The Law Firm Rebooted: How the GenAI 'Lightbulb Moment' Let Landfall IP Build the Scalable Patent Firm They Always Wanted

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Editor's Note: Since late 2024, the legal industry has seen the emergence of a new business model: the "AI-first" or "AI-native" law firm. In the series "The Law Firm Rebooted, " Legaltech Hub interviews some of these firms to uncover how they're disrupting the way legal services are structured and delivered. You can see our previous installment of the series, focused on Lawhive, here.

Landfall IP is an AI-native patent law firm founded by Michael Drapkin and Nathan Mutter, two patent attorneys who spent more than a decade building a top-ranked patent practice at a large Am Law 100 firm before setting out to rebuild the model from scratch around AI. Legaltech Hub recently sat down with Drapkin and Mutter to discuss why they walked away from the traditional law firm structure, what it actually means to be "AI-native," how Landfall IP differs from an AI patent platform, and where they see the legal industry heading in the next five years.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What was the impetus for launching Landfall IP?

Nathan Mutter: Michael and I are both patent attorneys—we've been in the industry for a long time. We actually met each other at our previous firm, an Am Law 100 firm, almost 15 years ago, where I started my career. We knew that each other had some special attributes in terms of building and being innovative, and we clicked right away. We've been partners ever since. At that previous firm, we built a very large practice and were top outside counsel for many large technology companies, including Qualcomm and Micron, among others. We worked together for over a decade building and innovating, and that was really the springboard for what came next.

Michael Drapkin: I think what we realized very early on is that we could not scale just by adding more attorneys, the way many law firms operate. So instead we thought of it more like a production process than a series of one-off engagements. We mapped the entire pipeline, found where the handoffs could be, and where we could bring in technology.

In 2015, we started trying to automate everything we could, and at that point it wasn't very much. We brought in developers and started building automation. That worked beautifully—we became top outside counsel. In 2022 I was named U.S. Patent Practitioner of the Year by Managing IP, and was a finalist in 2021 and 2023. Everything was chugging along, and then the ChatGPT moment arrived, as it did for many people. A lot of lawyers looked at that and saw a toy, a threat, and worried about plagiarism and errors. We looked at it and thought, this is the final piece of the pipeline we'd been building for a decade—it finishes the automation for us.

That's really the whole story: we spent that decade breaking down the patent process and understanding where automation should be, where patent agents should be, and then AI was the finishing piece. It was a lightbulb moment, and we reached the same conclusion almost without having to talk about it. We knew this was going to be amazing. That was the genesis of things.

What made you decide to go against that traditional law firm model?

Drapkin: Once that moment occurred, we realized the traditional law firm model was very unlikely to win over the next decade. It's not that the attorneys weren't great—they were excellent, and we had an amazing team—but there was suddenly going to be a fundamentally better way to do things. The question we asked was: if we were designing a patent practice from the ground up right now, would it look the way law firms exist today, or would it be something completely different?

It was perceived as a risky move, but we felt strongly it would look completely different. Traditional patent law firms rely on legacy business models—partner-centric structures, certain partner compensation expectations, slow decision-making, associate pyramids—and all of that would change significantly with AI. Given those incentive structures, we thought it would be hard, particularly in a patent practice, for that traditional model to keep winning.

So that's why we founded Landfall IP: AI-native, built from the ground up to maximize these things. The important thing is that we're not just a traditional law firm, and we're not just a technology company—we bring the best of both together.

What does it mean to you to be an "AI-native" law firm?

Mutter: The way we view AI-native, it's a system or framework of organization that's fundamentally designed from the ground up with AI at its core, throughout all its processes. That organization or framework simply wouldn't exist without AI. The way to think about it is in contrast: if you have an existing workflow or framework and you just augment it with AI, then by our definition AI is not native to that process.

And that goes back to Michael's earlier point about why we needed to start from the ground up—fundamentally, creating an AI-native firm or process requires redesigning and rebuilding, which would have been hard to do within an existing firm. So to be native, really, it's built from the ground up with AI at its core.

Drapkin: One analogy that really rings true for us is what Pixar did. When computers came to animation, the established studios like Disney said, "Here's a digital pencil, here's a digital pen." But the animation workflow didn't change; it was still hand-drawn, and the production process stayed the same. Pixar started from a different question—not how do we make it faster, but what does filmmaking look like when we bring digital into this from the start? It changed the entire pipeline and remade the medium. It's a similar distinction to what we see between AI-enabled and AI-native.

Why is AI so central to how you've built your firm, particularly for the patent work you're doing?

Mutter: We leverage AI agents for key tasks throughout the process. We bring in world-class expertise and optimize points throughout that process, and it's particularly beneficial for patents because the capabilities AI brings are very relevant to a lot of patent work—text generation, analysis of large technical documents, and similar tasks that AI is very good at. We have a custom-built AI process that wraps around these foundational tools to supercharge our functionality.

For example, we have a proprietary drawing-creation tool. Creating patent drawings used to be a very time-consuming process; we've been able to supercharge that capability with AI tools we built ourselves. We have a library of skills and other agents and tools in the background that we orchestrate end to end. AI really ensures quality, reduces friction for our practitioners, and lets them focus on exercising judgment and steering the process. It drives continuous improvement—this idea of compounding, this feedback loop—so the system gets better over time.

So what makes Landfall IP, as an AI-native patent law firm, different from an AI-powered platform or tool?

Drapkin: It's a great question, and it comes up a lot. What we've found is that the tools are getting better and better, but what clients really want is to be taught—not just "here's a tool, go use it." They love the counseling relationship and the expertise we bring. What they want is that combination of services, with AI and improved functionality built into the whole service process, without having to learn the set of tools we're orchestrating. So it's the service-plus-technology piece that's distinct from just handing someone a tool and telling them to figure out how it fits into their practice. We provide the full range of services on top of that.

The big thing for us is that people often don't believe it when we tell them to expect incredibly high quality, faster turnaround than they've ever seen, and cost advantages on top of that. People say, "You can't do all three—pick two of the three." So they have to see it, and that's been an interesting process. Now we're getting real traction—people are seeing that it fits into many different workflows, and realizing it can be faster, better, and more cost-effective, all at once.

What advantages does Landfall IP have over a traditional law firm?

Mutter: One advantage is that we have world-class attorneys on every matter—we're using technology to leverage our expertise, and clients can expect some of the best attorneys working on their matters and focusing their attention there. The time savings are a huge benefit, not only because getting patents on file faster is legally important, but because it's a smoother process for clients: they describe an invention to us, and we get something back to them quickly. It reduces the burden on their engineers and internal teams. It's a compounding benefit—moving fast helps in so many ways.

There are also the cost savings we mentioned. We're SOC 2 Type II compliant, so having that tech stack and those security guarantees is a real advantage. As an example of how the blend of service and technology shows up in our pipeline: we have a tool called the Discovery Agent, a voice-powered agent that interviews inventors. It's incredible—we use it alongside a practitioner and the inventor. The technology handles some of the interviewing, asking great questions and understanding any technology in the world, while the attorney on the call augments and steers the conversation with strategy, distilling and pulling out what's necessary. It's an ecosystem where we're leveraging technology in ways you couldn't before, paired with real-time expertise from a practitioner.

Drapkin: One of the biggest advantages is really about the Innovator's Dilemma—this is such a classic case of it, because law firms are doing well right now; it's a healthy industry, everybody's doing fine. But to actually take advantage of these technologies, you need a fundamentally different type of team. It used to be that you'd have a large leverage team of junior people—many getting trained, many not necessarily adding much value, but that was part of the process. Now what you really need is significant expertise both in patent law and in orchestrating these agents, and it's very difficult to disrupt that model from within. You also need a different structure—we have an amazing set of agents and a world-class paralegal team, but we don't need a huge team of people to do all that work. We need a fresh, secure, modern platform, and many law firms are still running old tech stacks.

The problem is you can't just throw those things away—there's a lot that makes it very difficult to disrupt that model internally. Some law firms will be able to do it well—Kirkland & Ellis, for example, is going all in, building their own knowledge base and spending $500 million. But that's one of a handful of firms that can do that. Many firms are simply going to find it too structurally different, too many changes required, so they'll continue on largely as they are. That's how law firms structurally exist right now—partnerships where all the money is distributed every year, which makes it very difficult to think long term. So there are both structural issues and Innovator's Dilemma issues that give us tremendous advantages.

What are some of the challenges of running an AI-native firm?

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Drapkin: I think the questions you're asking today reflect one of the challenges—there's a lot of confusion in the market about what "AI-enabled" even means. Is this a firm, or is this a tool? Should we bring the tool in-house? Everybody says they're integrating AI into their practice—what does that actually mean? That confusion creates a real challenge. Right now we spend a lot of time educating people about what we're doing.

Mutter: Generally, building a law firm from scratch has been incredibly rewarding. The challenge is making the decisions—because you get to design everything from scratch, and that in itself is a challenge, but it's been an incredible ride.

Looking ahead five years, what do you think a successful law firm looks like?

Drapkin: I think many existing law firms will do well, but the ones that do will need to disrupt themselves and do a lot of uncomfortable things to transform. The successful firms will be looking ahead at how AI can improve service for clients—not just improving quality, speed, and cost, but rethinking things from the ground up and asking whether there's a better way to do this than the way it's always been done.

I think there will be many AI-native firms that are wildly successful because they were built from the ground up that way, and there will be firms that genuinely transform themselves. But I think there will also be many firms where that disruption is just too much, and it's going to be hard for them to make that change.

Mutter: This idea of remaking yourself—changing your tech stack, changing how you compensate, promote, and train people—those are really hard things to do. But I think the firms that win are the ones with the foresight and the fortitude to make those tough choices and really invest. Michael made the point earlier about looking further down the road instead of just one or two years out, investing in technology, making changes that are painful now but that ensure survival down the road. I think many firms will do that, but it's going to be a tough choice for most.

What advice would you have for someone else who's considering starting an AI-native law firm?

Mutter: One is: don't be afraid to question every assumption. Part of the exercise we did—and are still doing, honestly—is rigorously questioning our assumptions about how something should be done. Michael and I are pretty good at questioning assumptions and innovating, but we still catch ourselves on a regular basis saying, "Why are we doing this? Just because that's the way we've always done it?" And then we stop and ask, wait, is there a better way? So being disciplined about that is certainly one piece of advice.

Drapkin: I'd say a couple of things for folks in this very traditional, structured, conservative, stable legal market—that's the way it is today, but they need to start thinking that it's going to be disrupted. If you're going to move in and start doing something different, it's going to be much more like a startup, so start thinking like a startup. Listen to what makes a startup successful and what the challenges are.

I'll leave you with a Malcolm Gladwell thought. Gladwell used to be a newspaper reporter, but he saw that newspapers were going to decline, so he left the newspaper to start writing books and building the company he has now, which does a whole range of things. All of his colleagues in the news business said, "Oh my gosh, how are you doing this? It's so risky, you're taking such a risk." And he said the risk isn't leaving—the risk is staying where you are and watching the world change around you.

That's what I'd say to everybody: the real risk is assuming it's going to stay the same forever. This is going to be a very dynamic world going forward. The legal industry is conservative, so it will keep moving slowly until it doesn't. You're seeing the kind of adoption and money going into this space that tells you it's going to be much more turbulent over the next ten years. So just because it's stable now doesn't mean it will stay that way—there's a lot of change coming.

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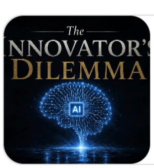

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Stephanie Wilkins

Director of Content Legaltech Hub

Stephanie Wilkins is the Director of Content at Legaltech Hub, where she helps lead the company in building out its editorial content and thought leadership strategy. Previously, she was the Editor-in-Chief of Legal Technology and Legaltech News at ALM, where she served as a guide for the entire ALM newsroom in tackling the intersection of law, technology, and AI. Less than a year into her role, she was named to the Fastcase 50 class for 2023, an...

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