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How to Evaluate (and Escape) Legal Tech Fragmentation

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Count them. Your document management system. Your billing software. E-discovery platform. Time tracking. Confict checking. Matter management. Client portal. Email archiving. Practice management. Maybe a CRM nobody uses. Probably two or three research tools with overlapping features.

We've seen frms with 23 diferent software vendors. Twenty-three. Each one solves exactly one problem. None of them talk to each other. Your IT director spends half their time maintaining integrations that break every time a vendor pushes an update.

This is the tech stack equivalent of building a house by hiring a diferent contractor for every room, then wondering why the plumbing doesn't reach the kitchen.

How We Got Here

Nobody set out to build this mess. It accumulated.

In 2015, a partner championed a new e-discovery tool. Made sense at the time. In 2017, the fnance team picked billing software without consulting IT. In 2019, someone bought a client intake tool that duplicated half the features in your matter management system. Each decision was reasonable in isolation. Together, they created a maze.

The pattern repeats at nearly every frm we've seen. Point solutions multiply because nobody owns the architecture. Partners buy tools for their practice groups. Departments solve immediate problems without considering the broader stack. And vendors are happy to sell you another piece of software rather than help you consolidate.

> *Tech sprawl isn't a technology problem. It's a governance problem.*

The Hidden Costs

License fees are the obvious expense. They're not the biggest one.

The real cost is time. Every hour your staf spends re-entering data from one system to another. Every workaround your paralegals have invented because the "ofcial" process involves fve diferent tools. Every report that requires exporting from three systems, manually combining spreadsheets, and hoping the data lines up.

One mid-sized firm we audited discovered their attorneys spent an average of 47 minutes per day on administrative tasks caused by system fragmentation. That's nearly two full weeks per attorney per year. At partner rates, we're talking about $200,000+ in lost productivity annually for a 40-attorney firm. And that's before counting support staff time.

Then there's the risk. Data living in 15 different systems means 15 different security surfaces. 15 different vendor relationships to manage. 15 different opportunities for something to go wrong. When a firm gets breached, it's rarely through their primary systems. It's through that forgotten tool someone installed three years ago and never updated.

Auditing What You Actually Have

Before you can fix the problem, you need to see it clearly. Most CIOs don't have a complete picture of their tech stack. Shadow IT is everywhere.

Start with a full inventory. Not just what IT manages. Everything. Talk to practice groups. Talk to administrative staff. Ask: what tools do you actually use daily? You'll find subscriptions nobody remembers buying. Trial accounts that became permanent. Personal tools that handle firm data.

For each tool, document four things:

- What problem does it solve? (Be specific. "Document management" isn't specific enough.)
- Who uses it? (Not who should use it. Who actually does.)
- What data does it hold? (Client data? Financial data? Both?)
- What does it connect to? (APIs, integrations, exports, manual data transfer.)

This exercise is tedious. It's also essential. You cannot make good decisions about consolidation without knowing what you're consolidating.

We did this with a 60-attorney firm last year. They thought they had 14 software vendors. The actual count was 31. More than half were tools that individual attorneys or practice groups had acquired without IT involvement.

The Consolidation Decision Tree

Once you see the full picture, you'll face choices. For each tool, you have four options: keep it, replace it, consolidate it, or kill it.

Keep it when a tool does something unique that nothing else in your stack can replicate, it's actively used, and the vendor is stable. Your core document management system probably falls here.

Replace it when a tool is outdated, poorly supported, or has better alternatives. That e-discovery platform from 2012? Time to look at modern options.

Consolidate it when two or more tools do overlapping things. Do you really need three different research tools? Probably not. Pick the best one. Or find a platform that covers what all three do.

Kill it when nobody uses it, or the problem it solves no longer exists. That client portal you built five years ago that clients never log into? Pull the plug.

The hardest decision is consolidation. It requires someone to give up their preferred tool. That partner who loves the obscure practice management app? They'll fight you. Win that fight. The cost of maintaining parallel systems isn't worth one person's preferences.

Build vs. Buy vs. Integrate

Here's where firms usually go wrong. They see fragmentation and assume the answer is buying one massive platform that does everything. Enterprise suites promise this. They rarely deliver.

The big platforms (you know the names) try to be everything to everyone. They're mediocre at most things. Outstanding at nothing. And they lock you in. Once you've moved everything into one vendor's ecosystem, you're at their mercy on pricing, features, and support.

The better approach: strategic integration over monolithic platforms.

Keep best-of-breed tools where quality matters most. Your document management system is the backbone of everything. Don't compromise on it. Same for billing and time tracking if those drive revenue recognition.

But instead of buying more tools, build connections between the ones you have. Modern integration platforms (think Workato, Celigo, or custom middleware) let you create data flows between systems without replacing them. The billing system can pull time entries automatically. The DMS can sync with client intake. Matter information stays consistent across platforms.

This isn't cheap or easy. But it's usually less expensive than enterprise suite licensing, and it preserves fexibility.

Vendor Negotiation Reality

Legal tech vendors know you're stuck. Switching costs are high. Data migration is painful. So they price accordingly.

A few truths about vendor negotiations:

Multi-year deals aren't always better. The discount looks attractive. But you're locking in for three years with a vendor who may not keep pace with the market. We've seen frms trapped in contracts with vendors who stopped innovating years ago.

Per-seat pricing is often negotiable. Especially for larger frms. Don't accept list price. Ask about enterprise agreements. Ask about tiered pricing. Ask what happens if your headcount changes.

Data portability is more important than price. Before signing anything, understand your exit options. Can you export your data in a usable format? What does migration support look like? If the answer is "we don't really support that," you're handing them permanent leverage.

Reference checks matter. Talk to frms who've been customers for three or more years. Not the happy quotes on the website. Find them through your network. Ask about support quality, upgrade pain, and whether the vendor delivers on roadmap promises.

One negotiation tactic that works: run a competitive process even when you think you know who you'll pick. Get real proposals from alternatives. Let your preferred vendor know you're evaluating options. Prices drop. Terms improve. Vendors suddenly fnd fexibility they claimed they didn't have.

Integration Architecture for Law Firms

Most law frm tech stacks look like spaghetti. Data fows in all directions. Nobody can draw the diagram. When something breaks, tracing the problem takes hours.

Good architecture starts with identifying your source of truth for each data type:

- Client and matter information: usually the practice management or matter management system
- Documents: the DMS
- Time and billing: the financial system
- People and structure: HR/directory systems

Everything else should pull from these sources. Not duplicate them. Not maintain separate versions. Pull.

When you add a new client in your matter management system, that data should flow automatically to billing, to the DMS, to your CRM if you have one. One entry. Multiple destinations. No re-keying.

This requires an integration layer. Some firms build it with iPaaS tools (integration platform as a service). Some use custom middleware. Some rely on vendors with native connectors. The right approach depends on your technical capacity and budget.

What doesn't work: asking attorneys and staff to maintain consistency manually. They won't. The data will drift. Within six months, you'll have the same client spelled three different ways across four systems.

The Vendor Reduction Roadmap

You won't fix this in a quarter. Plan for 18 to 24 months to meaningfully reduce fragmentation. Here's a typical sequence:

Months 1 through 3: Audit and assess. Full inventory. Understand what you have, who uses it, what it costs. Document data flows and pain points.

Months 4 through 6: Prioritize and plan. Identify quick wins (unused tools you can cancel immediately). Map consolidation targets. Build the business case for leadership.

Months 7 through 12: Execute phase one. Kill dead tools. Begin first consolidation project (pick something visible but not mission-critical as proof of concept). Implement initial integrations.

Months 13 through 18: Scale consolidation. Roll out broader platform changes. Train users. Retire legacy systems once replacements are stable.

Months 19 through 24: Optimize. Fine-tune integrations. Address gaps. Establish governance to prevent future sprawl.

The governance piece is critical. Without it, you'll be back where you started in five years. Someone needs authority to approve new tools. Every purchase request should require answering: does this duplicate something we already have?

What Good Looks Like

A well-architected legal tech stack isn't one product. It's five to eight core systems with strong integrations between them. The specific tools depend on your practice areas and size, but the pattern is consistent:

- One DMS that everything connects to
- One financial system that handles time, billing, and reporting
- One matter/practice management system as the source of truth for clients and matters
- One e-discovery platform (if you do litigation)
- One research platform (not three)
- An integration layer tying it all together

That's it. Six systems instead of twenty. One vendor relationship per function instead of three or four. Data that flows automatically instead of being re-entered manually.

Is this easy? No. Does it require uncomfortable decisions? Yes. Will some attorneys complain about giving up their favorite tool? Absolutely.

Do it anyway. The productivity gains justify the political pain. And your IT team will stop spending half their time on integration maintenance.

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