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Change is good

Last week I attended on a press pass the Canadian Bar Association's "Law Firm Leadership Conference."

The conference's theme was "Change Management" and, accordingly, the focus was on ways in which law firms can innovate, and thereby alter, the course of the profession.

One of my all-time favorite legal scholars, Richard Susskind, spoke at the conference, one of the main reasons I chose to attend it. I'm very glad that I did. All in all it was an enjoyable and educational conference, and I left Toronto with a number of thought provoking issues to ponder.

First, should the leaders in our field be benevolent custodians or jealous guardians of the profession? When phrased that way, the answer seems obvious: Of course we want to be benevolent custodians with only the best intentions, carefully making choices that will improve our profession for the generations that inherit it.

The reality, however, is just the opposite. Lawyers tend to carefully guard the profession and are reluctant make changes that might alter the way things have always been done. We revere precedent and distrust change. As a result, we cling to the past, making decisions about technological changes and innovation that ultimately harm our profession in the long run.

That is a mistake since, as Susskind aptly noted, any lawyer who takes the time to research emerging technologies would wholeheartedly agree that these new platforms fundamentally change the practice of law. Attorneys who deny that fact are reacting emotionally, rather than intellectually.

New technologies have the potential to radically alter the ways in which legal services are delivered to consumers. Forward-thinking attorneys are embracing virtual law offices, cloud computing, social media and collaboration tools. Innovative practitioners understand the importance of using knowledge

management to alter the consumer experience first, and the law firm's systems second.

There has been much talk in recent years about pricing legal services differently, including the death of the billable hour and the increase of flat fee services. As Susskind stressed, however, the key to change is to deliver legal services effectively and efficiently. Ultimately, it boils down to delivering value to legal consumers by working differently, rather than through pricing services differently.

The key to working differently is the use of emerging technologies. To do so, the legal profession as a whole must embrace technological change. Attorneys must make it a priority to learn about and understand new technologies, then incorporate them into their practices.

As another conference speaker, Patrick Lamb, noted, law firms must change their culture. That's not simply a matter of using one or two new technologies, but a matter of changing attitudes. He emphasized that law firms' youngest members are the key to accomplishing the attitude makeover required.

Generation Y attorneys are less attached to the status quo. They are part of the connected generation and grew up with the Internet. For them, it's not business as usual: They understand how to use the new technologies and are not averse to change.

These attorneys are the future and the inheritors of the profession. Law firms should be generous benefactors and give their younger attorneys the opportunity to lead the charge to change. Because, as we all must understand — change is good.

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