Kintsugi in Knowledge Management: a Call to Arms from Three Conference Experiences to Empower Law Firm Knowledge Managers to Navigate AI Projects and Embrace Imperfection

Abstract: The Japanese art of Kintsugi teaches that imperfections and failures are not flaws to hide but opportunities for growth and enrichment; it says that true strength and beauty come from embracing imperfection and learning from the fractures along the way. In this article **Hélène Russell** draws on insights from three conference experiences to show how KM professionals can make use of Kintsugi and act as the 'golden joiners' within their firms when it comes to AI projects, making use of their blend of resilience, organisational cultural awareness, communication skills, and adaptive knowledge-sharing practices.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI); leadership; knowledge management; knowledge managers; information management

INTRODUCTION

In a period of immense transformation, driven by advances in technology, law firms face new challenges as they seek to integrate artificial intelligence (AI), particularly Generative AI (GenAI), into their operations. Knowledge Management (KM) professionals play a vital role in guiding these efforts, ensuring not only that AI projects align with organisational objectives but that these initiatives benefit from strategic communication, knowledge-sharing frameworks and related Information Management experience, such as the importance of data cleansing and appropriate taxonomies.

Amidst these changes, for KM professionals, the Japanese art of Kintsugi – the repairing of broken pottery with golden joinery – offers a powerful metaphor and a unique approach to managing AI integration in law firms. Instead of concealing imperfections, Kintsugi celebrates breaks as an integral part of an object's history, which enhance its beauty. This metaphor reframes setbacks as valuable learning experiences and encourages firms to build resilience by understanding and embracing imperfection. This perspective is essential in the legal sector, where a traditionally conservative stance can lead to resistance to change, hesitancy to explore failure and a reluctance to explore AI's full potential because of its current lack of faultlessness.

Drawing on insights from (1) the knowledge café on change management at the BIALL (British and Irish Association of Law Librarians) 2024 conference, (2) my keynote at the Southern African Online Information Meeting (SAOIM) on navigating difficult times, and (3) the "How might we" workshop at the CILIP conference on strategic innovation, this article explores how KM professionals can act as the 'golden joiners' within their firms, supporting AI projects with their unique blend of resilience, strategic communication skills, organisational cultural awareness, and adaptive knowledge-sharing practices.[1]

EMBRACING IMPERFECTION AND UNCERTAINTY IN AI PILOTS

Kintsugi teaches that imperfections and failures are not flaws to hide but opportunities for growth and enrichment. AI projects, especially in law firms, are seldom flawless from the start. These initiatives require an experimental approach, with pilots that often reveal technical or procedural gaps.

While other sectors may enjoy a 'fail fast' culture, lawyers are often expected to de-risk and provide security for clients. Clients tend to want law firms to be cautious in their advice and focused on quality rather than

experimentation, providing leadership and support in challenging times. The conservatism that results from this can inhibit the open-minded experimentation necessary for successful AI adoption.

KM professionals are uniquely well-placed in law firms to guide others through this cultural shift, because of their experiences with learning and knowledge projects. KM professionals, who are often either dual-qualified as lawyers and KMers, or work alongside such dual-qualified professionals, are adept at bridging gaps between traditional legal practices and other operational projects. They can position themselves as advocates for embracing imperfections and encourage a mindset shift, from seeking perfection to embracing progress. By using their experience in advocating for continuous improvement and supporting an adaptable, learning-oriented approach in other knowledge projects, KM professionals can help to create an environment where AI projects are seen, not as high-stakes gambles, but as natural ongoing, evolving processes.

REFRAMING SETBACKS AS LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Integrating AI into legal workflows presents numerous challenges, from initial inefficiencies in processing to concerns about data security and ethical considerations. Each obstacle, however, provides an opportunity for growth. KM professionals can play a pivotal role by implementing structured reflection practices, such as After Action Reviews (AARs) which encourage teams to examine the gaps between anticipated and actual outcomes in AI projects, as well as using their skills to encourage the necessary cultural shifts.

For example, an AI pilot project may face delays in integration due to unforeseen data compatibility issues. Rather than viewing this as a setback, KM professionals can guide teams through an AAR to dissect the root causes of the issue, explore alternative approaches, and use these insights to refine future AI pilots. By posing each question and reflection with curiosity, as part of a learning journey, KM professionals foster a culture of continuous improvement.

By leading AARs and other reflective exercises, KM professionals encourage lawyers to shift the focus from blame to constructive analysis, allowing legal teams to approach future AI projects with a stronger foundation. This shift not only enhances AI project outcomes but also helps teams build resilience by normalising the process of learning from mistakes.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF RESILIENCE

The philosophy of Kintsugi also emphasises resilience, a principle that KM professionals can apply to cultivate a supportive environment for AI integration. In traditional

law firms, mistakes are often viewed as failures to be avoided, creating an environment where AI project challenges might be concealed or downplayed. However, if AI adoption is to succeed, law firms must shift towards a culture that values transparency, resilience to missteps and appreciates how lessons are learned from mistakes.

KM professionals can play a critical role in this cultural transformation. By normalising the discussion of AI 'flaws' and encouraging teams to identify setbacks as part of the growth process, KM professionals help their firms develop a mindset that does not tolerate mediocre performance, but values resilience in the face of difficulties.

This shift in perspective also enables law firms to emerge from these initiatives with a better view of the strengths and weaknesses of AI, and be more adaptable in its use, i.e. an early GenAI tool might suit preparation of marketing presentations or creation of summaries of meeting notes, but not be suitable for the drafting of a lease which a client needs to be ironclad.

COMMUNICATION AS THE GOLDEN VEIN IN AI INTEGRATION – LESSONS FROM BIALL

Communication emerged as a central theme at the BIALL Knowledge Café, where participants identified strategic communication as essential for guiding teams through AI-related change. These practitioner insights are helpful to smooth transitions, ensuring that all stakeholders understand the goals, benefits, and challenges associated with AI initiatives.

Create a Strong Vision and Communication Plan: Attendees emphasised the importance of a clear, strategic vision for AI projects. KM professionals can support AI initiatives by articulating how these projects fit within the firm's broader objectives, such as enhancing client services, increasing operational efficiency, or bolstering competitive advantage. A well-structured communication plan should convey the strategic importance of AI while providing clear, relatable examples of anticipated benefits. When stakeholders see how AI aligns with the firm's long-term vision, they are more likely to embrace the change.

Avoid Silence, Encourage Transparency: Silence during AI rollouts can create uncertainty, leaving room for speculation and scepticism, with a human bias towards negative assumptions. BIALL attendees shared that transparent, regular updates are crucial, even if the message is simply 'work is in progress'. KM professionals can support this by facilitating open, honest communication that addresses both what is known and what remains uncertain. By managing expectations and acknowledging unknowns, KM professionals help build trust, demonstrating that the firm is committed to an informed and transparent approach.

Use Repetition and Multiple Communication Channels: Effective communication around change requires repetition across various formats. A single email or meeting is

seldom enough to convey the complexities of an AI project and is unlikely to resonate with all employees to the same extent, given the level of diversity in the modern workplace. KM professionals should leverage a range of channels – emails, newsletters, notices to communities of practice, workshops and presentations, one-on-one conversations – to reinforce key messages and ensure that each team member understands the project's significance. Repeated exposure to consistent messaging helps reinforce commitment, making it easier for teams to internalise the project's value.

Deliver Difficult News with Care: AI projects often come with challenges and setbacks, and how these are communicated can significantly impact morale and trust. BIALL attendees stressed the importance of delivering difficult news thoughtfully. KM professionals can guide leaders on the timing and framing of such communications to minimise disruption and maintain confidence in the project's trajectory. Empathetic, transparent communication reassures teams that setbacks are part of the process, not signs of failure.

Tailor Messages to Different Audiences: The BIALL Knowledge Café discussions highlighted the need for customised communication strategies. KM professionals often function as a bridge between distinct groups and are experienced in understanding the unique perspectives within different departments. This means that they are easily able to tailor AI-related messages to resonate with varied audiences. For instance, IT teams may benefit from technical details about AI integrations, while legal practitioners may need insights into how AI will streamline case management. By customising messages to suit distinct roles, KM professionals ensure that communication is both relevant and accessible.

Through these practical communication strategies, KM professionals enhance transparency and buy-in, helping to mitigate resistance and foster a culture where AI initiatives are seen as collaborative, well-supported ventures.

NURTURING KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS AS FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL AI INTEGRATION

Knowledge networks are crucial to the success of AI initiatives in knowledge intensive organisations such as law firms, enabling them to leverage collective expertise and maintain continuity across departments. As trusted points of connection within these networks, KM professionals play a pivotal role in ensuring that insights from AI projects are shared across silos, facilitating collaboration, and helping teams address complex challenges with a collective mindset.

In their role as 'golden joiners', KM professionals can build resilient, adaptive knowledge networks that can support the evolving needs of AI initiatives. By establishing forums where teams can share insights, discuss challenges, and exchange ideas, KM professionals ensure that knowledge is continuously generated and disseminated across the firm. This approach not only strengthens individual AI projects but also creates a foundation of collective wisdom that enhances the firm's long-term adaptability.

KM professionals are also well-placed to engage junior staff members, who may offer fresh perspectives on AI's potential, and help to foster a culture of openness and inclusivity. By valuing diverse contributions, knowledge networks become agile systems capable of responding to both the challenges and breakthroughs that AI projects bring.

The 'How might we …' workshop at CILIP's conference concluded that KM professionals were ideally placed to lead AI projects despite their lack of technical or coding skills, given their unique combination of knowledge and skills (their ability to create communities, to communicate to all levels, to build trust and learning mindsets, often in difficult situations where teams feel that they have failed their clients, and to approach new challenges with curiosity).

Historically, KM professionals have not been good at marketing their skills inside their organisations and have often been overlooked as leaders, but as law firms navigate the complexities of AI integration, KM professionals are called to act not as passive facilitators but as active leaders, guiding their firms through the intricacies of AI adoption with their patience, insight, and a willingness to embrace the unexpected. By fostering a culture that values the lessons of imperfection, KM professionals help to build stronger, more adaptable organisations that are prepared to thrive in the face of future challenges. As we embrace each AI project as part of an evolving journey, every learning opportunity becomes an asset, strengthening the firm's ability to innovate and succeed.

How can KM professionals ensure that their firms centre them in AI projects? This was extensively discussed at the 'How might we ….' workshop. Attendees agreed that much depended on ensuring that stakeholders at all levels in their firms can see and understand their unique skill sets and the commonsense value that they add to these projects, reducing risk, encouraging progress, and providing the necessary facilitation between departments. Attendees agreed that they needed to improve their skills in personal branding and marketing and to be braver in stepping forward to lead inside their organisations.

CONCLUSION: THE KINTSUGI LEGACY IN LEGAL KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Kintsugi teaches that true strength and beauty comes from embracing imperfection and learning from the fractures along the way. For law firms adopting AI, this mindset is invaluable. By focusing on resilience, strategic communication, and continuous learning, KM

professionals must step up and position themselves as the 'golden joiners' and essential leaders in AI projects. They have a unique skillset that can ensure that setbacks become stepping stones, each one adding a unique 'golden vein' to the firm's knowledge base.

THE KNOWLEDGE CAFÉ, HOW MIGHT WE …?' AND AARS METHODS EXPLAINED

The knowledge café method used at the BIALL conference involved a structured but flexible format:

1) Introduction: A short introduction to the method and topic, usually fewer than five slides for a 10 to 15 minute presentation.
2) Group Discussions: Participants split into groups to discuss change management in their sectors and share best practices and tips. Each group had 20 minutes to discuss before switching groups to continue the conversation.
3) Discussion Prompts: Two questions were provided to facilitate discussion. Paper and pens were available for participants to capture their thoughts.
4) Plenary Session: After the discussions, a standing plenary session captured six or so top tips for sharing, consolidating the learning from the group discussions.

This method fosters an engaging and collaborative environment, enabling participants to share real-life experiences and strategies for thriving through change.

The 'How Might We…?' is a design thinking method that allows participants to reframe and open up their problem statements for efficient, targeted, and innovative ideation sessions to help solve design challenges. It is the bridge between the Define and Ideate stages of the design thinking process.

It uses this formula to get discussions started:

"How might we" + Intended Action (as an action verb) + "for" + Potential User (as the subject) + "so that" + Desired Outcome.

For example, "How might we identify unmet needs and create new markets through innovative product and service design?"

The After Action Review (AAR) technique takes multiple forms, but at its root, is a method by which a team asks itself the following questions:

1. What was supposed to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why were 1) and 2) different?
4. How will we ensure 1) and 2) are more aligned next time?

Endnote

Biography

Hélène Russell MBA is an author, trainer and consultant in Knowledge Management. She has been writing textbooks and training law firm employees since 2009, and prior to that she spent a decade as a solicitor / lawyer specialising in clinical negligence litigation and two years in-house in know-how. Visit Hélène's website at https://theknowledgebusiness.co.uk/