

An Innovator's Approach to Hybrid: Empathy and Iteration

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Law firms are in a time of innovation. The defining characteristic that differentiates innovation from all other forms of value is its time-based nature: an opportunity for change presents itself not for an infinite period of time, but a finite one. Also, innovation happens in the future, one for which we are provided no data to help us predict what it will hold. Innovation calls us to do the impossible: to build for a future we can't yet see. But—and here's the good news—some ways are better than others for preparing for it.

In law firms, the future we can't see is how to make hybrid successful. The traditional model has been broken, and a remote working model that—prior to the pandemic—never would have been considered, has been proven successful in terms of productivity and profitability.

At the same time, 100% work-from-home was an incomplete model and leaves on the table questions for moving forward: how can we serve our internal and external clients better? For internal stakeholders, the 'better' may translate as: how can we create healthier work environments—including mental well-being, diversity, equity and inclusion, environmental impacts, and more--that attract and retain top talent? Externally, better may mean, how can we design more client-centric delivery of services, so we improve the way we serve our clients?

Recognizing that this is a time of innovation, one way law firms can 'prepare for a future we can't yet see' is through leveraging two key levers: the need for empathy and iteration.

Empathy

Why is 100% remote working incomplete? This is a bold statement when the vast majority of attorneys (86%) have stated a preference to continue some form of work-from-home. While this is true, one thing almost all firms agree on is working in person has huge benefits to building culture, collaboration and mentoring junior members of the firm. To that end, there's a growing sentiment among law firm leaders that fully remote working will not have a long term positive effect on the success of the firm.

In fact, according to the 2022 Citi Hildebrandt Client Advisory, many firms believe the remote environment has damaged personal relationships at work and the sense of belonging amongst many lawyers--and may be a contributor to the ease with which lawyers, from partners to associates, are moving firms.

On the other hand, most firms have learned that mandating a return to the office is a failing plan. Thomson Reuters' 2022 State of the Legal Market found that when firms mandated any kind of return to the office, even hybrid, those firms experienced double the turnover rate of firms that did not.

That's why as of Q4 2022, getting hybrid right is cited as the number one challenge of 2023—and the number one opportunity is designing a return-to-office strategy that excites staff and supports culture, collaboration and connection.

Hoteling is a big part of this strategy – where 93% of firms will be implementing some kind of hybrid or hoteling through 2023/24—a key ingredient in firms' innovation strategy moving forward.

This is unprecedented – but is it innovation? It can be if we fully flesh out both the empathy and iteration factors. Here's more.

Being Intentional with In-Office Time

We have to recognize that cultural challenges to innovation can often be firms' attorneys. Attorneys are skeptical, autonomous and risk averse. They are trained to always scan for risk, precedent oriented, task-confined, and mono-disciplinary. They have no training or muscle memory of innovation, and they work in information silos.

This is why work-from-home works so well for attorneys. If we take empathy to the next level, we realize that attorneys want to be in the office sometimes, but they want that time to be intentionally different from the work they do at home. No attorney wants to come into the office just to say they did: rather, they want to accomplish collaboration and networking needs.

So, if we leverage empathy, we come to the conclusion that intentionality must be baked into hoteling scenarios. With hoteling, at the most basic level, lawyers simply need an app that helps them reserve that desk or conference room. There are a variety of each of these software solutions that exist.

However, if the room booking app helps attorneys “see” where other attorneys are in the office and when they plan to be in the office, then intentionality can become part of the equation. Attorneys are empowered to make decisions about whom they want to work next to and with.

Iteration

The other key lever in innovation is iteration. When creating something new, iteration is the process of refining that idea or concept. This is slightly uncomfortable for law firms and, in particular, attorneys who as described previously are precedent-oriented, trained to scan for risk and mono-disciplinary. Attorneys are trained to get the right answer, not to trial ideas, collect data and feedback, and then iterate—but that’s exactly what firms need to convince attorneys is needed now.

Iteration is the only way forward to a future we cannot predict. When there is no certainty or ‘right answer’, iteration is the process of moving forward. But iteration is also uncomfortable and emotional. It is uncomfortable in that law firms are built to reward predictability, whereas iteration emphasizes pivots based on learning. It is emotional in that it relies on feedback – confirming and disconfirming.

And this is also the good news: iteration does not happen in the dark. For the 93% of firms that are inclined to roll out some kind of hoteling through 2024, data and analytics will be the foundation of successful iterations.

What many firms are now moving forward with is piloting hoteling in one office, gathering the insights of that roll out experience, and then allowing the hoteling technology gather insights on space and occupancy analytics to both iterate the hoteling strategy in the pilot office, but also improve roll outs of hoteling in subsequent offices. What Jennifer also made clear was the need for firms to try something, learn from that trial, and iterate those findings. This is an innovator’s approach to change that is somewhat different than how firms have operated in the past – but it’s working.

Conclusion

Innovation calls us to do the impossible: to build for a future we can’t yet see. This is particularly uncomfortable for law firms and their attorneys who are trained and accustomed to processes where certainty is paramount.

In law firms, the future we can’t see is how to make hybrid successful. However, the innovators’ tools of applying empathy and iteration, firms can work their way to the right strategy that ensures the firm’s space is being utilized optimally and attorneys’ time in the office is intentional.



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