Luca Barbato

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Application to the NBER Digital Economics and AI Tutorial, Stanford University, 20–21 January 2027

Graduate Study

Programme	PhD in Economics and Management, LSE
Enrolment	2023–present (fourth year, 2026–27); expected completion 2029
Dissertation	Tasks, AI and Careers in Professional Services Firms (tentative)
Supervisors	Jordi Blanes i Vidal (main), Luis Garicano, Rocco Macchiavello (all LSE)
Coursework	Labour Economics; Organisational Economics; Industrial Organisation
Prior degrees	MSc Economics, LSE (2023); BSc Economics and Finance, Bocconi University (2021)
Teaching & service	Teaching Fellow and Graduate Teaching Assistant, MG205 Econometrics (LSE); PhD Programme Representative, Economics and Management

Research Interests

Fields: personnel economics; organisational economics; economics of AI.

Research Statement

Most production takes place in organisations (Simon, 1991). My research asks how the tasks people land on early in their careers shape their human capital and career paths, and how AI, by absorbing many junior tasks, is changing this. To what extent are diverging career paths due to talent? What role do learning on the job and connections play? Does discrimination affect careers, if not at the promotion margin then more subtly in the day-to-day task and project assignment decisions that unlock better careers? These decisions and interactions inside organisations are rarely observed in public datasets. I overcome this challenge by setting up exclusive data-sharing collaborations with individual firms and by assembling new datasets from unstructured firm records disclosed for regulatory purposes.

In my project 'AI and the next generation of lawyers', I ask what happens to human capital development when AI enters the production function as a substitute for junior tasks. If, as my work on US Big Law suggests (see below), early exposure to partner-level work drives careers, AI could either let associates reach that work sooner or remove the training ground that prepares them for it. Ide (2025) studies theoretically how AI affects the transmission of knowledge across generations of workers. In education, Strömberg et al. (2026) find that students who rely on AI for assignments score 20% lower on monthly exams within six months, unlike students who use AI as a tutor without cutting their study time, whose grades barely drop. Yet we know little about how workers choose to use AI across their tasks and what that means for their development.

To fill this gap, I have partnered with a major law firm employing 1,200+ lawyers, under a signed data-sharing agreement running to 2029. What distinguishes this project from other ongoing work is access to the universe of AI prompts written by the firm's lawyers, matched with internal productivity and HR data. This will allow me to look not only at who uses AI and how much, but also for what purposes and to replace which tasks. Does AI replace menial, repetitive tasks, or does it instead take the place of judgement-heavy tasks that are crucial for human capital development? Exploiting variation across departments in AI adoption, I will test whether AI use speeds up or slows down associates' progression towards partner-level work. A second focus is the distributional consequences of AI, given the sizeable gender gaps documented among lawyers and in other high-skilled organisations (Azmat and Ferrer, 2017; Bircan et al., 2025).

In 'What Makes Experience: Evidence from US Big Law', I aim to disentangle the determinants of career success inside large law firms in the US. Often, workers who get the best cases and the most valuable tasks also

tend to be the best connected. I ask whether career success depends on learning on the job vis-à-vis connections, or instead reflects early sorting based on ability and other traits including gender and ethnicity. I build a new dataset from the itemised time records that top law firms must disclose in US court proceedings, covering thousands of lawyers over twenty years. Using LLMs to classify such records, I recover the projects lawyers work on, the tasks they perform within them and whom they work with and I follow their careers after they leave the firm. Associates whose first case gives them a bundle of tasks closer to partner-level work are less likely to leave and twice as likely to make partner. Among those who do leave, doing more senior-like work predicts landing a better job. These patterns hold conditional on connections, which independently predict success. Building on these results, I will exploit variation in which cases happen to be staffing up when an associate joins to separate learning on the job from sorting on ability. As records run to the present, in future work I will also track how AI is changing the composition of junior work across firms.

The work people are given in their first years on the job can have lasting effects on where they end up. AI is now changing that work. Whether it widens or narrows the paths through which people learn and advance, and for whom, is the question at the centre of my research, and one I would be glad to explore with the Digital Economics and AI community at the Tutorial.

References

Azmat, G. and R. Ferrer (2017). Gender gaps in performance: Evidence from young lawyers. *Journal of Political Economy 125*(5), 1306–1355.

Bircan, Ç., G. Friebel, and T. Stahl (2025). Gender promotion gaps in knowledge work: The role of task assignment in teams. RFBerlin Discussion Paper 2518, ROCKWOOL Foundation Berlin.

Ide, E. (2025). Automation, AI, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Working Paper 2507.16078, arXiv.

Simon, H. A. (1991). Organizations and markets. *Journal of Economic Perspectives 5*(2), 25–44.

Strömberg, D., V. Lei, and Y. Wu (2026). The generative AI learning penalty: Evidence from Chinese secondary education. CEPR Discussion Paper 21577, Centre for Economic Policy Research.