The Job That AI Was Supposed to Kill Needs More Humans Than Ever

Court reporters outmatch the technology in skill, but the profession faces another crisis: a shortage of workers

By
Allison Pohle
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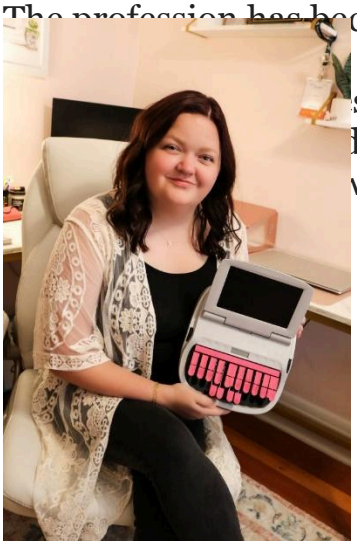
Three years into training to be a court reporter, Jayne Williams is used to warnings that AI will soon take over her budding career.

Few roles look more ripe for extinction at first glance. Automated transcription services are proliferating—and rapidly improving in accuracy. And more courtrooms are turning to real-time speech-to-text tools, often to fill in when a human stenographer isn't available.

The 33-year-old says she isn't worried. Once she passes the final speed test, Williams hopes to work in the Iowa courts, where she can earn a base salary of $63,000 and state benefits. With the per-page fees they can collect for selling transcript copies and for transcribing depositions, court reporters across the country can make upward of $100,000.

The profession has become an example of AI's limitations in replacing human [illegible]. In an actual courtroom, court reporters record [illegible]stures and transcribe through distracting courtroom [illegible]door slams. Other times, they must gently ask witnesses [illegible]while recounting traumatic testimony.



Jayne Williams hopes to work in Iowa's courts. CHRISTIAN WILLIAMS

The verbatim transcripts they certify become part of the official legal record and play an especially critical role in appeals. "Everyone needs their day in court,"

says Williams, who lives in Pella, Iowa. “We’re a big part of that.”

The threat isn’t that AI can do the job better, legal professionals say. It’s that too few humans are going into the field. A long-brewing shortage has worsened as more stenographers retire and too few newcomers complete the rigorous training to replace them. In California, nearly half of active court reporter licenses were issued at least 30 years ago, the state’s judicial branch says.

Over a decade, the estimated number of U.S. court reporters has fallen 21% to fewer than 23,000, according to a 2025 report from the Council for the Advancement of Professionals, Technology and Unbiased Reporting.

That has created an opening for speech-to-text technology and AI-powered transcription services. Instead of relying solely on traditional court reporters, more courts are allowing “digital” reporters to operate the recording equipment and certify transcripts.

This month, California’s Supreme Court heard arguments on whether to allow electronic recording, prohibited now in many civil cases. Because of the reporter shortage, about 72% of these cases between April 2023 and June 2025 had no verbatim record, according to the Judicial Branch of California.

North Dakota phased out using stenographers this year and switched to recording all proceedings. The lack of court reporters is one reason. So is the prohibitive cost of transcripts for some trial participants. Depending on how the record was taken, people would pay hundreds of dollars for a stenographer’s transcript versus $10 for an electronic recording, says Sally A. Holewa, the state court administrator.

The National Court Reporters Association says AI-assisted transcription remains prone to errors. “Nobody can take over the integrity that we bring,” says Cindy Isaacsen, the association’s president. One example it cites came during the 2023 double-murder trial for Alex Murdaugh. The digital recording system used as a backup to the official court reporter produced a transcript the defense said was too flawed to be of much use.

Others counter that the technology is improving and that the digital court reporters operating it do more than just hit “record.” They must get certifications showing they can operate the equipment and capture a legal proceeding. This can take a matter of weeks as opposed to the sometimes yearslong process for traditional reporters.

“The future isn’t stenographers versus AI, it’s legal professionals using AI to meet industry demand,” says James Holmes, chief revenue officer for Verbit.AI, which provides courtroom transcription services.

Learning the art of creating a word-for-word transcript in real time, court reporters say, is like simultaneously learning to play an instrument and speak a foreign language.

In Iowa, Williams has taken classes in medical and legal terminology. And she spends at least 18 hours a week practicing on her stenography machine—a specialized keyboard she likens to playing chords, which allows her to transcribe exceptionally fast.

In some states, aspiring court reporters can spend months or longer trying to pass the tests needed to work in the field. Texas, for instance, requires reporters to achieve 95% accuracy—94.8% doesn’t count—while typing 225 words a minute for five minutes straight.

Those tests predate modern technology, as many court reporters now use audio recordings as a backup, says Allie Hall, a certified court reporter who runs a training program with about 800 enrollees currently. She thinks the industry should consider testing entry-level reporters at a speed fluctuating between 180 and 225 words a minute over the five-minute period.

More court reporters now work as voice writers, which requires a shorter training process. Emma Guillot spent 10 months in such a program online before becoming a certified court reporter in Baton Rouge, La. The 24-year-old speaks into a sound-dampening “stenomask,” using vocal shorthand to transcribe every word from a proceeding. The text is captured using a speech-to-text program, and she can refine it afterward.

Guillot, who also has a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice, says that while some people think of court reporters as older ladies typing away in courtrooms, it is a perfect fit for her. AI can help, she says, but can’t replace trained professionals: “Attorneys and judges want a record they can trust.”