Can Robots be Lawyers?

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Popular media suggests that computers are about to replace humans – even in white-collar professions like lawyering. But new research from SSNer Frank Levy and his colleague Dana Remus raises cautions. Automation can help, but today’s robots cannot handle complex tasks or make nuanced judgments.

In their new working paper released online through the Social Science Research Network and discussed in a recent New York Times article entitled "The End of Lawyers? Not So Fast," Levy and Remus show that emerging software is still limited in the range and complexity of tasks it can perform. As in many professions, computerization helps human workers become more efficient and accurate. But robots cannot mirror the values and ideals of the legal profession or navigate day-to-day challenges that aren't black-and-white and require nuanced judgments.

Frank Levy is the Rose Professor of Urban Economics Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and a lecturer in the Department of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School. He studies the impact of computerized work on skilled jobs, as discussed in his previous SSN brief with Richard Murnane on “How Computers are Transforming American Jobs.”