57 Tips for Successful Innovation Outcomes in Law

Dennis Kennedy
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1. Get to work on innovation, however you define it, and let others talk about definitions while you are getting work done.

2. Legal innovation simply means applying innovation techniques in the legal world, in a variety of different dimensions.

3. While focusing only on optimization can have great value, it also narrows your perspective and causes you to miss bigger innovation prizes.

4. Look outside the legal silo and learn the standard types of innovation and business models. Think more in terms of recombining ideas from other sources than creating completely new ideas out of thin air.

5. Understand the fundamental innovation models (and their variants) that already exist and become fluent in the language of these models.

6. Keep the book Ten Types of Innovation at the core of your innovation library and, better yet, give it a place of honor on your desk so it’s always at hand.

7. Linger in the WHY stage of WHY-WHAT-HOW as long as you can.

8. You MUST get the customer into the conversation at the beginning. Find ways to facilitate those conversations in directed and productive ways.

9. While you will probably gravitate to several favorites, it’s a great idea to learn (and maybe even memorize) many of the standard business models to give you a framework and context for your efforts and to help you communicate in the language of business.

10. Diversity is essential in innovation. Take a look around the room at your next meeting. And the one after that. And the one after that.

11. Always emphasize from the beginning that idea generation is about “quantity,” but reassure participants, especially lawyers, that they will get to focus on “quality” later.

12. Make a list of the constraints that you believe that you face. Simply writing them down will change your attitude. Then decide whether they are barriers that stop you and why. The others are opportunities to help you move in new directions.

13. What happens if you look at a project and invert the maxim of people, process, then technology and frame your effort as technology, process, then people? Does it provide a new insight or framework?

14. You must deal aggressively with the “lawyer inhibition factor.” A creative idea might be to get a group of lawyers to “brainstorm” a process that optimizes their ideal roles.
15. Not all of the best ideas are contained within your organization. In fact, they rarely, if ever, are. Look outside in thoughtful and strategic ways.

16. Keep your written plan or roadmap simple, keep it short, and keep the reader’s attention. Can you get it onto one sheet of paper? Why not?

17. Determine which of the four fundamental innovation categories (mission; targeted but flexible; predetermined product or improvement; “check the box” or “innovation theater”) your effort falls into and try to get at least a one-day design thinking or strategic planning event scheduled.

18. If asked to take on an innovation leadership role, make your list of hard questions and get them answered. The fact that you are willing to ask hard, thoughtful questions shows that you are the right person for the role.

19. When hiring personnel and choosing leaders, do not put together a group of people who look and think like you do.

20. Consider looking closely at where you team members are on their career S curves and building for the 15%-70%-15% mix based on placement on the S curve. (See Whitney Johnson’s Building an A Team for details.)

21. Find yourself a guide or “Yoda” to help you learn how best to sell to your internal audience, enlist and engage your internal champions, and navigate the political landscape.

22. Build some small wins into your project roadmap and use them to build momentum.

23. A well-conceived “show and tell” road trip can kickstart your program and might even generate more projects than you can handle. That’s a good thing.

24. Committees are a necessary evil. Don’t “have” meetings; lead your meetings. Own your meeting style and set your agendas in advance.

25. It’s hard, but you have to be able to ask for help. People often are willing to give you more help than you’d expect. In fact, the help you might ask for might be easier for them to give than what they were afraid you were going to ask them for.

26. Consider the creation of a small advisory board of internal and external experts as part of your pitch for your program or as part of your request for what you will need to take on the program initially or to take it to the next level.

27. If you’ve ever worked with a coach, you already understand how helpful they can be. Consider building the requirement for coaching for yourself into your job description.

28. “It’s just the scientific method” can be a powerful persuader of skeptics.

29. Experiments give us data we can analyze and use for improvement. Stress test your hypotheses. If you don’t, your customers will.

30. Find a simple feedback tool and start using it regularly. The old adage is a good one: “Feedback is the breakfast of champions.”

31. Develop your own brainstorming style, experiment and see what works best for you and your groups, and keep people informed about what gets developed out of the session.
Ongoing engagement after the session should be a priority goal.

32. Find a form of prototyping that best suits your style and needs and identify who can build those prototypes for you. Remember that a piece of paper can be a prototype.

33. Consider the MVP (Minimum Viable Product) approach when you have a product or service that is “close to done” but has been languishing in the finalization process.

34. Require the completion of a value proposition canvas for any proposed new effort.

35. Take the initiative in recommending KPIs, get agreement from management on those KPIs, and provide regular, one-page, reports on KPI success.

36. Get a decent knowledge of the standard process improvement methods and try to become well-versed in the one that appeals to you.

37. Include space on your team and a line in your budget for at least one project manager.


39. Do not cut corners on your own learning. Insist that your employer facilitate your learning and your access to innovation communities and events.

40. Three places to find early wins if you are struggling to find a starting point: simple dashboards, expert locators, and lightweight knowledge management tools.

41. Persuading general counsels on innovation efforts requires special approaches and language, but these can be learned.

42. Outside law firm panel convergence efforts, if properly understood, provide some of the best opportunities for innovation success.

43. If you are in a law firm, try to leverage the business development team as your ally in finding innovation partners. If you are in a corporate law department, try to leverage the panel RFP process to find innovation partners.

44. Look for others (including other law firms or clients) that you might collaborate with to increase your reach and reduce your costs.

45. Take time to look at other innovation projects, both successful and unsuccessful, internal and external, and see what you learn from them.

46. If someone in management called you right now, what numbers and data would you like to have at your fingertips to answer questions on the spot. Build a simple reporting dashboard to give you that.

47. A portfolio approach treats innovation efforts as types of investments and gives you ways to manage investments in the same way you manage your retirement plans and other investments.

48. Make changes to budget and investment allocations a key result arising out of your project evaluations to increase the risk of finding winners and pruning projects not likely to succeed in the short-term.

49. You might not ever have to do a full-blown pivot, but you will definitely be making course changes. Become familiar with the pivot concept and stay open to making needed changes.

51. Develop a toolbox for dealing with common internal barriers to innovation, progress, and other roadblocks.

52. Don’t be cavalier about failure and “fast fails.” Understand how to prepare for the real-world and personal impact on you and others. “Resilience” and “learning opportunities” might seem like euphemism, but they can make for a better environment.

53. Take care of yourself.

54. Is there always a reserved seat for your customer at your innovation table?

55. Innovation is a practice and a discipline. Approach your work in that way.

56. If you haven’t thought through business model changes as part of your project, you aren’t done yet.

57. Keep learning. Every day.
About Dennis Kennedy

Dennis Kennedy (dmk@denniskennedy.com) is President of Dennis Kennedy Advisory Services LLC, an information technology and innovation lawyer, and author well-known for promoting the use of technology in the practice of law. He focuses on innovation, legal technology, speaking, writing, and coaching and is an adjunct professor in the LegalRnD program at Michigan State University College of Law and also at the University of Michigan Law School.

Dennis retired as Senior Counsel for the Digital Payments & Labs group at Mastercard, where he focused on information technology law, fintech law and innovation. His new company will concentrate on innovation, legal technology and productization, including “Legal Innovation as a Service” packages and the Kennedy Idea Propulsion Laboratory.


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About the Kennedy Idea Propulsion Laboratory

The Kennedy idea Propulsion Laboratory (www.denniskennedy.com/kennedy-idea-propulsion-laboratory) is a division of Dennis Kennedy Advisory Services LLC. KIPL is the home for Dennis Kennedy’s R & D efforts, custom consulting, writing, advisory board work, and innovation projects. This set of tips grew out of the first book to be published under the KIPL umbrella – Successful Innovation Outcomes in Law: A Practical Guide for Law Firms, Law Departments, and Legal Organizations (Publication date scheduled for August 2019).

KIPL has created the Legal Innovation as a Service product for innovation leaders want to jumpstart and course-correct their innovation projects with targeted, pre-scoped, flat fee engagements.

On KIPL’s current roadmap are:

- Panel convergence assistance packages
- LegalTech Product Insights packages
- TechPrompts – a product for getting in-house counsel up-to-speed on important technologies
- Innovation Portfolio Management Tools
- Online courses

To learn more about KIPL, KIPL products and services, partnering, and custom consulting services, contact Dennis Kennedy at 734-926-5197 or dmk@denniskennedy.com.

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