



EDITOR'S NOTE

# ADOPTING INNOVATION

WHERE DO YOU FALL ON THE CURVE?

**F**or several years now, we have been inundated by news and opinion pieces about the transformation of law taking place because of technological advances. However, this is not the only time in the history of law that has been viewed as transformational. For example, in 1977, Morton J. Horwitz wrote *The Transformation of American Law, 1780–1860*. In it, Horwitz posits that significant changes in approaches to common law and private law profoundly changed the law's role in U.S. economic growth. The shift he describes, as well as its consequences, are dramatic.

Is the transformation of law we are seeing now unique, or is it just another in a long line of the law's response to changes in society and how we work? I think it is both, and an understanding of the cycle of the diffusion of innovation and change management principles can help us successfully navigate the changes.

From a 10,000-foot perspective, the changes we are seeing in the business of law now are just the latest evolutionary steps. However, the current transformation differs in pace than previous iterations. Today's changes are happening faster than ever before. The challenge is that, in general, people don't like change. They resist change because of the inherent uncertainty and fear of being unable to learn new skills or technologies. Change management experts generally agree that change is easiest when it is incremental—people have more time to adjust and can take smaller steps that seem more manageable. However, the pace of change we are currently seeing in the legal field is not moving at a measured, incremental pace. Rapid, massive changes are harder for people to process and can lead to greater resistance.

How does an innovative idea spread and become more mainstream? Some of you may be familiar with Everett Rogers's 1962 book *Diffusion of Innovations*, now in its 5th edition. Rogers's research sought to understand and describe how a successful innovation gets

adopted more widely (or diffuses) until it is accepted by the majority. Rogers identified five types of adopters distributed along a bell-shaped curve. Each group is influenced by the group before it and members of a group tend to display similar characteristics. Rogers described these groups as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards.

In his article "Professional Formation as a Social Movement," William (Bill) Sullivan describes how an individual's impetus to change is tied to how the need or situation is presented. When a challenging situation is described as inevitable, support for the change typically wanes. However, when the situation is described as an opportunity to implement positive change, people are energized and excited about innovating. Sullivan calls this framing and says, "At moments of disruption, reframing becomes one of the defining tasks of leadership."

Where is your team on Rogers's adoption curve? Are they in the right place? If not, consider how you can reframe the opportunity and encourage innovation adoption.

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