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M&A · INTEGRATION · LATERALS

Making law firm integrations work

In-depth playbooks, a delivery kit and four diagnostics for mergers, bolt-ons and lateral hires: everything is covered, with tools that ensure it's achieved successfully

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Integration losses cluster in five places

Each workstream in the playbook is built to address at least one of these

People drift	Client erosion	Culture split	Savings fade	Governance gap
The top decile leaves quietly, mid-level talent first, often long before anyone resigns.	Slow attrition masked by WIP, only visible six to twelve months later, by which time it's hard to reverse.	Two sets of values and behaviour operating under one name.	Cost-outs booked in the deal model, never owned by a named person or taken out of the budget.	An integration office without authority. Decisions reopen and reporting turns into commentary, driving disinterest or ignorance from board-level down.

1 : 4

Each week of detailed planning before close saves about four weeks of remediation after it (Alt-V field observation)

The deal has an owner from the first conversation. Integration usually gets one after close, in the same week the deal team disbands.

Every merger proposal tends to follow one of four designs

Being clear before the vote helps with partner engagement; the structure has usually determined this already

	Absorption	Merger of Equals	Preservation	Holding
What prevails	Acquirer's model prevails	A new model, built jointly	Target keeps its model; backbone shared	Each keeps its own
Integration intent	Extensive and fast	Extensive and slow	Finance, compliance, IT only	Minimal, by design
Integration cost, % of deal value	**15–25%**	**35–55%**	**10–20%**	**5–15%**
Savings realised by Day 365	**65–80%**	**35–50%**	**75–90%**	Near 100% of a small promise
Time to full integration	12–18 months	24–36 months	6–12 months (backbone)	Governance in 3–6 months

The expensive pattern: an Absorption run behind a Merger-of-Equals label to win the vote. Trust goes faster than any systems decision could cost it.

Illustrative ranges, Alt-V M&A and Integration briefing (July 2026).

A 90-minute session on what the deal already is, before the vote

The gap between the deal's structure and how it is promoted to the firm and the market is the finding that matters most

0–10 minutes	**Frame** The four designs and what the session will and won't produce
10–45 minutes	**Drift test** Eight dimensions read against the term sheet, deed, draft org chart and systems budget
45–70 minutes	**Appetite gates** Four pass/fail gates, worked through with the whole room
70–90 minutes	**Read and commit** Name the design, the gate most at risk and the single next step

APPETITE GATES, AND THE ANSWERS THAT FAIL THEM

Governance capacity	*"We'll work that out as we go."*
Vote-margin honesty	*"We need this closed by the announced date."*
Integration resourcing	*"The COO can run this alongside everything else."*
Retention honesty	*"We don't expect anyone to leave over this."*

For bolt-ons the map compresses to six decisions a managing partner can answer alone: design, retained partners, Day 1 backbone owner, brand, walk-away trigger, accountable owner.

Ten stages to close, then a year that decides the value

Pre-merger playbook (Part 1) and Integration playbook (Part 2)

PART 1 · PRE-MERGER

1. Strategic rationale
2. Target screening
3. Initial approach
4. Indicative valuation
5. Heads of terms
6. Due diligence
7. Deal structuring
8. Approvals and vote
9. Signing and closing
10. **Pre-close integration**

PART 2 · INTEGRATION

Pre-close
Day –90 to 0
Plan, stand up the IMO, Day 1 readiness, partners clear what they voted for

Day 1
Day 0
"We are one firm." No surprises

Stabilise
Day 0 to 30
Combined firm working

Integrate
Day 30 to 90
Major decisions made and announced

Optimise
Day 90 to 180
Single operating model emerging

Realise
Day 180+
Savings realised, IMO wind-down

Most value is lost in the Day 30 to Day 365 stretch, which gets the least senior attention.

Three gates and four quarters to a single operating model

Full delivery-level integration for a Merger of Equals runs past Day 365; the roadmap says so up front

Day 1

BANNER CHANGE ONLY

- Email, telephony and secure files working
- Conflicts unified for new matters
- Day 1 comms issued in sequence
- IMO charter signed and approved by board before close

Day 100

STEADY STATE

- No daily surprises
- Org design cascaded to Layer −1
- Integration backlog visible and worked
- First health-check baseline

Day 365

IMO WIND-DOWN IN SIGHT

- 90% of master plan complete
- Savings tracking to the design's range
- Two consecutive green health checks
- No unplanned "two systems" exceptions

Q1 Stability and readiness

Q2 Major decisions made and announced

Q3 Systems and a single operating model

Q4 Realisation and wind-down readiness

The step firms most often skip: reconciling bottom-up savings plans against the top-down deal model in Q2.

Twenty workstreams covering the full scope of the integration, each with a named owner

Each comes with pre-drafted decisions, timeline, RACI and template links that can be adopted immediately and modified as required

GOVERNANCE	PEOPLE	CULTURE AND MARKET	OPERATE	PROTECT
Integration strategy and principles	Org design and restructuring	Cultural integration	Technology	Regulatory and compliance
IMO governance	People and HR	Stakeholder communications	Finance	Competitive response
Programme structure	Partner and senior leadership	Client retention	Real estate and facilities	Savings realisation
Benefits realisation and health checks	Remuneration and retention	Marketing, brand and positioning	Knowledge transfer	Exit and reverse planning

Run from an Integration Management Office with a daily stand-up for 30 days, weekly workstream forum and fortnightly steering committee.

Partnership considerations that corporate M&A playbooks miss

A single supplement consolidates every law-firm-specific point in the toolkit, ensuring that they are known, documented and addressed.

Partner approval

75% by number and by capital is common. A 51/49 win is lost operationally.

Conflicts

Two firms' conflicts multiply. Unified checking is a Day 1 item.

Deed mechanics

Capital, goodwill, lock-up and restraints. Get the deed in the first week of diligence.

PII run-off

Six years minimum under the SRA. The most under-provisioned cost line in legal M&A.

PEP transition

Combined PEP changes for both sides. Set expectations before the vote.

AML re-baseline

Mandatory on change of control, and a multi-FTE-year programme requiring named responsible owners from Day 1.

Lockstep or merit

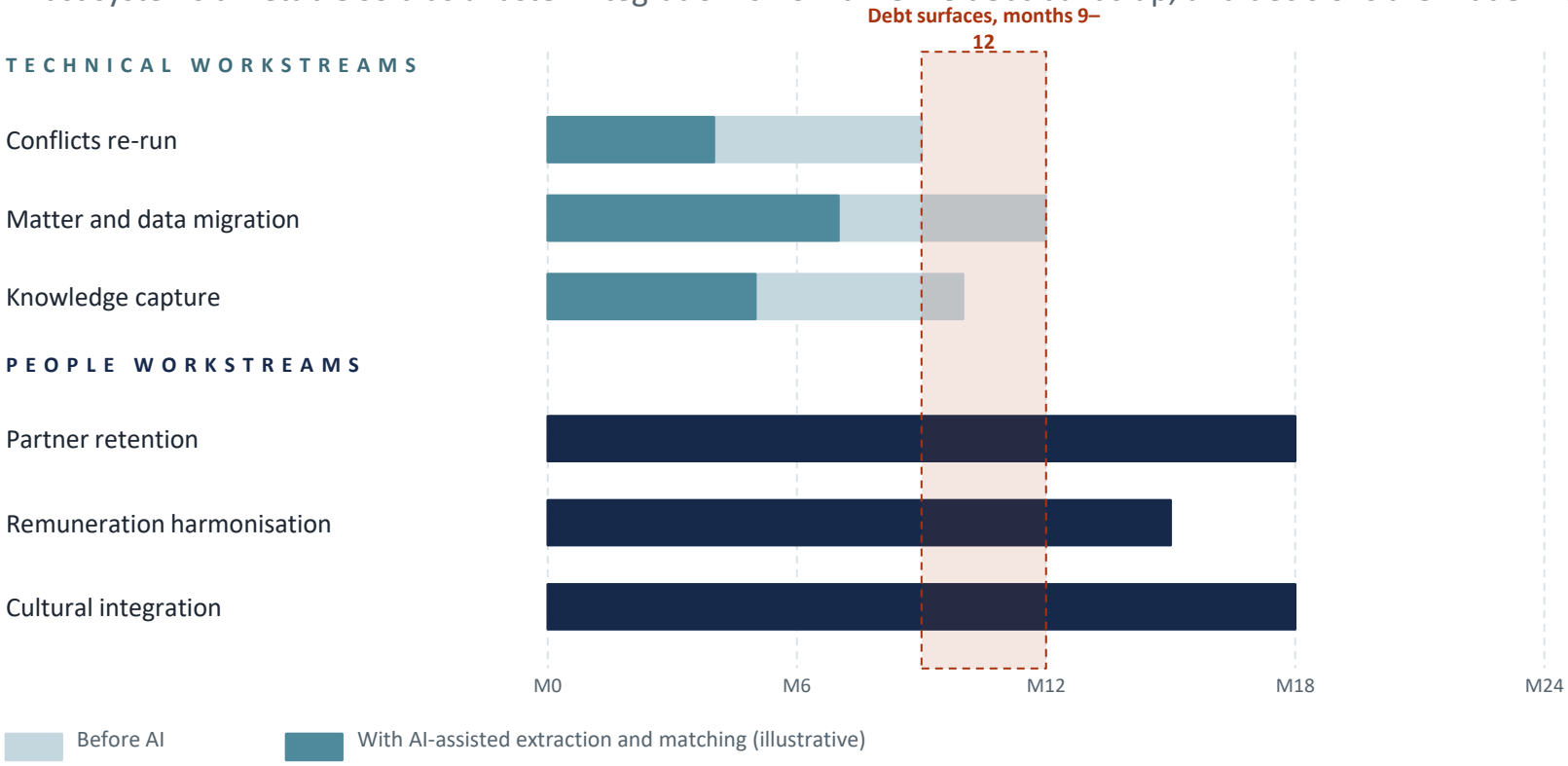
Adopt one, build a new one, or run two for a defined period, but reward should help drive behaviour, and compromise dilutes culture, one partner at a time.

Practising certificates

Individual and entity authorisations, per jurisdiction, on multi-month timelines.

AI shortens the technical workstreams; the people workstreams keep their own timetable

A fast systems timetable sold as a faster integration is how timeline debt builds up, and decisions are made without proper context.



Integration timeline debt

- Technical work finishes early and the programme is read as ahead of schedule.
- The IMO is stood down or moved to the next deal.
- Retention, pay and culture drift into ‘business as usual’ and lose their governance just as they reach the hard part.
- **Log any freed capacity as a decision with a named purpose.**

Three shapes of lateral acquisition, treated separately

Firm-merger machinery doesn't scale down; the Lateral Acquisition Annex replaces it

A Partner hire

One partner and a portable book. The highest-volume band in the UK and Australian mid-market.

Main risk: Book claimed at face value

B Team lift-out

A partner-led team of three to ten fee earners moving as a unit.

Main risk: Springboard injunctions and restraint timing

C Small-firm bolt-on

Two to fifteen partners absorbed onto the acquirer's systems and brand; no entity retained.

Main risk: Successor-practice PII and client-account movement

WHAT THE ANNEX ADDS THAT FIRM-MERGER PLAYBOOKS DON'T CARRY

Book portability check

Claimed book discounted by practice area, using published portability data, before the offer is priced.

Pre-offer conflicts protocol

Built to the Bolkiah standard*, so diligence on a lateral's clients doesn't create the conflict it is looking for.

Successor-practice and PII drill

SRA, LPLC and Lawcover tests. Keeping the target's name alone can make the acquirer its successor practice.

Sponsor Partner model

One accountable sponsor, a pre-arrival plan, joint client notice, novation register and checkpoint dashboard.

*As established in *Prince Jefri Bolkiah v. KPMG* (1999)

One sponsor, one plan, checked and tracked against actuals

The delivery kit (templates T29 to T34) feeds the Lateral Retrospective at each checkpoint

T29	**Lateral candidate scorecard** Six dimensions plus a deal-breakers test
T30	**Pre-offer conflict sanitisation** Bolkiah-standard, two-stage clearance
T31	**Sponsor Partner charter and dashboard** 30/60/90/180-day checkpoints
T32	**Joint notice letter pack** Cooperative, adversarial and hybrid versions
T33	**Per-matter novation register** Consent, KYC re-underwriting, disputes
T34	**Anonymous cultural pulse** Ten items scored to 100

LATERAL RETROSPECTIVE: FOUR OUTCOMES

Accelerate	Green on every dimension, book at 110% of plan or better, sponsor not declining
Continue on plan	Green, without the Accelerate conditions
Renegotiate	Amber, or Red with the sponsor still supportive or book above 50% of plan
Manage out	Red, sponsor Red, book below 50%, and cash or pulse also Red

Five dimensions: book realisation, cash collections, sponsor forecast, cross-referrals, cultural pulse. Weakest score sets the verdict.

Four diagnostics across the deal sequence

Browser-based, inputs kept on the user's machine, board-ready A4 report

BEFORE HEADS OF TERMS

Integration Readiness Assessment

Both firms side by side across culture, operations, finance and technology. Risk score, gap analysis and a first-90-days plan.

43 ATTRIBUTES

4 AXES

BEFORE AN OFFER

Lateral ROI and Break-Even

Claimed book discounted for portability and ramped over 12 quarters against the guarantee. Three scenarios and a sensitivity grid.

12 QUARTERS

15 PRACTICE AREAS

BEFORE A BOLT-ON IS SIGNED

Successor-Practice and PII Screener

Deal structure tested against the SRA, LPLC and Lawcover successor tests. Determination, indicative premium band, structural options.

3 REGULATORS

5 PREMIUM BANDS

12 TO 36 MONTHS IN

Lateral Retrospective

Actuals against plan on five dimensions, variance traced to five drivers, one of four recommended actions, cohort view.

5 DIMENSIONS

4 OUTCOMES

What the reports look like

Fictional deal to illustrate tools: Marlowe Kendrick LLP acquiring Tresham Vyse



Integration readiness: 48, Elevated; technology 65, High



Team lift-out: breaks even in Q12, not on the downside



Bolt-on: successor practice Likely through name usage



Cohort of three: Accelerate, Renegotiate, Manage out

All firms, people and figures in the sample reports are invented. Full sample pack available on request.

Eight documents and 34 working templates

Ready to populate and drop into a client workspace

DOCUMENTS

- Pre-merger playbook: ten stages
- Integration playbook: twenty workstreams
- IMO governance framework
- Law firm supplement
- Cultural integration guide
- Competitive response playbook
- Exit and reverse planning
- **Lateral Acquisition Annex**

TEMPLATES

Strategy and diligence	**T01 · T02 · T03**
Plan and govern	**T04 · T05 · T09**
Savings and benefits	**T06 · T07 · T08**
People and organisation	**T13 · T14 · T23**
Culture and communications	**T10 · T11 · T12 · T28**
Clients and conflicts	**T16 · T17 · T25 · T26**
Technology, finance, property	**T19 · T20 · T21**
Regulatory and knowledge	**T22 · T24**
Partnership	**T15 · T18**
Contingency	**T27**
Laterals	**T29 – T34**

Cross-referenced to the Org Design, Partner Remuneration and Change Management toolkits rather than duplicating them.

We can support you in a range of ways, with each option producing working assets that assist the firm

A firm can stop after any one of them and still hold a usable asset. We can also educate and upskill teams to build internal capability

1 Integration Readiness Review

PRE-VOTE WHERE POSSIBLE

The readiness map run with the sponsor and board, ending in a detailed report covering: the *actual* deal design, the gate most at risk, the right way to brief the partnership and the next steps.

2 IMO set-up

12 WEEKS

A working Integration Management Office: charter signed, workstream leads named and briefed, cadence locked for six months, RAID live, Day 1 plan tested before close.

3 Integration Partner

12 TO 18 MONTHS

Programme leadership through the integration year and beyond, built to hand over to the firm's own owner, usually the COO or a senior partner.

PRINCIPLES IN EVERY ENGAGEMENT

A 70% answer on Monday beats a perfect one next quarter

Decide once, log it, and reopen only on new information

Visible leadership from both legacy firms

Say what you know when you know it

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Agree the integration design before the vote.

It is the one step that makes every later decision on systems, pay, brand and people easier to explain.

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