

Debevoise & Plimpton Is Building a New Model for Delivering AI Adoption Advice

By Benjamin Joyner

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General counsel face a constant stream of novel issues, few more pressing than the myriad legal and regulatory issues raised by the adoption of new AI tools and workflows. At the same time, they're always under pressure to bring down outside counsel spending.

Debevoise & Plimpton believes it may have a solution to both issues at once.

The firm is in beta testing for a new subscription offering for AI adoption, the Suite of Tools for Assessing AI Risk (STAAR). For a flat monthly subscription fee, Debevoise provides its clients access to an online platform containing various AI adoption policies, vetted AI use cases, and continuous regulatory tracking and updates related to court decisions and laws governing the deployment of AI.

The program is designed to address AI use cases that will be broadly applicable to multiple clients. STAAR is intended to cover relatively low-risk use cases, and clients will still need to work with an attorney on an hourly basis for higher-risk use cases like those related to core business functions.

Subscribers "don't see it as an area in which they're competing [against other businesses], and they view this as being a way to get some kind of regulatory comfort, risk comfort from a legal point of view," said Avi Gesser, co-chair of the firm's data strategy and security group.



Photo: Rick Kopstein/ALM

"If this is something that Debevoise, with all the experience that we have and all the visibility that we have and all the sort of regulatory background that we have, thinks is a good way to do this particular thing ... that to [clients] feels pretty safe from a regulatory point of view," he added.

How It Works

STAAR contains comprehensive AI adoption policies, protocols for workflows and tasks such as data scraping and AI labeling, and risk assessments for novel AI models like DeepSeek.

It also contains vetted use cases created for clients, which are stripped of identifying details and made broad enough for use by other subscribers with similar needs. The use cases are known as DARTs, named for their passage through the Debevoise AI Risk Assessment Tool, the firm's process for vetting use cases for legal and regulatory risks.

The individual DARTs are very granular, including detailed descriptions and training guides, specifying the AI tools to be used, containing sample inputs, prompts and outputs, and providing screenshots of relevant settings within individual tools. They also include descriptions of the risks involved in a given use case, and methods for mitigating those risks.

Gesser mentioned that the DARTs are as specific as using Zoom's AI-powered summaries for job interviews conducted in the U.S.

"If you wanted to use [Microsoft] Teams instead of Zoom, it's a different DART. [If] you want to do it in the U.K., it's a different DART," he said.

In addition to the policies and use cases, STAAR provides regulatory tracking on topics such as state regulation, international laws, and law governing chat bots, as well as more overarching quarterly updates.

Why the Model Works for Clients

Gesser told Legaltech News that clients felt an acute need for some sort of standards for AI deployment in the absence of comprehensive regulation. By pooling the efforts of multiple clients, the firm can both save them money and create a de facto industry standard, mitigating risk.

"The regulatory environment is pretty complicated and uncertain, and so staying on top of it is a big burden and expense," Gesser said.

"To the extent we have visibility across a whole group of clients within an industry, and get a sense of what are best practices and what is common through this sort of subscription model, we can get a sense for when people are doing something that's out of sync with what we think is the market," he added.

The program emerged out of Debevoise's ad hoc efforts to advise clients on AI adoption and governance. While the firm initially planned on providing individual documents with customizations for flat fees for legal advice on AI use cases, they found that clients were unaccustomed to paying by the document, and were often more concerned with making sure their practices and policies aligned with other businesses than crafting unique policies.

Additionally, the granularity of many AI use cases meant that it might not be financially worth it for a single client to pay the firm on an hourly basis to go through the process of vetting a specific use case.

"Knowing that we had five or six clients that were all interested in the same thing, it made sense to find some way to pool that work," Gesser said.

What's Next

The firm is only working with a small number of clients during the beta testing phase, as it is experimenting with the best ways to deliver updates and provide regulatory tracking to subscribers.

However, the firm plans to expand access to a larger group of clients at the conclusion of phase one, which is set to end in August.

With AI regulation is particularly muddled at the moment, as states move toward a patchwork of laws in the absence of comprehensive federal rules, Gesser believes client needs for help adopting AI tools will only grow as the technology evolves.

"Most of our time is actually spent on the application of existing laws that were never designed to apply to AI being applied to AI," he said. "The level of complexity with AI adoption isn't leveling off, as far as I can tell. It's just getting more and more [complicated] with agents and all these other pieces."

The subscription format may also serve as a model for further offerings from Debevoise. STAAR was partially modeled on an internal cyber tool that the firm had previously made available to clients on a subscription basis, and Gesser said he could see the model being applied to other areas of the law.

"I think there's a lot of promise in at least exploring these kinds of models, not because you'll get it right the first time, but because there's so much demand ... for some other system," he said. "Maybe what we do here isn't exactly going to be right for other clients or other practice areas and so forth, but there's something in a lot of different practice areas that could look something like this."