

## The Reinvention Imperative for Lawyers: Futures Forum Recap

In the first Futures Forum [session](#) of 2026, moderated by College of Law Practice Management Fellow Terri Mottershead, Professor Michele DeStefano offered a clear-eyed assessment of how rapidly changing client expectations, technology, and leadership demands are reshaping the legal profession. The conversation focused on preparing for the future, specifically on how lawyers and law firms must adapt to changing expectations regarding leadership and technology before external forces leave them with no real choice.

DeStefano, a professor at Harvard Law School and a leading researcher on the legal profession, began by situating her perspective in an unconventional career path. Before law school, she spent nearly eight years in advertising and marketing, including roles at Leo Burnett and Levi Strauss. That background, she explained, fundamentally shapes how she understands legal services. In both marketing and law, success depends on a deep understanding of the client, how they operate, the pressures they face, and how they experience service delivery.

From that foundation, DeStefano identified two dominant demands she consistently hears from clients across her global research: innovation and client centricity. Importantly, she framed client centricity not as better manners or faster responses, but as a shift away from prioritizing legal advice alone and toward designing the overall client experience. As technical legal work becomes more standardized and accessible, she argued, “it’s a focus on how we do things versus what we do,” with experience increasingly driving differentiation.

Artificial intelligence featured prominently in the discussion, though not as a replacement for lawyers. DeStefano described AI as a leveling force that commoditizes certain tasks while making judgment, experience, and leadership more valuable. Senior lawyers, in particular, benefit from the ability to evaluate outputs, recognize errors, and deploy AI strategically. She cautioned that, without foundational expertise,

these tools are difficult to use effectively and likened AI to a quiet but powerful assistant—“a secret friend”—that enhances rather than replaces professional judgment.

The conversation also explored how firms are responding at the organizational level. DeStefano defended the use of pilots as a practical way to lower risk and overcome cultural resistance, while warning that pilots without a unifying strategy can stall progress. She emphasized the growing importance of multidisciplinary teams, sprint-based collaboration, and closer alignment between law firms, in-house teams, and business stakeholders. These models often clash with traditional billing structures and siloed firm hierarchies.

The need for adaptive leadership emerged as a central theme to guide organizations through uncertainty without predetermined solutions. DeStefano stressed that many of today’s challenges, from AI governance to workforce expectations, don’t have ready-made answers and require leaders who can facilitate collective learning rather than dictate outcomes.

The session closed with a call to action. DeStefano urged participants to seek out discomfort as a catalyst for growth, encouraging them to “do something that scares you to death” and “go challenge yourself.” She pointed to innovation communities, sprint-based programs, and cross-disciplinary learning as practical entry points for reinvention. As an added resource, she shared a recommended reading list to help attendees continue developing the skills and perspective that will define successful legal professionals in the years ahead.

### Blickstein Group Analysis

Professor Michele DeStefano’s remarks land hardest not as a meditation on artificial intelligence, but as a diagnosis of misalignment. The real pressure on the legal profession is not that AI exists, but that it exposes how much of legal work, and legal



leadership, has been organized around assumptions that no longer hold. Technology is the accelerant, not the root cause.

At the center of that shift is the changing nature of client relationships. As AI standardizes and democratizes technical legal tasks, differentiation moves decisively toward judgment, context, and trust. The Cream / Core / Commodity framework provides a way to segment work based on its economic and strategic characteristics: Cream work is highly differentiated, relationship-driven, and difficult to replace; Core work is repeatable, predictable, and central to ongoing client relationships; Commodity work is standardized, process-driven, and highly competitive. This framework is foundational because it informs nearly every subsequent decision: pricing, staffing, technology investment, delivery models, and growth strategy.

With this framework in mind, it's clear why DeStefano's emphasis on client centricity is not a call for better "service," but for deeper integration with client decision-making, understanding business constraints, risk tolerance, and how legal advice is actually used. Firms that still sell expertise as their main differentiator risk being seen as trying to fix problems clients no longer consider hard to solve, thanks to new technologies.

The profession's reliance on pilots reflects this tension. Pilots are useful in a risk-averse environment. But without a coherent strategy around where the organization is headed, experimentation becomes noise. Incremental testing cannot substitute for architectural thinking about workflows, incentives, pricing, and governance, especially when multidisciplinary collaboration and sprint-based work collide directly with hourly billing models that reward isolation over integration. However, pilots should be used downstream to make sure that the solutions identified to support the organizational strategy actually work as intended.

Law firm leaders are increasingly asked to guide organizations through problems with no settled solutions, yet they lack the authority structures common in other industries. The result is a familiar paradox: strong insight, slow execution. Reinvention stalls not



because lawyers lack intelligence or motivation, but because the system resists coordinated change. However, at many firms, the various partners carry the burden when it comes to resistance to change. According to Blickstein Group's [2025 Law Firm COO Survey](#), the biggest obstacle to implementing change is the partners as a whole. Not far behind is the inability to form a strategic consensus.

Firms that “wait and see” may preserve short-term stability, but at the cost of long-term relevance to clients already transforming how they operate. Firms that experiment through pilots but lack a strategy waste time and resources. The real risk, then, is not technological disruption but that clients will find other ways to take advantage by implementing their own tech solutions, bringing more work in-house, and using Alternative Legal Service Providers (ALSPs). The opportunity for law firms, who are the providers of choice, is to get ahead of this and suggest solutions, which takes it back to strategy.

Reinvention is more than adopting the latest technology. It comes from proactively aligning leadership, incentives, and client experience into a coherent operating model, rather than waiting until other firms have adapted and clients have moved on.

