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Spurring digital transformation in Singapore's legal industry

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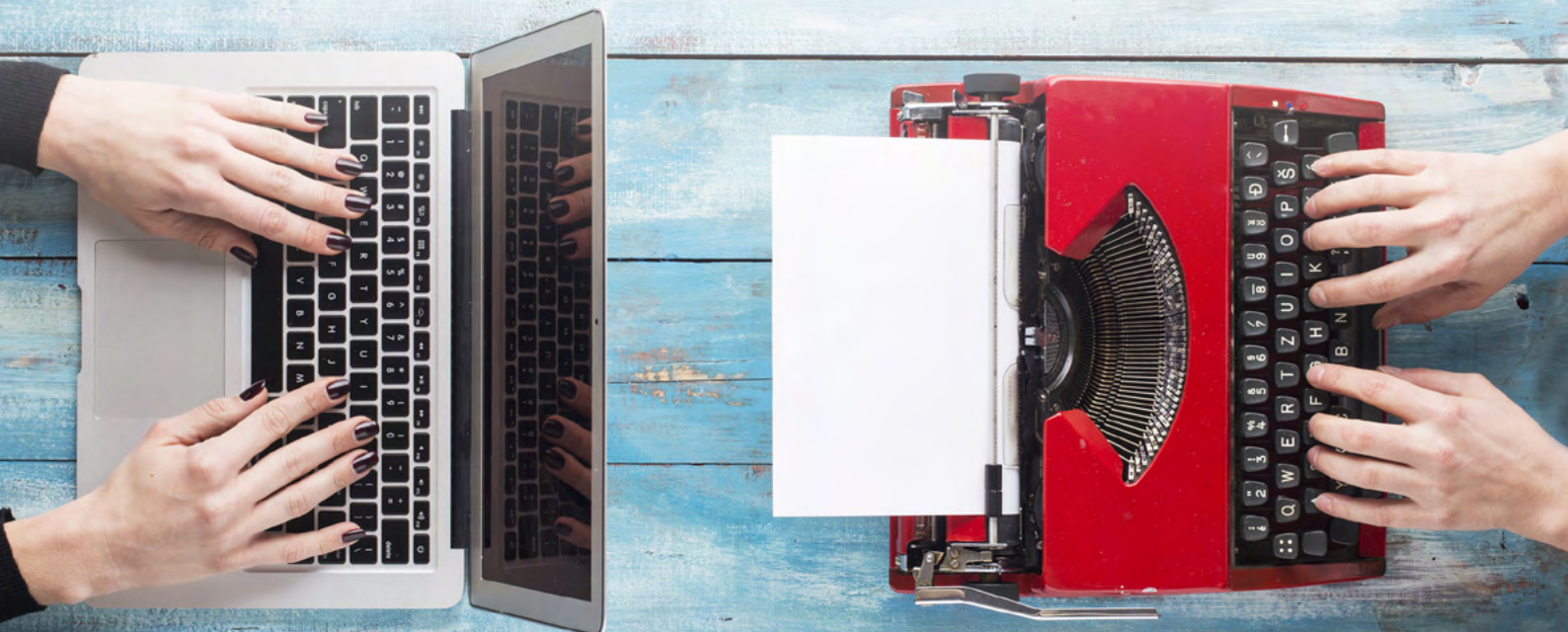
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Advancing together

RULE OF LAW UPDATES AND PERSPECTIVES





Spurring digital transformation in Singapore's legal industry



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companies all over the world claim they have accelerated the digitalisation of their customer and supply-chain interactions, as well as their internal operations, by three to four years. They also said they thought the share of digital or digitally enabled products in their portfolios has advanced by seven years.

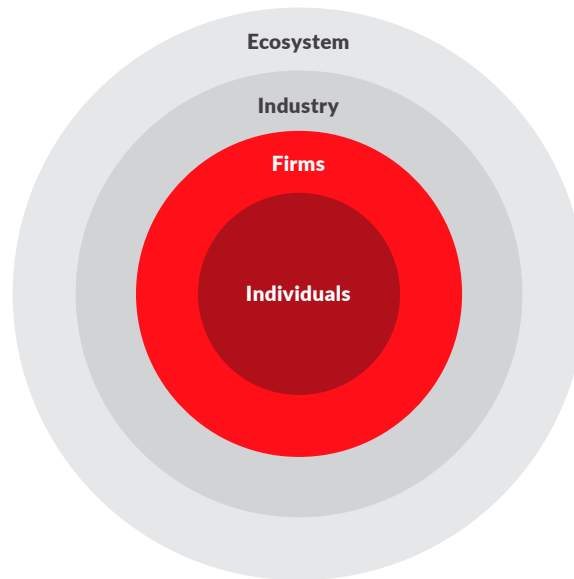
While technology transformation is not new to the legal profession, COVID-19 has cemented the importance of technology and further mainstreamed its use in the delivery of legal services. Many lawyers now access and work on their case files from home through virtual workspaces. It has become de rigueur for court and arbitration hearings, as well as mediation sessions, to be conducted in either a fully virtual or hybrid manner.

Even as we look forward to moving away from the spectre of COVID-19, the changes it has wrought in legal technology transformation are here to stay. The question is: how can lawyers, law firms, legal industry and the broader legal ecosystem be prepared for, and benefit from, these changes?

COVID-19 has transformed the way we live and work. It has caused the processes and operations of businesses and organisations to be restructured, as well as transformed business models. A 2020 McKinsey Global survey¹ reported that

¹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/how-covid-19-has-pushed-companies-over-the-technology-tipping-point-and-transformed-business-forever>

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Developing technologically savvy lawyers

Gone are the days when mastery of law was the sole expectation a client had of his or her lawyer.

The law increasingly intersects with myriad domains, some of which, like cryptocurrency and autonomous systems, can be nascent and complex. Other growing areas such as AI applications, sustainability and family offices require understanding across a broad spectrum of disciplines. As such, there is growing recognition that lawyers need an appreciation of contemporary issues and skills beyond the hard letter law.

Further, as information and transactions are moving a lot faster than before – a good example being digital banking and e-payments – clients now expect the same quality work from their lawyers, but within a much shorter turnaround time as well as at a lower price. The only way lawyers can respond to these new types of expectations is by making substantial improvement in the productivity of how they go about their work. One part of the solution is clear – lawyers need to adopt technology to work more productively in order to do more within the constraints of a given amount of time and resources.

Making such changes is by no means simple, and we need to start early by ensuring that future lawyers – the law students today – are acquainted with using legal technology, so that they are ready to embrace a technologically integrated practice environment. To that end, the law schools in Singapore regularly fine-tune their curricula to ensure that law graduates are equipped with future-ready skills and competencies. Such efforts, which take into consideration regular input from legal practitioners and law firms, and significant reviews such as the recommendations of the Committee for the Professional Training for Lawyers in 2018, ensure that the legal education in

Singapore is responsive to the needs of the changing business environment. Prospective lawyers are also encouraged to gain exposure, not only through formal education, to complementary areas such as computing, and to build up their Technology Quotient, i.e. their ability to adapt and integrate technology in the context of their work.

Growing digitally enabled law firms

The technology area of artificial intelligence, and specifically machine learning, is evolving very rapidly. But organisational and institutional processes have their own rate of change as these are complex combinations of people, process and technology. Hence, the speed at which an individual organisation and an entire industry can adopt and assimilate these technologies moves at a slower and more gradual pace. There is a real need and sense of urgency to start making these changes now, and it is timely to 'learn-by-doing' and gradually assimilate these new capabilities.

In recognition of this, and to spur change, the Singapore Ministry of Law (MinLaw) rolled out two funding programmes – Tech Start for Law in 2017 and Tech-celerate for Law in 2019 – to support Singapore law firms in their digital transformation journeys. A total of S\$6.5m was allocated to these two programmes which saw more than 400 successful applications.

But funding is only one part of the story. Another key aspect in the digital transformation journey of a law firm is the knowledge of technology and innovation, and the ability to put theory into practice. To enable this, the Law Society of Singapore has launched 'Raising the Bar', a four-month acceleration programme customised to equip small and medium Singapore law firms with the relevant knowledge, skills and tools to address their pain points and identify focus areas to accelerate their business journey including

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technology, strategy, branding, digital marketing and more. Through this programme, law firms will receive advice from industry experts and pilot at least one digital solution or business transformation initiative.

Further recognising that law firms in Singapore, especially small and medium law firms, did not have sufficient scale and IT expertise to customise digital solutions to suit their legal workflow and processes, MinLaw saw the need to explore new ways of supporting the industry in adopting more technology. This was the impetus for MinLaw to develop the Legal Technology Platform (LTP), in collaboration with its platform technology partner, Lupl.

The LTP, which will be launched in the first quarter of 2022, is a matters management tool designed around legal workflows and integrated with commonly used legal technology solutions such as practice and document management systems. It will progressively be connected with digital systems of local public agencies that lawyers commonly interact with, such as LawNet and e-Litigation. The LTP will be the single platform that can meet most, if not all, of a lawyer's technology needs for matters management and enable them to work anytime, anywhere from their laptops and mobile devices.

Catalysing transformation together as an industry

While individual lawyers and firms have their roles to play in building competencies and investing in technology, the legal industry – both the public and private sectors – will also need to come together to catalyse change and innovation.

But this would not be without roadblocks, the first being the need for the public and private sectors to achieve alignment in terms of their vision for the legal industry and how to get there. For example, while governments would push for technology solutions to be more affordable and customised to users' needs, solution providers would focus on ensuring commercial viability in the long run.

Such roadblocks are not insurmountable and addressing them will require a significant amount of coordination and concerted effort among the industry stakeholders – the law firms, in-house legal departments, legal technology solution providers, law schools and other government bodies.

This is why when MinLaw embarked on developing the Legal Industry Technology and Innovation Roadmap (TIR), it involved over 90 industry stakeholders and took close to one year to complete. Launched in 2020, the TIR is a sector-wide plan to promote innovation, technology adoption and development in Singapore's legal industry over the course of this decade until 2030. It also articulates Singapore's vision to be a global legaltech hub and its future plans to attract leading global law firms and legaltech firms to establish operations in Singapore.

Building on the TIR, MinLaw is working with the Singapore Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) and industry partners to develop the Legal Industry Digital Plan (IDP) which will be launched alongside the LTP. The IDP will be an extensive resource guide for law firms in Singapore to assess their digital readiness and identify digital solutions to adopt at each stage of their growth.

Driving transformation as an ecosystem

The legal industry is part of the broader legal ecosystem that comprises governments, regulators, courts, technology providers, law schools, research institutes and other entities as well.

These parts are all interconnected in fulfilling the legal needs of businesses and individuals, maintaining law and order, advancing access to justice and pushing the boundaries of technology and innovation.

Technology transformation is a collective effort and requires all these parts of the legal ecosystem to act in concert – to recognise the need for change, adopt a positive mindset, start or continue learning-by-doing efforts, and finally bring about the transformation.