

Designing for Adoption in Law Firms: Getting Generative AI Right from the Start

Generative AI has reached the tipping point in the legal sector. Virtually every large law firm now has multiple solutions deployed and is concurrently exploring pilots on an ongoing basis. Midsize firms, too, are increasingly aware that clients will expect them to keep pace. But there's a difference between deployment and adoption, and recent studies indicate that adoption of this technology remains relatively low among lawyers.

The reasons for this vary. There is still wariness among some lawyers that adopting AI is an indication of a lower skill level. The impact of a productivity tool on billable hours is another factor.

But there are also more fundamental issues: many innovation and IT teams assumed adoption of this seemingly intuitive technology would occur organically, thus there have been – in some instances – fewer resources assigned to strategically driving adoption than perhaps there should have. And when resources are allocated, they're often focused on tool-specific training rather than adoption methodologies.

The fact is: adoption is not about technology, it is about people. The best-designed AI tool will fail if lawyers don't integrate it into their daily workflows. That means adoption must be deliberately engineered well before the first roll-out.

In our new series on adoption, LTH will offer various frameworks for adoption success. In this article, we look at pre-deployment adoption planning: how you can use design choices in the technology you choose to drive later adoption. We'll explore how law firms can design for adoption from day one using behavioral insights, proven innovation frameworks, and early lessons from leading firms.

Adoption as a Behavior-Change Problem

Lawyers are not natural early adopters. They're trained to identify risk rather than novelty, and the incentive structures in law firms, such as billable hours, client satisfaction, and reputation, encourage consistency (doing things the way they've always been done) over experimentation. Cognitive science tells us that professionals tend to elevate and remember losses compared to gains. A new tool must therefore be dramatically better than the old way to justify the switch.

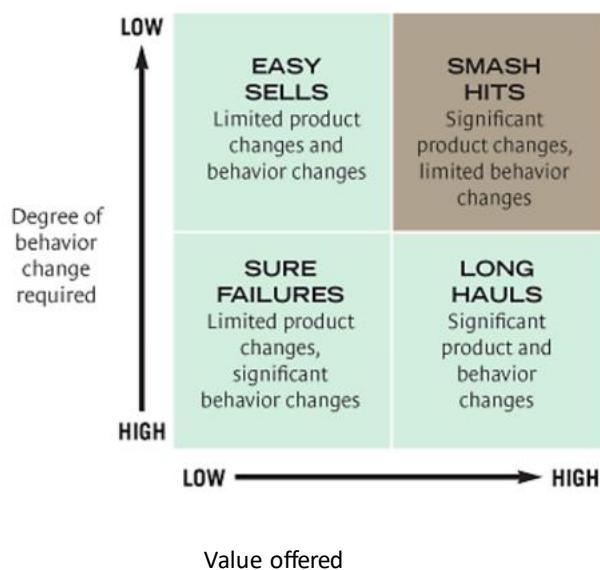
In fact, research in innovation diffusion often cites the “9x better” rule: for a new solution to overcome status quo bias, it must be perceived as at least **nine times** better than the incumbent approach. Communications theorist Everett Rogers called this the “Relative Advantage” theory and considered it the most important driver of adoption. That means even during use case prioritization and solution selection, firms need to be focused on adoption, with special attention given to which solutions are capable of delivering an outsize benefit compared to those whose utility is more incremental.

The lesson: For generative AI solutions, law firms have to prioritize use cases that deliver immediate, obvious value, not abstract promises.

The “Benefit vs. Behavior Change” Lens

One practical way to identify high impact use cases is to map them on two axes:

1. **Benefit to the lawyer or client** (e.g., time saved, quality improved, risk reduced).
2. **Behavior change required** – Is the lawyer working in familiar tools, or must they adopt a whole new platform?



The sweet spot is the top-left quadrant: *high benefit, low behavior change*. Examples include:

- **Drafting first-pass documents in Word** via an embedded AI assistant and clause library.

- **Summarizing and analyzing lengthy contracts or transcripts** directly in the DMS.
- **Generating quick research overviews** from trusted datasets without leaving the firm's knowledge environment.

By contrast, high-benefit but high-behavior-change tools (such as entirely new workflow platforms that require lawyers to work outside of the platforms they're used to sitting in) may still be valuable but will require more sequencing, training, and cultural preparation. Firms should begin with "smash hits" before attempting "long hauls."

The lesson: Use case prioritization is not just about business value. Ease of adoption should also be factored in.

Rogers' Five Attributes of Adoption

Everett Rogers' "Diffusion of Innovation" theory provides another lens for assessing whether a use case is adoption-ready. Rogers identified five attributes of products that explain most of the variance in adoption rates:

1. **Relative advantage** – Is the new solution or way of working clearly better?
2. **Compatibility** – Does the solution align with existing values, workflows, and systems?
3. **Simplicity** – Is it easy to use and understand?
4. **Trialability** – Can lawyers experiment on a limited basis before committing?
5. **Observability** – Can users easily see others benefiting from the solution, or are quick wins easily achieved and shared?

For law firms, relative advantage and compatibility often matter most. If AI tools can integrate directly into Word, Outlook, or the DMS, and produce outputs lawyers recognize as valuable, adoption likelihood increases exponentially – partly because word of mouth about these kinds of wins will travel organically. Trialability and observability can then be engineered through pilots, visible champions, and storytelling about early wins.

The lesson: When identifying solutions, in addition to ensuring they meet technical requirements, consider whether the products you demo and review have the attributes that will make them more likely to be adopted.

Evidence from Leading Firms

Recent deployments illustrate how these principles work in practice.

- **A&O Shearman** rolled out an AI assistant across approximately 3,500 lawyers, starting with narrow but high-value use cases like drafting and summarization. Crucially, the firm emphasized *human review* – creating a “minimum viable trust” model that reassured lawyers while allowing experimentation.
- **Ashurst** rolled out their AI assistant firmwide in June 2024 after one of the market’s most extensive pilots (525+ users, 4k+ pilot queries). As part of the rollout, the Ashurst transformation team developed lists of concrete, practice-specific tasks (e.g., first drafts, due diligence snippets, research summaries) and “inspiration pages” showcasing realized value through lawyer case studies. Instead of abstract demos, these specific examples provided lawyers with clear insight into “tomorrow morning” utility.
- **Clifford Chance** integrated Microsoft Copilot into its global environment, deliberately positioning it as *assistive technology* rather than a threat to legal judgment.
- Other firms, such as **NautaDutilh**, have made adoption progress by embedding AI directly into everyday tools and providing transparent dashboards that show team-level uptake and results.

The common thread: they didn’t just deploy technology; they engineered adoption into the design from the outset of the project.

Adoption as Strategy, Not Afterthought

Perhaps the most important lesson is that adoption planning cannot be bolted on after procurement. It must be woven into the firm’s overall innovation strategy. That includes:

- **Leadership alignment.** Senior partners and practice heads must visibly sponsor AI initiatives and connect them to client service and firm strategy.
- **Education.** Teach lawyers and other staff about AI and why it’s critical that law firms adopt it. Understanding why it’s critical for professionals to use the technology will open minds to new ways of working.
- **Workflow integration.** Most tools should live where lawyers already work -- Word, Outlook, Teams, or the DMS – rather than in standalone portals (there are obvious

exceptions to this, but then the obvious value of the solution must be outsized compared to point solutions).

- **Incentives and recognition.** Firms should consider billable credit for training, recognition for AI champions, or other structural incentives that make adoption feel professionally rewarding.
- **Client alignment.** Communicate clearly how AI supports quality, efficiency, and responsible practice. For many clients, visible adoption of AI (with appropriate safeguards) is a selling point.

Practical Starting Checklist

For firms considering their first or next generative AI rollout, here is a quick design-for-adoption checklist:

- Use case screening.** Apply the benefit vs. behavior-change and Rogers' five attributes tests to any solution being evaluated.
- Pilot with champions.** Identify innovators and early adopters in each practice group.
- Build in trust.** Position AI as assistive, mandate human review, and publish clear guardrails.
- Engineer trialability.** Allow safe sandboxes or practice-area pilots.
- Make wins visible.** Share adoption metrics, testimonials, and case studies internally to showcase value.
- Embed in workflows.** Even if they won't be operating it there, ensure the tool appears in or is visible in the same environment lawyers already use.

The Strategic Payoff

Designing for adoption is not simply about driving usage metrics. Done right, it accelerates return on investment, reassures clients, and positions the firm as an innovator. Equally, it builds lawyers' confidence that AI is not replacing their judgment but augmenting their craft.

In the coming years, the firms that succeed with generative AI will not be those with the flashiest technology. They will be the ones that understand adoption as a human-centered design challenge and build that insight into every step of their strategy.