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Nicole Black: From the Defender's Office to Legal Technology Evangelist

Black is among the leaders in educating lawyers about technology's role in modern law.

Monica Bay, Law Technology News

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There's a shortage of women in science, technology, engineering and math. And there's still a 17 percent gender gap in pay—across the board—in all of legal (and 18 percent at Big Law). But within the legal technology community, there are many women with thriving careers. In her effort to inspire girls and women (and men) everywhere, Monica Bay recently interviewed [Nicole "Niki" Black](#), 46, based in Rochester, N.Y. Black [describes herself](#) as a lawyer, author, speaker and analyst; she is the legal technology evangelist at MyCase, which offers law practice management software.

Education: University of Rochester, B.A., 1992; Albany Law School, J.D., 1995. Admitted to the New York bar, 1996.

At any point in your education did you consider a career in science, technology, engineering or math? In middle school I considered becoming a veterinarian, but it didn't take me long to figure out that math and science weren't my favorite subjects. I abandoned that idea and began to think about becoming a lawyer.

First paid job: I taught tennis for the local Parks and Recreation summer program when I was 15.

Current job: Joining [MyCase](#) when it was just a small startup—with a few hundred customers—and working on a team through an acquisition and an IPO (initial public offering) certainly isn't where I thought my career path would lead when I started law school. But I wouldn't change it for the world. I've been with the company for four-plus years. I provide input on product development and marketing and also educate lawyers about the intersection of law and technology. I speak at conferences and write articles and books for various outlets, with the goal to help lawyers understand how to use the latest technologies to run their law practices effectively and efficiently.

What was your "first seat at the table"? When I was interning for the Monroe County Public Defender's Office after I graduated from law school, I was in charge of an appeal. I drafted the

appellate brief, argued the appeal and won—reversing a murder conviction. That accomplishment made me realize the power—and value—of my degree and helped me understand that I could use my skills to make a difference in people's lives.

First obstacle and how you overcame it: When I graduated from law school in 1995 I moved to Rochester because I wanted to work for the Monroe County Public Defender's Office. They weren't able to offer me a position at that time but gave me the option to volunteer 20 hours per week in the Appeals Department. So I was a waitress at the Olive Garden to make ends meet and interned at the P.D.'s Office for nearly a year. I was hired at the office in June 1996, working in town courts as an assistant public defender.

Most flagrant sexism you encountered and how did you address it? After almost four years with the P.D., I became an associate at a litigation firm. About three years into my tenure at the firm—when I was eight months pregnant—a partner asked me to appear at a New York Supreme Court pre-trial conference in an outlying county. After the conference ended, as the judge, two male lawyers and I were walking out of the judge's chambers, the judge turned to me and asked how long my maternity leave would be. I told him it would be three months. He then said, "I know the managing partner at your firm. That maternity leave is certainly going to be inconvenient for the firm."

I looked at him, smiled and said, sarcastically, "Oh, I doubt it. It's not as if I do much around there, anyway. Surely they won't even miss me!" Then I smiled at the other lawyers and walked out the door. It cut to the heart of his sexist comment: My firm was granting me a long maternity leave because I was important to the firm. I was an attorney who provided value, not a pregnant woman who was a burden, as he implied.

Recent accomplishment: Our parent company, AppFolio, had its IPO in 2015. I was among the 20 employees (out of 650+) who were flown to New York City to be at NASDAQ when we went public—and when our CTO, John Walker, rang the NASDAQ bell. It was an incredible experience and not something I'd ever envisioned being part of my career path.

Secret to your success: Tenacity. I've always ignored the naysayers. I never give up and always believe in myself.

Work tips re: "managing up:" Be receptive to, and learn from, the feedback from supervisors. Presumably they've been doing this longer than you and have more expertise and experience than you do. Try to understand the issues they're facing. Don't assume that actions they take that relate to you are a reflection of you or of their perception of your work. Instead, they may have everything to do with pressures they're facing and goals they're trying to meet.

Most important mentor: At the beginning of my career, it was [Edward "Ed" Menkin](#), a criminal defense attorney based in Syracuse. He is a good friend of my parents and was instrumental in encouraging me to become a lawyer. He exposed me to the courtroom and other legal experiences when I was in college. Those experiences convinced me that law school was the right career path for me.

Dress codes: Dress appropriately for the situation, but wear clothes that you feel comfortable in. Don't try to be someone you're not, but make sure to maintain your professionalism.

At the podium: Most recent: Nov. 12, 2016: "Top Tech Tools For Lawyers," Mississippi Bankruptcy Law Conference, Jackson, Mississippi. October 28, 2016: "Cybersecurity and Cloud Computing: Don't Believe the Hype," Above the Law Academy for Private Practice, Philadelphia.

Advice for young women: Your career will likely be circuitous—you probably won't end up where you thought you would. That's not a bad thing, so don't be hard on yourself if you veer off your intended career path. Keep Dr. Seuss' book, "[Oh the Places You'll Go](#)," close at hand and re-read it when your path seems unclear. If you follow your instincts, you'll end up right where you're supposed to be.

Balancing tips: Choose your life partner wisely. Support from that person, or lack thereof, can make all the difference. Take care of yourself and always put yourself first. No one can do it all. As long as you do the best that you can under the circumstances, it'll be good enough.

Five favorite technology tools: [Apple Watch](#); [Wacom Bamboo tablet](#) (instead of a mouse); [Amazon Echo](#); [Aidata portable laptop stand](#) (because I travel frequently); and cloud computing (which allows me to work remotely and take my office with me wherever I go).

Book that inspired you: "[The World is Flat](#)" by Thomas Friedman. I read it in 2006, right after I started my blog, "[Sui Generis—A New York Law Blog](#)." The book helped shape my understanding of how technology and globalization were changing our world, which encouraged me write two books published by the American Bar Association: [Social Media for Lawyers: The Next Frontier](#) (co-author: Carolyn Elefant) and "[Cloud Computing for Lawyers](#)." I am now reading "[The Second Machine Age](#)," on how technology, including artificial intelligence, is affecting the workplace.

Favorite charities: Immediately after the 2016 elections I set up recurring donations to charities that protect constitutional rights: American Civil Liberties Union ([ACLU](#)), [NAACP Legal Defense Fund](#), [Planned Parenthood](#), [Center for Reproductive Rights](#), and [Anti-Defamation League](#).

Favorite vacation venue: New York City. I travel there often for work and with my family. Great food, culture, and people—and there's always something new to discover. What more could you ask for?

Your mantra: Make choices that increase your options rather than limit them.

Favorite quote: "Well-behaved women rarely make history." —*Laurel Thatcher Ulrich*

Compiled by Monica Bay, a Fellow at CodeX: The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics and a freelance journalist.

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