

## Strategic Perspectives

# Industry leaders discuss Wolters Kluwer Future Ready Lawyer Survey: How top industry trends affect the client-firm relationship

By *Katalina M. Bianco, J.D.*

The evolving client-firm relationship, recruiting and retaining talent, and the impact of technology on both were the focus of a panel discussion on the Wolters Kluwer [Future Ready Lawyer 2022: Leading Change](#), held before a packed house at the LVNx 2022 Conference in Chicago on September 22, 2022. Now in its fourth year, the survey includes insights from 751 legal professionals across the U.S. and 10 European countries and provides a guideline for firms navigating the challenges of the legal industry at the tail end of a pandemic. How ready are law firms and corporate legal departments to meet these challenges? The expert panel presented informative and lively opinions for discussion.

The panel consisted of leading industry experts and was moderated by [Nicole Stone](#), Director of New Product Development Content Strategy, Wolters Kluwer Legal & Regulatory, U.S. The expert panelists were drawn from law firms and legal departments and included: [Sarah Andeen](#), Chief Knowledge & Research Services Officer, Chapman & Cutler; [Jared Applegate](#), Chief Legal Operations Officer, Barnes & Thornburg LLP; [Esther Bowers](#), Chief Practice Management Officer, Honigman LLP; [Leslie Brown](#), Director of Legal Process Innovation, Greenberg Traurig LLP; and [Chloe Carver](#), Outside Counsel Programs Manager, Microsoft.

### Are you ready?

In her opening remarks, Stone stressed that in this time of post-Covid, change in the industry is “pervasive, persistent and perpetual,” leading to increased pressure on the legal profession. This pressure results in a “VUCA environment”: one of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The question is whether firms are ready to meet the challenges of a VUCA environment.

Stone outlined the survey’s key trends affecting the client-firm relationship and the notable gap between firms’ expectations and preparedness to meet these expectations. According to the survey approximately 79 percent of respondents acknowledged the growing importance of technology, the increased volume and complexity of information, and the changing client-leadership expectations. However, about a third of respondents considered themselves to be very prepared to meet the challenges. The same gap appeared when questions related to the growth of alternative legal service providers and the emphasis on improved efficiency and productivity.

Survey results indicate that client-firm relationships have improved since

pre-pandemic days, yet 78 percent of legal departments say they are ready to switch firms. Much of these results are related to technology, Stone said. In today’s environment, technology use is essential as a firm evaluation factor. According to the survey, in the next three years, the majority of corporate legal departments will ask law firms to describe the technology they use to be more productive and efficient. Notably, 70 percent already are asking this question, and just over a third of firms consider themselves as very prepared to use technology to do so.

Stone also provided an overview of the current talent troubles experienced in legal departments. Resignations have had a significant impact of legal departments with 86 percent of respondents affected. Notably, 70 percent of lawyers responded that they are likely to leave their current legal department positions within the next year. Clearly, legal departments are facing challenges recruiting and retaining staff, both legal and tech. The survey indicates that the use of technology by a department may be a key element in recruiting and retaining lawyers today, many of whom are well-versed in the use of technology as a tool to increase efficiency and reduce the time spent on non-essential tasks.

Stone then led the panel of experts in a discussion revolving around key questions raised by the survey.

### Key factors affecting client-firm relationship

In discussing the high percentage of in-house counsel who indicated they were likely to switch firms in the next year, Esther Bowers of Honigman referred to the retention of the relationship between client and firm as client “stickiness.” Bowers stressed that a firm’s ancillary services that serve clients should be used to create greater stickiness. She noted the important role of technology in providing the services. Leslie Brown, Greenberg Traurig, said that responsiveness to client needs is key. The starting point to a relationship that sticks is dialogue between client and firm, a marked change from the lawyer-client relationship of old, she noted. Sara Andreen, Chapman & Cutler, suggested a practice innovation team be created to develop the specific tools needed to meet a client’s needs. Chloe Carver of Microsoft favors a layered approach. The foundations for a corporate legal department are budget and cost, she said. When times are tough, corporations will tighten budgets, and firms need to work within those budgets. “At the end of the day, budget is the key driver.” At the tail of the pandemic, the firms that succeed will be those who can weather the budgetary storms, she said.

### Relationship seeding

Stone noted that in the past, client relationships were often developed and sustained by partners or long-term practitioners which created a generational gap in relationships formed with clients. Panelists discussed whether their firms had experienced this gap and how it affected the seeding of client-firm relationships. Jared Applegate, Barnes & Thornburg LLP, said that in meeting with top clients, he can see that clients are different since the pandemic. Firms need to meet with clients,

talk strategy with them, and think about how they are seeding their relationships. In doing so, firms should pair people generationally to build a solid structure on which the relationship can be based. “This is a relationship business,” he said.

*“The starting point to a relationship that sticks is dialogue between client and firm, a marked change from the lawyer-client relationship of old”*

Andreen said that younger associates should be brought into client meetings, not just to address the generational gap but to retain talent. Brown cautioned, however, that firms should not take junior associates to meet clients as “window dressing” to impress the client. The associates must be active and engaged to strengthen client relationships.

### Technology adoption

The FRL survey suggests that technology continues to be a top priority for legal departments. With 91 percent of law department attorneys expecting firms to use more technology in the next three years, but just over a third of attorneys at firms indicating their firms are very prepared in the tech arena, there is a profound gap between the two responses. The panel discussed the gap and possible remedies to overcome it. Bowers noted the disconnect between partners and junior associates as to why technology is a benefit and of value to clients. Partners do not need to know the mechanics of technology but must understand why it is important. As to retention of talent, good technology makes associates happy because it removes the remedial work and allows them to spend

that time on more meaningful tasks. Applegate opined that technology is a tool that is good for specific work the lawyers are doing and can be a source of “wellness” for associates. Brown’s opinion is that the number of attorneys that said their firms are prepared for the use of technology to meet client needs sounds low. She suggested that partners may not know what tools the firm has available. As Stone noted, it can be a matter of perception as to a firm’s technical resources. Applegate cautioned against lawyers stating their firms have certain technological tools before they actually adopt them, but Brown responded, “Don’t say no to a client, ask first” if the firm can adopt the tools. Andreen suggested lawyers keep pressuring firms until they adopt tech tools. Partners need to talk to their peers when they see the benefits of technology to get that technology into the firm. Carver agreed, stating that firms can be “more nimble” than a large corporation like Microsoft. Bowers suggested involving attorneys on the front end to help with the adoption of technology. Attorneys will be more invested in the adoption of technology if they are part of the process.

Furthering the discussion on the role of technology in the client-firm relationship, Stone asked the panelists for their thoughts on robotic process automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Will robotic processing or AI hold great value or impact for attorneys in the near future or is this technology the latest “shiny object”? Applegate feels that such technological tools fall within the category of shiny objects. The tools should be used to enhance, not lead attorney’s work. Core problems are usually communication issues and not lack of tools. Brown disagreed with this opinion, stating that robotic process automation can be a “huge” retention tool for associates happy that they do not have to do the more low-level tasks. If firms use automation for mundane tasks, they can cut costs, making the technology not merely a shiny new thing

but a tool to cut certain processes down from months to weeks. Andeen, taking the middle road, noted that some tasks are appropriate for automation, others are not. Carver said legal departments need to get more specific with firms regarding tech tools. They need to ask how AI is used for specific tasks rather than questioning a firm about what it is “doing with AI.” Bowers noted that there is a place for AI, but firms need to understand how it is integrated into their processes.

### Team structures

The FRL survey stressed the substantial changes to technology, process, and talent over the past few years, raising the question of steps firms have taken to change team structures to support the needs of the future. Applegate said his firm has put a number of teams together for the overall “client journey” from beginning to end. Bowers spoke of her firm’s restructuring to help teams understand

the big picture and connect to the client journey. Brown noted that restructuring has to do with attorney skillsets, making use of stronger legal backgrounds in

***“Attorneys will be more invested in the adoption of technology if they are part of the process.”***

specific areas. She offered that her firm has been adding more data scientists that are able to work in litigation. Carver stated that Microsoft restructures to better align to how it believes the future will look. Microsoft also is hiring firms with data scientists, she said. As for in-house restructuring, one goal is to eliminate redundancy, an area that can be a major opportunity for law firms able to help Microsoft reach that goal.

### Talent recruitment and retention

The panel turned to a discussion of the recruitment and retention of talent in their organizations. In addition to the use of technology and looping associates into client strategy meetings, the experts offered ways in which their firms are addressing talent issues. Bowers said her firm is moving to a full-firm strategy to adopt work allocation programs as a way to heighten associate satisfaction. This strategy also is used in the recruitment process, she said. Andreen noted that her firm has an intern program in which the firm hires people after senior year in college for two years to determine if they want to go to law school. If the hires enjoy the internship and working with the firm, they are less likely to quit after training.

You can access the Future Ready Lawyer Survey 2022: Leading Change by clicking [here](#).