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Preparing Lawyers to be Practice-Ready in a Tech-Driven World

With a new emphasis on legal innovation, law schools are using experiential learning and technology tools to meet the future needs of law firms and legal departments.

Gabrielle Orum Hernández, Law Technology News

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Getting law students practice-ready by graduation has always been a challenge for law schools, but many schools have begun to look beyond traditional legal training to enable students to compete in an increasingly tech-driven legal market.

Philip Weiser, professor of law at University of Colorado Law School, heads the school's Silicon Flatirons Center for Law, Technology, and Entrepreneurship. He says he thinks that changing law student mindsets to consider the technology needs of future clients, rather than future employers, could give them a leg up after graduation.

"Part of the issue is that we need to train lawyers to think like clients, not to think like lawyers. If lawyers aren't familiar with how to analyze and present data or how to use technology to do things the way their clients do, whether it's Excel or PowerPoint, they're at a huge disadvantage," Weiser says.

Colorado, along with the University of Michigan Law School, has highlighted entrepreneurialism in their approach to legal technology training. The program Weiser leads connects students to local entrepreneurs and legal departments at technology companies for internships so students can "start to see their roles as problem-solvers and as collaborators" more than just knowledge aggregators.

"I think that corporate legal department experience is going to be 10 [times] more powerful in this direction than most law firms, because most law firms are not going to be at the cutting edge," Weiser says. He adds that Big Law tends to be "operating at the legacy mode."

Some law school programs have partnered with technology vendors to get students both technologically prepared for careers in law and thinking about ways they can use technology to boost efficiency and workflow in practice. Several legal technology companies have extended their

products to law schools, often for free, in hopes of helping the programs improve their efforts to train students.

Larry Bridgesmith, a professor of law at Vanderbilt University Law School, leads the school's program on Law & Innovation. This program offers hands-on courses in legal project management and design using technologies like artificial intelligence-based legal research platform ROSS Intelligence, legal virtual assistant tool Kim, and drag-and-drop programming platform Neota Logic. The companies behind all three companies donated their technologies to students.

The program Bridgesmith leads will host its first legal hackathon in April, an event he says "brings students together with practicing lawyers and technologists and system engineers all for the purpose of learning how to work with each other." Collaboration with technologists is a key skill for the next generation of attorneys, Bridgesmith says.

His goal in the hackathon is "not to make a lawyer an engineer or a developer, but to get used to working together to accomplish something."

Kevin Mulcahy, director of education for Neota Logic, teaches two courses at Georgetown University Law Center using the Neota Logic drag-and-drop coding platform. Like Bridgesmith, he thinks that asking attorneys to pull double duty as attorneys and programmers is a fairly unreasonable approach to new demands for technology literacy in the legal industry, but that working with technologists could produce some much-needed tools for the field.

"Traditional coding languages that have been around for dozens of decades now require too much dedication [to learn]. The knowledge expert is not going to be the same person as the programmer," he says.

But while attorneys may not need to be full-fledged coders, Mulcahy thinks that familiarizing attorneys with machine language is likely to spur innovation within law firms. He says attorneys "cannot rely on manual processes to be their exclusive way of making a living, they have to supplement that with power tools."

At Vanderbilt and Georgetown University Law Center, coursework connects law students with local nonprofit organizations and undergraduate student programmers to develop a tool that nonprofit groups can use to support their constituencies. The tool has been used to provide advice, conduct intake, prepare forms, as just a few examples of its applications.

"We're offering hands-on experiences," Bridgesmith says of Vanderbilt's experiential coursework, adding that the ABA's 2013 decision to tie accreditation to experiential learning is encouraging this practice across law school tech innovation programs.

On the business side, Mulcahy says corporate clients are beginning to look to attorneys at Big Law firms to create re-usable technology to help navigate litigation and legal concerns, not just static legal advice. "Corporate clients want tools, they don't want individual memos as much," he notes.

Mulcahy says attorneys, historically known for their reticence towards technology and the automation of the legal profession, are beginning to warm to the idea that software could be more a conduit of legal information than a threat to their jobs.

"They're starting to acknowledge that knowledge that comes through their software is their knowledge," he points out.

Meanwhile, e-discovery education, one of the areas with the highest demand for technology skills, still lacks a strong base in law school programs. But Suffolk Law School, Georgetown University Law Center, and Tulsa College of Law, among others, have adopted practical curriculum around e-discovery management in recent years.

While many of these initiatives are reaching students, others are getting a fairly traditional approach to legal technology learning. Jin Lee, a third-year law student at Emory University School of Law, has a first-year associate job waiting for her at a top law firm in Washington D.C. in the fall when she graduates. However, the technology that she was trained to use throughout law school and in her summer associateship with the firm doesn't look particularly different than it has in the last decade.

Lee spent most of her summer toggling primarily between LexisNexis and Westlaw researching relevant case law for ongoing litigation, a skill she's honed with the help of representatives from both companies stationed at Emory. While her firm does use computerized timekeeping and cloud-hosted document storage, she found these systems fairly self-explanatory.

Where Lee really sees a marked difference in technology at the firm is around data security. Throughout her summer associateship, the document management system Lee's firm employs requires a login through a private network and a separate secure system, making it time consuming and cumbersome to save and retrieve files.

Lee says that in her summer at the firm, more advanced data science and technology know-how seemed to be outsourced to the firm's team of librarians and IT professionals, leaving her to work on compiling the content knowledge. "They really encourage us to use them because we would take forever, and they know where to go," Lee says of the firm's legal support professionals.

Overall, Lee's sense is that the firm is looking to boost ease of use. "Basically, our firm wants to make sure we stay happy with the technology we have to use and we don't get frustrated with the software," she says. "When we're happy, we can be more efficient and bill hours as quickly as possible."

But while bigger firms like Lee's can still afford to employ large numbers of legal support professionals and are even hiring increasing numbers of data specialists and e-discovery staff, smaller firms may expect first-year attorneys to do the work of the support staff have traditionally assisted with, much of which today requires some level of technological fluency.

Colorado Law School's Weiser says that while many law schools hope to be forward looking, they rarely change traditional learning methods without a push from law firms and legal departments hiring their graduates. "The idea that law schools will change slowly is not a surprise to me," he says, adding that firms are likely to change with added pressure from hiring markets.

But with added pressure to innovate firm technology comes pressure to innovate law school technology training, and slowly but surely, law schools are adapting to the challenge. "We're at the beginning of a really radical change. For most law school leaders, that's a really new development,"

he says.

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