The IT landscape can change dramatically in just five to 10 years. Along with emerging technology, aspects of the CIO function and law firm management can change as well. In 2025, CIOs might spend more of their time managing multitudes of vendors, and they will need to navigate new devices and methods for communicating. They will have to oversee all these changes while keeping an eye on budgets and maintaining security in an increasingly insecure world. By staying on top of current and future best practices, today’s law firm CIOs can ensure current success while preparing their firms for continued success.

The CIO Today
Today, CIOs typically oversee a broad, complex department that touches on every other department, function, practice area and location. The CIO’s primary role is to handle IT in a safe, efficient manner, even as security becomes an increasing concern for law firm staff and attorneys.

Clients, attorneys and staff are using a growing array of devices and software to send and receive confidential data. As more data are created and move around networks and through email, they become increasingly vulnerable to deliberate and accidental data breaches. Firms need to worry about protecting client information and privilege, and they might also need to protect data under federal regulations such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the Omnibus Rule and the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH).

CIOs must continually look for ways to leverage technology to make the firm more efficient and create competitive advantages. Clients demand 24/7 access and immediate responses from their legal counsel.
keep up with demand, law firm attorneys and staff are becoming increasingly mobile and want to use a range of devices from laptops to smartphones to tablets. Some are eagerly embracing new apps and ways of communicating, which complicates the CIO’s priorities of security, efficiency through application selection, integration and end-user training.

The CIO of the Future
While many CIO functions and priorities will remain the same in 2025, there will be some significant evolutions within the role. Consider how the technology that drives law firms has changed in the last 10 years. Smartphones have become ubiquitous, and everyone expects to have an internet connection wherever they are, whenever they want it. What’s next?

» The Cloud and Security: While there will be many changes in hardware and software, the most significant changes will revolve around cloud technology. The cloud is already significantly affecting the way many firms do business by delivering services and software over the internet, rather than installing them on end users’ computers. These trends will become even more pronounced.

As more law firms move functions to the cloud, the CIO’s priorities will shift. Keeping data secure will become even more important and far more complex. Rather than nice-to-have features, law firm CIOs will need to implement security technologies such as encryption, intrusion detection, anti-phishing, new email security technologies and more. They will also need to oversee cloud-based technologies for security, disaster recovery and ease of integration.

» Staffing and Vendors: By 2025, CIOs will lead a department that looks very different in terms of staffing and the types of work that must be managed. It will be more cost-efficient for cloud-based companies to oversee tasks for multiple firms, rather than for each firm to handle those tasks themselves. Between in-house staff and vendors, CIOs will have roughly the same number of people to oversee, but they will work in different capacities. As infrastructure is outsourced to the cloud, law firms will keep fewer tech support personnel in-house. Those resources will shift to training and security.

While CIOs today are highly focused on strategic planning and execution, these areas will continue to grow in importance. As the use of the cloud spreads and other advances in legal technology emerge, there will also be an increased base of outside vendors and service providers to handle tasks currently overseen by in-house staff. That will affect the CIO’s ability to operate on a strategic level because of shifting staffing arrangements. CIOs will have a more focused in-house IT department pared down to a handful of critical positions. Within the next 10 years, the CIO of a 200-person firm might only directly manage four employees — one full-time helpdesk employee and three employees to work with cloud vendors.

As infrastructure is outsourced to the cloud, law firms will keep fewer tech support personnel in-house. Those resources will shift to training and security.
The Small Firm CIO of Today and 2025

To oversee service providers rather than employees, CIOs must develop different management techniques and approaches. That includes evaluation and supervisory functions. These tasks will become more complex as firms adopt more technology and more vendors serve the firm.

» Mobility: For mobility, most firms have focused on the benefits of allowing attorneys and management to work remotely. In the future, IT staff will also be less tethered to the office. While the benefits of increased mobility will provide many advantages, CIOs must implement extra steps throughout the firm to keep data secure. The CIO will also need to expend more time and effort to provide education and security training at the end-user level to make sure attorneys and staff understand the risks of new technology.

» Money: Regarding budgets, CIOs should be able to anticipate costs and avoid unpleasant surprises, although they will not see costs decline significantly. According to a report by Gartner Inc., worldwide IT spending will total $3.54 trillion dollars in 2016, which represents less than one percent of an increase over 2015 spending. The 2015 total represents a decrease of $216 billion dollars from 2014. And Gartner predicts that 2014 spending levels will not be surpassed until 2019. When IT budgets are broken down as stated in the Gartner report, communications services represent the largest category, followed by IT services, devices, software and data center systems. While overall spend on communication services and IT services will decrease, those savings will be offset by increases in spending on devices, software and data center systems.

» New Metrics for Success: As the CIO’s role shifts, so will the measure of success, which will be determined by making the firm efficient and profitable through IT.

Enhanced, Not Disrupted
For law firm CIOs, the last few years have been challenging from a competitive and technology standpoint. While it is impossible to predict the future, law firms will continue to face an evolving environment. Technical fluency will continue to be a key component of the CIO’s job, but other traits will become more important by 2025. Those include the ability to train people and explain complex solutions in a way that lawyers and key stakeholders can understand.

Many firms have developed efficient workflows that technology will enhance, rather than disrupt. By understanding the changing IT environment, identifying the risks and embracing the right technology and vendors, CIOs will help their firms thrive in 2025 and beyond.