

2026 TOP LAWYERS

THE JURY HAS SPOKEN!

The votes have been tallied and our fifth annual list of the Valley's top legal eagles is a matter of record. From AI law to criminal defense to malpractice litigation, these peer-selected attorneys will always do your case justice.



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PHOTO COURTESY/ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

How we Picked our TOP LAWYERS

PHOENIX magazine generates its Top Lawyers list via an online survey of practicing attorneys in the Greater Phoenix area. Partnering with Colorado Springs-based information research firm Data Joe, PHOENIX disseminates emails to each of the roughly 16,000 active attorneys licensed with the State Bar of Arizona, directing them to an online portal managed by Data Joe. The survey, which takes place over six weeks, asks respondents to provide the names of up to three attorneys they deem the best in 39 legal specialties. To spread the votes democratically, respondents are asked to nominate at least one attorney in each category who works in a firm other than their own.

At the conclusion of the voting, Data Joe tallies the votes digitally and verifies that vote recipients are in good standing with the State Bar. PHOENIX editors then set the vote thresholds in a manner that ensures the top 10 to 20 percent of vote-getters in each category make the Top Lawyers list. Our fact-checkers then call each attorney on the final list to confirm their affiliation with a Valley-based firm and obtain accurate contact information.

PHOENIX does not give preference to attorneys who advertise. Top Lawyers earn their place on the list purely by virtue of the votes they receive, and our sales staff does not see the list until the lawyers have been confirmed by our fact-checkers. 2026 is the fifth year PHOENIX has conducted Top Lawyers.

AI LAW

Adjacent to IP and consumer protection, AI law encompasses the legality and ethical considerations surrounding the development and use of artificial intelligence systems.

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APPELLATE LAW

Did a trial court hand you an unfavorable verdict? These attorneys will help you plead your case to a higher court.

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BANKRUPTCY & REORGANIZATION

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SCOTT ZWILLINGER

- **FIELD/SPECIALTY:** Arbitration & Mediation, Civil Law Litigation, Commercial Litigation
- **LAW SCHOOL/YEAR GRADUATED:** Brooklyn Law School, 1998
- **YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 28

You mediate and litigate high-conflict commercial disputes, which sometimes involve family businesses. What's your secret to navigating these family conflicts?

Family-business disputes are unique because business interests, personal histories and emotions become inseparable. Relatives know exactly which buttons to push and minor slights become magnified over time, creating wounds that have nothing to do with business. When mediating such disputes, it is essential to meet separately with each person and take the time to listen without judgment.

Have you agreed to work with clients on mediations only to realize their dispute might be better served through the traditional court system?

No, I have never concluded mediation was the wrong choice, no matter how early the dispute is brought to me. Mediation is never a waste of time. Even when we don't resolve a matter, mediation reveals priorities, challenges assumptions and... plants seeds that often build a bridge to a later resolution.

I imagine your work requires a heavy dose of empathy for every interaction. How do you recharge from a day of managing other people's biggest life stressors?

Personally, family time is the best reset... I recharge by traveling as much as I can, getting outdoors with my wife and now mostly-grown children, where hopefully our phones do not have reception, and, of course, our dogs. My wife is a veterinarian so it's a motley crew.

On the commercial law side, who is your typical client? Is there a commercial field that constitutes most of your work?

My litigation clients are primarily entrepreneurs, owners of closely held and mid-sized businesses and professionals seeking pragmatic solutions to difficult problems. Much of my work involves ownership disputes, business divorces and all types of breaches of contract and business-related torts.

You did undergrad and law school in Brooklyn. Are you a native New Yorker? Who does the best New York-style pizza in the Valley?

I am a native New Yorker. Grew up in Park Slope, Brooklyn, before it was the hipster capital it is now. There may be video of me singing "New York, New York" [after] the Knicks' championship. Honestly, nothing here truly replicates a New York slice... but Pizza to the Rescue is a local favorite.

Who is your all-time favorite fictional attorney?

I'll go with *Law & Order*'s Jack McCoy. He is relentless, prepared and guided by a strong moral compass, and I particularly enjoy the episodes where he wrestles with hard choices rather than pretending the law always produces black and white answers.

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CIVIL LAW LITIGATION

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CIVIL LAW TRANSACTIONAL

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CONSTRUCTION

Construction law encompasses the rules and regulations required for planning, designing and constructing buildings as well as the financial institutions, architects, engineers and construction workers involved.

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Companies hire these legal advisers to provide guidance on regulatory compliance, financial reporting, contract negotiation, lawsuit litigation, internal employee concerns and more.

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CORPORATE FINANCE/MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

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- Family Law, Insurance Coverage/Bad Faith
 --- WS ----- RG -----: Western State University College of Law, 1999
 ----- S I N P -----: 25

Please give us the thumbnail on Insurance Coverage/Bad Faith as a legal specialty. What does it entail?

Insurance coverage and bad faith litigation is an intriguing practice that combines meticulous analysis of policy language with evolving legal principles. I've always enjoyed the intellectual challenge of untangling complex coverage issues and resolving difficult questions of policy interpretation. That foundation continues to shape how I approach litigation across a wide range of cases.

You also made our Top Lawyers list in Family Law. Are the two fields connected?

Yes, but only in an ancillary way. Coverage litigation can intersect with family law when insurance issues arise, but its application extends to virtually any type of case where insurance may be implicated. Understanding coverage issues allows me to identify and address insurance questions that can impact litigation strategy and outcomes.

One of your areas of family law expertise is adoptions. What is the most surprising legal complication of adopting?

That it's often less complicated and less expensive than people expect. The biggest challenge is frequently taking the first step and beginning the process. While contested adoptions can be complex and time-consuming, uncontested adoptions are typically much more straightforward.

Guardianships and conservatorships are a hot topic due to well-publicized cases such as that of Britney Spears, Wendy Williams and Bam Margera. What does media coverage both get right and wrong about them?

The media often focuses on the most extreme cases, but the reality is often far more complex. These proceedings typically involve significant medical issues, unique circumstances and competing perspectives that may not be fully captured from the outside. Because guardianship and conservatorship impact an individual's autonomy, the law sets a high standard before one person can assume decision-making authority over another.

You grew up in Argentina and traveled to Brazil frequently. First, sorry about the World Cup. Second, where's the best place in the Valley for Argentine or Brazilian food?

It was a disappointing loss for Argentina, but overall, it was a fantastic World Cup. I look forward to this tournament every four years – it's one of the great sporting events! The Brazilian steak-houses in the Valley do a wonderful job showcasing the traditional churrascaria experience, and we're lucky to have several great options. Unfortunately, we still don't have an authentic Argentine restaurant in the Valley – we need one!

Who is your all-time favorite fictional attorney?

James Spader as Alan Shore [in *Boston Legal*].

"If I wasn't a lawyer, I'd like to be..."

A rock star [and] singer.

2026 TOP LAWYERS

* Top Vote-Getter

CRIMINAL DEFENSE

Enlist a criminal defense attorney to represent you in court when charged with a crime. These trial pros are adept at navigating the criminal justice system, advocating for defendants and negotiating verdicts and sentences.

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Mitchell Stein

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MICHAEL EDGELL

► **FIELD/SPECIALTY:** Labor and Employment

► **LAW SCHOOL/YEAR GRADUATED:** Arizona State University, 2001

► **YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 25

You started your career as a prosecutor. What inspired you to join the private sector?

I enjoyed prosecution, but private practice offered the opportunity to solve a broader range of problems and build long-term relationships with clients. The biggest shift was moving from a case-focused role to a counselor's role, helping clients identify risks early, make sound decisions and prevent disputes before they become lawsuits.

As an expert in labor and employment law, you've written about how social media influences behaviors in the workplace. What are your main takeaways?

Social media blurs personal and professional boundaries. Employees should assume online conduct can affect coworkers, workplace culture and professional reputation. Employers need clear, consistently enforced policies, but must also respect lawful off-duty activity and protected concerted activity.

What does your casework entail? Do you typically represent workers or employers?

I primarily represent employers, especially small and midsize businesses and faith-based organizations. Much of my work is preventive: policies, contracts, training, workplace investigations and day-to-day counseling. When disputes arise, I defend employers in EEOC proceedings and litigation involving discrimination, harassment and other employment claims.

As a faculty associate with Arizona State University, what's your take on the next generation of lawyers?

The students I teach are bright, practical and remarkably comfortable with technology. Gen Z tends to ask more openly why a rule exists and how work fits into a larger life. That is a good perspective and approach.

What interests and hobbies do you cultivate outside your work?

I enjoy traveling and spending time with my family. I am also an unapologetic collector of comics – part nostalgia, part appreciation for the art and design. I enjoy discovering new films and animation with my son, who shares my love of movies and comics. We also enjoy attending San Diego Comic-Con together.

Who is your all-time favorite fictional attorney?

Tom Hagen, as played by Robert Duvall in *The Godfather*. He is calm, prepared, strategic and almost always the most reasonable person in an unreasonable room.

"If I wasn't a lawyer, I'd like to be..."

A film director. Movies were my first passion, and I would want to do something creative.

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DISABILITY LAW
Disability lawyers possess the legal and medical know-how to assist applicants in filing disability claims and protect people living with a disability from discrimination regarding employment, education, housing and other opportunities.

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EDUCATION
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ELDER LAW
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ENERGY MINING
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FAMILY LAW
Anything affecting familial relations – including domestic disputes, divorce, adoption and child protective proceedings – falls into this legal category.

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GOVERNMENT & ADMINISTRATIVE

If a case involves the creation, administration or regulation of government agencies, it falls under this bureaucratic specialty's umbrella.

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HEALTH CARE LAW

This broad specialty includes medical malpractice, privacy violations, experimental drugs and more.

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IMMIGRATION LAW

Who is allowed to enter the country – and for how long – is the concern of immigration law, which includes visas, residence, refugee status and deportation.

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INSURANCE COVERAGE BAD FAITH

This specialty scrutinizes insurers – particularly those acting in “bad faith,” or who unreasonably fail to uphold their responsibilities to protect insurance holders.

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INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY TECHNOLOGY

One of the fastest-growing legal specialties in the U.S., IP&T is at the core of every business transaction. It includes intangible assets like music and new tech.

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LABOR & EMPLOYMENT

Wage and hour regulations, discrimination, collective bargaining and wrongful termination all fall under the purview of labor and employment law.

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LAND USE/ ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

What can a plot of land be used for? And how do those uses affect the water, air and wildlife conditions? Those are the questions of this legal specialty.

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**AUSTIN KURTZ**

► **FIELD/SPECIALTY:** Personal Injury

► **LAW SCHOOL/YEAR GRADUATED:** UCLA School of Law, 2015

► **YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 10

Personal injury is among the largest legal specialties, and arguably the most visible. What's the biggest misconception about the field?

[That] everyone advertises simply because they want to see their own face everywhere. The reality is that personal injury is an extremely competitive field. Advertising is necessary to get people's attention, build relationships and create opportunities to help clients. In the past, the best lawyers often got the best cases because word of mouth within the community was enough. In the modern personal injury world, you have to advertise, build a brand and put yourself out there.

You manage personal injury cases from intake to settlement or trial. What's your favorite part of a case?

The best part of a case is the resolution. Whether that means reaching a fair settlement that properly compensates a client or going to trial and getting to present the entire case, that is the moment everything has been building toward.

Even though you're based in Scottsdale, you're also licensed to practice in California and Colorado. How might this benefit a local client?

Having lawyers with multistate licenses expands our connections beyond the Arizona legal community and allows us to build relationships with lawyers and professionals throughout the country. Those relationships can also be valuable when a case extends into another jurisdiction. Through pro hac vice admission and partnerships with attorneys licensed in other states, we can help clients pursue cases outside the states where we are directly licensed.

What interests and hobbies do you cultivate outside your work?

I am a horrific recreational basketball player and awful golfer, but I love getting out there and playing with my friends. I blame my lack of athleticism on the fact that my real passion is spending time with my family... Outside of work, life is about hanging out with them, having fun and enjoying our time together.

Who is your all-time favorite fictional attorney?

I love television lawyers because I think they're absurd. My personal favorite is Peter Bash from *Franklin & Bash*. I don't think that show gets nearly enough love.

"If I wasn't a lawyer, I'd like to be..."

A serial entrepreneur. I love practicing law, but one of the best parts of starting a law firm has been getting the opportunity to participate in the marketing, growth and strategy behind the business. Sometimes, that side of building the firm is almost as much fun as practicing law.

2026 TOP LAWYERS

* Top Vote-Getter

MEDICAL MALPRACTICE — DEFENSE

These lawyers protect the interests (and career longevity) of physicians and the institutions at which they are employed in medical malpractice cases.

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ROBERT MITCHELL

- **FIELD/SPECIALTY:** Securities Law
- **LAW SCHOOL/YEAR GRADUATED:** Arizona State University, 1987
- **YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 39

What precisely is Securities Law? Give us the elevator pitch.

Securities law covers disputes over investments and between investors [and] industry professionals, [including] broker-dealers, advisors and firms in FINRA arbitrations. [It also covers] fraud claims and employment disputes among financial advisors. I've represented nearly every type of party in hundreds of these cases.

Describe a few of your typical clients. Is there a type of case that constitutes the bulk of your work?

Entrepreneurial, hardworking and usually facing high-stakes stress. My clients run the gamut, but they share a drive to build businesses. I do the legal heavy lifting for them in their legal matters so they can get back to what they do best. Learning how they approach business is the best perk of the job.

Do you also work the sell-side of the industry? If an Arizona business wanted to go public, for instance, would you take them as a client?

No – that's transactional work, and I'd refer them to a good securities transactional attorney. I only handle litigation.

You're no stranger to high-profile cases. Which do you think made the biggest impact, both in terms of coverage and the legal field?

A \$38 million jury verdict I won in federal court for a Los Angeles real estate investor in a defamation case made *The Wall Street Journal's* front page. The case featured an attempted murder-for-hire plot and experts tied to the Bernie Madoff and O.J. Simpson cases. It opened the door to other reputation-based matters – clients wrongly portrayed in a movie, book or corporate press release.

You're a regular public speaker on the topic of effective trial opening statements. What's the single most important must-do for a strong opening statement, and what's the single most never-do?

Must-do: Tell a compelling, honest story that connects with human emotion. Never-do: Over-promise and under-deliver. Juries never forget a promise you didn't keep.

You're a member of Mensa! What's that like? Do you have meetups?

I qualified for and joined Mensa years ago, though I haven't been an active member. It was a fun credential in my 20s – these days my work keeps my brain busy enough.

"If I wasn't a lawyer, I'd like to be..."

Right here. I actually love what I do. Helping successful and good people navigate extreme stress and complex disputes is deeply rewarding.

MEDICAL MALPRACTICE – PLAINTIFF

These lawyers represent patients in medical malpractice cases. The burden of proof is on them to show malpractice did indeed occur.

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PERSONAL INJURY

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PRODUCT LIABILITY

Defective or dangerous products? Manufacturers, distributors, suppliers and retailers are held accountable for consumer items in this area of law.

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PROFESSIONAL MALPRACTICE

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REAL ESTATE

The legal definition of real estate? Land and the buildings on it. Also covered in this specialty: who can own a property and how exactly it can be used.

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SECURITIES LAW
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SPORTS LAW
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TAX LAW
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TRIBAL LAW
Encompasses the legal systems, codes and institutions created by Native American tribes to govern their members and territories.

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WILLS ESTATES TRUSTS
If you want to make sure your affairs are handled in a specific way after you die, consult a lawyer who specializes in this kind of legal planning.

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WORKERS COMPENSATION
This subset of employment law protects employees who become injured or disabled while doing their jobs.

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JADA ALLENDER

- **FIELD/SPECIALTY:** Sports Law
- **LAW SCHOOL/YEAR GRADUATED:** Arizona State University, 2021
- **YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 5

Sports Law spent a few years in the Top Lawyers penalty box, for lack of nominees. That's no longer the case. Has the Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) revolution been a big shot in the arm for the specialty?

Yes, but NIL is not the whole story. Sports has been an increasingly popular asset class. All major leagues now allow private equity ownership at some level, family offices have been piling in, women's sports valuations are multiplying and new areas like pickleball are scaling quickly, which have all contributed to the growth.

What other services can a Sports Law attorney provide clients besides negotiating endorsements and contracts?

Most of my work goes beyond athlete deals. What keeps me busy is the business behind sports and entertainment: ownership and franchise structures, media deals, sponsorship transactions, brand and IP strategy, governance, investments and more.

Is there a pro athlete you regard as the gold standard for how to navigate their off-field career?

Serena Williams. In addition to several brand partnerships and business moves related to her sport, she has Serena Ventures, which has a real seat at the business table through ownership and investing.

You started law school at 19, around the age that most people start undergrad. What was that like, and how has it shaped the lawyer you've become?

Honestly, I really enjoyed law school – other than the events I couldn't go to when they were held at bars. Being the youngest in a room teaches you that you can't rely on seniority, you earn your credibility by letting the work do the talking.

What do you enjoy doing when you're off the clock?

Watching University of Oregon football games – Go Ducks! – and attending stand-up comedy shows.

"If I wasn't a lawyer, I'd like to be..."

A travel blogger. I'd happily spend a year living out of a suitcase exploring new countries.

Buchalter

Businesses turn to Buchalter for sophisticated legal counsel that is practical, commercial, and results-driven. We advise entrepreneurs, growth companies, lenders, real estate and private equity funds, strategic and financial buyers, property owners, franchisors, and employers across the full business lifecycle.

The Buchalter advantage is simple: deep Arizona market knowledge backed by the resources of a 600-lawyer national platform. We help clients navigate complex challenges, capitalize on opportunities, and achieve their business objectives. Below are seven of our leading lawyers.



Craig Cartwright
REAL ESTATE TRANSACTIONS



Matthew Levine
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Kevin Lytle
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600 Attorneys, 15 Offices, 90 Years

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