



# Hacking Big Law: Putting a Legal Hackathon to the Test

Insights and key takeaways from our experience  
in running a legal hackathon

OSLER



*“...it is one thing to recognize the need for change, and quite another to know precisely what needs changing.”*

## Big Law is facing big changes

Just as with other professional services businesses, the connection between those who provide a service and those who purchase it has transformed, creating demand for a more collaborative and open relationship. From the customer’s perspective there is a heightened sense that their relationship with their law firms should be more like their relationships with other vendors: transparent, open, cooperative, actively managed and predictable.

### THE EVOLUTIONARY ROAD

While this evolution has spelled trouble for some, it has also spawned new law firms, new solution providers and innovative new ways to market and deliver legal services. It has also pushed firms of all sizes to realize that to stay competitive, they must change too.

Of course, it is one thing to recognize the need for change, and quite another to know precisely what needs changing. In my role as Osler’s Chief Knowledge Officer, I am involved with creating processes and initiatives that help our firm pinpoint what needs to change and find new ways to innovate. The end goal is to enable our firm to remain competitive and, most importantly, continue to meet our clients’ complex legal service needs.

At Osler, we have been working on some of Big Law’s critical challenges for more than five years through our Practice Management and Innovation initiative. Focused on process, pricing, profitability and promotion, this initiative includes implementing legal project management, general process improvement, efficient service delivery, strategic pricing and cost management. Through the Practice Management and Innovation initiative we have gained tremendous insights into our clients’ needs and expectations as they relate to service delivery, our approach to matter management, and even our own capabilities and limitations as a firm. Not surprisingly, we have also learned a great deal about the process of innovation itself – including the need to find inventive ways for exploring where change is most needed and how to make it happen.

It was through this need to find a new and creative way to uncover what needs to change that we looked to an entirely different industry for inspiration and discovered the hackathon.

### AUTHOR



**Mara Nickerson**  
Chief Knowledge Officer

“...hack away at the ivy-covered walls to reveal a new, more agile and more client-focused organization.”

#### THE LEGAL HACKATHON: PUTTING INNOVATION INTO PRACTICE

Borrowed from the world of computer programming, the term “hackathon” is a blend of the words “hack” and “marathon,” and refers to an intensive collaboration of programmers working on a software project or exploring solutions to a difficult programming problem. Encouraged by the potential outcomes and learning opportunities that can come out of a hackathon, we decided to put it to the (legal) test.

The players and issues in the legal world are obviously different than those in tech, but the objective remains the same: identify a problem in need of fixing and explore possible solutions through intensive collaboration. Or as Terry Burgoyne, Osler partner and Head of our Practice Management and Innovation initiative, says, “hack away at the ivy-covered walls to reveal a new, more agile and more client-focused organization.”

We held our first-ever hackathon on February 3, 2016, as the centrepiece of a month-long legal innovation program at Osler, highlighting the innovation initiatives we have on the go within the firm. Our main goals for the hackathon were to try to engage clients and partners in a collaborative exercise to discuss how Big Law could work more efficiently to deliver greater client value, and hopefully develop some ideas on how to tackle some of the critical challenges that Big Law is currently facing. We also hoped to assess the effectiveness of the hackathon as a forum for troubleshooting challenges, fostering innovation and driving new insights that could enhance the client service experience.

#### GAINING ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

It takes a lot to put on an event like this. You need organizational support from senior levels, active participation from clients and external experts, and time (possibly the most elusive resource of all). But we received a great deal of internal support, with partners and administrative staff offering their time and talents, including Terry, who acted as the hackathon’s chair. Like all innovation practices, collaboration was key (both in the hackathon’s planning stages as well as participation in the session itself) and bringing together a variety of experiences and viewpoints to the hackathon process was vital to the initiative’s success.

CREATING THE HACKATHON TEAM

Co-hosting the hackathon with Ryerson University’s Legal Innovation Zone (LIZ), an organization dedicated to driving innovation in the legal industry, was an easy decision. Canada’s first legal incubator, LIZ is home to 19 start-up companies, all actively working to change the status quo of the legal system. We knew LIZ’s executive director, Chris Bentley, and director, Hersh Perlis, would provide invaluable insight in approaching our endeavour.

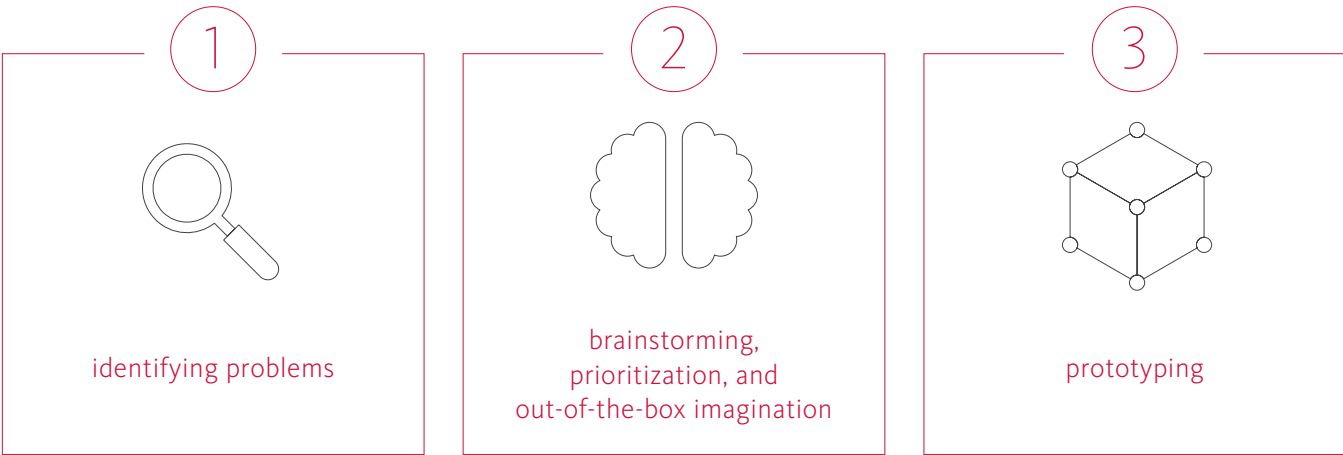
We also knew the hackathon itself needed a dynamic format that could keep participants engaged, so we brought in Steve Gedeon, Associate Professor at Ryerson University’s Ted Rogers School of Management, to facilitate the hackathon, using an approach called Design Thinking. Thought leader and legal industry guru Jordan Furlong also joined us as emcee, providing expert insight to those who were participating.

Our participants included a wide range of Osler members and community connections: representatives from some of our client companies, some of our own lawyers and people involved in other aspects of the legal industry. We sought to bring a multiplicity of voices and broad viewpoints to the table. And, as word got out about the hackathon, we discovered that participants were just as excited as we were to explore what the hackathon could offer. It turned out that clients were not only interested in the subject, but also for the opportunity to create new dialogue. Responses to our invitation came quickly and we were easily able to fill the hackathon to capacity.

THE HACKATHON PROCESS AS IT HAPPENED: IDEAS IN ACTION

Led by Steve, the half-day hackathon session used an action-oriented approach. First, he had participants, working in teams, “open up” their thinking, identifying problems clients face or problems their external law firms face in delivering services, and then converge towards solutions using brainstorming, prioritization and out-of-the-box imagination. He took the group through a series of fast-paced exercises aimed at generating a number of prototype

DESIGN THINKING:



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solutions that could be refined over time. His methodology drove home the notion of how those in Big Law can be more agile in their approach to developing tailored solutions for clients.

Much of the morning was spent writing on flipcharts, debating and prioritizing. Each exercise segment – punctuated by Steve’s hand-held klaxon horn – forced the teams to distill their ideas down to a workable solution, which were then presented to the entire group. Throughout the session, attendees were engaged, listening intently to each other and actively exploring new solutions and ideas. It was truly impressive to see all of the participants, from client executives to in-house practitioners, up out of their seats, enjoying the hackathon, and to watch their excitement and interest grow throughout the session.

As a pilot exercise, the session was intended to demonstrate that the time invested in active problem-solving pays off by creating solid, potentially actionable results. This is significant, given the pressures we all feel about doing as much as we can in the time we have available and maintaining a full schedule. Brainstorming may seem like an odd use of time at first, but it quickly became apparent it could be a valuable approach that can help in yielding better solutions for clients, particularly when well directed.

DISCOVERIES ABOUT BIG LAW: WHAT WE LEARNED

The Design Thinking approach Steve used in the hackathon session focuses on empathy and pushes to solve real problems that are causing stakeholders real pain, which enabled participants to examine the role of empathy in developing client relationships. Sometimes, lawyers approach a client’s issue impersonally, simply as a challenge to be solved, or a straightforward business transaction. They forget that for the client, an issue can be a source of pain. It is more than a static problem – it actually hurts in some way. We learned that identifying this pain point is a critical step in personalizing the relationship. As Steve put it, “If you are not solving a pain, people will not return your phone calls.”

The session also gave us new insights into a profession that is facing a buyer’s market. As Jordan said in his opening remarks, the legal industry is becoming more service-oriented, with clients becoming more knowledgeable about their choices and expecting more for their buck. Clients today have more choice and are less inclined to accept the traditional billing practices of large firms. Consequently, lawyers and firms need to recognize that the relationship with a client must be genuine, and this requires work and diligence to maintain.





As for our biggest objectives for the hackathon – to engage in a dialogue around solving problems facing Big Law and identify how we can change – we were able to gain a number of promising and practical ideas. Some of the solutions our teams came up with were quite big, like designing a regulatory collaboration portal for multiple clients, or a new model to help internal and external counsel work together to evaluate and manage scope change on a matter. Others were smaller and easier to implement, but just as significant to the business of law.

As a whole, the exercises demonstrated how a law firm can become more connected and agile with a little practice, and how this, in turn, can send a new message to clients: “Come and talk to us. We are open to working with you differently. We are happy to have the dialogue.” This was a key takeaway for the hackathon attendees.

Based on anecdotal feedback, it seemed as those who participated felt the hackathon demonstrated how valuable it can be to take a step back and approach problems in a collaborative fashion. One of the participants described it as “a new way of approaching issues and challenges to come up with different and creative solutions.”

From my perspective as the hackathon “coordinator,” we wanted to gain fresh ideas and test out a new problem-solving process. The experience proved to us that there is value in looking outside of our everyday world to find solutions for problems within our industry.

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#### OUR TAKEAWAYS

The following ideas resonated most with participants:

The problems of Big Law are more solvable if we translate them into specific client pain points.

The hackathon can produce good ideas that work well in Big Law – practical solutions we think are worth exploring further.

Clients aren’t just willing, they want to engage in joint problem solving. Involving clients in evaluating how things can be done differently can go a long way in creating new dialogue and a mutual understanding that can positively influence change.

Looking outside the legal world can be both inspirational and instrumental in finding new ways to innovate.

This process confirmed the benefits of a firm allowing the time to analyze and discuss issues, specifically by taking the client’s perspective. It also confirmed you do not have to be right with your first thought or idea. In fact, if you take the time to write out ideas and share them with other team members, there is a greater chance that a solution will make itself apparent through synergy.

## CONCLUSION

**At Osler, we pride ourselves on being innovative in our legal advice.** The mandate of our Practice Management and Innovation initiative is to apply the same level of innovation to how we practise law and serve our clients. In our experience, the hackathon is a valuable addition to have in our innovation “toolbox” – and one we would turn to again. As our clients’ requirements evolve, we will continue to innovate and explore different ways to move dialogue forward on all levels, internally and externally, to affect change – because that is what service businesses have to do.

#### About Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP

Osler is a leading law firm with a singular focus – your business. From Toronto, Montréal, Calgary, Ottawa, Vancouver and New York, we advise our Canadian, U.S. and international clients on an array of domestic and cross-border legal issues. Our collaborative “one firm” approach draws on the expertise of over 400 lawyers to provide responsive, proactive and practical legal solutions driven by your business needs. For over 150 years, we’ve built a reputation for solving problems, removing obstacles, and providing the answers you need, when you need them. It’s law that works.

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