

# Kirkland's Palantir Deal Is About the Ontology, Not the AI

*And the idea behind it may matter more to a twelve-lawyer litigation boutique than to the firm that just committed half a billion dollars.*

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By **David Eiras** · Founder, Satrix.ai · June 26, 2026

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On June 4, 2026, Kirkland & Ellis (the world's highest-grossing law firm) announced it had partnered with Palantir to co-build a custom platform for private-equity fund formation. The coverage fixated on the number: a reported \$500 million committed to AI over the next few years. But the number isn't the story. Sitting quietly in the announcement was a far less glamorous word that explains why Kirkland chose to *build* its own system rather than buy one off the shelf: **ontology**.

If you practice in a commercial-litigation boutique, that word, not the half a billion dollars, is the part worth your attention. Because the thing Kirkland paid to build is something a small firm can build at small-firm scale, and it has nothing to do with owning the biggest model.

## So what is an “ontology,” really?

Palantir's own explainer puts it bluntly: an ontology “represents the *decisions* in an enterprise, not simply the data.”

Almost all legal technology is data-centric. Your document management system holds documents. Your docketing tool holds dates. Your billing system holds time entries. Your review platform holds a database of records. Each is a competent filing cabinet. But none of them knows that *this* email is the evidence for *this* element of *this* claim against *this* defendant, to be argued by *this* deadline, which is computed from *this* court's rules. That knowledge lives in a senior associate's head and in the gaps between four systems that don't talk to each other.

An ontology is the layer that models those relationships: the “connective tissue,” in Kirkland's words, that links the moving parts into a single operational system. Palantir offers a useful metaphor: if your data are the *nouns* of the business (the matters, parties, documents, deadlines), then actions are the *verbs* (file, serve, calendar, settle). An ontology is what lets you write complete sentences: reason across the nouns and the verbs together, then act.

*The Ontology represents the decisions in an enterprise, not simply the data.*

And it closes the loop. As Palantir puts it, “closing the action loop... is what distinguishes an operational system from an analytical system.” A dashboard tells you what happened. An ontology lets a decision flow back out into the systems that actually run the work.

## **Why this is a litigation story, not just a Big Law one**

Kirkland applied the idea to fund formation (side letters, obligations, closing commitments, ongoing compliance) precisely because that work is a tangle of interdependent documents and promises that no general-purpose chatbot can hold together. The firm’s own stated reason for not buying off the shelf was that such tools are trained on “widely available market knowledge,” so they serve the common denominator and can’t knit together the specific moving parts of a live transaction.

Commercial litigation has exactly that shape. The interdependencies just wear different clothes: claims instead of covenants, deadlines instead of closings. Here is what that looks like on the ground.

### **THE SETUP**

#### **An ordinary bad Tuesday at a boutique**

Picture Hale & Brennan, a twelve-lawyer commercial-litigation boutique. It defends a mid-market manufacturer, Northwind Components, in a contract dispute with a former distributor. Fact discovery closes in three weeks. There’s a scheduling order, a document review well underway, three depositions booked, and a damages model the partner has been refining for the mediation everyone assumes is coming.

Then opposing counsel files an amended complaint. It adds a fraud claim.

In most boutiques, what follows is a flurry of partner emails, a worried squint at the calendar, and a junior associate told to “figure out what this changes.” What it actually changes lives in two senior litigators’ heads and across four systems that have never spoken to one another.

### **STEP ONE · VISIBILITY**

#### **Start from the connections**

In a firm with an ontology, the partner starts from the relationships, not the inbox. The new fraud claim is an object. It links to its legal elements — and through those elements, to the documents and witnesses that bear on each one, the deadlines it creates or moves, the firm’s prior work product on similar claims, and the exposure if it lands. One question, asked in the language of the case rather than the language of four databases: *what does this claim touch?*

The same connections surface something the scramble would miss for weeks. The fraud allegations rest on the same set of representations already at issue in a

second matter the firm handles for a Northwind affiliate. Like a shared raw material running through two products, this one claim runs through two matters at once.

#### STEP TWO · SIMULATION

### Test the options before committing

Before anyone commits, the team runs the choices as scenarios. Move to dismiss the fraud claim on the heightened pleading standard, or answer it and fold it into discovery? Each path is modeled against the schedule, the budget, the added discovery burden, and the revised exposure — staged in a safe, sandboxed copy so the downstream consequences are visible before they're real. The deadline math isn't eyeballed; it's computed from the court's rules and the standing scheduling order.

#### STEP THREE · ACTION

### Let the decision write itself back

When the partner chooses, the decision doesn't die in a memo. It writes back. The litigation calendar updates with the new and shifted dates. The matter budget revises. The review protocol expands to capture the fraud-relevant custodians. A draft motion is staged for the partner's edit. The affiliate matter is flagged to its responsible lawyer. The systems that run the work are updated by the same decision that was just made — with a human signing off on each step, and every step logged.

#### STEP FOUR · LEARNING

### Keep what the firm just figured out

Because the whole sequence is captured — what was decided, on which facts, with what result — the next amended complaint isn't a cold start. This response becomes a reusable pattern. The "tribal knowledge" that usually walks out the door with a retiring partner becomes something the firm actually keeps.

## A reality check

None of this is magic, and none of it is free. Kirkland is spending at a scale no boutique can touch. An ontology has to be built and maintained; the underlying systems still have to hold clean data; and the lawyer, not the model, still makes the call and owns it. The lesson of the deal isn't that every firm needs Palantir.

It's that the firms pulling ahead are investing in the *decision layer*, not just buying one more tool that answers questions about documents. That gap, between data that sits still and decisions that move, is the same whether you're forming a multi-billion-dollar fund or defending a four-million-dollar contract claim.

And it's a gap a boutique is unusually well placed to close. A small firm's universe of matters, clients, and recurring claim types is finite — small enough to model genuinely

well. That's the bet behind what we're building at **Satrix.ai**: the decision layer for litigation boutiques, not just another chatbot.

We're working with a small group of boutiques right now to build it *with* them, not just for them. If that's you — if you've ever watched an amended complaint detonate an ordinary Tuesday and wished you could see, in one place, everything it touched — **let's talk.**

**David Eiras** is the founder of Satrix.ai, building the decision layer for commercial-litigation boutiques. If you run or practice at one and want a seat in the early group shaping it, reach out — founder to founder.

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**Sources & further reading:** Kirkland & Ellis press release, "Kirkland & Ellis and Palantir Partner to Transform Private Equity Fundraising" (June 4, 2026) · Palantir, "[Why Create an Ontology?](#)" · Artificial Lawyer, "Kirkland + Palantir Partner For PE Platform." Quotations from Palantir's ontology documentation; the Hale & Brennan / Northwind scenario is an illustrative composite.