



# Emerging Skill Sets: Are You Ready? Are You Sure?

**In all fields, the most effective professionals are cultivating three intersecting skill sets: technological proficiency, cognitive adeptness, and social-emotional intelligence. These foundational capabilities drive precision, judgment, and collaboration in today's legal practices.**

BY THERESA ELLIOTT

The World Economic Forum (WEF) recently met to explore emerging skill sets required by adults in professions who seek to maneuver the modern landscape and attain success within their field, with their clients, and with their managers. Three primary skill sets were identified by the WEF and supported by adult learning experts: advanced technological proficiency, high-level cognitive abilities, and enhanced social and emotional skills. These skills are considered essential for adapting to an increasingly modern, digital, automated, and rapidly changing workplace.

## Technological Skills

As technology continues to reshape industries, professionals must go beyond basic computer literacy and develop a deeper understanding of new tech platforms. We have all heard the saying “data is king,” but do we understand and appreciate how fast data can now be collected, organized, analyzed, and deployed using databases from around the world? There are some big things all of us need to stay on top of in the technological world, including the following:

- **AI and big data:** This is one of the fastest-growing skill areas. Professionals need to understand how to effectively, safely, and wisely use artificial intelligence (AI) tools, analyze large data sets, and interpret the resulting insights to make informed decisions.
- **Digital fluency:** Beyond basic computer skills, digital fluency involves a deep understanding of how technology influences business processes. This allows professionals to drive innovation and integrate new systems that boost productivity.
- **Networks and cybersecurity:** With the rise of remote work and increasing cyber threats, expertise in network management and cybersecurity is in high demand to protect

clients' and lawyers' organizational data and infrastructure. The State Bar of Wisconsin's recently released book *The Law of Business on the Internet* is a vital resource for attorneys advising clients on internet-based transactions. Authors Shane Delsman, Alex Phillips, Kirk Samson, and Zach Willenbrink provide practical insights into understanding digital agreements and e-signatures; knowing when and where a business can be sued for online activity; protecting trademarks, domain names, copyrights, and patents; managing compliance with data breach laws; protecting consumer information; reducing liability through effective website policies, and more.

• **Technology design and programming:** More firms are finding that staff members need working knowledge of software design, programming, and development methodologies. Legal staff, paralegals, and attorneys will be indispensable if they can develop, deploy, and manage programs and spreadsheets.



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• **Cloud Computing:** The ability to understand the importance of cloud work, and to work with and manage resources on cloud platforms, is essential for many roles.

### Cognitive Skills

The increasing automation of routine tasks places a premium on unique human cognitive abilities that machines cannot replicate.

• **Analytical and critical thinking:** The ability to evaluate information objectively, question assumptions, and use data to draw logical conclusions is highly valued. It is crucial for solving complex problems and making strategic decisions without bias. In a world filled with personal biases, lawyers, paralegals, and other staff members who can critically evaluate all sides of an issue will become more valuable to their firm's success.

• **Creative thinking:** As machines handle more standardized processes, creative thinking and innovation are needed to develop new ideas, find unconventional solutions, and drive business growth. Being able to identify opportunities, take risks, and try new things will separate those who only can complete today's tasks from those who

are trying to solve tomorrow's problems and position their firms for new business opportunities.

• **Complex problem-solving:** Employers seek individuals who can effectively analyze and solve intricate, real-world problems. This requires research, creative thinking, and strategic planning. One example is the shortage of attorneys in rural communities. Many judges, lawyers, and paralegals are discussing ways to attract more legal experts to areas of Wisconsin whose residents are underrepresented. Legal professionals willing to solve this complex problem are engaged in brilliant discussions and exploring potential solutions. Are you a problem solver, or are you waiting for someone else to come up with the solution? Can you grapple with complex issues that need a short-term and long-term road map?

• **System thinking:** This involves understanding how different parts of a system or organization interrelate and how to manage the system to achieve a desired result. Do you know how money comes into your firm? Do you know how to increase that money? It starts with someone being able to depict on a flowchart how money is generated, by

whom, and at what rate and then understanding which skills or actions should be replicated or passed on to certain individuals, to increase results. Some people are exceptional at understanding the levers to pull in their organization, while others might be lost in the repetitive behaviors that garner nothing new. Knowing how to develop a systemic perspective of how work comes in, is managed, and goes out of your business is a valuable skill to seek out in current or potential employees.

### Social and Emotional Skills

The shift to more collaborative, hybrid work models has increased the importance of emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities.

• **Leadership and social influence:** With many teams operating remotely, effective leaders must inspire trust, influence others, and foster a positive work environment using clear communication and team management skills within their organization and with suppliers, other firms, and clients.

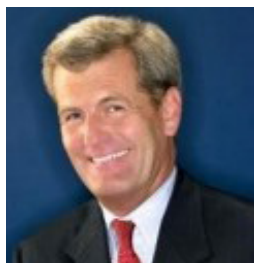
• **Adaptability and resilience:** The fast pace of change requires professionals who are flexible and can adjust to new situations, processes, and technologies. Resilience is the ability to recover from setbacks and remain productive during stressful periods.

• **Cultural competence:** The increasing diversity of the global workforce makes it crucial for employees to navigate and communicate effectively across different cultures, fostering inclusivity and respect.

• **Curiosity and lifelong learning:** The most future-ready professionals will be those with a curious mindset who are committed to actively and continuously learning new skills throughout their career. Not only does lifelong learning keep you sharp, it keeps you engaged in a community to which you have dedicated your career. I have said it before, and I will say it again, lifelong learners don't count credits; they are just curious and hungry to learn.

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**"Even if you're on the right track,  
 you'll get run over if you just sit there."**



### Four Ways to Develop New Skill Sets

1) Take a structured learning course, such as a continuing legal education (CLE) program, that is relevant to your desired skill set. Read newly released books so you are not only educating yourself but also are up to date on the latest releases. Actively share what you have learned with a peer, a client, a friend, or a family member. Become a “thought leader” who spreads nuggets of information based on things you learned in the CLE program or in the book you just read. The fastest way to cement learning is to teach it to someone else.

2) Gain experience by being on a committee that addresses an issue that matters to you. Practice technology, innovation, or inclusion by immersing yourself in a topic that requires skills you need to develop.

3) Find a mentor. Find someone you can learn from – a person who can give you

advice, tips, and techniques as you work through the development of a new skill set. Actively seek constructive, honest feedback from colleagues and managers.

4) Learn through practice. Reading a book without action is just reading a book. In 2023, the State Bar released *Reduce Your Risk: A Guide to Personal Safety and Security*. The book addresses how judges, lawyers, and staff can keep themselves safe in a world in which they might be at heightened danger because of their jobs. When we asked buyers of the book, “What did you change after you read the book?” many said, “It gave me a lot of ideas. I know there are things I should do for my office, my family, and myself, but I just haven’t found the time.” Unless knowledge is applied, it is just information. Identify what you want to implement. Assign completion dates. Assign individuals, including yourself, to take charge of items. Work the plan.

### In Summary

As the legal landscape evolves, the most effective professionals are cultivating three intersecting skill sets: technological proficiency, cognitive adeptness, and social-emotional intelligence. These are not optional add-ons but foundational capabilities that drive precision, judgment, and collaboration in today’s practice. Yet many people will assume they already possess them or dismiss their importance, risking stagnation. If we fail to invest in these areas, we expose ourselves to miscommunication with clients, friction with colleagues, and the erosion of self-trust, relying on outdated methods at a time when clients demand clarity, efficiency, and ethical accountability. The call to action is clear: assess your current capabilities honestly, seek targeted training, and adopt deliberate practices that integrate technology, critical thinking, and empathy into every matter. **WL**

