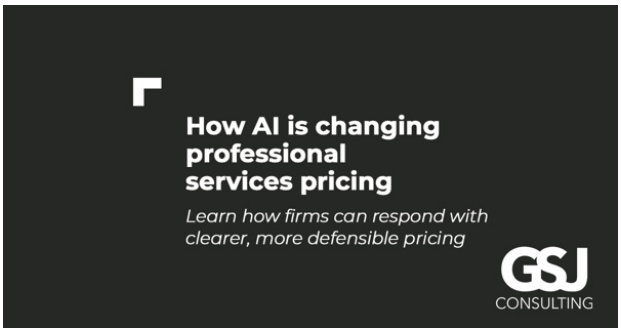


How AI is changing professional services pricing

Date: Monday November 9, 2026

Professional services pricing has traditionally been difficult for clients to assess. They might seek competing proposals, consult procurement or draw on previous engagements, but reliable comparisons were often hard to find. Differences in scope, experience and complexity made it difficult to establish what a particular service should cost.

AI is beginning to change the preparation clients can bring to that conversation. They can describe a proposed engagement, specify the type of firm and expertise required, and request an indicative price. They can ask AI to examine a proposal, flag unclear charges, compare pricing models and prepare negotiation questions.

Those answers may be incomplete or wrong. Nevertheless, clients now have an accessible way to test a proposal before discussing it with the firm. That changes the pricing conversation, even when it does not improve the underlying market information.

A new source of pricing confidence: how clients are using AI to test a pricing proposal

Imagine a business owner receiving a $25,000 proposal for a legal, accounting or consulting engagement. Previously, their response might have depended on whether the fee felt “reasonable”, whether they trusted the adviser and whether they had time to obtain another quote.

Now they can ask AI: ***“What questions should I ask before accepting this proposal?”***

The result might prompt them to question the staffing mix, request clearer deliverables, challenge open-ended exclusions or ask whether routine work could be completed more efficiently. They might also receive a suggested price range that becomes the starting point for a negotiation.

This does not make AI a reliable pricing authority. A general-purpose tool may lack current transaction data, misunderstand the

scope or compare services that are materially different.

But an imperfect estimate can still influence expectations. A firm may find itself responding to a confident price objection built on uncertain information.

The proposal must carry more of the argument

As clients begin using AI to review proposals, a proposal that lists activities, hourly rates and an estimated total leaves considerable room for interpretation. Clients may struggle to understand why senior involvement is necessary, what makes the engagement complex or which responsibilities the firm is accepting.

AI gives them another way to interrogate those gaps. It can identify ambiguity, but it cannot reliably supply the missing commercial context. The firm needs to make that context visible.

For example, “review commercial agreement” describes an activity. It tells the client little about the issues requiring attention or the decisions the review will support. A stronger explanation connects the work to the client’s exposure, negotiation priorities and intended transaction.

The objective is greater clarity. Clients should understand what they are buying, why the proposed approach is appropriate and what could change the fee. If the proposal leaves those questions unanswered, the client’s AI tool may provide its own interpretation.

Value needs to become more specific

Professional firms frequently describe their value through experience, responsiveness and quality. These matter, but they are difficult for clients to compare when every proposal makes similar claims.

A more useful value discussion starts with the decision the client needs to make. What is at stake? Where is uncertainty causing delay? Which risks require attention? What would a useful result allow the client to do?

An accountant may help a business owner understand the financial consequences of an expansion. A lawyer may help resolve the contractual issues delaying a transaction. A consultant may help management choose between competing investments.

These examples connect expertise to a practical purpose. They do not require the adviser to promise an outcome beyond their control. They require a clearer account of how the engagement will help the client act.

Pricing options become a strategic tool

AI makes it easier for clients to explore alternatives to the pricing model initially offered. Firms can pre-empt that discussion by developing options that reflect different needs.

A defined diagnostic may suit a client who needs clarity before committing to implementation. A staged fee may suit an engagement with uncertain later phases. A retainer may suit recurring advice, while a fixed fee may provide useful certainty for a well-defined assignment.

Each option needs clear boundaries, assumptions and provisions for changes in scope. A fixed fee with extensive exclusions may offer less certainty than its headline suggests. Equally, a retainer with poorly defined access can create frustration for both parties.

The firm's role is to help the client understand the trade-offs and choose an appropriate arrangement. That conversation can demonstrate commercial understanding before the substantive work begins.

How should firms respond to AI-driven price objections?

The practical response begins with understanding the economics of delivery. Firms need to know where AI reduces effort, where review remains essential and which engagements have sufficient predictability to support alternative fees.

They also need consistency in how their people discuss price. A well-designed proposal can unravel if the adviser responds to the first objection with an immediate discount. The better response is to explore the comparison: what scope, expertise, assumptions and responsibilities sit behind the client's suggested price?

Sometimes that discussion will reveal a genuine opportunity to simplify the engagement. Sometimes it will expose a comparison that does not fit. Either way, it creates a basis for a considered pricing discussion.

If your firm is reviewing how it explains and structures its fees in an AI-informed market, GSJ Consulting can help you strengthen your pricing strategy and proposals. Get in touch to discuss your approach.

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