

New Plexus research: only 6.7% of General Counsel have operationalised AI as the legal profession hits its 2026 tipping point

Future-Ready General Counsel 2026 surveys 150 GCs across Australia, the US, New Zealand and EMEA finds 58.7% are actively adopting AI in legal, but just 8.7% own enterprise AI governance, exposing a structural leadership vacancy at the heart of the modern enterprise.

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA 6 May 2026 | Plexus, the Legal Operating System for the modern enterprise, today released *Future-Ready General Counsel 2026: From Legal Manager to Chief Legal Officer*, a global research report based on responses from 150 General Counsel across Australia, the United States, New Zealand and EMEA. The data reveals that 2026 is the year artificial intelligence (AI) in the legal function moves from pilot programs into the operational bloodstream of leading legal teams and that the profession is bifurcating between GCs who are redesigning the function and those who are managing its decline.

The report, available at plexus.co/future-ready-general-counsel-2026, covers the structural pressure on in-house legal, the workload-multiplying effect of AI in the near term, the operating-model and identity choices facing every General Counsel, and the three moves that separate the architects of the future legal function from its administrators.

Six findings every General Counsel and Chief Legal Officer should know

- 59% of Chief Legal Officers say workload increased last year (ACC Chief Legal Officer Survey 2024, n=669), confirming the structural under-resourcing of in-house legal pre-dates AI.
- 81% of GCs say their teams lack the staffing to do their jobs effectively (Axiom GC Survey 2024, n=300); in Australia the figure rises to 97%.
- 58.7% of GCs are actively adopting AI across legal workflows, but only 6.7% have fully operationalised AI-enabled operating models (Plexus Future-Ready GC Survey 2026, n=150).
- 43% of GCs already using AI report a 21–40% reduction in manual legal work, proving the productivity dividend is real and measurable.
- Only 8.7% of GCs own AI governance in their organisation, despite legal having unique responsibility for enterprise risk, compliance and responsible AI deployment. IT and the CIO own it in 28.7% of organisations; AI governance committees in 14.7%.
- 69% of GCs spend less than 40% of their time on strategic work, and 32% of organisations still view legal as a cost centre rather than a strategic asset.

The 1:500 problem is a design problem, not a talent problem

Plexus client data across Australian enterprise companies puts the median lawyer-to-employee ratio at 1:500, a structural mismatch that no amount of overtime will close. The report shows 56% of total lawyer time sits in work categories with high automation potential, with contracts and procurement alone consuming 38% of lawyer time. Yet 78% of Australian GCs anticipate a headcount freeze in 2026, even as workload continues to grow.

Compounding the problem, AI is currently a workload multiplier rather than a workload reducer in the in-house legal function. Every AI-generated contract, communication and policy created elsewhere in the business produces a downstream legal obligation. AI liability frameworks, automated decision-making laws and data governance requirements are compounding globally. And when a business unit can generate a contract in 30 seconds, it expects legal to turn it around in 30 minutes.

*“The legal function that waits to see what AI does to the profession will spend the next decade catching up to the one that decides what the profession does with AI,” said **Andrew Mellett, Founder and CEO of Plexus**. “The data is unambiguous. Workload is up. Headcount is flat. AI is generating more work for legal before it generates time savings. The path forward is not to work harder inside a broken model. It is to redesign the function, automate the commodity, architect the operating model, and own the AI governance agenda. That is what separates a General Counsel from a Chief Legal Officer.”*

Australia's 18-month lag is the country's biggest legal-tech advantage

The report makes a contrarian case for the Asia-Pacific market. Where US and UK adoption rates sit at 61% and CLM penetration at 74%, APAC sits at 34% AI adoption and 49% CLM penetration (Thomson Reuters 2025; ACC/Everlaw GenAI Survey 2025). US and UK legal teams are now spending 12 to 18 months unwinding failed first-generation CLM implementations before the real transformation work can begin. Australian and New Zealand GCs can skip the rip-and-replace cycle and deploy proven, second-generation legal automation technology from day one.

What 150 GCs say defines the future-ready leader

When asked what defines a future-ready General Counsel in 2026, AI literacy and fluency topped the list for the first time, cited by 48% of respondents ahead of business acumen and strategic partnership (40%), data and analytics capability (22%), change leadership (18%) and regulatory and ethical awareness (12%). Technical legal mastery is now assumed; the differentiator is the ability to translate law, risk and technology into business value.

Named contributors to the research include Steve Maycock, General Counsel at Spirit of Tasmania; Belinda O'Toole, Global General Counsel at Deloitte; Andrew Collings, General Counsel, Corporate & Commercial at IAG; Pat Datt, Senior Legal Counsel at Noumi;

Adrienne Gubbay, Senior Legal Counsel at People's Choice Credit Union; and Karla Mahmut, Legal Executive at PETRONAS Australia.

Three moves in sequence

The report concludes with a prescriptive playbook.

Move 1 Automate the Commodity: identify the 56% of work in high-automation categories and build or buy infrastructure to handle it without lawyer time.

Move 2 Architect the Function: define explicitly what lawyers do, what self-service handles and what technology decides; publish SLAs.

Move 3 Own the AI Agenda: claim the AI governance vacancy that currently sits unowned in 91.3% of organisations.

“The question is no longer whether to adopt AI in Legal. It is how to do so responsibly, measurably and strategically, starting now,” added **Mellet**. *“Because in 2026, the only thing riskier than changing is not.”*

Methodology

The Plexus Future-Ready General Counsel Survey 2026 captured responses from 150 General Counsel in January 2026. Respondents span four regions, Australia (53%), the United States (30%), New Zealand (10%) and EMEA & other (7%) and every level of AI maturity, from teams with no AI strategy to fully operationalised models. 78% of respondents manage teams of 10 FTEs or fewer, reflecting the prevalence of mid-market in-house legal functions. Industries represented include energy, finance and banking, technology, healthcare, consulting, insurance, manufacturing and 91 others. All responses are self-reported. Quotes are included only with explicit respondent consent.

Download the report

The full *Future-Ready General Counsel 2026* report is available now, free of charge, at plexus.co/future-ready-general-counsel-2026.

About Plexus

Plexus is the Legal Operating System for the modern enterprise. Plexus helps in-house legal teams scale legal work across the business, automating routine tasks, embedding legal into the operating bloodstream of the organisation, and freeing lawyers to focus on the strategic work only they can do. Plexus combines contract management, matter management, compliance workflows, marketing legal review and legal AI in a single unified platform, delivering legal work up to 400× faster at 20–30% lower cost than traditional methods. Trusted by the world's leading brands, including Coca-Cola, Nike, PepsiCo, Woolworths, Asahi and L'Oréal, Plexus is the legal team's force multiplier.

Learn more at plexus.co.

Media contact

Plexus Media Relations

Email: info@plexus.co

Web: plexus.co

Tags: General Counsel, Chief Legal Officer, AI in Legal, Legal Operating System, legal automation, legal AI governance, in-house legal, CLM, future of law, Plexus, GC research 2026