

Harnessing the Momentum of Change to Build a Legal Culture That Supports Digital Transformation

By Curt Meltzer, Litera Evangelist

What a year this has been. Spurred by the pandemic, law firms and corporate legal departments have abruptly discovered that they can, in fact, work remotely, and that they can do so quite well. Paper has turned out to be less necessary for legal work than we all thought. Zoom and other videoconference methods have taken the place of face-to-face meetings and expensive travel so completely that many wonder whether we'll ever go back to our old ways of operating.

As legal professionals, we've all gotten a kick start on our [digital transformation](#)—but now is not the time to rest on our laurels or congratulate ourselves on our progress. Instead, we should harness that momentum to build a culture that will support our continued transformation.

To understand how, we should first look at what stands in the way.

Legal Practice Has Resisted the Digital Transformation

Let's start by clarifying what we mean by "digital transformation." I don't mean layering technology on top of "the way we've always done things"; that's like putting a new roof on a house with a crumbling foundation. I'm talking about the wholesale reinvention of legal service delivery through technology. While [legal professionals have dragged their feet](#), other industries have seen remarkable increases in profitability after embracing that transformation.

We've long had access to videoconferencing capabilities, collaboration tools, editable PDFs, cell phones, laptop computers, and, with all of those, the ability to work from home (or anywhere else). Only a tiny percentage of lawyers have taken advantage of those options, while IT departments have consistently bemoaned the difficulty of convincing lawyers to adopt tools that would dramatically enhance their efficiency.

All that changed this year. The pandemic provided a unique—and hopefully once-in-a-lifetime—opportunity to upend some of the challenges and mindsets that have plagued legal practice for years. We've seen utilization of existing technologies skyrocket. Clearly, the tools weren't the problem; our culture was. The billable structure of legal practice, the hierarchical distribution of power in most law offices, and the very nature of law, with its reliance on precedent and tradition, have combined to make lawyers exceptionally change-resistant. Yet to achieve digital transformation, "[a strong bias toward change is critical](#)."

So how do we get there?

How Legal Professionals Can Find the Motivation to Make a Cultural Shift

I see three straightforward ways that legal professionals can tap into the motivation they need to make the cultural shift toward digital transformation.

First, there's the necessity born of the pandemic. At least in the U.S., working from home is the "new normal" for the foreseeable future. Law firms and corporate legal departments have started [rethinking their reliance on paper-based processes, along with the massive infrastructure and huge offices needed](#)

[to accommodate them](#). Legal professionals can use the momentum of the pandemic and its associated changes to investigate what they're doing well and what they could improve.

Second—and this is big—lawyers need to transform to meet client expectations. As a rule, both corporate counsel and law firm lawyers do what it takes to make their clients happy. Those clients are undergoing their own digital transformations and investing considerably in technology. They want to see that their suppliers and service providers are doing the same. This is a highly motivating force, even for the most change-averse lawyers.

Finally, there's the internal motivation of investing in your own future. This one is tough. Yes, learning a new approach will take time and—temporarily—reduce efficiency. This is a hard pill to swallow for lawyers who feel that their tried-and-true approaches are working well. After all, lawyers are paid for their time, which makes them reluctant to invest time in anything that doesn't return an immediate profit. But David Maister makes this point brilliantly: "[What you do with your paid time determines your current income, but what you do with your unpaid, non-reimbursed time determines your future.](#)"

If you want to stay afloat during the pandemic, keep up with your clients, and set yourself up for a successful future, now is the time to learn how to use technology to reinvent your practice.

Start Your Cultural Shift Today

Chances are your legal practice looks entirely different now than it did just four or five months ago. If you've been impressed by the way you've changed and the resulting improvements in your work, don't let that momentum slip away. We still have the rest of this pandemic to get through. Our clients are still demanding more. And we have our futures to prepare for.

This is the time to think about how [temporary changes might become permanent](#). What else could you do to continue the digital transformation of your legal practice?