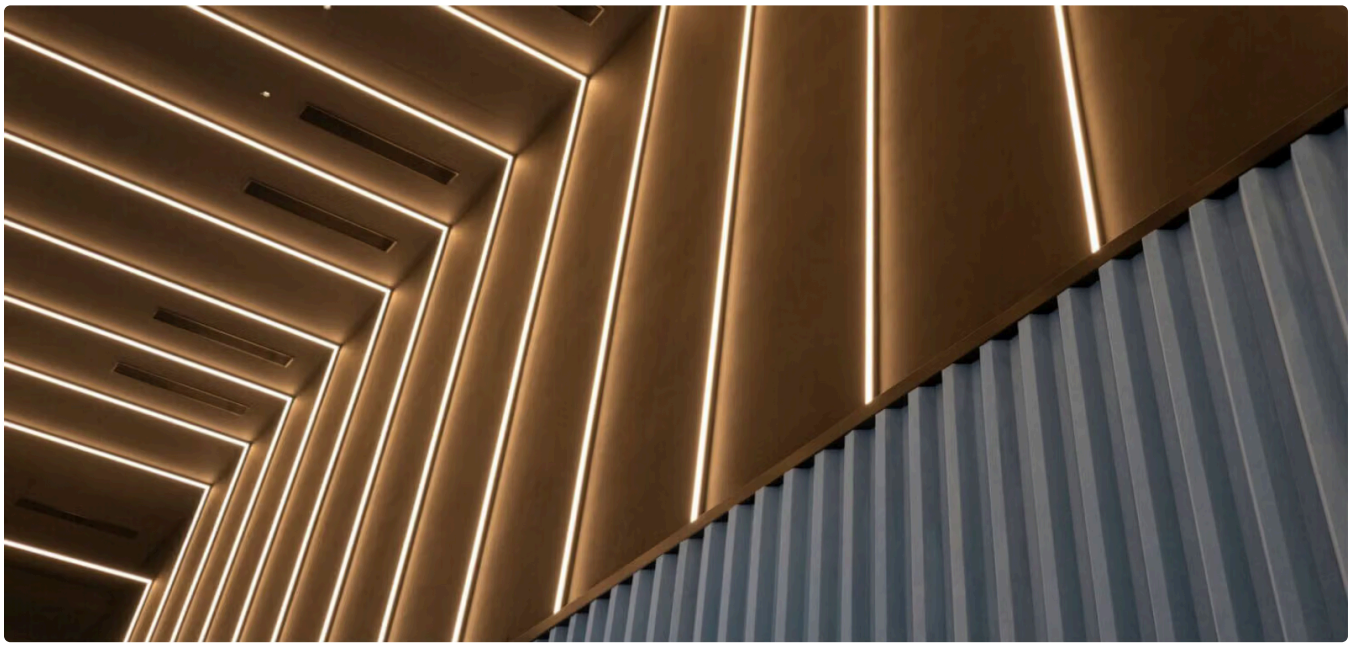
The false finish line: Driving tech transformation in large law

Written by Jennie Strickland



The feeling of a successful go-live is one most legal technology leaders will recognize. The project has hit its milestones. Training is complete. The system is live. A company-wide congratulatory message lands, and for a moment, the hardest part feels finished.

But technical implementation and operational transformation are not the same thing. A system can be deployed perfectly and a firm can still fail to change how it operates. In many cases, the technology works exactly as intended while the underlying habits, workflows, and behaviors remain untouched.

The mistake lies in treating go-live as the finish line. In reality, it is just the halfway point. It marks the end of implementation and the beginning of adoption, which is often the more difficult phase. The pattern that follows is familiar: every milestone met on schedule, a project team with every reason to be proud of the work, and then, 18 months later, active usage reduced to a fraction of what the system was built for. Workarounds return. Old processes reappear. When firms investigate, the causes are usually the same. The project was declared complete long before users felt the change had truly begun. The pattern is consistent enough to be structural. And the cause is very rarely the technology.

The implementation is not the transformation

When technology programs get treated as IT projects, something done to the business rather than with it, the disconnect shows up before the project is even underway. Requirements get filtered through intermediaries instead of shaped by the people closest to the work. The business disengages from decisions it assumes aren't its concern. By go-live, the system reflects what the technology team understood the business to need. That framing creates a divide before the work has even started. The programs that work differently share a common characteristic: there's no "us and them".

At home, our family pets are Shetland sheepdogs, and they're unique in that when we take them out, on countryside walks or about town, they're always moving together, in step, and usually side by side, regardless of their surroundings or the activity. It's a really beautiful thing to watch. That's what these programs should look like. Business transformation projects need the business as an equal partner from day one: combined teams, shared goals, shared accountability, from the boardroom to the people using the system daily. Without it, a firm loses early visibility into whether the system is meeting requirements during the build. It ends up with a business that was never truly invested in the outcome. Real buy-in looks different from performative buy-in, and the gap between them is where most transformations fail.

The human dimension of this is something most firms underestimate. Change touches identity, not just workflow. When people are uncertain about what a new system means for their role, their expertise, or their standing in a team, that uncertainty rarely surfaces as open objection. It surfaces as slow adoption, workarounds, and a gradual drift back to familiar habits. The firms that move furthest are the ones that create space for those questions early, and treat them as legitimate rather than inconvenient.

Good leadership in a transformation stays committed when the project gets difficult. It doesn't just say the right things at the launch event and move on. And the project will get difficult.

Transformation projects need to be famous inside their organizations: people need to understand why they matter and feel invested in the outcome. But awareness without infrastructure doesn't deliver change. The leaders who carry programs through the difficult middle, when initial enthusiasm has faded and the hard embedding work is still ahead, are the ones who had a deliberate plan from the start: clear milestones, defined accountability, a roadmap that people at every level can see themselves in.

That plan has to include more than communications. Real commitment shows up in the structures that support people through the change at every stage. Workshops that address the practical questions people are asking, not the ones the project team assumed

they'd have. Office hours where anyone can raise a concern without it becoming a formal escalation. One-to-one coaching for the roles where the disruption is most significant. Regular check-ins that surface problems early enough to address them, rather than waiting for adoption numbers to tell the story six months later. These are the structures that turn leadership intent into leadership impact.

The model that sustains all of this over time is one borrowed from Japanese manufacturing: Kaizen, the practice of continuous incremental improvement. Small, consistent changes rather than periodic big-bang upgrades. It's the model Clio practices with our customers through regular on-sites, workshops, and training. The principle is simple: regular improvements, even incremental ones, signal to users that the firm is still invested in making the system work. That signal matters as much as the improvements themselves. A firm that keeps refining its systems sends a clear message that the transformation is still live.

Measuring what changed

The question most firms don't ask after go-live is the one that would tell them the most: is anyone's working life different? Go-live dates and training completion rates are inputs. They measure what was done to a firm, not what changed within it.

Internal champions are the most underused asset in post-go-live programs. Not because firms don't create them, but because the role tends to fade once the delivery team moves on and the formal project closes. A group of champions who meet regularly, surface problems early, and share what's working gives a program something formal reporting rarely provides: an honest, ground-level picture of how the system is being used, from people whose colleagues trust them in a way they'll never trust the project team. Keeping that group active, and ensuring someone owns adoption as an ongoing responsibility rather than a project role, is what separates firms that sustain change from those that watch it erode.

Structured check-ins at the right intervals make the difference between catching a problem and inheriting one. At 30 days, the question is diagnostic: where is adoption stalling, and what's causing the friction? At 90 days, the question becomes operational: are there measurable differences in process efficiency? Errors down, cycle times reduced, steps removed? One Clio Operate customer removed two full days of effort from their matter opening process. That's the kind of result that keeps people invested, and builds the case for the next improvement. At six months, one question tells you whether a transformation has landed: would people resist going back to the old way, not because they've been instructed to, but because the new approach works better for them?

That last question can't be answered by a satisfaction survey alone. Surveys capture what people think they feel at a given moment. This one asks what they'd do if the status quo changed again.

Finishing what was started

The pressure to demonstrate progress on technology transformation is creating a specific failure mode. Firms declare go-live a success, move to the next initiative, and leave the first to gradually revert. Twelve months later, they're technically live on multiple systems, proficient in none, and accumulating the kind of change fatigue that doesn't announce itself until it becomes a crisis.

The practical test before committing to anything new is a simple one: what is the adoption rate on the last program launched? If that number isn't readily available, or isn't where it should be, the foundation for the next initiative probably isn't there yet. A new go-live built on an unfinished first one doesn't accelerate progress. It compounds the problem.

The firms that lead this industry in five years won't be the ones that launched the most. They'll be the ones that finished what they started.

About Clio

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