

Strategic change management in the age of generative AI

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JUNE 15, 2026

The pace of change in legal technology and service delivery has accelerated markedly in recent years, with generative AI further compressing adoption timelines. New tools, capabilities, and client expectations are emerging rapidly, compressing multi-year transformations into changes measured in quarters.

Although the legal industry is no stranger to evolution, the speed and frequency of recent developments are placing new operational pressure on organizations striving to respond strategically rather than reactively. As a result, many organizations are increasingly relying on advisors with experience in legal operations, technology implementation, governance, and organizational change to help establish sustainable frameworks for evaluating and deploying emerging technologies.

This environment can create pressure to move quickly, often without a clear framework for evaluating priorities or measuring success. Organizations may adopt tools opportunistically, pursue overlapping initiatives without coordination, or defer decisions amid continued uncertainty. Over time, these patterns can contribute to fragmented workflows, duplicative effort, and what many professionals describe as “change fatigue.”

Why the current environment feels different

Although the current moment may feel unprecedented, many of the underlying organizational challenges are familiar. What distinguishes the current environment is less the existence of change than the speed at which it is occurring.

That distinction matters because it suggests legal organizations do not necessarily need entirely new management models to respond effectively, but rather greater discipline, coordination, and adaptability in applying existing ones.

Established change management frameworks still apply

Organizations can draw upon established change management principles that provide structure during periods of uncertainty. Harvard Business School professor John Kotter’s eight-step process, introduced in his influential book “Leading Change,” emphasizes creating urgency,

aligning stakeholders, and embedding change within organizational culture. The ADKAR model, developed by change management consultancy and research organization Prosci, focuses on individual adoption through awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. The McKinsey 7-S framework takes a broader organizational perspective, examining the alignment among strategy, structure, systems, and related operational elements.

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While these frameworks approach change differently, they share several common themes. Effective change management is intentional rather than reactive, requiring sustained communication, coordination, prioritization, and reinforcement over time. For legal organizations evaluating new technologies or evolving service delivery models, these principles can provide operational discipline in an environment where competing initiatives frequently demand immediate attention.

Generative AI and the acceleration of organizational change

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence has intensified many of these organizational pressures. Over a relatively short period, legal organizations have been presented with an expanding range of AI-enabled tools promising improvements in efficiency, knowledge management, drafting, research, and client service delivery. At the same time, competitive pressure and widespread market attention surrounding generative AI have accelerated adoption timelines in ways many organizations are still working to evaluate carefully.

Organizations are no longer assessing a single technology initiative in isolation. Instead, they are simultaneously evaluating multiple AI platforms, vendor relationships, governance policies, security considerations, records retention and disposition obligations, and operational use cases across different practice areas and business functions. For many legal organizations, these evaluations also require careful consideration of privilege, confidentiality, client data handling, and defensible information governance practices.

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The complexity of these decisions has also increased demand for experienced guidance. Generative AI adoption frequently involves overlapping operational, legal, governance, cybersecurity, contractual, information management, and workforce considerations requiring coordinated analysis across multiple disciplines. Organizations without prior experience implementing enterprise-scale technology change may find it more difficult to establish governance structures, evaluate vendor risk appropriately, or align implementation decisions with broader business objectives.

The pace of investment also introduces additional organizational risk. Some legal organizations may feel pressure to deploy generative AI tools before governance structures, training programs, or measurement frameworks are fully established. Others may delay adoption because of professional responsibility obligations, confidentiality requirements, accuracy limitations, or uncertainty regarding long-term business impact. Without a structured approach to evaluation and implementation, organizations risk either fragmented experimentation or unnecessary stagnation.

This is where established management principles become particularly valuable. Generative AI adoption is not solely a technological decision; it is also an operational and organizational transition. Successful implementation often depends less on how quickly a tool is deployed and more on whether organizations can integrate it thoughtfully into existing workflows, define governance standards, communicate expectations clearly, and support professionals as roles and processes evolve.

Importantly, the rapid development of generative AI also reinforces the need for adaptability rather than rigid long-term planning. Because capabilities, regulations, and market expectations continue to evolve quickly, organizations may benefit from implementation strategies emphasizing iterative learning, measured experimentation, and continuous reassessment.

Building more deliberate implementation strategies

Applying these principles does not require rigid adherence to a single methodology. Rather, it involves adopting a more deliberate approach to implementation and decision-making. Organizations may benefit from clearer governance structures so that new tools are evaluated within broader strategic objectives rather than immediate market pressure.

Developing these frameworks often requires practical experience with both technology implementation and organizational change management. Organizations may benefit from working with advisors who understand not only the technologies themselves, but also the operational realities, regulatory considerations, and stakeholder alignment challenges associated with enterprise deployment.

This support is most useful when it helps organizations make decisions, assign accountability, and measure adoption rather than merely select tools. Structured pilot programs can help assess capabilities before wider deployment, while stronger alignment among legal, technology, operations, and finance teams can reduce friction throughout implementation.

Established change management principles can help organizations sequence initiatives, allocate resources strategically, and define success criteria more consistently. Over time, this can reduce fragmented adoption and improve the likelihood that new capabilities are integrated in a manner that delivers measurable operational value.

The human dimension of organizational change

The success of any organizational change effort ultimately depends on the people responsible for implementing and sustaining it. The current pace of technological change has introduced heightened uncertainty for many professionals, particularly as emerging technologies continue to shape discussions around evolving roles, responsibilities, and required skill sets. Although organizations may not be able to provide definitive answers regarding long-term outcomes, they can still address uncertainty in constructive ways.

Clearly communicating what is known, what remains uncertain, and how decisions will be made can help reduce speculation and strengthen organizational trust. Providing opportunities for engagement, including training programs and participation in pilot initiatives, can also help professionals feel more connected to the broader change process. This may be particularly important where generative AI tools intersect with confidentiality obligations, privilege considerations, records retention requirements, and internal governance policies, all of which may require consistent operational guidance across the organization.

Organizations that invest in communication, alignment, and capability development are better positioned to translate strategic decisions into sustained operational outcomes.

Adaptation as differentiation

As legal organizations continue to navigate a rapidly evolving landscape, several themes emerge. First, while the current pace of change is notable, it does not necessarily require entirely new management theories or operating models. Established frameworks already provide useful tools for navigating uncertainty and organizational transformation.

Second, organizations are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes when implementation is deliberate, coordinated, and aligned with broader strategic objectives rather than driven primarily by reaction or urgency. Finally, sustained change depends not only on technology adoption, but also on communication, trust, and organizational alignment over time.

The ability to manage change effectively is becoming an increasingly important organizational capability within the

legal industry. Access to technology alone is unlikely to be the primary differentiator. More likely, differentiation will come from an organization's ability to evaluate change thoughtfully, implement it consistently, and sustain it operationally over the long term.

As emerging technologies such as generative AI continue to evolve rapidly, organizations may increasingly require experienced guidance to navigate implementation decisions, governance considerations, operational integration, and long-term change management. The organizations best positioned to benefit will be those that treat change management not as a one-time implementation exercise, but as a recurring operational discipline.

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This article was first published on Reuters Legal News and Westlaw Today on June 15, 2026.