Boosting the Rate of Technology Adoption

By Aaron Baer

For many observers of the legal industry, the seemingly glacial change of innovation can be astounding. After all, it’s not unreasonable to wonder how the use of data analytics, process mapping or new technology within a law firm can be considered to be innovative. But the reality is that lawyers (and law firms) are often resistant to change. Being trained to identify all potential risks and being subject to a system that relies so heavily on precedent doesn’t exactly align itself well to change. And of course, there’s the incentive misalignment that will remain present in the legal profession so long as the billable hour reigns supreme.

My journey in the legal innovation space began four years ago. In that time, we’ve adopted some of the world’s leading products to help provide more efficient legal services without sacrificing quality. That many of these service providers are based in Toronto — one of the world’s leading legal tech hubs — is simply a bonus.

Though sometimes it feels like things haven’t changed (and they certainly haven’t moved at the pace I expected, nor that consumers deserve), it’s only when you look backwards that you realize how far we’ve come. When I reached out to legal tech companies four years ago, most were shocked that a lawyer from a leading Bay Street firm was reaching out to them to solicit their services. In many cases, these companies were desperately trying to make inroads with law firms that didn’t understand the value proposition for their products.

Needless to say, that’s no longer the case. The list of legal tech providers grows longer and longer each year, as do the opportunities for lawyers and law firms to provide better client service through improved process, better technology and engaged employees who constantly strive to improve their service offering.

I like to say that adopting new technology is easy: if you pay whatever a vendor is asking, then you can have whatever technology you want. Of course, the real adoption — the actual use of the technology that you’re paying for — is the hard part. And this is the part that many firms — in spite of the glowing press releases they pump out touting their latest accomplishments — struggle with. And make no mistake, we’re far from perfect.

What’s been interesting in the last year is the changing tides: in part, due to continuing pressure from new competitors, as well as (understandably) increased cost consciousness from clients; but in large part due to successful internal efforts.

It always brings a smile to my face when it’s our more senior lawyers who are ensuring that our junior lawyers are leveraging the technology we have available. Of course, there’s generally a strong desire from our youngest lawyers to take advantage of technology and process improvements to get work done more efficiently, but it’s been great to see some of our biggest internal champions be senior lawyers (some of whom leverage the technology themselves; others whom grasp the benefits it brings for clients, even if they won’t be the one using it).

Interestingly, there’s another group of lawyers who is rarely mentioned in these types of articles (which normally focus on the curmudgeonly older lawyer who rides their horse and buggy to work, contrasted with the overworked millennial seeking reprieve from another 12-hour day stuck doing contract review manually when leading tools like Diligen can make the process far more efficient). That group is the senior associate/younger partner — too senior in many cases to be the ones using the newer technology themselves (as these products are often the most valuable for the more-repetitive and process-driven work traditionally performed by junior associates), but far too young (and with far too many years of practice left) to be in a position to ignore them. It’s this group of lawyers that bears the most risk of being left behind as the pace of change in the industry picks up, and this presents a fantastic reverse-mentoring opportunity (a
largely foreign concept in the legal profession).

It is, after all, these senior associates/younger partners who will ascend to the upper ranks of law firm management in the near future. And if they can master these new technologies and new ways of thinking, they will be well-positioned to lead their firms forward in the future, while also having a first-hand understanding of the challenges of internal adoption and change management.

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