

Debevoise Harnesses Client Practice, Internal Experimentation to Navigate AI Era

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In the AI era, organizations are testing how and where to best apply generative artificial intelligence models—all while navigating their ever-changing capabilities and a host of complex security and regulatory risks.

For Debevoise & Plimpton, there's wisdom—and smart business sense—in tackling these challenges collectively with clients.

The firm is leveraging its internal AI teams in collaboration with its client-focused AI practice—and the practice's proprietary-developed AI advisory platform, Suite of Tools for Assessing AI Risk (STAAR)—to not only stay head of the fast-evolving AI landscape, but modernize how it designs and delivers client services.

The unique approach underscores how adapting to the AI era can mean blurring the lines between internal and external services, and innovating beyond just technology development.

AI Policy Committee

Like other law firms, Debevoise formed a committee to centralize how it manages AI adoption and risk. Launched in 2023, the Debevoise's AI policy committee establishes firm-wide AI policies and approves AI use cases and tools for internal use.

The committee is designed “to encourage innovation and information sharing around what various groups might be doing, and to manage the risk all at the same time,” Debevoise chief information officer Karen Levy told Law.com.

The group is made up of a cross-section of firm stakeholders and AI experts—including Levy—Debevoise's technology and applied AI teams, its general counsel's office and various firm leaders, including partner and leader of its AI practice Avi Gesser.

The committee provides guidance to the firm's applied AI team, which works closely with practice groups and supporting operations groups—nonlegal teams such as finance, marketing and professional development, among others—to develop AI use cases.

A partner and a group of lawyers from each practice group, as well as one representative from each operational team, are appointed “AI liaisons” to the applied AI team and meet on a regular basis to share AI best practices and use case ideas.

While the firm already provides organization-wide enterprise and legal technology platforms to its lawyers and staff, individuals can request

specific gen AI tools and use cases for their groups via an input form managed by the AI policy committee.

"We get requests for, usually, point solution tools that are either function-based, sometimes practice-tools, and we do evaluate all of those," Levy said.

The committee will vet proposed tools on a number of criteria, including a product's security controls and whether the proposed solution meets a need not already being addressed by available tools.

To determine if the firm's gen AI investments are panning out, the applied AI team quantitatively and qualitatively tracks the usage of the AI tools within the firm and works closely with practice groups to drive adoption.

How the Firm Is Using AI

Since Debevoise empowers individual practice and operational teams to procure and leverage gen AI tools, there are a variety of ways the firm puts the technology to work.

"It's practice group by practice group. I don't think we have one killer use case that pervades all the practice groups," Gesser told Law.com. Still, he noted that "research, summarization, translation and idea generation are probably common to all groups, but used somewhat differently for the most part."

As an example, Gesser said, "Some of the documents we were reviewing are in a different language, so we want to translate them. We use AI for that. Some of them are highly technical, so we want a high-level summary in a plain language format. We use it for that. You're looking for patterns, creating graph chronologies. ... It's a series of use cases across an overall task, which is reviewing these documents efficiently and effectively."

A big part of Debevoise's approach to gen AI is letting staff and attorneys experiment with how best to leverage the technology in their own work. "What we found is, put the tools in the hands of people who are actually doing the work and give them guidance, and they'll figure out, for the most part, how to do stuff that they weren't able to do before, and also to do the stuff they're doing more efficiently," Gesser said.

To be sure, such experimentation still comes with guardrails. "What has been fundamental in our training and in all the governance is that it's all about a Debevoise product all the way through. We cannot compromise quality. To figure out how to use the tool with the level of supervision and the requirement for excellence that we have for all our work is tricky, but I think we've sort of figured that out for a lot of our use cases," he added.

In addition to exploring use cases, the firm is also determining where leveraging advanced AI has best return on investment.

"We're anticipating where the AI can really add value, and we're testing it, and we're trying things out, and we are seeing some successes. But, it's uneven, and it's coming sometimes at a big cost," Gesser said.

Still, Debevoise is transparent with clients about its experience with AI, which helps address some of the pressures to realize cost savings with the novel technology.

"Our clients who are sophisticated about this want to know that we're on the right path. Maybe we're not there yet for all the stuff we're doing with AI, but we're starting to see some evidence of that kind of saving."

He added, "To the extent their concern is we're not taking enough risks, I think we are getting good at having conversations with clients and showing them ... we are taking some risks, and

we are willing, in some places, to sacrifice short-term profitability for long-term viability.”

Leveraging STAAR

A key resource supporting the firm’s internal gen AI efforts is STAAR, a subscription-based offering that gives the firm’s clients access to a gen AI-enhanced database containing AI policies, vetted use cases and other resources related to AI adoption and governance.

Gesser told Law.com that STAAR, now in its second iteration and powered by gen AI technology from AI legal tech startup Legora, comprises around 120 documents, many of which were initially drafted for specific clients and then stripped of identifying information. Such documents represent the most up-to-date AI guidance, with the firm adding around five to 10 new documents to STAAR each month.

STAAR, however, is much more than a client offering. It is also essentially an internal database—after all, pooling together AI best practices, advice and policies helps the firm as much as it does its clients.

“This is both our internal knowledge management tool and our external client facing portal simultaneously. We are using the exact same database with the exact same [gen AI] model on top of it for both purposes, which is how we are confident that this is going to be useful for our clients, because it’s super useful for us,” Gesser said.

He added that since the law firms and its clients are still experimenting with how best to apply AI models “we’re learning and our

clients are learning at the same time ... We really understand [clients’] struggle, and we feel like we’re doing it together.”

As the AI models and best practices evolve, Debevoise helps its clients—and itself—continually keep ahead of the landscape through updating STAAR. “We have this very powerful feedback loop that [has] a long tail, and that gives us and our clients comfort that those documents, to the extent they are not optimal, they’ll get fixed—the way that legal advice and AI doesn’t get fixed.”

The subscription-based STAAR allows the law firm to not just learn from and apply the same advice it gives to clients, but also transform some of its legal services in response to clients’ demands for most cost efficiencies.

“If STAAR lacks a certain AI policy or resource that a client is looking for, Debevoise will perform the work in question, and afterward ask the client if it’s okay for the output of that to be added to STAAR,” Gesser explained. “If it’s okay for the output of that to be added to STAAR, it’s part of the subscription, because we want the subscription folks to be generating new content for STAAR. If you don’t want it to be in STAAR—because it’s secret sauce and you don’t want anybody else to know about it—then we do it separate. It’s not part of the STAAR subscription, we just charge you by the hour.”

“So for our clients and for our internal folks, we’re not answering the same question over and over again in different ways and charging for it. ... We’re giving them real transparency into what we’ve already done,” he added.