



(<https://www.legalfutures.co.uk/blog/a-blueprint-for-innovation/print/>)

A blueprint for innovation



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Posted by Dan Bindman, Associate Editor at *Legal Futures*

As the world of legal practice moves from a state where innovation is not just rewarded but expected as a norm by commercial clients and the label 'not innovative' is the kiss of death for a law firm's hopes of winning work, the question of what innovation looks like becomes vitally important.

Many UK firms have grasped the innovation nettle, adopting a new approach to service that has paid dividends. Appointing a dedicated member of staff to lead efforts appears to be increasingly common.

In day-to-day practice what is required, above all, is a mindset change, the experts say. You will be open to collaboration with other disciplines, and have a laser focus on the specific needs of your client – their so-called 'pain points' to use a current buzz phrase.

Ask someone familiar with stimulating innovation in law to define this mindset and you may first be given examples of what is decidedly not innovative as illustration.

For example, reheating a modernisation project that your law firm has undertaken and trying to persuade a client that it is an innovation that will work for them, is not going to fool anyone, says Michele Destefano, a US lawyer and founder of collaborative think tank Law Without Walls – which aims to bring a human-centred design perspective to law – in her recent book *Legal Upheaval* (<https://www.legalfutures.co.uk/latest-news/lawyers-need-to-see-benefits-of-innovation-says-guru/>).

"That's showing that you do not understand their business at all and haven't taken the time to figure out what they need, and you're trying to force fit some shiny toy you've made for some other purpose. That's definitely not innovation."

The book is a weighty effort. After an introductory chapter covering the sweep of ongoing technological and regulatory developments in legal practice, followed by chapters breaking down the anatomy of legal practice and lawyers' need to be open to change, the author sets out a blueprint for innovation.

Coming up with a generic charter for change that matches the myriad needs of firms and clients is hard, but the book goes about it systematically, albeit apparently targeted at large firms employing international talent.

It outlines a four-month "innovation cycle" with overlapping phases aimed at multi-disciplinary teams that include lawyers – their members distributed around the globe.

Once a team bonds via group exercises, it works on solutions using virtual connections, video conferences and webinars, backed by coaching and mentoring. Then, finally, teams present their solutions to a panel of multi-disciplinary judges in a celebratory 'community event'.

Ms Destefano gives the example of entrepreneurial teams being judged by venture capitalist judges.

At its heart, she says, innovation for law firms means thinking about a service change that puts the client's interest first.

There are new software, bots, digital platforms and portals, and automated and digitalised products to help with contracts, she points out. But innovation will probably take the form of small increments rather than 'big bang' interventions – what she describes as "lasting incremental change that adds value yet appears small on the surface".

Giving the cautionary tale of a bank's general counsel inviting a panel of firms to produce an update on legal developments, she relates how the lawyers found it impossible to suppress their desires to claim credit and identify their individual contribution and law firm 'brand' at every turn.

Worse still, the lawyers were on a first-name basis with each other and when they met with the client they did not introduce themselves, so he had no clue who they were.

Her next book, which she has started writing, will include more concrete examples of innovative practice.

Firms should take care not to send out an innovation rainmaker who talks a good game, but the client is billed in the same old way at the end of it.

Having the client write in a portion of the bill equal to the profit margin, much as you might add a tip for good service in a restaurant, may be a step too far for many firms. But it is certainly innovative.



Getting the plan right: Put the client's interests first

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