

Time to Turn the Wheel Again? Or Will This Year be Different?

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on January 18, 2018

Can 2018 really be here already? A year ago, in [“2017 – The Year to Try Something New?”](#), I argued that 2017 was already a year of change outside the legal profession (“The Cubs are national champions and University of Alabama is *not*...” Well, what a difference a year makes!) and urged our readers to consider making 2017 a year when they fundamentally rebuilt some aspect of their business, starting with the perspective of “how would we design this process if we were starting from scratch?”

How many of you tried that? And if you did, what kind of results did you get? Are you ready to pick another aspect of your business to work on in the new year? Go for it! We’d love to hear from those of you who took this path.

Most firms likely continued on the same path they’ve trod for the past decade, gradually making incremental improvements in client service, processes, application of technology and overall strategic approach, while avoiding radical breaks from “best practices” even for isolated aspects of the business model. Some firms are better at this than others and are advancing their business models faster as a result, and this continues to drive [winners and losers](#) as we’ve noted many times before. The early returns on 2017 results suggest a wide divergence in outcomes, even from firms that would seem to be similarly situated. Whichever side you fall on, 2018 is here, the books are closed on 2017, and we hamsters are back on the wheel. You go back to zero and start all over again.

There is hope, though, that we can eventually break this cycle. Firms *are* making progress. They *are* gradually reengineering business processes (even if they are not starting from scratch) and we *are* seeing increased efficiency, better client service, and better client outcomes. Not from all, perhaps, but from much of the industry. Maybe this is not good enough for the long term, but it’s still better than we used to do, and the clients and the firms are benefitting from this change. Firms are also getting far smarter than they used to be about managing costs, confronting culture, and addressing accountability and the individual lawyers who can adapt have benefitted from all of this.

Change, though, is accelerating – in the world, the broader economy, and the legal industry. Law firms cannot continue to afford “gradual.” No one can if they hope to maintain a leading position in their industry. Whatever you did in 2017, you will have to do more in 2018 (and 2019, etc.). The challenge for leading firms is in some ways even harder than for others – when you are in the lead, it’s far easier to sit back and rest. But we trust you won’t do that.

Right now, before the year really gets going, sit back and set some priorities. Decide which business processes really must be addressed this year – and which can wait. Decide which strategic initiatives are most critical to long-term success and concentrate your resources there. Don’t get distracted by the easy and popular, but ultimately unimportant, initiatives that bleed leadership time and energy with modest results. Keep your eye on the goal, decide what is important for *your* firm, and set the leadership agenda. Then stick to it. A year from now, will your business models be different, or will it be time to get back on that wheel (again)?