

The AI Adoption Domino Effect Series

Tipping the First Tile:

How Legal Teams Are Jumpstarting AI with Smart Pilots

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Generative AI has moved from novelty to necessity in a remarkably short time. In just over a year, tools like ChatGPT and Gemini have evolved from intriguing demos to daily-use platforms within many legal departments. Despite this rapid transformation and the undeniable productivity gains for those who have embraced the shift, most legal teams still find themselves somewhere in between curiosity and commitment. The interest is there. The pressure is building. But the path forward remains murky.

Common AI Adoption Scenarios

At UpLevel Ops, we've had a front-row seat to the evolving landscape of AI in legal, and if there's one constant, it's that every client arrives with a unique mix of needs, ambitions, and roadblocks. But despite that diversity, a few patterns emerge consistently.

The first type of legal team we encounter is those who've already taken a few steps into the world of generative AI. They've experimented with free versions of popular tools, perhaps even invested in entry-level business licenses. But now they're stuck. Sometimes it's because their tools work well in isolation but haven't been integrated into actual workflows. They have potential, but they're still in "playground mode," which is useful for experimentation but not connected to the day-to-day work. In addition, they can't get past internal approvals, or they don't know how to operationalize what they've started.

For other teams, the issue is more fundamental: the tool isn't the right fit. It looks good in a demo, but in practice, it's clunky, unintuitive, or just not powerful enough. Legal teams find themselves saddled with a subpar solution that no one wants to use. Even when IT tries to push adoption from the top down, the rollout falters. The energy drains. Usage drops. You can't build momentum on something no one trusts or enjoys using.

Then there's the third group: those stuck in search of the "perfect" tool. This is one of the most dangerous holding patterns we see. It's usually driven by good intentions and a desire to get it right the first time. But over time, it becomes a form of avoidance. Instead of starting with tools that are already available and proven, teams spend months vetting vendors, drafting exhaustive requirements lists, and imagining features that may never exist. They delay action in pursuit of a mythical solution that will tick every box from day one.

We try to break that cycle by reframing the question. It's about practicality, not perfection. It's about choosing something flexible, extensible, and easy to build on. Right now, that means starting with platforms like ChatGPT and Gemini. These are the foundational systems driving nearly all innovation in the space. They're well-supported, enterprise-ready, and constantly improving. Better yet, they're customizable and inexpensive, making them ideal for pilot programs and scalable long-term use.

The Power of Starting with a Pilot Program

One of the most consistent success factors we've seen across legal teams adopting AI is the decision to start small, but strategically. A thoughtfully scoped pilot program is a great method for de-risking innovation, aligning stakeholders, and building sustainable internal momentum.

Most of our successful clients begin with a tightly defined group of users, often on a business license from a foundational AI provider such as OpenAI or Google. These users aren't randomly selected but instead are typically individuals with a strong understanding of their workflows, openness to new tools, and the capacity to provide meaningful feedback. This combination of structure and enthusiasm is essential. It ensures that the pilot team isn't just using the tool; they're actively shaping how it will scale.

From a risk management standpoint, this approach puts everyone at ease. For IT and InfoSec, the small group size limits exposure and gives teams time to ensure the tool is being used in accordance with security protocols and data governance frameworks. Rather than saying "no" to new tools, they get a chance to help shape the rollout in a way that meets the organization's standards. This alignment between legal ops, IT, and InfoSec is critical and much easier to achieve when the stakes are initially kept low.

For legal leadership, pilot programs provide real-world validation. It's one thing to read about AI benefits in an industry article, but it's quite another to see your team saving hours a week, surfacing new use cases, or improving the accuracy and speed of legal research. The visibility of that progress matters. Once a GC or CLO sees a member of their team producing significantly faster work with greater confidence, the conversation shifts from "Should we use this?" to "How fast can we scale?"

Equally important is the cultural impact. Within a pilot group, energy builds quickly. Members start trading tips, sharing results, and brainstorming new use cases. That internal buzz spreads. Colleagues outside the group notice the shift and start asking to join. Curiosity becomes contagious. When managed correctly, the pilot becomes not just a testing ground, but a catalyst for change that feels organic, not forced.

Finally, controlled rollouts give legal teams a chance to experiment with governance structures and user training before opening the floodgates with a full implementation. How are custom AI assistants being saved and shared? What guidelines are needed around inputting sensitive data? Which use cases deliver immediate value, and which ones need a more thoughtful approach? These questions are much easier to answer when the rollout is measured, not massive.

In short, a well-structured pilot is more than a safety net; it's a springboard. It gives teams the space to explore, experiment, and build confidence. And when it works, as we've seen again and again, it sets off a chain reaction that transforms isolated success into enterprise-wide momentum.

A thoughtfully executed pilot isn't just about cautious experimentation; it's about sparking confidence, energizing teams, and setting the stage for broader transformation. When done right, your initial successes will ripple outward, paving the way for deeper, enterprise-wide adoption of generative AI.

But even the best pilots can stall without a strategic roadmap. In Part 2, we'll tackle how to navigate the crucial next steps, from overcoming internal roadblocks and scaling beyond pilots to choosing flexible solutions that keep your momentum alive.

The dominoes have started to fall. Next, let's ensure they continue to fall in the right direction.

Next month in *Brainwave*, look for Part 2 of **The AI Adoption Domino Effect Series - Keeping the Dominoes Falling: Turning Pilot Wins into Department-Wide AI Success.**

Learn more about the **AI Advantage** from UpLevel Ops at UpLevelOps.com.