

# CIO Review

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**C**olleen Nihill is the firm's chief knowledge management and practice services officer. In this role, she leads a multidisciplinary team of business professionals who support the firm's 15 diverse practices and internal business functions to optimize the way that work is accomplished through matter planning, process design, and document automation technologies.

The legal industry, like many of the sectors it services, has witnessed large-scale operational disruption in connection with the pandemic. The combination of shuttered offices, a dispersed workforce, an increase in client demand, and myriad digital advancements has law firm leaders rethinking the way they practice law. There is a greater appetite for change and an explicit recognition that digital transformation is not only a competitive differentiator, but a true business imperative. To successfully drive this model forward, law firms must execute a strategy focused on people, process, and technology. The reality of this new environment, however, requires a fresh approach to this framework and a reordering of the importance and emphasis on each factor.

• **TECHNOLOGY**

Law firms previously sought out legal technology vendors over those with a broader focus because of a belief that law firm needs were unique. But the pandemic highlighted many uses for technology that law firms shared with other industries. For example, the need to collaborate with peers, co-author papers remotely, automate commonly used documents,



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# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE LEGAL INDUSTRY:

*AN UPDATED APPROACH USING A TRADITIONAL MODEL*

By **Colleen F. Nihill**, Chief Knowledge Management & Practice Services Officer, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius

sort through large quantities of data, and produce high-quality deliverables exists in all business sectors. Accordingly, vendors that have not previously been part of the legal ecosystem have begun courting law firms to tap into this \$150 billion industry. Many of these “new” vendors for law firms are established companies with stable financials and mature operating models that significantly reduce the risks associated with imbedding new applications directly into legal workflows. Since these technologies are not as well known as the suite of Microsoft tools with which lawyers regularly interface, they require more “care and feeding” to be properly adopted. Regardless of which technology is being employed to address a particular use case, there will be no transformation without qualified people to guide the implementation, adoption, and maintenance of new technology offerings.

#### • PROCESS

Lawyers tend to work autonomously and perform tasks in nuanced ways even when working in the same practice area or on similar matters. So, it’s not easy to document a legal workflow with standard operating procedures. But when the lawyers involved in a specific matter can identify who does which task, how that task is done, and which, if any, digital assets are being used, a law firm can make the


most of a piece of technology. The idea of stepping back and engaging in design-thinking sessions to envision how to make improvements is not something that is traditionally taught in law school, nor is it commonly embedded into the practice of law. Additionally, it is not a billable activity—the building block of every law firm’s revenue structure. To successfully move forward with these types of initiatives and help advance practice, law firms can bring on a set of highly trained and multidisciplinary professionals that work side by side with the lawyers to ensure that lawyer time is managed efficiently and that there is governance around the exercise of process improvement.

#### • PEOPLE

Law firms have a proven track record of hiring technology teams that oversee back-office operations such as information security, application maintenance, networking, systems architecture, and incident management, among other functions. These roles have grown in importance and created a subset of specialized professional staff. But individuals who work directly with lawyers to help change the practice of law must possess a different set of skills compared to their traditional IT colleagues. They must have a strong understanding of the business of law, an ability to understand discrete areas of practice, and specialist pedigrees in certain areas of technology. Most importantly, they must have soft skills to

garner the trust and respect of law firm leaders since they will be invited “behind the curtain” to help drive and support change. Four personas are emerging that should be added as new roles that exist in addition to other technology-oriented positions:

- First is “the interpreter,” an individual who can work with groups of lawyers at levels of seniority and engage in unfamiliar discussions centered on how the work is done.
- Second is “the visualizer,” an individual who develops an intuitive user experience and user interfaces with reduced training timeframes to help drive adoption and reduce barriers to usage.
- Third is “the proceduralist,” an individual who is organized and disciplined to ensure that documentation is completed, data governance standards are installed, and routine process auditing occurs.
- Fourth is “the integrator,” an individual who can work with more traditional technology teams to scale and oversee the applications imbedded in legal matters.

It is an exciting time to be part of an industry that is eagerly embracing change. When new voices with different skills join law firms and are deployed correctly, they are able to create solutions to modernize the practice of law, improve client relationships, and push engagements to more successful outcomes. 

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