

Firms must grasp the innovation nettle to deliver greater client value says leading “legal rebel”

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Every law firm – from the largest global to the specialist boutique – has the opportunity to adopt new practices, to harness emerging technologies and fresh business practices in order to streamline operations and deliver better value. Every general counsel expects it.

But taking the first step of that innovation journey can be daunting.

It need not be according to Michele DeStefano, international keynote speaker at this month’s Managing Partners Forum, who will provide practical advice to Australia’s leading legal practitioners seeking to plot their innovation path.

DeStefano, Professor at the University of Miami School of Law; founder and director of LawWithoutWalls; and a member of the guest faculty at Harvard Law School’s Centre on the Legal Profession and Executive Education programme, maintains that there is value to be gleaned by any firm attempting innovation – “even if your model isn’t broken.”

Recently recognised as a “legal rebel” by the ABA, DeStefano says that even in firms where the business model is still working well, innovation initiatives offer great value.

She says all innovation efforts ensure new skills are learned and transferred, that a more collaborative culture engaging both lawyers and clients is nurtured, and that millennials remain motivated.

Through LawWithoutWalls DeStefano works with legal practitioners, entrepreneurs, business people, academics and students to establish global collaborative teams able to take a real business problem and craft a pragmatic but fresh and elegant solution that satisfies both business and legal requirements and has on a number of occasions spawned a start-up business.

It’s an approach that has already been embraced by companies looking for fresh legal and business solutions including Microsoft, Spotify, Lockheed Martin and BUPA which have sponsored projects seeking innovative solutions to real business issues. Once a business sponsor steps forward LawWithoutWalls engages with students and academics from all over the world, locally including Griffith, Sydney and Melbourne universities’ law schools, lawyers from firms such as Eversheds and White & Case, and entrepreneurs and business mentors.

According to DeStefano; “I think people have been really confused about innovation and there has been a disconnect between what clients say that they want and what firms are delivering.” By assembling a collaborative and diverse team the solution is more likely to successfully address the underlying business issue while maintaining legal rigour.

DeStefano said firms that formed collaborative and diverse teams to tackle a client-identified issue were taking important “small, incremental steps” that would then ripple more widely. She said that in her experience people involved in innovation projects acted as change agents, and helped reshape the client-lawyer relationship and value proposition.

Chilli IQ’s 10th Managing Partners Forum is themed *Being an Agent of Change* and has been tailored specifically to provide practical insights and the opportunity to attend interactive sessions so that Australia’s legal leaders can begin to transform themselves and their staff into more innovative, collaborative teams.

DeStefano believes that the condensing of the legal firm landscape over the last 5-7 years has left Australia “ahead of the game” in terms of local lawyers’ willingness to collaborate with clients on innovative solutions when compared to their international peers.

Chilli IQ has determinedly steered away from the “death by PowerPoint” approach at this year’s Forum, instead offering immersive workshops to give legal leaders a close-up view of the new way of working. Paul Hawkins, founder and “chief combobulator” of Crazy Might Work will lead a session exploring how design thinking and innovation frameworks could be applied in legal practice while Simon Pole, global design director of Unispace, will explore the legal workplace of the future.

Innovation and technology leaders from King & Wood Mallesons, Gilbert + Tobin, and Hall & Wilcox will also outline how they are using digital technologies to streamline legal services and add value.

The current legal firm and remuneration landscape won’t be overlooked however, despite this headlong plunge into the future with Alan Hodgart and Ray d’Cruz providing delegates with up to the minute analyses of both.

About the 10th Managing Partners Forum: The Managing Partners Forum has become the “must attend” event on Australia’s legal calendar. An opportunity for a frank exchange of views among senior leaders of the nation’s leading law firms and industry general counsel, the event brings together thought leaders from Australia and around the world to deliver cutting-edge insight and direction about what it takes to deliver market leading legal services.

Managing Partners Forum 2016: 17-18 February 2017, Byron @ Byron Resort and Spa, Byron Bay, NSW

Further information at <https://www.managingpartnersforum.com.au/home-1>

About Chilli IQ: The Chilli IQ partnership focuses on the delivery of exceptional quality events, attracting the highest calibre of local and international presenters for its conferences. Chilli IQ leads the field in efficient and effective knowledge delivery and is constantly evolving to satisfy the needs of its expanding audience.

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