



Lawyers, software (alone) won't be enough

Enterprise systems promise transformation, but without strategy, structure and cultural change, they fall short. "Plugging new systems into old structures will cause even the best tools go underused or misused", says expert Claudia Vanheiden

by claudia la via

Legal departments and law firms are increasingly investing in enhanced and complex software in an effort to modernize operations, increase efficiency, and future-proof their practices. But despite rising budgets and ambitious rollouts, many of these software projects stall, underdeliver, or quietly fade into underuse. The problem? It's rarely the technology. "A common misconception", says Claudia Vanheiden, founding partner at Vanda Advisory - a Zurich-based company which provides advice and support to legal service providers - "is to treat these initiatives purely as IT projects. But real transformation depends on how people, processes and strategy evolve around the system — not on the system alone". Vanheiden works with law firms across Europe to guide them through complex technology projects, often entering mid-stream when initiatives have lost momentum or clarity. She says the patterns are strikingly consistent: projects often lack strategic grounding, ownership or cross-functional collaboration. "Plugging new systems into unchanged structures will cause even the best tools to be misused or underused", she adds.

A SYMPTOM OF OTHER STRUCTURAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

Technology is often blamed when digital initiatives don't deliver. But Vanheiden points out that underperformance is typically a symptom of deeper structural and organizational issues. "The tools themselves are rarely the problem. Success depends on having the right people involved — across finance, IT, marketing, HR and legal operations — and ensuring they have both the authority and the clarity to lead real change". Too often, project ownership is delegated to someone without the strategic overview or the clout to drive cross-departmental alignment. "No owner, no outcome", Vanheiden says. "You need someone who understands the broader firm strategy and has visibility into how the firm really works".

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CUSTOMIZATION AS A CRUTCH

One recurring issue is the over-customization of software. "Every system comes with a logic. But instead of adjusting their ways of working, where possible, many firms try to bend the system back to old habits", says Vanheiden. While some tailoring is necessary, too much customization can lead to technical complexity, inefficiencies and ballooning costs. In most law firms, large business system implementations are rare events, often handled on top of an already full workload by professionals with little previous experience in such projects and the required change management. "This isn't just a tech challenge. It's a leadership, structure, and cultural challenge", Vanheiden notes.

Another misconception is that the job is done at go-live. Vanheiden warns: "Day two is where value is either released or lost". Without clear post-implementation planning — including ownership, feedback loops, regular usage reviews ongoing adjustments, refinements and training refreshers over a longer period of time — systems can quickly fall out of sync with firm needs, becoming underused, outdated or even actively disruptive. Her advice? Appoint a long-term system owner from the outset. "Ideally someone with the authority to improve how the firm works, and with visibility into both law firm strategy and daily operations". If that level of understanding isn't available internally, bringing in an expert for regular check-ins helps to constantly align with evolving business needs.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE, BUT TIME IS KEY

Vanheiden frequently helps firms recalibrate projects that have already gone off track. “It’s never too late to reassess — but the later you wait, the more expensive the fix”, she says. Even projects near the finish line sometimes need to pause to realign goals and ensure buy-in from stakeholders. “Pushing through just to get the job done often results in poor adoption or worse, the need to revisit and rebuild later, ultimately wasting time and investment.

Early warning signs — like vague updates, disengaged stakeholders or misaligned priorities — should prompt a reassessment. Leadership involvement is key. “It is difficult when leaders disengage after signing off on the budget”, she says. “They need to stay involved, or at least ensure that someone with the right expertise is regularly assessing project health”.

START WITH GOALS, NOT SOFTWARE

For firms at the beginning of their system implementation journey, Vanheiden offers clear advice: don’t start by picking software. “Start by asking: what do we want to improve? What

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problems are we solving? Then figure out how software can help — not the other way around”. She warns against falling for polished demos or peer recommendations without internal clarity. “Off-the-shelf solutions always come with tradeoffs. You need to know what really matters to and works within your firm”.

Finally, she emphasizes the human side of transformation: “The technology part is the easy part, shifting behaviors and mindsets is where the real work begins”. 📌

