



Critical 2026 Trends In-House Legal Teams Must Prepare For

Insights on the systems, skillsets, and market shifts defining the next era of legal

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Understanding the 2026 Legal Landscape

What's Driving Legal's Urgent Transformation?

In-house legal teams are navigating a period of profound change. What was once a reactive, risk-management function is now at the center of enterprise strategy, pulled upstream by rising regulatory scrutiny, complex cross-border compliance demands, and the accelerating pace of technological change.

According to [FTI Consulting's 2025 GC Report](#), 41% of general counsel (GC) now rank regulatory compliance as their top risk, seeing a sharp increase year-over-year. This data highlights the real-world consequences of shifting global rulesets, AI governance uncertainty, and growing enforcement activity that legal teams are contending with.

At the same time, disputes, investigations, and internal incident responses are escalating. FTI Consulting notes that 85% of GCs expect legal risk and workload to increase, with more than half citing higher volumes of investigations as one of their top five business risks.

Despite these growing demands, resources aren't keeping up. According to [Thomson Reuters Institute's 2024 Legal Department Operations Index Report](#), more than half of legal departments expected budgets to remain flat or even be cut.

Over the last year, this has put legal leaders in a tough position: finding ways to increase bandwidth with the same (or fewer) resources and without pushing in-house lawyers to the point of frustration and burnout.

Meanwhile, the broader business environment is shifting fast. Digital transformation, AI, and a surge in new data sources are introducing new forms of organizational exposure, and with them, new responsibilities. Legal is now expected to weigh in earlier on decisions across privacy, supply chain, ESG, and other cross-functional domains, embedding the function deeper across enterprise operations. This has placed legal at the intersection of governance, innovation, and business execution.

Legal teams that aren't ready for the increased pressure will face more than just internal inefficiencies. Without the right systems and structures in place, they risk falling out of compliance, facing legal or reputational damage, and slowing down key business processes like closing deals or onboarding vendors. Legal can also become a blocker to innovation if it can't keep up with the pace of change.

To succeed in this new environment, legal teams can't wait until problems arise. They need to prepare now. That means rethinking how work is managed, from intake and triage, to team structure, technology choices, and the skillsets needed to operate at scale. Legal leaders who act early and lead through this change will be in a stronger position to protect the business, accelerate growth, and secure their role as strategic partners at the C-suite table.

This eBook explores the key trends reshaping in-house legal in 2026, and the steps General Counsel and Legal Ops leaders must take lead through change.

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Top 7 Legal Trends of 2026

In-house legal teams are facing a wave of change in 2026. This eBook explores seven critical trends they must prepare for, from rising board-level influence and AI-powered workflows to talent shortages, evolving tech stacks, and legal's growing role in business operations. These shifts are already underway and the teams that act now will be best positioned to lead in the year ahead.

1. It's Legal's Turn to Lead

Increasing GC Impact on Board-Level Decisions

General Counsels are increasingly relied on by corporate boards as strategic advisors who help navigate today's most complex risks. As legal issues become more central to business success, boards are turning to their GCs more frequently for guidance on high-impact areas like cybersecurity, ESG, AI governance, and cross-border compliance.

A recent study by [BarkerGilmore](#) found that 75% of company board members prefer that their GCs express views on business strategy and actively participate in strategic long-term planning. This highlights that corporate boards increasingly expect GCs to lead strategic advisory, being seen more as a partner in shaping company direction and managing enterprise risk.

To meet this growing expectation, GCs must translate risk into business terms, align with cross-functional priorities, and support the board in making informed, forward-looking decisions. Legal leaders who can communicate clearly, think commercially, and lead through complexity are becoming essential to organization-wide success.

Legal Becoming a Cross-Functional Business Partner

As regulatory and operational complexity grows, legal teams are becoming deeply embedded across core business functions. From product launches and vendor onboarding, to marketing, procurement, and compliance, legal is now involved earlier in business processes, playing a proactive role in shaping decisions.

This change is driven by the rising number of cross-functional risk domains, such as AI regulation, data privacy, ESG reporting, and supply chain accountability, which require input from legal alongside teams like HR, finance, and IT. Rather than working in silos, modern legal departments are becoming collaborative enablers, helping the business move quickly while remaining compliant.

Legal's involvement has also deepened in areas like technology procurement and platform governance, where teams must assess legal implications tied to automation, AI and machine learning (ML) deployment, and data use. **As companies continue to invest more in digital transformation, legal's cross-functional role is critical in designing frameworks that reduce friction, manage risk, and support scale.**

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Tips for Your Team to Embrace this Trend

- Free up strategic legal leaders → Use automation and self-service tools to reduce low-value work, giving GCs and senior counsel space to focus on high-impact issues.
- Make it easy for the business to engage legal early → Design simple intake and triage processes that empower business partners to get answers quickly.
- Invest in communication, not just compliance → Develop the skills and tools needed to translate legal risk into commercial terms when working with boards and executive stakeholders

2. Legal is Moving Past the AI Hype and Into Real Use Cases

Embracing AI Agents to Manage Business Priorities

The growing list of in-house legal responsibilities means teams need solutions for managing the many requests they receive from across the business. Thankfully, AI in legal has continued to evolve rapidly, from **simple chatbots** to **intelligent agents that can analyze and act**, not just respond. Instead of a person manually reviewing every request, these AI agents can manage intake, understand what type of legal assistance is needed, triage them based on type and priority, initiate workflows (*such as routing a contract to the right approver*), and even complete routine tasks like sending reminders or updating matter records.

By taking over high-volume, repetitive steps in the legal workflow, AI agents reduce manual bottlenecks and give in-house lawyers the time to focus on more strategic work. *This kind of automation improves turnaround cycles, increases consistency, and ensures no requests are missed.*

And now that adoption is moving beyond pilots and experimentation, these tools are delivering real operational value. This breed of legal technology is especially critical as request volumes rise and legal teams remain lean.

Use of Purpose-Built GenAI Assistants for In-House Teams

Corporate legal teams are also adopting generative AI legal assistants, which are no longer just experimental tools, but custom-built solutions trained on internal documents, policies, and playbooks. Unlike general-purpose AI tools, these assistants understand the language and context of your business and can provide reliable answers to legal FAQs, help draft first-pass contracts or clauses, and guide business users through legal processes.

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Typically deployed as a chatbot on applications used across the business, like Slack, Microsoft Teams, email, intranets, and more, these assistants give business stakeholders instant, around-the-clock access to legal help without needing to submit tickets or emails. This is especially valuable given that around **43% of legal teams are still juggling multiple intake channels**, which creates inconsistency and slows down response times.

GenAI assistants help centralize access and reduce intake overload by handling low-risk, routine requests directly, speeding up resolution times without requiring legal to step in every time. As adoption matures, these assistants are playing a more operational role by supporting scale, improving consistency, and increasing responsiveness across the business.

Shift Toward Legal Prompt Engineering and Digital Fluency

As AI becomes more embedded in legal workflows, new skills are emerging as essential.

Prompt engineering, which refers to the ability to craft effective inputs for AI tools, is becoming a core competency. Legal professionals must learn how to interact with generative tools to produce accurate, useful results, whether for drafting documents, summarizing matters, or interpreting policies.

While many legal professionals have traditionally been slower to adopt new technologies than peers in other functions, that's beginning to change. **As AI becomes more integrated into how legal work gets done, lawyers are recognizing that building fluency in these tools is becoming critical to career growth.**

This shift toward digital fluency also includes understanding how AI models work, leveraging features such as AI confidence scores for greater accuracy, evaluating outputs for risk and bias, and knowing when human judgment must take over. Legal teams that invest in upskilling will be better positioned to get real value from AI tools, while maintaining reliability, compliance, and client trust.

Tips for Your Team to Embrace This Trend

- Start with the highest-volume, lowest-risk use cases → Focus AI adoption on routine workflows like intake, triage, and approvals, where automation can free up legal time fast without requiring deep legal knowledge.
- Deploy GenAI assistants where the business already works → Embed legal chatbots into Slack, Teams, or email to give stakeholders easy access to policy answers, FAQs, and document generation.
- Upskill your team early → Start building prompt engineering and AI evaluation skills now, so your team can lead adoption instead of playing catch-up.

“Before buying or configuring tech, make sure leadership is aligned to a clear vision of what you’re trying to solve, and that you’ve define what measurable outcomes you want to achieve.”

Chad Hallberg, Director of Legal Transformation Services @ Stryker

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3. Legal Teams Get Metrics-Driven

Increased Demand for Real-Time Legal Reporting and Dashboards

As legal departments become more integrated into business strategy, leaders are now expected to deliver the same level of transparency and accountability as functions like finance, sales, and marketing. That means being able to clearly answer key operational questions: What types of matters are we handling? How much are we spending vs. what we budgeted? How long do legal requests take to resolve?

This is why **55% of legal teams are now prioritizing improvements to their data and reporting capabilities**, recognizing that better insights are essential to managing rising complexity and performance expectations.

Real-time dashboards are critical to meeting these expectations as they give legal teams a centralized view of team workload, request types, cycle times, and overall team performance. The insights generated from these dashboards help GCs and Legal Ops quickly spot bottlenecks, track trends, and identify opportunities for improvement or automation.

This level of visibility is becoming increasingly important as legal teams face growing volumes of complex, high-risk work, often without additional headcount. Real-time insights help teams optimize how work is distributed, where to focus efforts, and how to make the most of limited capacity.

Reliance on Analytics to Demonstrate Legal's Strategic Value

Legal teams have long struggled with perception, often being seen as a cost center, a blocker, or the department of "no." But in 2026, leading legal teams are using dashboards and analytics to tell a new story about their value.

By surfacing data on how legal supports the business (i.e. turnaround times, volume of matters handled, risk reduction, or cost avoidance), teams are reframing their impact in terms the organization understands. In other words, dashboards are becoming communication assets for CFOs, COOs, and boards.

This data-driven storytelling helps legal shift the narrative from reactive and transactional to proactive and strategic. It gives GCs and CLOs the evidence they need to advocate for headcount, justify tech investments, and show how legal is enabling growth.



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Tips for Your Team to Embrace This Trend:

- Start with the metrics leadership cares about → Focus on visibility into metrics that align with business goals and help legal demonstrate value.
- Build dashboards that drive decisions, not just reports → Use data to identify bottlenecks, optimize workloads, and prioritize automation opportunities.
- Treat reporting as storytelling → Use visuals and trends to communicate legal's impact in a language C-level leadership understands (i.e. link legal outcomes to business performance).
- Make it sustainable → Choose tools that update automatically and reduce manual effort, so your team spends time acting on insights rather than chasing them down.

4. Legal Teams Are Expanding Their Skill Sets

Growing Competition for Tech-Enabled Professionals

As legal work becomes more digital, strategic, and complex, many teams are struggling to find professionals with the right blend of legal expertise and tech fluency. With legal tech making rapid advances, there's a growing need for lawyers and legal ops professionals who are not only strong in legal analysis, but also comfortable with technology, fluent in data, and capable of working cross-functionally with business, product, and compliance teams.

As legal teams begin to embrace digital transformation, adopt AI tools, and scale automation, the demand for legal professionals who are proficient in modern legal technology is outpacing supply. This is creating intense competition for a limited pool of candidates who can bridge legal expertise with operational agility.

This talent gap is pushing legal leaders to think differently about how they build their teams, investing in reskilling existing talent, redesigning roles, and building teams that can support tech-enabled legal service delivery.

Decline of the Traditional “Lawyer-Only” Team Model

The in-house legal team of 2026 looks very different from five years ago. While legal expertise remains essential, the best-performing teams now include professionals from other disciplines such as legal operations, process design, technology, project management, and data analytics.

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This shift reflects a broader change in how legal work gets done. Lawyers, legal ops professionals, technologists, and analysts are working side by side, each contributing their strengths to deliver legal services faster, smarter, and at scale. This results in more scalable operations, better use of technology, and a team structure built for efficiency.

Over **76% of legal departments still rely on manual processes for managing their legal matters** leading to burnout, disengagement, and attrition.

Focus on Retention Through Meaningful Work and Enablement

Retaining top legal talent isn't just about compensation. It's about how work gets done.

To avoid this, forward-thinking teams are using automation to eliminate low-value work and free up lawyers for more strategic, high-impact matters. They're also investing in better tooling, knowledge sharing, and internal development to create an environment where legal professionals can grow, collaborate, and focus on the work that is most impactful and fulfilling.

Tips for Your Team to Embrace This Trend:

- Rethink your team makeup → Bring in legal ops, tech, project management, and data roles to build a modern, scalable legal team.
- Reskill from within → Invest in upskilling your current team on legal tech, automation, and AI to close capability gaps without relying entirely on new hires.
- Eliminate burnout by removing low-value work → Use automation and self-service to offload repetitive tasks so your team can focus on the strategic matters that keep them engaged.
- Design for retention → Give legal professionals modular tools, room to grow, and work that's meaningful.

“In order to be relevant in the long term, lawyers are going to need to understand technology like they've not understood it before. That is something that legal ops teams need to bring in and offer their legal teams. It isn't the people who are using new technology that stand to lose their jobs, but those who are not using or who know nothing about AI.”

Connie Brenton, Founder and CEO @ LegalOps.com

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5. Growing Use of Self-Service and Workflow Automation

Expansion of Self-Service Tools for Business Users

In 2026, as technology matures, automation is becoming a realistic and essential part of legal operations. Leading legal teams are shifting toward wider adoption of self-service tools as a standard part of their delivery model. As legal becomes more embedded across fast-moving business functions, teams can no longer scale by fielding every intake manually. Instead, they're enabling business users to generate NDAs, submit review requests, find policy guidance, and complete low-risk tasks on their own.

These self-service capabilities are being delivered through intuitive, front-end tools like guided workflows, contract generators, and AI legal chatbots embedded in Slack, Teams, email, and internal portals.

For the business, it means faster access to legal help. For the legal team, it reduces repetitive intake, prevents bottlenecks, and keeps high-value work prioritized.

In fact, automated self-service portals are now becoming the baseline expectation for operationally mature legal departments.

Automation of Routine Legal Workflows at Scale

In-house legal teams are building end-to-end automation into their internal processes to drive speed, consistency, and scale. While self-service addresses how the business interacts with legal, automation focuses on how legal operates behind the scenes. In 2026, routine tasks like routing approvals, assigning ownership, generating documents, or tracking matter progress are increasingly being handled by automated systems.

This trend reflects a broader push toward process-driven service delivery. Workflows that once required back-and-forth emails or manual reviews are now being managed through configurable automation, ensuring the right steps are followed, the relevant stakeholders are looped in, and no work is missed. Legal teams that embrace this shift are not only moving faster, but they're building infrastructure that supports scale and reduces risk as business demand grows.

Contract / Agreements ^

Please select this option if you require a legal related document (e.g.) Non-Disclosure Agreement, approval, redlining, signing, and more.

Privacy / Data Breach v

Intellectual Property v

Procurement v

Marketing Review v

HR v

Other / General Legal Advice v

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Tips for Your Team to Embrace This Trend

- Identify your top intake pain points → Start by automating the most frequent, repetitive request types (i.e. NDAs, contract reviews, or policy lookups) to see immediate time savings.
- Make self-service easy to find and use → Embed tools directly into the platforms business users already use, like Slack, Teams, or your intranet. The more accessible it is, the more likely it is to be adopted.
- Automate behind the scenes too → Build end-to-end workflows that handle document generation, routing, and approvals without legal manually managing each step.
- Standardize before you scale → Define clear processes and templates before introducing automation so your workflows run smoothly and deliver consistent outcomes.

6. Legal Tech Stacks Are Getting More Flexible

Shift Toward Modular Legal Technology Ecosystems

In 2026, more legal teams are moving away from rigid, all-in-one platforms and toward modular technology ecosystems that give them greater control, agility, and alignment with how they actually work. Rather than adapting their processes to fit a single tool, teams are assembling a curated stack of best-in-class technologies, each solving a specific part of the legal workflow, and all integrated around a common hub.

This modular, plug-and-play model allows legal teams to move faster and adapt their tooling as business needs evolve. Tools like **Checkbox** serve as the front-door for intake, triage, and workflow automation, while other systems such as contract lifecycle management (CLM) software, contract review AI, or spend management tools can be connected as needed.

This leaves legal departments with a flexible and highly advanced tech stack that avoids unnecessary complexity and scales with the business.

Preference for CLM-Lite Solutions Over Monolithic CLMs

One specific shift within this move towards modular tools is the growing preference for **CLM-lite** over monolithic CLMs, especially among legal teams that have struggled to fully implement traditional contract lifecycle management systems. Many legacy CLMs focus solely on contracts and don't offer coverage for intake, triage, approvals, or cross-functional workflows, leaving significant operational gaps.

Instead, legal teams are increasingly choosing leaner, more focused tools that address their contract needs while integrating seamlessly into broader workflows.

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For example, solutions like **Checkbox** can handle intake, document generation, approvals, and routing, while tools like Ivo provide AI-powered contract review, all without requiring a lengthy and rigid CLM implementation.

In 2026,
legal transformation is about connecting what works for your specific organization.

Tips for Your Team to Embrace This Trend:

- Start by mapping your legal workflows → Understand where your team spends the most time and where handoffs happen to identify where tech can drive the biggest impact.
- Think in ecosystems, not one-size-fits-all → Choose flexible, best-in-class tools that solve specific problems and integrate well with your existing systems.
- Avoid overbuilding → Focus on what your team actually needs now (not the most feature-rich or complex solution) as simple, scalable systems tend to see better adoption and faster ROI.
- Make intake your foundation → Implement a front-door solution to orchestrate workflows across your entire legal tech stack, ensuring consistency and visibility.

7. Legal is Leading Change Across the Business

Legal-Led Workflow Transformation Across Departments

In 2026, legal is becoming a surprising catalyst for operational innovation across the business.

As legal teams adopt advanced tools like workflow automation, document generation apps, and self-service portals, other departments are taking notice and following their lead. HR, procurement, finance, and compliance teams are now asking to use the same tools legal has implemented to manage their own intake, approvals, and document-heavy processes.

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Whether it's onboarding new vendors, handling employment agreements, or responding to internal policy questions, these functions see how legal's systems streamline requests, eliminate bottlenecks, and ensure consistency.

Legal teams who have implemented modern technology solutions like Checkbox are now in a position where they're setting the standard for how efficient, scalable workflows should operate. In many organizations, legal's successful use of technology has earned it a new role: the internal champion for workflow transformation across departments.

Instead of manual check-ins or occasional trainings, legal is designing workflows that ensure compliance is built into day-to-day operations.

Rather than relying on employees to remember policies or send follow-up emails, legal teams are putting systems in place that help the business stay compliant, without extra effort.

For example, Legal Ops teams are building workflows that automatically check for conflicts of interest, route the document to the appropriate approvers, track how matters are handled, and create auditable trails along every step.

Operationalization of Risk and Compliance Policies

In many companies, risk and compliance policies are written down, but not always followed in practice. Modern in-house legal teams are changing that by building automated systems that actually enforce them.

These workflows run in the background, helping to minimize risk while creating clear records of what was done and when. **It means less manual work, greater efficiency, and a much easier way to turn policies into consistent, everyday actions across the company.**

Tips for Your Team to Embrace This Trend

- Share what works → Proactively showcase your legal workflows to collaborating functions (e.g., HR or procurement) who may benefit from using the same platforms or processes.
- Build once, scale across departments → Create modular, repeatable workflows that can be repurposed for cross-functional use cases beyond legal.
- Automate policy compliance at the workflow level → Look for opportunities to embed controls (like approval routing or audit trails) directly into processes, so compliance happens by design.
- Use legal's credibility to drive enterprise change → When legal leads with structured, scalable workflows, it sets a precedent for how other teams can modernize. Don't just solve for legal, solve for the business.

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How to Prepare for 2026

Actionable Insights for Legal Teams

The most successful in-house legal teams of 2026 will be the ones leveraging modular legal technology, with the structures and skillsets in place. Based on the trends explored in this report, here are five key actions legal departments should take to stay ahead:

1. Redefine Legal's Strategic Role

Position the legal team as a proactive business partner. Ensure General Counsel are engaged at the executive and board level, and embed legal earlier in product, procurement, ESG, and compliance decisions.

2. Modernize Your Legal Tech Stack

Switch from rigid, monolithic platforms to modular legal tech solutions. Combine CLM-lite tools, legal AI assistants, workflow automation, and real-time dashboards to create a tailored ecosystem that suits how your legal team works.

3. Invest in Digital Skills and Multidisciplinary Talent

Upskill existing legal team members in digital fluency, prompt engineering, and legal tech tools. Build teams that blend legal expertise with operations, tech, and data to drive performance, support career development, and scale the business.

4. Scale with Self-Service and Automation

Deploy self-service tools and automated workflows to handle high-volume, low-risk tasks. Free lawyers to focus on complex advisory work while reducing intake bottlenecks across the business.

5. Use Data to Prove Legal's Value

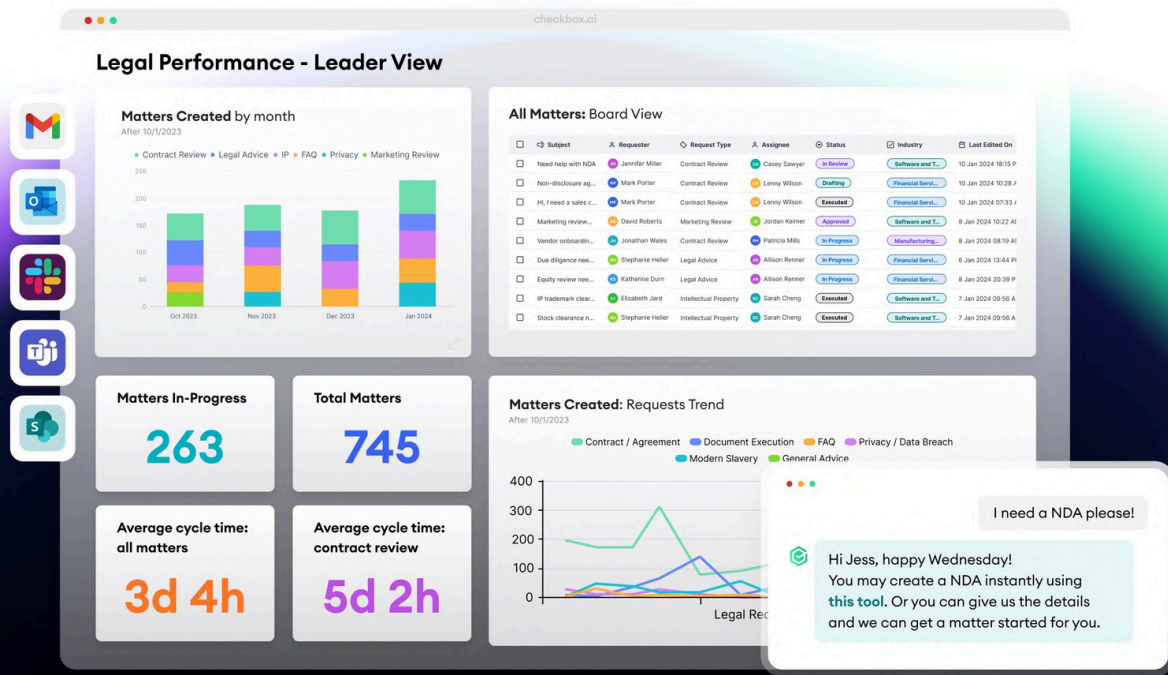
Build live dashboards and adopt reporting tools that clearly communicate legal's impact. Key metrics include request volumes, turnaround times, risk reduction, and cost savings. Make the case for resources and influence using metrics that matter and speak to the business.



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Checkbox: Legal's 2026-Ready Solution



Why Are Legal Teams Turning to Checkbox to Stay Ahead?

This eBook highlights that legal teams are being asked to lead with innovative solutions through rising complexity, deliver more with fewer resources, and adopt modular technologies that power scalable, efficient legal service.

Checkbox is built to support legal teams in navigating this transformation. Here's why legal teams preparing for 2026 are choosing Checkbox:

Strategic Scale Without Extra Headcount

Checkbox automates intake, triage, document generation, and approvals, allowing stretched teams to deliver more value without growing the team.

Self-Service That Meets Modern Expectations

Empower business users with tools to generate contracts and agreements, submit requests, and access policy guidance, all without requiring legal's direct involvement.

AI & Automation to Free Up Lawyers for Strategic Work

Reduce repetitive tasks and support meaningful work by embedding automation into high-volume, low-risk workflows.

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Modular Legal Tech Stack Powered by Integration

Checkbox acts as a central workflow hub that connects to best-in-class point solutions (like Ivo for contract review, or Ironclad for CLM capabilities), enabling a customizable, flexible legal stack that works for the business.

Cross-Functional Workflow Enablement

From HR to procurement and compliance, other departments are adopting the same apps legal builds in Checkbox, turning legal into a model for operational innovation across the enterprise.

Operationalizing Risk & Compliance

With Checkbox, legal teams can move beyond static policies and enforce risk controls through real-time, auditable workflows such as Certificate of Insurance (COI) declarations, incident intake, or signing authority approvals.

See how Checkbox can help your legal function lead with scale, speed, and impact in 2026.

[Book a Demo](#)

The screenshot displays the Checkbox interface for a contract review matter. The main window shows an email from Jennifer Lee via Email dated 19 Jul 2023 10:15 AM, titled "New advertising partnership with Apple #123". The email content discusses a new product partnership with Apple and requests legal review. The interface includes a "Details" panel on the right with fields for Status (Unassigned), Requester (Jennifer Lee), Assignee (James Brown), Due date (20/10/2023), Business unit, Operational Jurisdiction (Global), and Contracting (Equipment & Supplies). A "Files" panel is also visible. A "Need contract review" notification from Samuel Wilson is shown in the bottom left, and a "Need help with NDA" notification from Jennifer Miller is shown in the bottom right.