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The Trailblazers: Advice, Insight and Wisdom From Women Leaders in Corporate Legal Tech

Five women corporate legal professionals in the technology industry share their thoughts on the gender gap, memorable career challenges and more.

Rhys Dipshan, Law Technology News

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From in-house counsel to information governance specialists and legal executives, women corporate legal professionals are directing and leading efforts at some of the largest and most impactful technology companies around the country.

But far too often, these professionals are the exception rather than the norm. The corporate legal tech sector, after all, remains largely underrepresented by women practitioners.

This gender imbalance is not one that is easily explained or solved. But one thing is certain—the current efforts of women legal technology professionals are paving the way for future generations to continue chipping away at gender barriers and make even more progress toward a fully representative and diverse corporate world.

For International Women's Day, Legaltech News interviewed five women trailblazers to discuss challenges they faced over their distinguished careers, their advice to future generations, and their thoughts how to promote a more gender-balanced legal tech environment.

What challenges have you had to overcome over your career?

Lucy Bassli, assistant general counsel, legal operations and contracting, Microsoft:

My favorite challenge was my first experience in a third-party mediation, where I was in front of a judge with two other attorneys representing two other parties, and both of the other attorneys were very seasoned and experienced. I had taken the place of the partner of the commercial bankruptcy firm I was with, and I was less than a year out of law school.

When I walked in, the other attorney asked where the partner is, and I said, "Well, he's not able to make it." And [the other attorney] looked at me and said, "Are you stepping in?" And I said, "Yes I am," and basically he smirked and laughed out loud.

So that was my first welcome into being a young female associate in that world. And then nine hours later, after we spent the entire day in the negotiation and both of the other parties were thoroughly exhausted and frustrated, I called the partner to report back. And he said, "Well, it sounds like you pissed them off, which means you did something right."

Lisa Hawke, director of policy and compliance, Everlaw, and former ethics and compliance officer, BP:

Breaking into tech from the energy industry as a nonengineer was a challenge. Also, since I came from a legal and compliance background and a large part of my job at Everlaw is our privacy and security program, I had to become skilled in those areas.

Focusing on areas where your experience and skills are transferable is important to overcoming the challenge of breaking into a new industry, as is being willing to take the initiative to learn if you have a skills gap (and actually doing it). I've spent a lot of time with Everlaw's engineering team, learning from external subject matter experts, and taking classes to bridge the gap.

What advice do you have for women looking to start corporate legal technology careers?

Elizabeth O'Callahan, vice president of legal, NetApp:

First, we need you. The industry cannot reach its full potential without diverse viewpoints and experience. Second, working as in-house corporate counsel is an incredibly rich and rewarding experience because you are a part of a team working together in aid of a larger purpose. Third, working in-house also provides more opportunities to work in other areas of law, which makes my practice fun, dynamic and challenging.

Linda Hovanec, senior director of product management, Wolters Kluwer ELM Solutions:

I would encourage everyone to understand the role that technology can play in providing data and insights. More than ever, corporate legal departments are being asked to act as strategic business partners in their organizations. Technology today can help by providing greater insights that lead to better decision-making in support of both business and legal goals.

Linda Sharp, associate general counsel, ZL Technologies:

Be a sponge. Learn all that you can and listen to the issues of the day. Talk to those that can impart knowledge regardless of gender and plan for the future. As we look at the technology world, we need to plan for the future, that next new idea, that new trend. Identify a path and plan of attack.

Bassli

I'd say don't let the legal services culture change you. You, young female attorney entering the legal profession, stick to what you see is the right course, try new things, be creative and don't shy away from innovation. Don't shy away when told that's how things have always been done.

Question things and find the one or two believers in your company or firm or department, or wherever it is you are going to land, who can actually support and champion your ideas and your creativity.

How can the gender imbalance in legal technology be solved?

Sharp

This is a tough question, with many facets. I believe it starts in early education. Studies have demonstrated a gender bias in elementary school teachers, which leads to girls being discouraged from pursuing math and science interests from an early age. This is only one aspect though.

With so many talented non-U.S. citizens coming to the U.S. for tech opportunities, this is another area to focus on in closing the gender gap. Although hard statistics on this issue are unavailable, the gender gap in H-1B visas is widely reported on, and if you walk the streets of Silicon Valley it becomes quickly evident. Until we address these underlying issues in education and immigration, this vicious cycle is not likely to change in the near future.

O'Callahan

My mantra on this topic—in legal tech and tech in general—is "inform, reform, perform."

Inform: Young women lawyers need to know that technology can be a great industry for them, and this requires education, outreach and partnerships between education and industry.

Reform: Our education system, workplaces, media and entertainment need to confront implicit bias in order to eradicate it.

Perform: Universities, law firms and corporations should be measured on their ability to recruit, retain and promote women, and success and failure should be reflected in the compensation of the leaders of those institutions; unless we properly incentivize behavior, it won't change.

Hovanec

I've actually been doing a lot of research over the last year on diversity in our industry and found that the experiences of women professionals in legal and technology are very similar. When organizations recognize that diversity of thinking, different opinions and experiences, actually lead to more creative problem-solving, they work to remove the barriers and the imbalance. Success starts from the top down.

I recently spoke with the diversity manager at an Am Law 100 law firm who shared that the managing director of the firm made diversity one of the five pillars of that law firm's growth strategy. That drove successful mentorship programs and other diversity initiatives that have delivered results. They now have a more diverse group of attorneys and more clients who recognize the value in their diversity.

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