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Innovation must become a necessary part of a lawyer's job

When we as a society speak of innovation, we are usually talking about invention. Dictionary.com defines innovation as "something new or different introduced." While this term could apply to countless circumstances, there is no doubt a stigma to this word. We most often discuss innovation solely in the context of the scientific, technological and medical pioneers who are responsible for changing the face of the world as we know it in some monumental way.

The unfortunate consequence of this thinking is that in emphasizing the value and importance of the discoveries of those engineers, scientists and researchers, we inevitably stifle discussion about the need and desire for innovation among the rest of us. We must recognize that innovation can take countless forms and means so much more than just the latest technological breakthrough or promising cure for disease.

This is particularly true as America strives for ways to stay ahead of numerous foreign nations which continuously evolve at a very rapid pace. What matters most is fostering progress, thereby leaving the world a better place than it was before the innovation. In the legal profession's new normal, it is incumbent upon us to think about what innovation means not only to our clients, but to us as lawyers as well. Since our clients' existence is so dependent upon their ability to evolve and progress in their respective businesses and in their lives, we cannot possibly serve their best interests if we, as their trusted advisers, are standing still.

What does innovation mean in the context of practicing law? Whatever you want it to mean. The possibilities are endless: Offering your legal services in a more streamlined, cost-effective way; creating a new law firm or practice group; developing a more sophisticated strategy for servicing your client that considers a creative amalgam of legal, business and economic factors; inventing a new type of service for your clients or a way of tailoring your existing services to new clients or enlisting new and different resources in developing a hybrid approach to the delivery of legal services.

Whatever it is, take the time to think about yourself and your circumstances, including your practice, your client base and its needs, your strengths, weaknesses, short- and long-term professional and personal goals and what you hope to accomplish. Once you gain some clarity around these issues, it becomes much easier to develop your own path for innovation.

PARADIGM SHIFT



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As Steven Johnson writes in his book, "Where Good Ideas Come From: A History of Innovation," there are numerous myths and misconceptions about the phenomenon of innovation. For example, contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of innovation is not the result of a singular "aha" moment providing an instantaneous, brilliant leap of logic or sudden clarity on an incredibly complex idea or concept. Innovation is often a long process, sometimes years in the making before it comes to fruition and usually involves brainstorming and collaborating with others before the significant breakthrough is made. Often, innovation is not the result of the experiment going right but, rather, attempts at discovery going horribly wrong. In addition, those epiphanies which do occur are not while in the throes of thinking intently about an issue or poring over some experimental data, but while doing something else entirely, like exercising, lying on a beach, reading a good book or daydreaming.

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It is often in the process of stepping away from the task at hand that the most meaningful connecting of the dots occurs. Finally, one cannot underestimate the importance of serendipity, one of life's greatest gifts when all else fails.

Johnson's points are extraordinarily relevant to lawyers. Each of us needs to create a space for the innovation process in our lives. Just as the technology companies of today promote their employees' creativity by providing time and resources for them to tap into the treasure trove within themselves, we likewise need to provide our minds with the space to think differently. If we are striving to accomplish something of great value and purpose, we need to be patient and allow the creative process to gently unfold within and around us. We need to recognize that we are often at our most creative when we stop inputting stimuli and instead give our minds the ability to take what we already know and to assimilate and reconfigure it. Sometimes you just need to take a step back and think about what you are doing, why you are doing it and whether there is a better way.

We often have exactly what we need right in front of us and we just need to be aware enough to see it. As a profession, we also need to stop underestimating the power of collaboration. Johnson discusses how most scientific discovery does not occur while a scientist is conducting experiments on her own but, rather, while laboratory findings and hunches are being evaluated and dissected by a group. This phenomenon provides a provocative metaphor for the rest of us. It compellingly demonstrates that whether we are solving a legal issue for an existing client or developing a pitch for a potential new client, we can accomplish much more if we collaborate with others by both seeking their advice and input and providing them with the benefit of our thoughts and experience.

Finally, we need to stop living our lives from a place of always needing to be right. In the quest to be perfect, we stifle our tolerance for and willingness to take risks. Innovation cannot occur in an environment where the status quo of rightness trumps the desire to grow and the willingness to get it wrong along the way.

Striving for perfection in our delivery of legal services does not mean that we can never venture outside the box for our clients in the name of doing a better job for them. Perhaps we should all bring a little more of the scientific method to our client relationships.