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# Season Special: Inside the Research and Innovation Engine of Nishith Desai Associates: A Blueprint for Building a Driverless Organisation

Ashima Ohri | Nov 06, 2024

# Innovation

# Law Firm

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# Nishith Desai

*BW Legal World's Ashima Ohri gets talking with the NDA Team to find out how the firm looks at Research & Development and Thought Leadership, including their project management system, the structure and significance of the Continuing Education (CE) sessions, and the firm's outlook toward the investment that goes into it all. An interview and an explainer, this piece captures keen insights from Dr. Nishith Desai and Milind Mundankar that you wouldn't want to miss.*



With rapid advancements in AI and technology, shifting macro- and microeconomic conditions, and complex international geopolitical factors impacting business, client expectations are evolving at an unprecedented pace, prompting law firms worldwide to rethink how they attract talent, enhance client interactions, develop practices, and

integrate technology. India's legal industry is no exception. Today's clients are tech-savvy and selective, who seek efficiency and round-the-clock accessibility from their legal partners. They expect agile, tech-advanced teams that are rapid in response and have business enabling solutions available at a moment's notice. To meet these evolving demands, a firm commitment to structured research and innovation is essential.

We spoke with Nishith Desai Associates (NDA), an India-focused global law firm widely regarded as one of Asia's most forward-thinking firms, to understand the inner workings of their 'innovation engine.' Known for pioneering thought leadership, knowledge management, and unique training models, NDA has set new standards that many in the legal community now look to as a guide. Here, we delve into the philosophy and systems that fuel NDA's innovative approach.

### **The Driving Force**

NDA, is driven by the philosophy of staying 'nano' thriving on its lean but power-packed braincount, with about 80 lawyers (150 members firmwide) spanning multiple global offices. It is the firm's unique approach that has helped bolster its position as a pacesetter law firm in today's world that requires more than legal expertise. The firm spends around 35%-40% of its time on research and innovative projects. At its core, it ensures a culture of growth with continuous learning and the ability to blend knowledge with innovation. For over three decades, NDA has crafted a dynamic ecosystem that integrates practice development, content creation, and cutting-edge technology to keep the firm off and running.

### **The Ignition Point**

Started in 1989, by Dr. Nishith Desai, a renowned international tax lawyer, the firm developed its three-dimensional philosophy:

- to innovatively solve complex legal problems,
- to foster the next generation of **socially** conscious lawyers and
- to shape the future of law.

With an equal 33% importance and weightage given to each of these aspects.

Insights gained from speaking with NDA underscore how the firm sees itself as more than just a law firm; it positions itself as a research-focused global organisation offering strategic legal and tax services to clients that aim to be global leaders. Their unique *research-to-knowledge-to-intellectual-property* strategy—coined NDA's DNA—enables them to stay ahead of the curve. The firm's research methodology follows a simple yet powerful formula: *Anticipate, Prepare, Deliver*. Their routine has evolved into anticipating new trends,

especially where technology and social change meet the law and prepare for the future well in advance. By nurturing a culture of continuous learning, research and specialisation, NDA stands transformed into a globally recognised firm.

### **Project Allocation: Crankshaft of Collaboration**

One of NDA's standout features is how research projects are managed. Typically, four to five members work on each research project, collaborating to develop content that is peer-reviewed within the firm alongwith senior leadership, which includes professor Dr. Mihir Parikh, Futurist and Strategic Thought Leader at the firm and then finalised for production by the firm's internal IT and digital content teams. For each new project, firm lawyers called the 'members' are free to nominate themselves based on their expertise, interest and the nature of the subject. This self-nomination system not only empowers members to take ownership of their work but also ensures that the best-suited individuals are working on each project. Firm members are also encouraged to work with members from the other practices and industries, to enhance the quality of the thought leadership.

Once the teams are formed, the content development process begins and is completed basis the subject matter in record timelines. Members are encouraged to select topics that are timely, insightful, and of significant relevance to clients and learners across a wide range of industries, including technology, finance, healthcare, and entertainment.

With the integration of AI and advanced technology, NDA has moved from traditional SQL modules to sophisticated systems to streamline the retrieval of past case studies, precedents, and important research materials. This technological advancement has made the firm's data easily searchable from a vast knowledge repository of video, audio, and written content for all its members. .

### **Continuing Education (CE) Sessions: The Bedrock of Innovation**

When asked what embeds learning so deeply into the firm's culture, NDA pointed to its daily CE sessions as a defining element. Every morning, from 9 AM to 10 AM, team members—spanning from interns to senior leadership across all global offices—convene for these sessions. Initially, some found it challenging to balance these with client responsibilities, yet over time, the sessions have become an essential part of firm life. This emphasis on structured learning stands out in an industry where few firms prioritize learning beyond traditional 'on-the-job' training.

Founder, **Nishith Desai** underscores:

*“We have painstakingly cultivated the spirit and discipline of brainstorming, churning unusual ideas, and introducing unheard-of methods and practices (among law firms and beyond) for long term strategic impact. This culture is possible only by nurturing a compulsive, participative and flourishing ‘learning’ culture. And that’s what we chose to do.”*

Describing the meticulous approach to its CE sessions, NDA emphasized that these daily sessions the same level of rigor as the firm’s broader research initiatives. Each session is carefully crafted with detailed PowerPoint presentations, which serve as the foundation for in-depth discussions and debates. After the session, materials are shared, and recordings are uploaded to an internal platform for future access. Topics range widely, from complex legal matters and case studies to essential skills like creating impactful presentations, drafting professional emails, and mastering Excel. The firm also brings in external speakers, including industry experts and academics, to broaden perspectives and enhance the learning environment. NDA’s leadership likens their training approach to that of pilots: just as passengers place their trust in pilots who commit to rigorous daily training, clients recognize the value of NDA’s lawyers dedicating 10% of their working hours every day—1 hour out of every 10—to skill-building and knowledge enhancement. This commitment, they believe, allows each team member to develop competencies ahead of the curve, achieving a broader skill set and greater capacity.

Read more on NDA’s Weekender titled **Rocketing Value with Continuing Education**.

In addition to CEs, the firm shares that it has developed other ‘learning’ programs such as ‘Yearn to Learn’ (training of fresh, early stage talent) or ‘Read to Lead’ (exploring books), or NDA’s regular ‘Globalization Retreats’ (fostering management education) and International Tax Crash Course (where top 15 law students across the world are selected for special 80 hours long training at its Alibaug research campus).



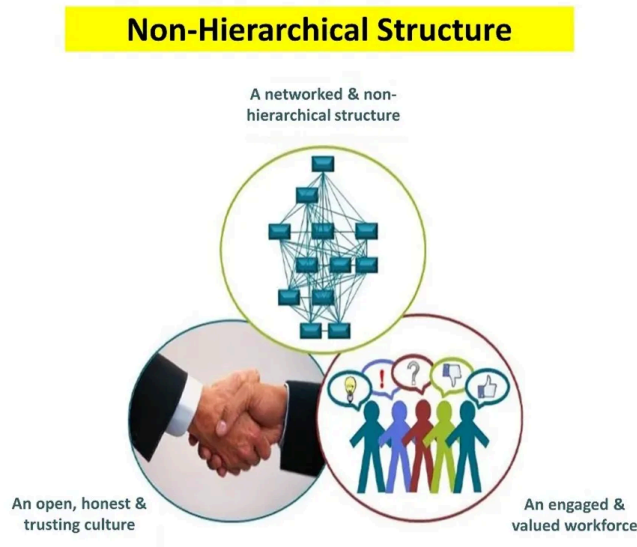
*Image: NDA’s EduRetreat to Estonia and Finland 2019*

**Furthermore, responding to the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, NDA initiated the ‘Client Continuing Education Program (cCep),’ which opened up its internal daily training sessions to clients for the first time. Through cCep, clients were able to engage in 300**

sessions over three months, gaining resources to manage certain legal processes independently—a shift that reflected the firm’s adaptation to the challenges of remote operations and client needs.

### **Networked Leadership Model**

NDA’s leadership structure is based on a 'Networked Leadership' model, described by the firm as one in which 'everyone is a leader, and everyone is a follower.' This approach, they believe, fosters a culture of shared responsibility and collective growth.



*Image: The relationship between networked organizational structure, organisational behaviour and an efficient workforce*

NDA’s designation system departs from traditional legal titles, instead grouping its professionals into two main categories: members with up to five years of experience and leaders.

Advancement at the firm is based solely on demonstrated expertise, with no titles like junior associate, senior associate, or principal in place. Nishith Desai explains: *“The hierarchy-based model creates a command-and-control system, which often leads to inefficiencies and internal politics. We believe in freedom with responsibility and creativity with discipline.”*

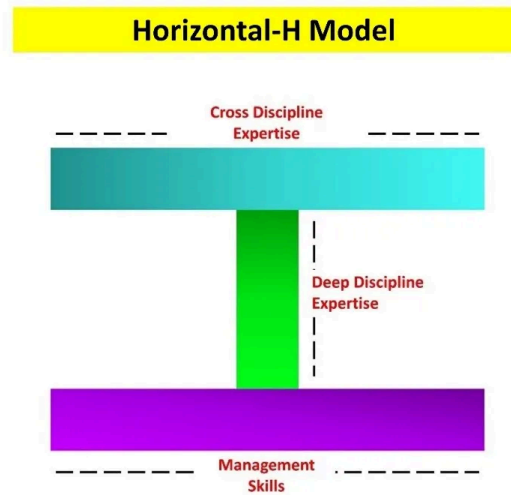
Read more on NDA’s Weekenders titled [Our Limit To Growth Is...](#) and [Networked Leadership and Beyond Partnership to Networked Leadership: A New Model for Law Firms?](#).

Notably, many of NDA’s practice area and industry leaders bring diverse expertise from fields beyond law, with backgrounds in electronics and computer engineering, surgery, chartered accounting, cost accounting, and management, among others. This multidisciplinary foundation informs their approach to legal practice, adding depth to the firm’s capabilities.

The Research and Innovation, along with Strategic Consulting Practice, is spearheaded by Dr. Mihir Parikh from the Silicon Valley office in Palo Alto, California. Dr. Parikh also leads the firm’s

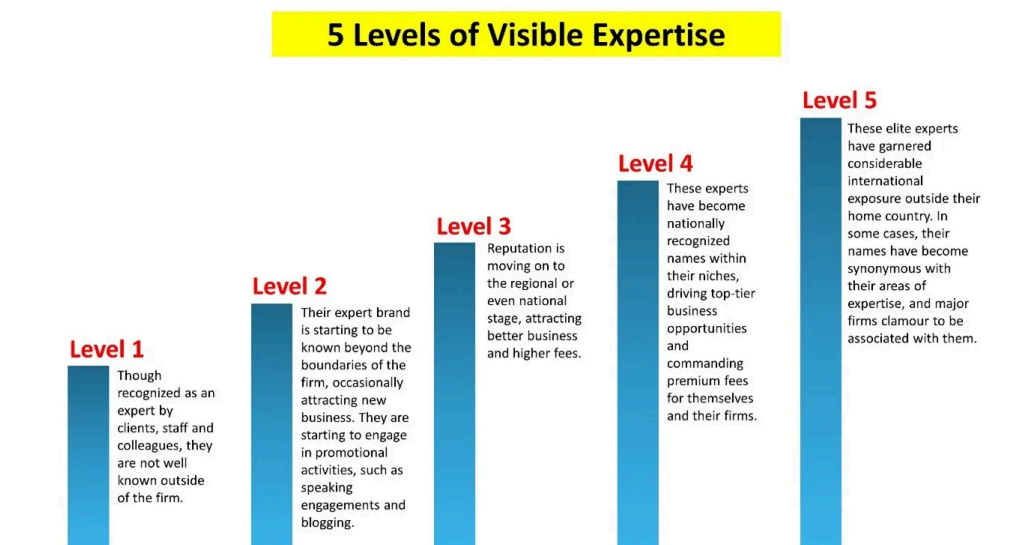
initiative to establish PACER, a Centre of Excellence for thought leadership at the crossroads of technology, law, and strategy. In addition, he serves as an adjunct professor in the Management of Technology and Innovation department at New York University, where he teaches in graduate programs. **NishithDesai** notes:

*“Also, we had identified a ‘Horizontal H’ approach, where apart from the core area of specialization, firm members are encouraged to learn management and leadership skills. This helped every member develop a wide enough understanding of ‘other practices’ to be able to expand their delivery capability and proffer integrated strategic advice.”*



*Image: T-shaped skills, combined with strong management abilities, creates a path for becoming visible expert*

At NDA, leadership is defined by both legal expertise and the ability to inspire. Leaders are expected to conduct themselves in ways that encourage others within the firm to follow. The firm’s growth framework outlines five levels of professional recognition: the first level is to be known within the firm, followed by recognition within professional circles, then the industry, then nationally, and, ultimately, globally.



*Image: The concept of Level 5 Leadership was created by business consultant, Jim Collins. He wrote about it in a well-respected 2001 Harvard*

[Business Review article, and published his research in his popular book, "Good to Great.](#)

### **Balance Scorecard**

Their balanced scorecard (BSC) is another technological solution that keeps all the firm members aligned with their strategic goals and core values.

**Nishith Desai** explains:

*"We are now trying to develop a model called 'Driverless Organization' – something on the lines of a driverless car. How does a driverless car work? Every piece or part, be it hardware, software, sensor, dashboard does its job. We give our people, a dashboard week-on-week, and we review their performance in the form of Balance Score Card.*

*In a profession or business, there are 4 dimensions – a) your clients – you take care of them; b) your people - clients are served by people – so you take care of people; c) your processes - you have good clients and good people, but if you do not have good processes, things will fail; d) your finances – unless you harmonise clients, people and processes, finance will not be right. This is the philosophy behind Balance Score Card. What you want to balance in your business (or profession) is your prerogative alone."*

The BSC has three categories: One is Financial (e.g., revenue by practice/industry/member, etc.) while the second is Client (e.g., number of products/services delivered per existing client, number of new inquiries converted to assignments, etc.). To strengthen and monitor elements of culture, essential to both firm's competitive positioning and employer proposition, NDA has introduced a third category of metrics, Learning and Growth. Part A of which includes measures of value creation such as article writing, research, thought leadership, podcasts, etc. – these can be objectively measured. Part B is behavioural and subjective – which include month-on month meetings, where the mentor-mentee are encouraged to sit together and discuss their BSC.

**Nishith Desai** adds:

*"Most law firms work till 2:00-3:00 am - people take pride in saying they work till 1:00-2:00 am; once in a while that's okay, but it should not become a norm. Remember, life is never straightforward, there are always ups and downs.*

*Balancing life or harmonizing work and life is very important to us. In our firm, 80-90% of our people leave at 5:30-6:00 pm. A typical day starts at 9:00 am – with one hour of Continuing Education Program – everyone attends this, no exceptions – I attend too. From 10:00 am, for the next 6-7 hours, we do billable work; the remaining hours are devoted to research."*

### **The Role of Technology in Innovation**

Technology is woven into every aspect of NDA's operations. From *Thomson Reuters Practice Management, Elite 3E, iManage, Luminance* likeplatforms, the firm has invested in top-tier tools



to enhance workflow efficiency and ensure secure, organised information retrieval. In addition, platforms like *Nishith.TV* (for videos) and *Nishith.Radio* (for podcasts) facilitate the creation of digital content such as webinars and other informative pieces, making the firm a leader in tech-driven legal services.

From strategic planning, decision-making, monthly leadership meetings, client relationship management, time spend record, work flow management, management information system (MIS) usage, to knowledge management – the firm has processes for most things.

In January 2024, NDA became the first Indian law firm to develop and implement **NaiDA**, firm's in-house AI Bot exclusively designed for its lawyers. 'Being the first' has been a pivotal force for the firm. Built on the advanced GPT-4 model from OpenAI and hosted on Amazon Web Services servers, NaiDA has been designed to empower NDA's lawyers with intelligent insights in their daily workflows. The current dataset comprises multiple cross-industry research papers, M&A labs, hotlines, podcasts, videos, and other content developed by the firm over the past decades.

Further, recently the firm undertook an interesting research project called '*Sprinting to the Future of Law Series*' spearheaded by Dr. Mihir Parikh, where lawyers across diverse industries are analysing some of the top just-over-the-horizon technologies (such as Cyborgs, Digital Twins, Hoverbikes, Space Internet and NetZero Buildings) and their future legal considerations. Additionally, in September 2024, the firm's US Team undertook a US Study Tour across various cities in Texas and San Francisco and interacted with some of the leading organisations in this space to further deepen their expertise.

**Milind Mundankar**, Chief Technology Officer shares:

*"As technology continues to reshape the world, NDA has embraced it as a core driver of innovation within our legal practice. By investing in cutting-edge platforms of Ai, we are empowering our lawyers to deliver superior client service with enhanced efficiency and precision. The launch of NaiDA marks a significant milestone in our journey, providing intelligent insights and automating workflows to support our team. Our commitment to exploring emerging technologies ensures that we remain at the forefront of legal innovation, anticipating the future and preparing our clients for it. At NDA, we believe that technology is not just a tool but a strategic enabler that shapes how we work and the value we bring to our clients."*

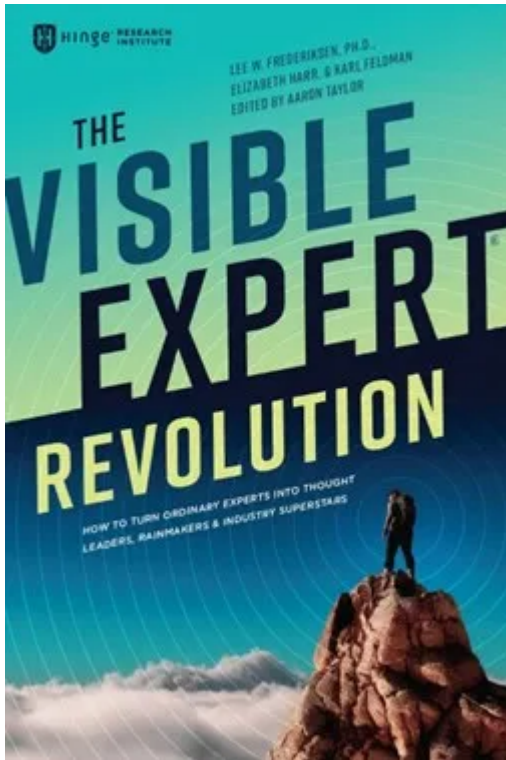
### **Global Inspiration, Local Impact**

While NDA has drawn inspiration from global best practices, particularly from AmLaw firms, they have successfully adapted these strategies to the Indian market. The firm has created a niche for itself by blending global innovation with local expertise, allowing it to provide tailor-made legal solutions while maintaining a global outlook. The firm has international offices across New York, Palo Alto (Silicon Valley) and Singapore.

This specialised approach recently made NDA to feature as a case study law firm in the book, '*The Visible Expert® Revolution: How to Turn Ordinary Experts into Thought Leaders*,



*Rainmakers and Industry Superstars*' authored by distinguished thought leaders Lee Frederiksen, Ph.D., Liz Harr and Karl Feldman.



*Image: The Visible Expert Revolution: How to Turn Ordinary Experts into Thought Leaders, Rainmakers and Industry Superstars, authored by Lee Frederiksen, Elizabeth Harr (Author), Karl Feldman (1 August 2013)*

### **Costs and Investments in Continued Excellence**

Running such an intricate system, from daily CE sessions to managing a research and publishing division, requires significant investment. However, NDA recognises this investment as essential to remain a leader and stay '*distinctly different*'. Whether it's the cost of building a research infrastructure, developing internal platforms to manage research project materials, the firm has committed substantial revenue allocation towards research (around 25%-35%) to ensure that learning, innovation, and quality remain at the core of its operations.



*Image: Blue Sky Thinking Research Campus known by the name of Imaginarium AliGunjan (in Alibaug, near Mumbai, IN) Google location*

Their Blue Sky Thinking Research Campus known by the name of *Imaginarium AliGunjan* (in Alibaug, near Mumbai, IN) is dedicated to stimulating and cultivating the imagination. AliGunjan is the first-of-its-kind and an IOT driven unique state-of-the-art campus to think, ideate and change the world for better — and together.

At the heart of this legal powerhouse lies a systematic approach that mirrors the operations of a newsroom. NDA's internal technology, media and publishing team ensure that the firm stays agile and at the forefront of legal thought. Every knowledge report, legal update, and paper produced by the firm goes through a tech-enabled peer review collaborative process (crowdsourcing of ideas) where lawyers, video editors, and designers work together to create high-quality, insightful content.

**Conclusion: A Blueprint for the Future of Law**

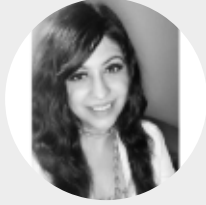
By blending talent development, a self-driven research project management model, continuous education, and cutting-edge technology, NDA has built an ecosystem that nurtures both innovation and excellence.

The firm describes its approach as one that reaches beyond standard legal services, focusing on shaping the future of legal practice. As the industry adapts to new challenges, NDA's model offers one example of how firms might navigate an increasingly competitive landscape.

Related and referenced readings:

1. Management by Trust in a Democratic Enterprise: A Law Firm Shapes Organizational Behavior to Create Competitive Advantage
2. From Knowledge Enterprise to Creative Enterprise
3. Our Limit to Growth Is...
4. Toss The Target, Toast the Potential
5. Scrapping the Leave Policy
6. Pursue Your Calling – And the Rest Will Follow

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