4 highlights the potential pros and cons of these new law firm investment and ownership models.

Chapter 5 in the 2025 Report (“Staffing and Workforce Transformation”) addresses flexible and alternative staffing models while also discussing shifting staffing models in IP law firms, new professional roles in law firms, and related challenges and strategic considerations—including AI’s disruption of traditional IP law firm operations and changes to career development.

One point from Chapter 6 in the 2020 Report (“Competitive Factors”) stands out as remaining especially true. The Chapter stated that corporations were expected to continue to invest in their in-house legal departments. In prior recessions, it was not unusual for companies to scale back their in-house legal departments to reduce their expenses and turn to outside counsel to meet their needs. That see-saw cycle, which saw the size of in-house legal departments change with economic cycles, seems to have ended, possibly for good. It may be that corporations have recognized that while in-house legal counsel is more of a fixed expense than outside counsel, it represents a valuable investment of company resources over the long term, with in-house departments serving as growth-accelerating business partners that are no longer seen solely as “cost centers.”

Chapter 7 of the 2020 Report (“Staffing the Trademark Practice Now and in the Future”) suggested that law firm partners must improve their relationships with professional staff to retain talent at all levels, transforming their IP firms into career accelerators and great places to work. This continues to be solid advice. Professional law firm staff, whether viewed broadly as all non-partner attorneys, or more narrowly as all non-attorneys, often represent the backbone of a firm and the key to producing high quality and profitable work. While Chapter 7 mentioned that working from home at least once a week has become normal in IP firms, as mentioned above, one day is often viewed as a baseline, and it is typical for professional staff to expect more.

Chapter 7 of the 2025 Report (“Strategic Recommendations for IP Law Firms”) focuses on planning for the future from various perspectives, including redefining the value proposition, transforming workforce/talent strategy, increasing collaborations with clients, anticipating policy reforms, and building resilience. This new chapter also provides guidelines for implementing AI tools for trademark searches, litigation support, and portfolio management.

Even with so many correct forecasts, there were some things that the Task Force did not expect when writing the 2020 Report. Chapter 1 of the 2020 Report remarked that corporate social responsibility and sustainability had become important for their effects on law firm bottom lines and engagement, and that law firms had also been focusing on diversity and inclusion efforts. The 2024 reelection of Donald Trump in the United States has had a chilling effect on corporate social responsibility and diversity/equity/inclusion efforts that has extended to other jurisdictions. Looking back to 2020, when these initiatives were embraced by corporations and embedded into the programming of numerous events and communications, the authors of the 2020 Report did not imagine that these efforts would take such a sudden turn.

The discussion of the role of technology in Chapter 8 of the 2020 Report also had its misses. The Report noted that blockchain had started to revolutionize IP and evidence collection; however, most would agree that blockchain remains a technology that perhaps has not seen its full potential as applied to IP law firms. Yet this stands in contrast to artificial intelligence, which is mentioned in case law review, trademark searches, and predictive analysis for the outcome of cases. In 2025, it is generally agreed that AI usage is pervasive and that it poses one of the biggest threats (as well as opportunities) to traditional law firm practice.

Chapter 6 of the 2025 Report explores the central role that AI is expected to have in influencing how IP law firms work and in the types of work they perform for clients. In addition to utilizing AI tools for increased efficiency and service innovation, law firms will also need to assist clients in developing AI governance frameworks, as well as advise and support them in licensing or disputes related to AI and its use of other pre-existing works and proprietary data. Chapter 6 also covers other areas of technological innovation, including blockchain, cybersecurity, and IP protection in virtual worlds.

There were also some predictions in the 2020 Report that are still too premature to call. Chapter 9 of the 2020 Report (“IP Law Firm Projections for the Future”) speculated that if globalization continued apace, despite COVID-19, IP law firms might find increased opportunities to handle foreign trademark work. They remarked that China had emerged as a hotbed for trademark filings and that jurisdictions like Brazil and India seemed poised for growth. Today, globalization is under attack, with tariff wars replacing open trade borders, so it remains to be seen whether the markets for trademark work will keep growing. The state of globalization, and how it will impact IP law firm structure and cross-border coordination, are addressed in Chapter 6 of the 2025 Report.

Some of the scenarios envisioned in Chapter 9 of the 2020 Report are still too futuristic to implement today. There was talk of “robo-judges” deciding cases based on algorithms and IP law firms dealing with so-called “smart IP rights.” These are transformations in our practice that may very well come to fruition, but it is too early to tell after only five years.

Chapter 9 of the 2020 Report ended on an optimistic note by stating that IP had proven in multiple sectors to be somewhat recession proof. It further remarked that the general trend through the 1990s and 2000s was a slight drop in work, but then a return to growth driven by innovation and knowledge economics. We are hopeful that this will remain true and that whatever effect politics, tariffs, technology, and new sources of funding have on the global economy, the ingenuity of people, perhaps aided by AI, will continue to result in new products, services, and brands that will keep IP law firm practices busy well into the future.



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