<u>Transforming Justice: A Human-Centred Approach to Digital Transformation in Legal Aid</u>

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As legal aid organizations around the world work to modernize their services, digital tools are often presented as the solution to doing more with less. Online portals and back-end efficiencies promise to streamline services and expand access to justice. Yet, as has been widely observed, these technologies often fall short of their promises because they are built from the top down, shaped more by institutional assumptions than by the lived experiences of the people they are meant to serve.[2]

Legal Aid BC (LABC) is actively exploring how digital technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), can help it better fulfill its mission of strengthening client-centred legal help for people experiencing barriers to the legal system. Yet rather than framing digital transformation solely as a technological challenge, LABC is approaching it as a design challenge, one that demands deep empathy for the people the technology is meant to serve. Human-centred design (HCD) offers a compelling framework for digital transformation in legal aid. Rooted in design, psychology, and engineering, and popularized by global design and innovation company IDEO and the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford (the d.school), HCD is a problem-solving approach that centres the lived experiences of the people most affected by a given problem. Its goal is to develop tools and services that are useful, usable, and meaningful within the real-life contexts of users.

This discussion paper explores how LABC is integrating HCD into its approach to digital transformation. It offers a case study of a legal aid organization doing its best to address lawyer and designer Margaret Hagan's observation that most access to justice technologies fail because they reflect the perspectives of lawyers and administrators rather than those of users.[3]

This paper begins by introducing LABC's understanding of digital transformation and explaining how the organization is adopting a HCD lens to guide its work. The rest of the paper is structured around the first two stages of the HCD process: Inspiration and Ideation. First, it shares findings from two major LABC research projects that sought to deeply understand the needs, barriers, and preferences of LABC clients (Inspiration). Second, it unpacks how these insights are shaping the organization's brainstorming on digital transformation (Ideation).

I. FOUNDATIONS FOR HUMAN-CENTRED DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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[2] This critique is well articulated by Margaret Hagan in her paper, "Participatory Design for Innovation in Access to Justice," *Daedalus* 148, 1 (2019): p. 120.

[3] Margaret Hagan, "Participatory Design."

Understanding LABC's Digital Journey

Digital transformation is a broad and often loosely defined term. At LABC, it describes the organization's comprehensive effort to leverage technology to help it deliver on its goals. To navigate this process more clearly, LABC distinguishes between three related but distinct terms:

- **Digital modernization** refers to updates to existing infrastructure, software, or processes to improve efficiency and effectiveness. For example, LABC upgraded its customer relationship management (CRM) system to Microsoft Dynamics 365 and is implementing Power BI to improve data analysis capability across departments.

- **Digital innovation** involves introducing new or adapted technologies in ways that bring about significant change. A recent example is LABC's launch of a lawyer-initiated online application option, which enables lawyers to apply for legal aid on their client's behalf.

- **Digital transformation** is the overarching concept that encompasses both modernization and innovation. It refers to the ongoing rethinking and retooling of legal aid services in light of people's needs and technological possibilities.

LABC also categorizes its digital initiatives based on who they affect most: client-facing, staff-facing, and lawyer-facing. These categories often overlap, as some initiatives affect more than one group.

While these distinctions help clarify the technical and operational aspects of LABC's work, they don't fully capture the philosophy guiding the organization's digital transformation. For that, we turn to human-centred design.

Introducing Human-Centred Design (HCD)

Human-centred design (HCD) is a creative problem-solving approach rooted in the belief that solutions are most effective when they are designed with a deep understanding of the people they're intended to serve. In the context of legal aid organizations, these people could include clients, frontline staff, lawyers, and community partners. HCD emphasizes empathy and perspective-taking, ensuring that design decisions are grounded in real people's needs, not just organizational goals or technological capabilities.[4] At its core, HCD pushes organizations to ask: Whose experience are we designing for? What do they truly need to succeed?

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[4] "Human-Centred Design (HCD)," *Interaction Design Foundation*, accessed April 15, 2025, https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/human-centered-design?srsltid=AfmBOoqPRsy_ji02UcH81VDIdHCaPgLXKiPoSZ11kmcAMt76vtl0hohu#what_is_human-centered_design_(hcd)?-0

HCD is guided by four key principles, which make up the HCD mindset:[5]

1. **People-centred** – Prioritize the lived experiences, preferences, and constraints of users.

2. **Solve the right problem** – Dig beneath surface symptoms to address root causes.

3. **Think in systems** – Understand how different parts of the system influence each other.

4. **Start small and iterate** – Test early, learn from users, and refine before scaling.

These principles come to life through a three-stage process:[6]

1. **Inspiration** – Learn about and empathize with people's needs, challenges, and context. Can involve observation, interviews, surveys, and other research methods.

2. **Ideation** – Synthesize what you learned in the Inspiration stage, identify design opportunities, and iteratively brainstorm, prototype, and refine potential solutions.

3. **Implementation** – Put the solution into action and assess if it's working.

The 3I (Inspiration, Ideation, Implementation) process is flexible and non-linear. Teams often revisit earlier stages as new insights emerge, making adaptability a key strength of the approach.

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[5] "Human-Centred Design (HCD)," *Interaction Design Foundation*.

[6] The design company IDEO is credited with popularizing this three-stage, or 3I, model of HCD. Stanford's d.school, another leader in design, popularized a five-stage model for design thinking (though not specifically human-centred design) that is highly compatible with the 3I approach. The five stages are: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test.
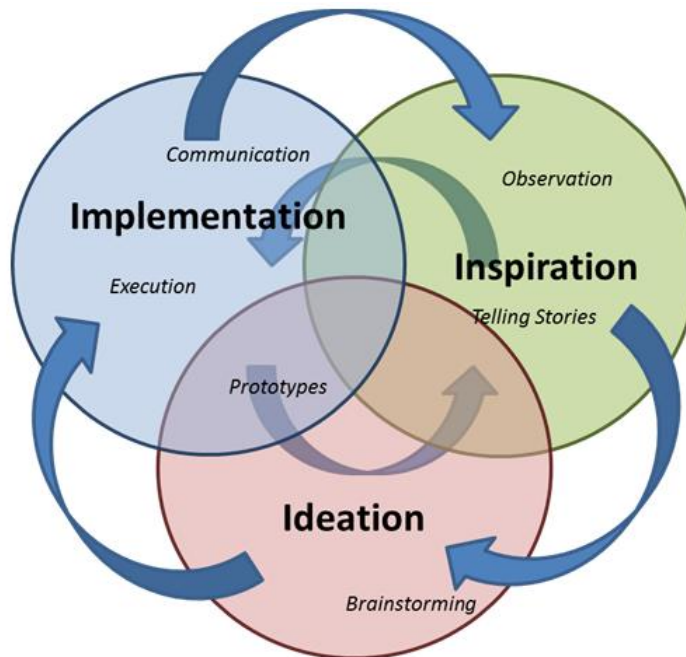
Figure 1. Illustration of the 3I HCD process. Image credit unknown.

Putting HCD into Practice at LABC

As an organization whose mission revolves around serving its clients, LABC sees HCD as a natural fit. Even before formally adopting the language of HCD, LABC had been practising several principles of the approach, particularly through its investment in understanding its clients. Indeed, recent efforts to study clients' experiences with digital tools and the legal system represent substantial work in the Inspiration stage of the HCD process. The next section of this paper details what LABC has learned through that research.

II. UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE'S NEEDS – INSIGHTS FROM CLIENT-CENTRED RESEARCH

Digital Potential, Real Limitations

It is widely thought that digital technology has the potential to increase access to justice for people facing barriers such as the inability to afford a lawyer, a lack of knowledge about legal systems, and a lack of proximity to local legal services.[7] It is also widely understood that this

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[7] See the collection of essays in Siddharth Peter De Souza and Maximillian Spohr, eds. *Technology, Innovation and Access to Justice.* Edinburgh University Press, 2021. https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-technology-innovation-and-access-to-justice.html

potential is unevenly distributed: insufficient access to the internet, limited digital literacy, and broader systemic inequities mean that for many, digital solutions remain out of reach.[8]

Recognizing this reality, LABC has prioritized research aimed at understanding who its clients are, what barriers they face, and how digital tools may or may not fit into their lives. Two major projects have shaped this understanding: the Achieving Digital Equity (ADE) project and the Criminal Law Clients with Complex Needs (CCCN) project. Together, these projects provide a powerful portrait of the diversity and complexity of LABC's client base.

The Achieving Digital Equity (ADE) Project

In 2020, shortly after wrapping up the evaluation of its flagship MyLawBC platform, LABC launched the ADE project to explore and quantify the barriers to digital access and engagement faced by clients and potential clients (i.e., British Columbians living with low incomes). Using a mixed-methods approach—including household surveys, client interviews, and conversations with frontline workers—the researchers, led by Kate M. Murray, sought to answer two interrelated questions: 1) What prevents people from accessing or using digital legal resources? 2) How can legal aid remain accessible to those left out by digital delivery?[9]

The researchers found that digital exclusion was widespread among the low-income households from which LABC clients come. The survey data suggests that 44% of British Columbians in lower income households face at least one barrier to internet use.[10] This number rises to 53% in very low-income households. Among respondents, the most common barrier to using the internet was a simple lack of access, whether because of unreliable internet coverage, the inability to afford internet, or a lack of devices. The second most common barrier to internet use was insufficient digital skills. The academic literature suggests that digital access and literacy is worst among groups who already face the largest systemic barriers to accessing justice: seniors, people with disabilities or mental health issues, gender diverse people, new immigrants, refugees, and BIPOC people.[11] In interviews with clients and frontline workers, researchers also heard that stress, trauma, and mental health challenges—which are extremely common amongst people with legal issues—significantly limited clients' capacity to seek legal

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[8] Kate M. Murray, "Digital Equity in Access to Justice: Literature Review - Summary Report." *Legal Aid BC,* May 2021. https://legalaid.bc.ca/sites/default/files/2021-11/Murray-2021-LABC-ADE-Literature-Review-Summary-Report.pdf; Riikka Koulu and Frida Alizadeh Westerling, "Rethinking access to justice through digitalization: User experiences of public digital legal aid services" (paper submitted to the *International Legal Aid Group Conference,* Harvard, USA, 2023).

[9] Kate M. Murray, "Achieving Digital Equity in Access to Justice." *Legal Aid BC*, October 2021. https://legalaid.bc.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Murray_2021_LABC_Achieving_Digital_Equity_Final_Report_0.pdf.

[10] Kate M. Murray, "Achieving Digital Equity."

[11] Kate M. Murray, "Digital Equity: Literature Review"

help online. In terms of what helps, the researchers heard that digital legal resources are often most useful when delivered in conjunction with one-to-one assistance from an empathetic and knowledgeable person, such as a community worker or legal aid navigator.

These findings have substantial implications for LABC as it continues along the path of digital transformation. They affirm that while some clients prefer digital options, client-facing digital tools must not replace one-to-one human connection, whether in person or over the phone. They suggest that digital and non-digital options for clients should be viewed as both/and instead of either/or.

The Criminal Law Clients with Complex Needs (CCCN) Project

Where the ADE project helped LABC understand a broad client base and its relationship to digital tools, the CCCN project zoomed in on a specific and often underserved client population: individuals with overlapping legal, social, and health challenges. Conducted in 2023, this year-long, mixed-method research project aimed to identify how LABC could achieve better outcomes for criminal law clients whose circumstances—such as homelessness, mental illness, addiction, and systemic discrimination—create complex and often unmet needs.

To build a multi-layered understanding of this group, researchers used a range of data sources. They analyzed the files of the 50 individuals who were the most frequent users of LABC's criminal legal services.[12] They surveyed 226 criminal defence lawyers who take legal aid contracts and conducted interviews and focus groups with professionals working closely with clients with complex needs, including outreach workers and LABC intake staff. Crucially, the project also incorporated the voices of people with lived experience, conducting low-barrier, trauma-informed interviews with 11 clients who had received criminal legal aid services.

The findings painted a picture of clients navigating extraordinary challenges, often with limited support. Among the 50 most frequent users of criminal law services, a significant proportion (40%) were unhoused at the time of applying for legal aid.[13] Most (66%) had not completed high school, and many had experienced significant trauma, including childhood abuse, early involvement with the child protection system, loss of stable housing, and incarceration. Mental health challenges were common, often affecting clients' ability to communicate, self-regulate emotionally, and process information. Most of these individuals (80%) were incarcerated the last time they applied for legal aid, which significantly restricted their access to phones and internet.

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[12] Lia Frederiksen, "Holistic Representation: Enhancing Client-Centred Criminal Legal Aid in BC." *Legal Aid BC*, September 2024. https://legalaid.bc.ca/sites/default/files/2024-09/Enhancing-Client-Centred-Criminal-Legal-Aid-in-BC.pdf.

[13] Lia Fredericksen, "Client-Centred Criminal Legal Aid," p. 21.

One of the strongest themes to emerge across all participant groups was the need for more time and more personal connection. Lawyers reported that the time allotments provided under LABC's standard representation contracts were often insufficient to build trust, manage communication challenges, and support clients with complex needs effectively. Many felt that additional time would allow for stronger relationships and better outcomes. Clients, too, emphasized the importance of one-on-one time. What they wanted, above all, was a reliable person who could walk them through what to expect, help them understand the legal process, and support them in knowing where to go and what to do next.

The CCCN's suggestions for improving outcomes for clients with complex needs—better service integration, more continuity in the client-lawyer relationship, and more face-to-face time—are not technology-focused. Instead, they point toward a need for deeper connection, consistency, and human presence within the legal aid experience. Still, it is possible that carefully integrated technological tools could help enable these improvements. For example, a secure digital portal may help community workers and lawyers better coordinate their support of a shared client, reducing duplication and improving the integration of care. But any such tool would need to be carefully designed to support, not replace, the relational and trauma-informed aspects of service delivery that clients most valued.

III. IDEATING WITH CLIENTS—AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE—IN MIND

With a clearer understanding of its clients and the problems they experience, LABC has entered the Ideation stage of the HCD process and is now brainstorming digital innovations and modernizations that could better support clients, lawyers, and staff without reinforcing existing inequities. The following early-stage ideas offer a window into this brainstorming. Some of the ideas are small, targeted improvements; others are more ambitious, longer-term possibilities. All are inspired by the insights gathered through LABC's recent research and its commitment to inclusive, human-centred design.

AI Tools for Lawyers: Freeing Up Time for What Matters Most

One of the most persistent challenges identified through the CCCN project was the gap between what lawyers want to offer and what they're funded to provide.[14] Lawyers repeatedly expressed a desire for more time with clients whose life circumstances complicate their experience of the legal process. Similarly, clients said they valued one-on-one time with someone who could help them navigate the legal system. However, there is only so much time available within the representation contracts that LABC is funded to provide.

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[14] Lia Frederiksen, "Holistic Representation: Enhancing Client-Centred Criminal Legal Aid in BC." *Legal Aid BC*, September 2024. https://legalaid.bc.ca/sites/default/files/2024-09/Enhancing-Client-Centred-Criminal-Legal-Aid-in-BC.pdf.

One potential solution to this problem lies in the strategic use of AI tools for lawyer-facing tasks. Specifically, LABC is exploring the idea of offering lawyers a proprietary, closed-domain AI tool to assist them with the time-consuming work of document analysis, such as reviewing large volumes of disclosure materials. This kind of AI-powered tool is already being used by some legal service organizations. For example, the California Innocence Project is now using CoCounsel, a generative AI tool developed by Thomson Reuters, to dramatically accelerate its review and analysis of case files, an essential and extremely labour-intensive part of deciding which cases to pursue.[15] The current understanding is that AI can perform document review tasks with the accuracy and thoroughness of a junior associate, but in a fraction of the time.[16] By reducing the time spent on document review, such a tool could allow legal aid lawyers to redirect their limited hours toward relationship-building, communication, and advocacy—areas where human connection is irreplaceable. Importantly, this kind of innovation wouldn't require any additional technological access or literacy from clients, which means it could offer meaningful benefits without deepening the digital divide.

Client-Lawyer Matching: Using Technology to Expedite the Process

Some LABC clients have expressed frustration with how long they waited to be connected with a lawyer after being approved for legal aid. Especially in family cases, it can take two weeks or more for LABC staff to find clients a lawyer who is willing to take their case. Wait times are longest for clients in smaller communities where there are fewer, if any, legal aid lawyers available. This waiting game can compound the stress that clients are already experiencing. For many, especially those facing urgent legal proceedings, delays can deepen their sense of powerlessness.

With an eye to improving this part of the client experience, LABC is exploring the option of adopting a tool like Justice Connect's Pro Bono Portal, a digital platform designed to efficiently connect lawyers with people who have unmet legal needs. The portal uses an algorithm to match requests for service to appropriate and available service providers and automatically offers these lawyers the case. Lawyers accept or decline offers through the portal, and intake

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[15] Kristin Sonday, "AI for Legal Aid: How to supercharge legal services organizations," Thomson Reuters. October 2, 2024. https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/legal/ai-legal-aid-service-organizations/; Bob Ambrogi, "At the Inaugural AI for Legal Aid Summit, A Call to Arms for Adopting AI to Tackle the Justice Gap," LawSites. January 17, 2025. https://www.lawnext.com/2025/01/at-the-inaugural-ai-for-legal-aid-summit-a-call-to-arms-for-adopting-ai-to-tackle-the-justice-gap.html; Matt Reynolds, "California Innocence Project harnesses generative AI for work to free wrongfully convicted," ABA Journal. August 14, 2023. https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/california-innocence-project-harnesses-generative-ai-for-work-to-free-wrongfully-convicted

[16] Bob Ambrogi, "A Call to Arms."

workers allocate the case through the portal, streamlining communication and limiting the need for back-and-forth emails.

Though the tool was designed with pro bono lawyers in mind, it can be configured to suit different service delivery models.[17] Justice Connect is already engaged in adapting the portal to meet the requirements of different partners around the world. As with the integration of AI for lawyer-facing tasks, the portal would be staff- and lawyer-facing and would not require clients to access or use any new digital technology.,

Rethinking Intake: Offering New Digital Paths Without Closing Old Ones

Intake is a client's first point of contact with LABC. For those navigating fear, trauma, or unfamiliarity with legal systems, this first interaction is critical—it can build trust or compound confusion. Intake is also one of the most resource-intensive parts of LABC's operations. LABC is looking at ways to improve the client experience of intake without increasing the resources required or overburdening intake staff.

As mentioned previously, clients—and lawyers and service providers on their behalf—are now able to apply for legal aid online. This option is gaining some traction: at the time of writing, 24% of the applications that LABC receives are submitted online. However, online applications are in the form of a fillable PDF, so, for clients who are deemed eligible for legal aid, the intake worker must still spend time copying the information from the PDF fields into the CRM system. To address this, LABC is already in the process of designing a digital application portal that is integrated with the CRM system, removing the need for this intermediate step and improving the digital interface for applicants.

LABC is also exploring the option of implementing an AI-powered application as a decision support tool for intake workers. LABC's intake policy is long and complex, filled with exceptions and with room for discretion. While this flexibility reflects the wide range of client situations, it creates a practical challenge for intake workers, who must interpret countless rules when evaluating an application. Intake also has a high rate of staff turnover, and it takes considerable time and training to get new staff up to speed. Closed-domain, generative AI, which excels at finding and surfacing relevant information in a user-friendly way,[18] could help intake staff more easily navigate the intake policies manual. Instead of needing to CTRL+F their way through the lengthy document, staff could type a question about a specific client or situation into the tool and receive tailored guidance. Housing Court Answers, a tenants' rights organization in New York City, has recently developed and launched this kind of application to assist its staff in

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[17] "Global Pro Bono Portal," Justice Connect.
　　https://probonoportal.org/?_ga=2.39390883.1847629179.1744665827-2013775605.1744665827
[18] Kristin Sonday, "AI for Legal Aid."

providing guidance to tenants facing eviction. So far, the project is considered a success.[19] A similar tool at LABC could increase the speed and consistency of intake decisions—especially in situations where multiple rules, exceptions, or funding criteria intersect—while preserving the human connection that many LABC clients value and need.

Finally, inspired by the recent work of innovators Quinten Steenhuis and Hannes Westermann in partnership with Missouri Legal Services,[20] LABC is curious about the possibility of offering potential applicants an AI-powered chatbot for self-screening. This kind of chatbot, which could be embedded into LABC's website, could ask applicants closed- and open-ended questions and, based on the information they provided, offer a prediction of whether they are likely, unlikely, or borderline likely to qualify for LABC's services. Missouri Legal Services found that its chatbot, MOLS, predicted whether clients would be accepted or rejected for its Tenant Help Project with 84% accuracy.[21] Notably, the MOLS chatbot rarely made incorrect predictions of rejection, erring instead on the side of caution. This is crucial for avoiding the risk of discouraging eligible applicants. Importantly, LABC's proposed chatbot would be optional and would not replace intake workers. It could be a helpful tool for digitally literate applicants without excluding those who are not.

These early-stage ideas illustrate how LABC is working to ensure that its digital transformation is guided by the experiences and needs of the people it serves. Even the innovations that would improve LABC's administrative efficiency—such as the client-lawyer matching portal or the AI-powered intake support tool—would benefit clients and would be designed with their needs and constraints in mind. All proposed tools are mindful of the digital divide and none would exacerbate exclusion. By keeping clients at the centre of its innovation efforts, LABC is ensuring that digital transformation not only enhances efficiency but also supports its mission: to strengthen client-centred legal help for British Columbians experiencing barriers accessing the legal system.

CONCLUSION

LABC's approach to digital transformation offers one model of how a legal service organization can embrace technology without losing sight of the people at the heart of its mission. By grounding its efforts in human-centred design, LABC is working to ensure that the tools it pursues are experienced as meaningful improvements by the people who interact with them. The organization's early-stage ideas—from AI tools for lawyers to real-time decision supports for

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[19] Kristin Sonday, "AI for Legal Aid."

[20] See: "Can LLMs help streamline legal aid intake?" Justice Innovation: Standford Legal Design Lab. April 9, 2025. https://justiceinnovation.law.stanford.edu/can-llms-help-streamline-legal-aid-intake/

[21] "LLMs legal aid intake," Justice Innovation.

intake staff—reflect a commitment to innovation that honours the complexity of clients' lives. As this work continues to evolve, LABC's experience underscores a critical lesson for the broader access to justice movement: digital innovation must begin not with the question "What can technology do?" but with "What do people need?".

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