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A Harbor report

From communicating value to activating it: Building the Enterprise Growth Operating Model

Second in Harbor's Enterprise Operating Model series. Read "Operationalizing AI: The leadership imperative for transforming AI investment into business & client value".

This report draws on Harbor's Sounding Boards and research with law firm Chief Operating Officers and Marketing, Business Development, Knowledge & Innovation, and Technology leaders, together with independent industry research. Individual comments are reported without attribution under the Chatham House Rule. Full research methodology on page 11.

The short version

Growth has become the defining priority for law firms, and firms have responded with the most significant investment in the business of law in decades. Artificial intelligence. Enterprise technologies. Strategic intelligence. Client listening. Pricing. CRM. Experience management. Enterprise data.

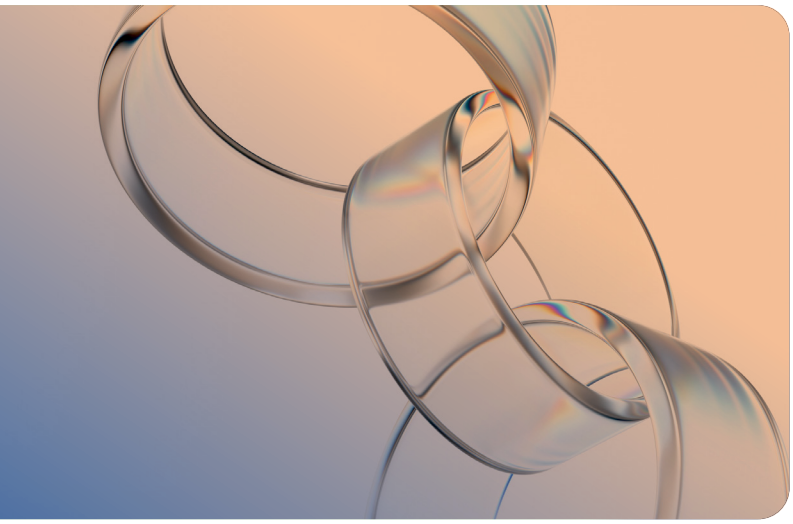
Yet a consistent pattern emerges across the market. Firms are investing heavily in the capabilities required to compete, and the urgency is clear: every Chief Operating Officer polled at Harbor's October 2025 COO Sounding Board, 13 of 13, named Marketing and Business Development as a function to transform in 2026. What's harder to find is evidence that the focus is translating into results. In the SKILLS 2026 Annual Report, an independent survey of law firm knowledge and innovation leaders, just 4% report that AI has had a high impact on their firm's win rates, and nearly half (48%) report no impact at all (N=124).

This is the Growth Paradox: more capability than ever and turning it into impact has never been harder.

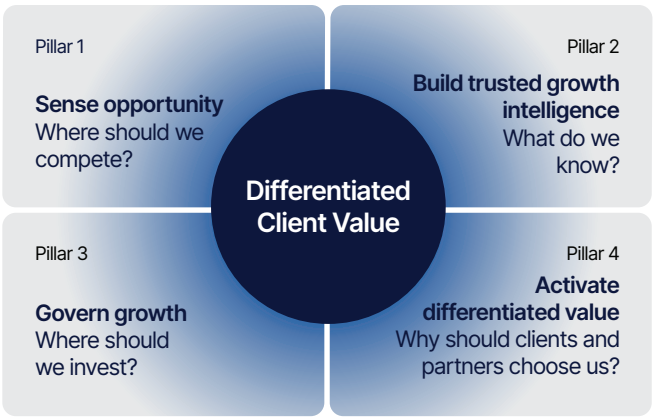
Harbor's first report, "Operationalizing AI: The leadership imperative for transforming AI investment into business & client value," argued that firms must put in place the governance, data, and operating disciplines required to turn technology investment into business value. That remains true, and for most firms the work is still underway. Business and client value is the foundation. Clients choose outside counsel for the outcomes a firm delivers, whether or not it has implemented AI. Exceptional laterals join for the platform and growth in front of them, whether or not a firm has migrated to the cloud.

That has a direct consequence for the growth function. Its mandate is shifting from communicating the firm's capabilities to activating them.

Enterprise capabilities become a competitive edge only when they're translated into differentiated value that clients recognize, partners experience, and the market rewards.



The Enterprise Growth Operating Model provides the structure to do that, across four pillars:





The growth paradox

Corporate legal departments have become more sophisticated buyers. They are expanding internal capabilities, applying greater discipline (and AI) to outside counsel spend, and directing work to the providers best positioned to deliver measurable business value. They expect firms to understand their industries, anticipate emerging challenges, improve outcomes, and deliver strategic insight alongside excellent legal advice.

Firms have responded decisively, and the investment has been real. Business operations are being modernized. AI is being embedded into enterprise workflows. Data is being integrated. Capabilities exist today that were unimaginable a few years ago.

That work should continue. For most firms, enterprise modernization is still in progress, and it will keep reshaping how legal services are delivered.

But one question remains largely unanswered: how do these capabilities translate into a durable edge in the market?

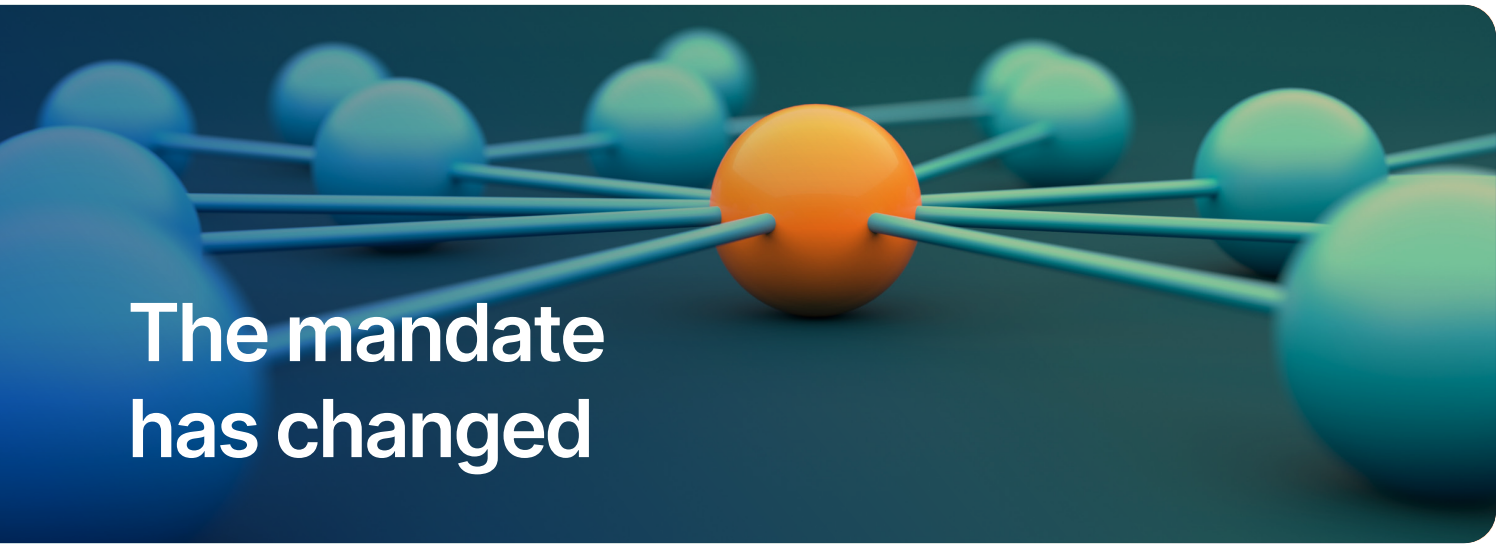
Across Harbor's executive communities, the answer is uncomfortable. Leaders describe organizations rich in technology, data, and intelligence, and constrained by fragmented governance, disconnected technologies, and operating models designed for a different competitive era. Strategic plans are revisited periodically while markets move continuously. Client intelligence sits scattered across partners, practices, and systems. Growth initiatives compete for investment individually instead of as a portfolio. The data bears this out: in Harbor's 2025 Marketing Technology Survey, only 21% of firms said most of their marketing systems are integrated, and better integration and data sharing ranked as the top technology investment priority, cited by 91% (N=33 respondents, 32 firms).

Law firms have more capability today than ever and translating it into advantage is harder than ever.

The real gap is an operating model: something that connects opportunity and technology into a repeatable system for creating value the market rewards.

Harbor perspective

Law firms have invested heavily in the capabilities required to compete. The operating model that turns that investment into results is what's missing.



The mandate has changed

Historically, growth was understood through a single lens: Marketing elevated the firm's reputation; Business Development pursued opportunities, and partners generated growth through relationships and entrepreneurial instinct.

That model reflected the competitive realities of its time. This one demands more.

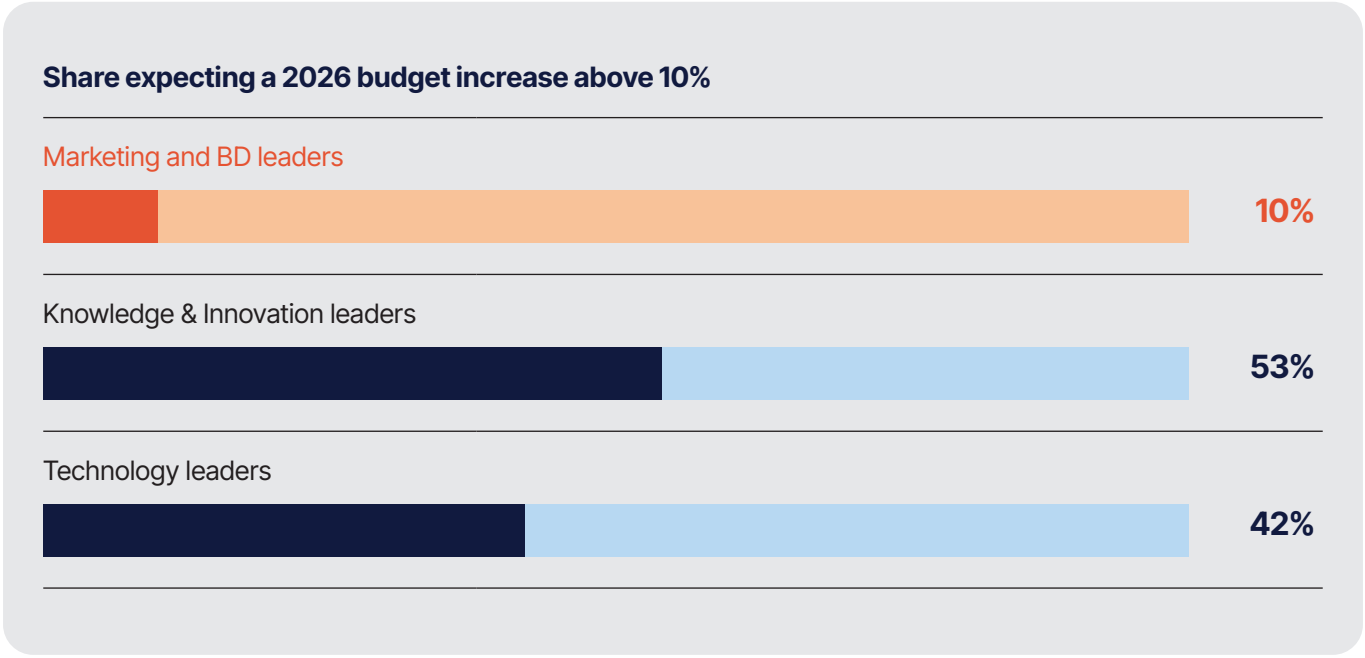
Growth today depends on capabilities that sit across the enterprise. Market intelligence. Client data. Pricing. Experience management. Knowledge. Finance. AI-enabled technology. Talent. Every function touches them, and every growth strategy depends on them.

Which is why the mandate of the growth leader has changed more in the last three years than in the previous fifteen.

That is a categorically different job. It means identifying market opportunity before competitors do. Connecting firm and market intelligence into something leadership can act on. Shaping where the firm invests, early enough to matter. Supporting lateral recruitment, mergers, and geographic expansion. And translating enterprise capability into value that clients experience directly.

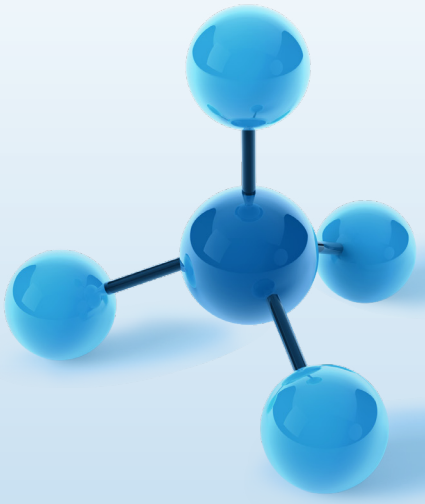
The profession is responding to this shift in two ways. Some firms are expanding the Chief Marketing & Business Development Officer, or CMBDO, mandate to carry it. Others are creating a new seat entirely, the Chief Revenue Officer. Different titles, same signal: a function moving from execution to orchestration.

Old mandate		New mandate
Communicate capabilities	→	Activate capabilities
Functional responsibility	→	Enterprise capability
Episodic planning	→	Continuous sensing
Initiative-by-initiative	→	Portfolio governance
Support the strategy	→	Inform the strategy



Source: Harbor Sounding Board live polls. Marketing & BD, Nov 13, 2025 (N=20); Knowledge & Innovation, Nov 20, 2025 (N=17); Technology, Dec 4, 2025 (N=12).

This is also where the pressure is landing. Growth leaders are being asked to demonstrate enterprise impact with tools, data, and governance structures designed for a functional mandate. The budget picture reflects it. While every COO polled named Marketing and Business Development as a function to transform, Marketing and BD leaders expected the smallest 2026 budget increases of the three functions Harbor polled: just 10% anticipated an increase above 10%, compared with 53% of Knowledge & Innovation leaders and 42% of Technology leaders.



Harbor perspective

Growth is no longer a functional responsibility. It is an enterprise capability, and it requires an enterprise operating model.



From business value to market differentiation

Harbor's report, "Operationalizing AI: The leadership imperative for transforming AI investment into business & client value", argued that firms need the governance, data, and operating disciplines to turn AI and technology investment into measurable business and client value. That conclusion stands, and for most firms that work continues. It's a starting point on a longer path.

Technology creates enterprise capability: better workflows, stronger decisions, sharper insight, less administrative drag.

Capability is what technology creates.

Advantage is what a firm does with it.

Clients choose outside counsel for the outcomes a firm delivers, whether or not it has implemented AI. Exceptional laterals join for the platform and growth in front of them, whether or not a firm has migrated to the cloud. What these investments enable is what matters, more than the investments themselves.

As AI becomes embedded across the profession, this distinction becomes the whole game. When every leading firm invests in the same capabilities, the capabilities stop differentiating. What separates firms is how effectively they activate them.

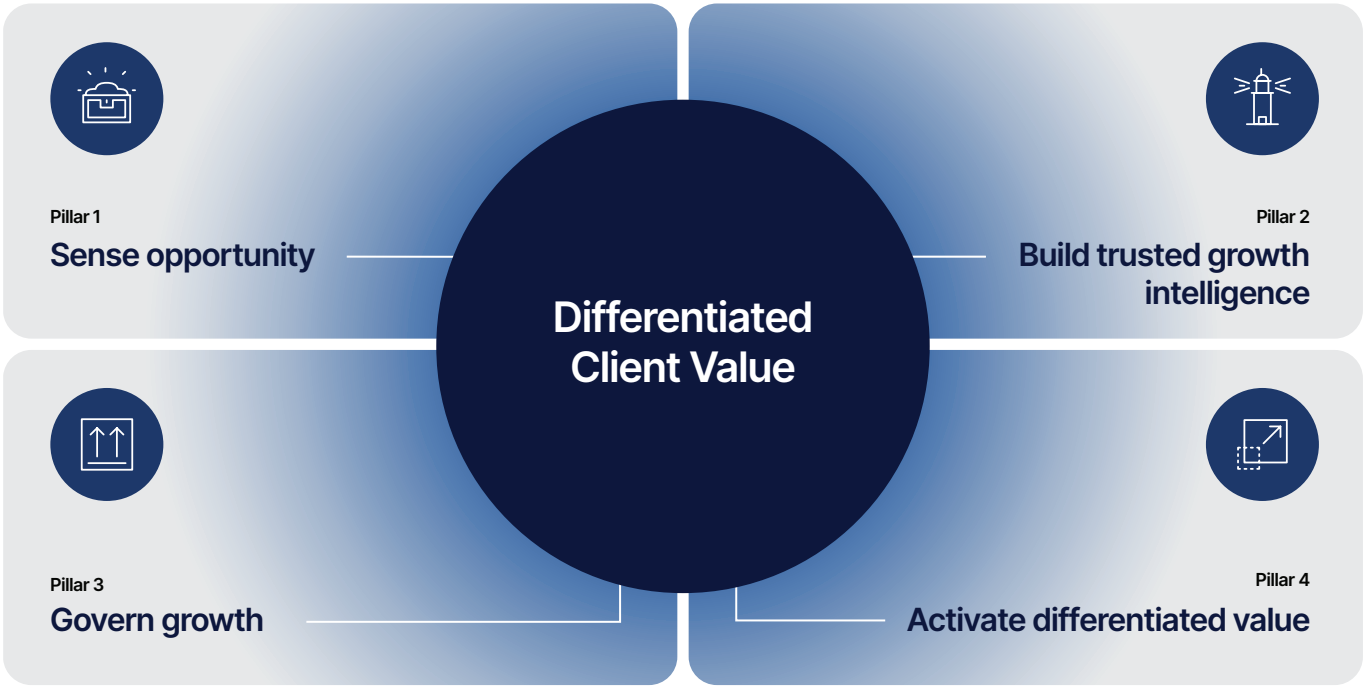
The value chain

- Technology investment
- Enterprise AI Operating Model
- Business value
- Enterprise Growth Operating Model
- Market differentiation
- Client and partner preference
- Sustainable growth

Harbor perspective

The Enterprise AI Operating Model turns technology investment into business value. The Enterprise Growth Operating Model turns business value into market differentiation.

The Enterprise Growth Operating Model



Sense opportunity

Where should we compete?

Firms have long identified opportunity through partner relationships, periodic planning, and client feedback. Those inputs were built for a market that moved slower than this one. Leading firms are moving toward continuous sensing, client tracking, industry developments, and technology signals together to recognize meaningful shifts earlier.

Build trusted growth intelligence

What do we know?

Every firm has data. Far fewer have intelligence leadership trusts. Many firms aggregate data through warehouses, reporting, and AI before establishing the governance beneath them, and the result is predictable: inconsistent definitions, duplicate records, fragmented and inaccurate reporting. Trusted intelligence requires an enterprise data strategy with clear ownership, governance, and systems of record.

Govern growth

Where should we invest?

For most firms the challenge has shifted from identifying opportunities for potential growth investments to choosing among them. Ideas are abundant; capital, attention, and talent are scarce. Leading firms are governing growth as a single portfolio, weighing lateral hires, technology, geographic expansion, and client initiatives through a common strategic lens.

Questions to ask before you invest
☐ Will this strengthen differentiated client value?
☐ Does it reinforce long-term strategy?
☐ Does it create capability the rest of the firm can use?
☐ Does it strengthen our position where we've chosen to compete?
☐ Does it complement investments already underway?



Activate differentiated value

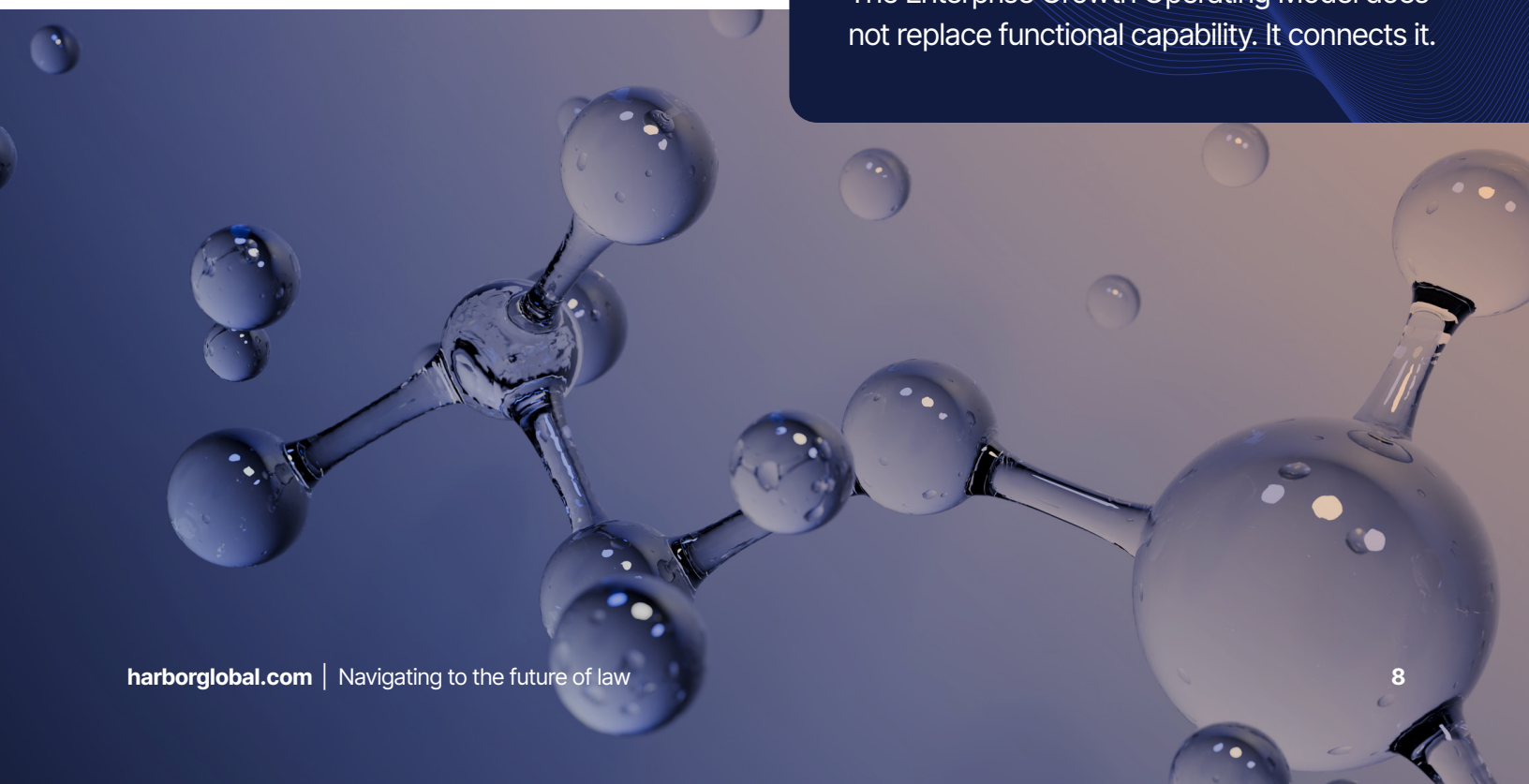
Why should clients and partners choose us?

Activation is the pillar most firms are least equipped for. It means connecting strategic intelligence, AI-enabled capability, pricing, and client listening directly to client outcomes and partner success, so that investment shows up in what clients and partners experience ahead of what the firm says about itself.

Growth pillar	Leadership question	Enterprise outcome
Sense opportunity	Where should we compete?	Earlier opportunity identification
Build trusted growth intelligence	What do we know?	Better strategic decisions
Govern growth	Where should we invest?	Disciplined allocation of capital, talent, and technology
Activate differentiated value	Why should clients and partners choose us?	Stronger client preference, partner preference, and market differentiation

Harbor perspective

The Enterprise Growth Operating Model does not replace functional capability. It connects it.





The growth platform

Done well, this produces something more valuable than a stronger marketing function or a more sophisticated business development program. It produces a differentiated growth platform, and that platform serves two constituencies at once.

Clients get firms that understand their business, anticipate challenges, surface opportunities they had not identified, and improve outcomes measurably.

Partners get something the market is only beginning to price properly. Exceptional laterals increasingly evaluate firms on the platform around them rather than reputation or compensation alone: whether the firm can help them find opportunities they would otherwise miss, deepen client relationships, and develop a larger practice than they could elsewhere. The strongest platforms do more than attract exceptional lawyers. They make exceptional lawyers more successful.

These reinforce each other. Better client experience strengthens reputation. Stronger capability attracts talent. Talent deepens relationships and expands capability. Growth becomes continuous instead of episodic. Advantage compounds instead of resetting.

Harbor perspective

The firms that lead the next decade will not simply create differentiated value for clients. They will build growth platforms that attract exceptional clients, exceptional partners, and exceptional opportunities.

The next competitive advantage

Every generation of firm leadership has faced a moment that resets how firms compete. Globalization. Alternative providers. Digital transformation. Artificial intelligence.

The current shift is no less consequential. Legal expertise remains essential, and AI will keep accelerating, but neither will determine tomorrow's leaders on its own. Advantage will belong to firms that connect strategy, intelligence, technology, governance, and commercial execution into operating models that continuously strengthen differentiated value.

The Enterprise AI Operating Model turns technology investment into business value. The Enterprise Growth Operating Model turns business value into market differentiation.

Firms that establish both will compete on fundamentally different terms.

How Harbor helps



Pillar 1

Sense opportunity

What we do

Build enterprise market sensing through strategic intelligence, client listening, competitive intelligence, and market insight.



Pillar 2

Build trusted growth intelligence

What we do

Establish enterprise data strategy, governance, AI-enabled analytics, CRM, and experience management that produce intelligence leaders trust.



Pillar 3

Govern growth

What we do

Design growth strategies, operating models, governance frameworks, and transformation programs that align investment with long-term advantage.



Pillar 4

Activate differentiated value

What we do

Translate enterprise capability into value propositions, client experiences, commercial strategies, and growth platforms that strengthen client and partner preference.

Where does your firm stand?

The four questions at the center of this model, where should we compete, what do we know, where should we invest, and why should clients and partners choose us, are the fastest way to find the gaps in your own growth operating model.

Harbor works with firm leadership teams to answer them.

About this research

This report draws on Harbor's executive Sounding Boards, Harbor's own survey research, and one independent industry survey. Sources and sample sizes are noted at first use in the text.

Growth Leaders Sounding Board	A workshop-format session held July 9, 2026 with 37 Chief Operating Officers and Marketing, Business Development, and growth leaders from Global 100 law firms (ranked by revenue). The session did not include live polling; its findings informed the qualitative perspective throughout this paper.
COO Sounding Board	Held October 2025 with 20 Chief Operating Officers from Global 100 and AmLaw 200 firms. Thirteen participants responded to a live select-all-that-apply poll on which functions they plan to transform in 2026.
Marketing & Business Development Sounding Board	Held November 13, 2025 with 20 participants, all of whom responded to a live poll on 2026 budget expectations.
Knowledge & Innovation and Technology Sounding Boards	Knowledge & Innovation Sounding Board, November 20, 2025: 21 participants, 17 of whom responded to a live poll on 2026 budget expectations. Technology Sounding Board, December 4, 2025: 15 participants, 12 of whom responded to the same poll.
Harbor 2025 Marketing Technology Survey	Fielded July–September 2025 with 33 respondents from 32 law firms (average firm size 867 attorneys; average revenue $995.2M, based on 2025 Global 200 and AmLaw 200 data).
Harbor's executive communities	Ongoing discussion across Harbor's CIO/CTO, Knowledge & Innovation, COO, CMBDO, and CFO communities, which typically include 15 to 25 senior leaders per session.
SKILLS Annual Report, 2026	An independent annual survey of law firm knowledge and innovation leaders, conducted by the Strategic Knowledge & Innovation Legal Leaders Summit (SKILLS.law) and fielded in January 2026 (N=124 for the response cited). Harbor did not conduct this survey; findings are cited from its published results.

Sounding Board comments are reported without attribution under the Chatham House Rule. Sounding Board polls are small-sample and directional. They reflect the views of participating executives and are not statistically representative of the broader market.

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Connect with a Harbor expert

Ready to move from **communicating value** to **activating it**? Harbor works with **firm leadership teams** to find the **gaps in their growth operating model** and **close them**.



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