From Boardroom Conversations to Working Prototypes: Why the AI Hackathon Belongs in Every Legal Strategy

How most law firms and legal departments adopt AI today follows a familiar pattern: leadership selects a platform, procurement negotiates the licence, IT rolls it out, and a training session is scheduled. What almost never happens first is a structured test of what the organisation's own people actually need.

The consequences of this pattern are becoming visible: adoption plateaus at a fraction of licensed seats, use cases are assumed rather than identified from practice, and the strategy is based on workflows that do not reflect reality. The gap is not a technology gap; it is an evidence gap.

There is a faster, cost effective, and more honest way to close it than another vendor demonstration or consultant report: a one or two day AI hackathon in which the professionals in the organisation -- lawyers, paralegals, knowledge managers and legal ops -- build working solutions together based on their own pain points.

What a hackathon reveals that top-down procurement cannot

A well-designed legal AI hackathon produces four strategic outputs that no vendor demonstration can replicate.

1. A map of actual use cases. The people closest to the work know where time and margin are lost: contract review bottlenecks, intake triage, first-pass research memos, due diligence checklists, and multilingual compliance monitoring. A hackathon is a structured, sanctioned process to show this to management. The resulting inventory is, in effect, a demand-side AI strategy generated by the organisation.

2. Evidence instead of opinion. Debates about whether AI “works” for legal tasks remain abstract until put to the test in practice. Each task carries different requirements around accuracy, confidentiality, jurisdiction, and auditability, and a prototype exposes those requirements in hours, not quarters. Even a rough proof of concept converts an abstract strategy discussion into a concrete investment decision with observable strengths and limits.

3. Talent discovery. Every legal organisation has hidden champions. Sustainable adoption depends far more on them than on any single procurement decision, yet one cannot appoint champions one has not found. A hackathon brings them to

management's attention. It also provides a realistic picture of the organisation's actual readiness.

4. A stronger negotiating position. The organisation is able to approach the vendor market knowing what its teams actually need, what off-the-shelf platforms can and cannot do against its specific workflows, and where a lightweight internal solution may outperform an expensive licence. Build-versus-buy becomes an informed architectural choice rather than a leap of faith. In a rapidly moving market, the ability to make that choice deliberately is alone a competitive asset.

The necessary ingredients for a successful hackaton

To yield usable results, an AI hackathon requires certain key ingredients.

1. Confidentiality first. Only sanitised, synthetic or public data should be employed, with risk and IT specialists embedded in the event's design, not simply consulted after the fact. In doing so, the organisation is forced to exercise exactly the data governance muscles that any serious AI deployment will require under GDPR and the EU AI Act. A hackathon becomes a rehearsal for compliant AI operations.

2. Mixed teams. Lawyers, legal ops, knowledge management, IT and, where possible, external technologists should work together. Lawyers tend to underestimate what is feasible; while technologists tend to lose sight of day-to-day practical needs. The value sits at their intersection.

3. Judging criteria tied to strategy, without dismissing polish. Leadership should sit on the jury: their presence signals that the hackathon is strategy work, and the experience educates them faster than any briefing paper. Time saved, risk reduced, quality improved, and adoption feasibility are parameters that must be rewarded. Equally important, however, are usability, looks, and intuitive adoption. A prototype that looks polished will garner much more support internally.

4. Strategic follow-up committed in advance. The most common failure is an event with no follow-through. It is important for leadership to commit beforehand to fund one or two winning concepts through a governed pilot with an owner, a budget, a security and professional responsibility review, and a fixed review date.

Smaller players may benefit from structural advantages

Boutique firms, specialist practices, and lean legal departments start with some inherent structural advantages: shorter decision cycles, closer proximity between practitioners and leadership, and fewer legacy processes to work around. A prototype can travel from the hackathon table to a structured pilot in weeks rather than months. That speed is what makes a two-day hackathon a realistic way to find out whether an AI use case holds up against actual matters, real constraints, and working practitioners, before scarce budget is committed to it. Firms that build this habit now will know which tools fit their work while larger organisations are still committing time and resources to standardise off the shelf tools.

The question for any decision maker

As a decision maker, if you had to defend your AI investment decisions to your partners or your board in three years, would you rather point to a vendor pitch deck or to evidence generated by your own people, on your own workflows, under your own governance? The market is moving so rapidly that strategies based on assumptions today could become liabilities tomorrow. Organizations that make decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions will be best positioned for success.