

2017 – The Year to Try Something New?

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on January 13, 2017

2017 has arrived, and already the year is looking like one of change outside the narrow bounds of the legal profession: The Cubs are national champions and University of Alabama is *not*, Brexit negotiations will be getting started, and we are about to have a new US President who could not be more different than the outgoing one. But, for most law firms, the concept of change is far more gradual than discontinuous. At a recent Managing Partner roundtable, one of our clients coined the term “tweakovation” as his characterization of the best you could do within the law firm setting. Cynical, yes, but is this right? Can we do better or are we doomed to constant minimalism in the search for real change? There is a creeping concern among some in the industry that we are constrained to just gradual improvement until some new big thing comes along to put us all out of business.

Last year I suggested that you make 2016 a “[Year for Growth](#)” with a particular focus on personal growth. You can teach an old dog new tricks, and for anyone who has done this, congratulations. Keep it up – growth is a journey, not a task. I suggest that this year, though, should be a year for change – actually try something new and different, changing the way you personally, or your firm, does business. If you are a working lawyer, consider how you could change your approach to managing your own practice. Is there a way to deliver the same service with a materially lower cost of delivery? If so, move toward fixing the fees and building the technology and skills needed to deliver it. Do you have trouble keeping up with all your client contacts? Create a new, disciplined and systematic approach to managing that part of your business life.

For those of you with firm management responsibilities, I want to make the challenge a bit harder. Pick one aspect of how your firm runs – just one, but ideally an important one that does not work as well as it should – and redesign it. There is catch, though, because we suspect you do that anyway. This time, *consciously* step back and redesign the process or area as it would be done if it was NOT in a law firm. Pretend the function doesn’t exist, and design it from scratch. If it’s an aspect of legal service, figure out how that service’s delivery would be designed by business people (go out and find some to advise you – maybe involve key clients). Can it be completely automated? If it’s an administrative process, go visit organizations outside law that handle those functions well. If necessary, bring in consultants from other industries who have never been in a law firm. How should this (training, billing, accounting, compensation, etc.) process work? Concentrate on changing one aspect of your firm in a way that goes beyond the bounds of continuous improvement – try something discontinuous in some aspect of the firm. If it works, expand on the theme in 2018.

This approach might seem risky to some, and certainly hard to do to the rest of us. Our industry, though, talks constantly about innovation. While technological innovation has been real and has led to some change in the profession, most other innovation has been gradual and continuous, rather than rapid and discontinuous. We remain at risk of someone coming up with that “next big thing” from outside the industry, rather than from within. Those firms that develop the core competence of true innovation will be much better positioned to resist the impact of that event. Developing that skill can only come from practice and hard work. So, lets make 2017 the year to try something new.