



Legal Geek: The Innovation Crowd's Changing Priorities in 2023

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Legal IT Insider's editor Caroline Hill speaks to some of the biggest names in the industry about how the innovation agenda is changing

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Legal Geek last week packed a punch in terms of the number of people it draws together and the sheer amount of energy and fun it brings to the table. What is interesting is that for the innovation cool kids, the conference is no longer primarily about finding new technology. It's about exchanging ideas and support in light of the fact that creating real change in a law firm or corporate legal team is harder than anyone thought.

The first Legal Geek conference took place in 2016, which, for a bit of context was just one year after Nixon Peabody's CEO and managing partner Andrew ... claimed in Forbes to be the first law firm to create a chief innovation officer role. From the University of Miami's school of law, Michele DeStefano's 2019 research paper on [The Law Firm Chief Innovation Officer: Goals, Roles, and Holes](#) is an interesting recap of the evolution of 'innovation' roles in law firms. The first one she became aware of was in 2015.

Speaking to me at the conference last week, Lucy Shurwood, a partner in Simmons & Simmons innovation arm Wavelength, who very recently joined from Pinsent Masons, where she headed the Advanced Delivery Team, said: "I used to come to Legal Geek to find out about technology and look at what vendors are doing and while I still do that, I come here to network with my peers and get ideas. It used to be more about technology, and now it's about ideas."

Tanja Podinic, formerly global director of innovation programs at Dentons, who in September joined PwC as global legal business solutions lead for generative AI, echoes that sentiment, commenting: "People are consistently looking at how to create more efficiency and how to solve client problems and what the market throws at us is what we have to work with. I don't come to Legal Geek to find out about new technology, I come to connect with thought leaders in the industry and to see what they are doing and understand where they are with it."

The first Legal Geek conference coincided with the explosion of interest in AI (sound familiar?) and focused on legal tech startups such as Kira Systems, RAVN and Levertton. Scroll forward a few years and a pandemic later, and Shurwood says: "In a lot of respects, the technology has plateaued. We had a big upwards surge with the likes of Kira but now that most of the easy stuff has been done and we're onto the next stages. It's less about pure technology now and more about collaboration and what we do to start turbo charging change."

Former Barclays Eagle Lab lawtech director Chris Grant, who is now head of legal market engagement at HSBC, agrees that the innovation community has matured, commenting: "We have become more serious about what we want to do, before we were just playing the game. We were excited about exploring what we could do but now there is more education across the industry so we can make better-informed decisions. We know we have a community that we can rely on."

He adds: "We are always challenged in terms of making a change, whether that be because of the structure that we have to fit to or the money we don't have. We need to make business decisions smarter and faster and with a tight business case and if I'm able to bounce ideas off others in terms of the problems to be

solved and approaches that people are taking, that's a wealth of knowledge that we haven't seen before."

The legal sector has always been quite unusual in terms of how much the community supports one another. I asked April Brousseau, director of research and development at Clifford Chance how her priorities for the conference differed to say, three years ago. "Three years ago, I didn't know what I was looking for I just knew that the cool kids were here. The cool kids are still here but now I come here to hear what everyone else is doing because it's a collaboration. I come here to be lifted up, and you can always guarantee to be lifted up," she says.

The joy of being together at the conference is all the more so given the well-documented struggles to effect change. Shurwood says: "It has been harder than any of us thought it would be to get technology into the heart of what law firms do." She adds: "That's why I love Legal Geek, because every year we can get together with a community of people who are committed to change."

Podinic's new role says everything about what the industry is interested in, and it's all around generative AI. But rather than repeating the collective AI hysteria of 2016, Shurwood says: "There is an element of anticipation, but no one quite knows how it will work and when we will really see things roll out across the industry. I suspect we will still have the same adoption problems: it may be the most amazing technology but there are still lawyers who don't use Teams, so gen AI will be a whirlwind for them."

It is worth reflecting back again to the first Legal Geek conference, where Nick West, chief strategy officer at Mishcon, said on stage that the future success of AI would depend on the culture of law firms changing. That they would have to become open to risk, and to failure.

That has arguably never been truer. What is reassuring is that for the innovation crowd, this is not their first rodeo. New technology still features high on the list of priorities, but knowledge sharing is key, and they now have an army of people to compare notes with.

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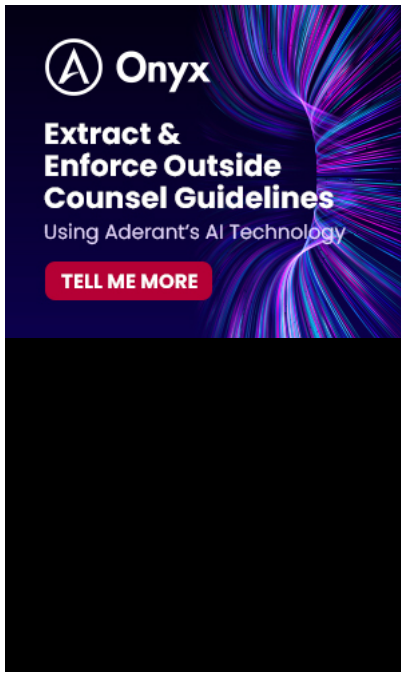
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