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New Harbor Research Finds Legal Departments Surging Ahead on AI, but Operating Model Gaps Are Limiting Scale

Released at CLOC Global Institute 2026: Harbor's Legal Department Maturity Index Survey reveals a profession at an inflection point and what separates the leaders from the rest

CHICAGO, May 11, 2026 — New research from Harbor, the leading provider of professional and technology services to the legal industry, finds that corporate legal departments have reached a critical inflection point: AI adoption is nearly universal, but most departments have not yet built the operating model to scale it. Harbor will share the full findings from its 2026 Legal Department Maturity Index Survey at the CLOC (Corporate Legal Operations Consortium) Global Institute (CGI) in Chicago, May 11-14, 2026.

“Legal departments have made progress in adopting AI and strengthening operational discipline,” said Kevin Clem, Executive Vice President, Client Engagement, Corporations at Harbor. “But technology alone isn’t delivering scale. The next phase of maturity will be defined by how well organizations align technology, workflows, talent, and governance into a cohesive operating model.”

Key findings from Harbor’s 2026 Legal Department Maturity Index Survey include:

- **Operating model maturity is lagging investment:** Despite near-universal AI adoption, most departments have not yet built the integrated workflows, governance structures, and talent models needed to scale what they have deployed. Technology is in place. The operating model has not kept up.
- **AI adoption is nearly universal, but depth varies:** 98% of legal departments report implementing or exploring AI, with 57% already live and 24% in pilot. The departments pulling ahead are those integrating AI into core workflows and systems — not running it as a standalone tool.
- **Technology is the top strategic priority:** 81% of departments rank it as their primary operational focus for 2026, alongside firm and vendor management and financial discipline. Legal is increasingly run as a business function and the data reflects it.

The survey also surfaces a significant shift in how legal departments engage outside counsel. As internal capabilities grow and operating discipline improves, demand is becoming more selective, more data-driven, and more value-focused. That shift is placing real pressure on traditional law firm delivery and pricing models — and the data on headcount, insourcing trends, and cost control tells that story clearly.

Harbor at CLOC Global Institute

At CGI, Harbor will lead two sessions focused on helping legal departments navigate this next phase of transformation, including:

- **Tuesday, May 12 (2:10 pm CT, Willis Stage) – The CLOC + Harbor State of the Industry Survey:** Insights from the latest industry data and trends shaping legal operations, featuring Lauren Chung, Practice Group Lead, Corporate Legal Solutions.
- **Wednesday, May 13 (1 pm CT, Marina Stage) – Benchmark Your Legal AI Maturity: Insights from Uber and DocuSign on Navigating Transformation:** This session, featuring Clem and Justin Hectus, Managing Director of Harbor Labs, is ideal for legal operations leaders seeking to translate AI potential into measurable productivity, efficiency, and strategic impact.

“CGI is where the legal operations community comes together to define what’s next,” said Chung. Our goal is to give legal ops leaders a clear picture of where they stand, where the gaps are, and what the highest-performing departments are doing differently.”

About Harbor

Harbor is the leading provider of professional and technology services to the legal industry, encompassing strategy, technology, operations, and intelligence. With a global team of over 900 professionals, Harbor works with over 80% of Global 200 law firms and 500 corporate law departments to optimize performance and enable business and digital transformation. Headquartered in Chicago, the company has offices in London, Belfast, Moncton, and Sydney.

Harbor, a BayPine LP portfolio company, is advancing its next phase of growth by broadening its technology, data, and managed services capabilities across the legal sector. For more information, visit www.harborglobal.com.

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