The Innovator’s Solution: Creating and Sustaining Successful Growth

By Clayton M. Christensen and Michael E. Raynor
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While this title may seem out-of-place on a legal bookshelf—especially for those not practicing within the corporate realm—it is worth reading. In a mere 320 pages, Clayton M. Christensen and Michael E. Raynor provide an in-depth look at the challenges of sustaining business growth and continuing success in light of ever arising and ever advancing technologies. Mr. Christensen and Mr. Raynor identify key decisions that managers must make in order to create growth and increase a business’s probability of success. While the connection to the legal profession may only be tangential, this discussion is relevant in the context of the rising competition between traditional legal practitioners and the rapidly-developing online legal services market.

The Innovator’s Solution is an updated release of the 2003 bestseller, and is the most recent of Mr. Christensen’s long line of highly received business commentaries. Mr. Christensen’s prior works include The Innovator’s Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail (Management of Innovation and Change), Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns, and How Will You Measure Your Life? Mr. Raynor’s prior works include The Innovator’s Manifesto: Deliberate Disruption for Transformational Growth, The Strategy Paradox: Why Committing to Success Leads to Failure (And What to Do About It), and The Three Rules: How Exceptional Companies Think. This
review will give a brief overview of The Innovator’s Solution followed by a discussion of the concepts’ relevance to those in the legal profession.

The book opens with a case-study approach by demonstrating that most businesses struggle to sustain growth over time, with many eventually succumbing to market newcomers with specialized knowledge of new technology and innovation. Readers are given a closer look at the rise and fall of several major companies whose managers—in the authors’ view—failed to undertake the risks necessary to adapt and move into up-and-coming markets for new technologies, or who simply failed to identify or appreciate the threat of so-called “disruptive innovations.”

The authors recap some of the most popular explanations for businesses’ common struggle to achieve growth repeatedly and well. Without exception, Mr. Christensen and Mr. Raynor dispute these traditional explanations, and offer an alternative theory of their own. They point out that many stagnant companies suffer from low-risk decision-making by those unwilling to reallocate resources away from traditionally profitable efforts and toward identification of and endeavors in emerging or future technology; however, more than simple risk-aversion, the authors point to a systemic failure of managers to ask the right questions of their businesses and future endeavors.

In response to this identified dilemma, Mr. Christensen and Mr. Raynor challenge managers to rethink their approaches to innovative growth, from the planning stage of identifying endeavors worthy of development, to the following stages of identifying the players and resources needed to undertake the effort, to the final stages of execution (and modification) of the strategy.
While the minutia of the business-planning advice are likely not relevant to most attorneys’ work, this book is a good resource for legal professionals—not only for the general insight it provides into the economy and business trends, but also for the message’s timely relevance to the ongoing struggle in the legal community to cope with the injection of online providers of legal or quasi-legal services, the accessibility and affordability of which are appealing to many potential clients. While the analogy to the corporate business model is far from perfect, the underlying concepts apply similarly to the legal realm. Attorneys can and should learn from the mistakes cited by Mr. Christensen and Mr. Raynor of businesses who failed to appreciate the threats of innovative newcomers or to prepare and modify their own business strategies accordingly.

While the temptation for many legal professionals may be to ignore or cast aside the potential threat of these online legal service providers, who may offer nominal, flat-rate fees for boilerplate legal documents that can be produced nearly instantaneously in the comfort of the client’s home office, an alternative approach may be in legal professionals’ better interest in the long run. Firms and law offices may be hesitant to give too much credence to the threat of such “impersonal” online services against the established, traditional model; however, to ignore the threat out of mere denial would be unwise. Rather, firms and law offices would seem to do well to invest in developing innovative methods not only to compete with the existing online legal services network (e.g., through online publication of reference materials for potential clients or establishing a greater Internet presence—aimed at client convenience), but to attempt to beat any current or future competitors to the discovery and control of the next great innovations. *The Innovator’s Solution* is an intriguing read, and is well supported by decades-worth of examples
and studies of business models and strategies. Attorneys, much like the intended businessmen audience, would benefit from Mr. Christensen’s and Mr. Raynor’s cautionary tales and advice.