

Make 2016 a Year for Growth

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on January 6, 2016

As we enter 2016, continued uncertainty hovers over the legal industry, fueled in part by uncertainty in the greater national and world economies and political environments. The US is in an election year, the outcome of which it is far too early to know. Much of the news from overseas causes us to pause, at best. The economy is struggling here and going backward elsewhere, and the stock market started 2016 on a particularly sour note. These themes affect us, but as individuals and as individual firms, they are beyond our control.

In our own industry, we continue to see mixed performance, with early (admittedly anecdotal) 2015 returns showing a continuation of the [“Winners and Losers”](#) theme we’ve discussed consistently for several years. Some firms and practices continue to do well and advance, while others fall further behind. The mantra of “change” seems to have become the obligatory industry slogan (much like that of politicians) whether or not the firm or its leaders ever really achieve, or even pursue, meaningful change. *“Clients seem to demand it, so we better say we’re doing it.”* Many “winners” are, in fact, innovating.

While this may sound depressing, there are reasons for much optimism, wherever you stand on this performance continuum. While we cannot control the world’s macro trends, we can control what we do as firms and as individuals. Both as a leader and as a firm, 2016 can be a year for growth and increased success if you are prepared to approach the year from new perspectives. Last week, my partner, Mike Short, [offered specific suggestions](#) for taking action at the firm level. His core message, though, is that as a firm you are far more likely to be successful concentrating on a small number of highly impactful initiatives, rather than focusing on a wide range of “improvements” simultaneously. Try to accomplish one or two things and you stand a good chance for success, but try to do ten and you most likely will achieve none.

This week, I’d like to focus on using 2016 as a year to pursue a personal growth agenda and focus. We may not, individually at least, be able to change what is happening in the outside world, but we can certainly change our own behaviors, styles and performance. As leaders, (or as individual professionals,) some of us are very good, and others less so, but wherever you stand on this continuum you can be better. Is your communications style making it difficult for you to convince your colleagues to do what needs to be done? If so, focus on improving on that front, perhaps with coaching assistance. Are you personally trying to do too much, at the expense of accomplishing too little? Learn to delegate and focus on the essential – What isn’t important? As a lawyer, are you a weak manager constantly overrunning budgets? Focus on project management skills. For each of us, there are aspects of our performance that could, with effort and perhaps some help, be improved, and through that improvement you will grow personally and your firm will benefit from that growth, both culturally and economically.

Most of us annually make a set of New Year’s resolutions that routinely go by the wayside long before February arrives. Achieving a personal growth agenda has to be different from that. It must start with the recognition that no matter how good you are, there are ways you can improve your performance – and it needs to be important to you. For most of us, this will require a fair amount of reflection, but the effort will be worth it.

Is this absolutely necessary? Of course not – I suspect most people reading this blog have achieved a great deal of success in their careers. Even so, there is always room to improve. For firm/practice/client team/office leaders, though,

personal reflection is critical if you want to be sure you are providing the best leadership you can. For some, this may lead to the conclusion that your talents are best focused on clients rather than on leadership. (How many “Practice Chairs” are still in those roles for reasons more related to politics than skill or even interest?) Acting on this recognition may create opportunity for your firm to achieve more than it otherwise would while also allowing someone else to develop. More dramatically, we’ve even seen a few firms where the primary cause of the firm’s failure was the leader’s inability to step down when they should. But even when the situation is much less extreme, as an individual you will be happier focused on what *you* can be the best at.

As we enter 2016, most firms are approaching their economic growth projections cautiously. It can, however, be a *very good year* for growth both at the firm level (by actually getting a few critically important things done) and at the personal and professional level for all leaders and professionals. Widespread professional growth within the firm will pay *immediate* cultural benefits and will, over time, ensure that the firm’s economic performance outpaces whatever level you would otherwise have achieved. To coopt the Army’s old recruiting mantra, make 2016 the year you learn to “Be all you can be”!