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The Law Firm Disrupted: A Fresh Face at the Top of an Innovation Leader

By Dan Packel
February 22, 2024

Welcome to The Law Firm Disrupted, a briefing from Law.com editor Dan Packel that surveys new competitive pressures on law firms and how their managers are coping, plus insights on the tactics and tech employed by would-be disruptors.


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We've only got a finite number of reporters in our newsroom, with only a limited amount of time at our disposal. And yet, I'm somewhat regretful at the fact that we didn't have the resources to reach out beyond the Am Law 100 for our recent deep dive into how law firms are using generative AI.

Take the Second Hundred. Here, it's a mixed bag. While some firms, often citing resource constraints, shy away from investments in innovation, others recognize that their market position gives them far more to gain from taking chances.

Clients come to Skadden, to pick just one name, because of something traditional: the cachet attached to the brand (and no, they didn't answer our questions). But firms on the larger side of the midsize spectrum need to do a little more to attract clients, and delivering legal services more efficiently—often aided by novel uses of technology—is one way to get there.

Am Law 200 firm Thompson Hine is a strong example here. No doubt, they've been savvy about this investment as a branding exercise: shelling out on an **extensive survey of in-house counsel** every few years is a good way to establish credibility here. But beyond marketing, it's fair to assume that the investments made by outgoing managing partner Deborah Read have made a real difference to the firm's clients.

"Our firm has set itself apart from our peer firms with our focus on changing the service delivery model through innovation," Tony White, her successor in the role, told me last week.

White is fully on board with the opportunities that generative AI offers forward-looking firms, calling the effective use of the technology the biggest challenge he faces as chair. That means working closely with clients to identify and implement areas where it can be deployed to increase efficiencies. For example, for several years, the firm has been relying on **algorithms to budget for new matters,** based on existing data. The starting point here is that lawyers already face a mandate to put together budgets for every business litigation and M&A matter they initiate.

But AI also presents external challenges. White is attuned to the prospect of expanded frontiers of competition.

"The things that law firms do that are not at the core of legal advice, those are at risk from non-law firms equipped with technology," he said.

Take the task of summarizing depositions. That's work for which law firms can currently bill clients, but also one where savvy buyers of legal services could say they're no longer willing to pay for humans to handle if AI can perform the task accurately and more efficiently. So part of the mission is also fighting off new entrants.

But White also shrugged off the prospect of the widespread adaptation of the technology fundamentally rejiggering the law firm operating model. To whit, Thompson Hine's associates needn't start thinking about unionizing in order to protect their jobs.

"It's got limitations right now to it," he said of AI. "It's not a plug-and-play technology. It's growing, but it's still not there yet that it's going to upend the apple cart of the legal industry."