The legal sector needs automation: Interview with the Avvoka team

The Victorian corridors of the Royal Courts of Justice don't exactly feel like a home for tech and innovation but, by embracing automation, the legal sector could free up a lot of time and money. A new generation of lawyers, legal tech entrepreneurs and COVID-19 converts are spearheading this move to increased efficiency.

Avvoka is an end-to-end document automation tool, which allows legal documents to be created, negotiated, signed and analysed more efficiently. "Instead of getting a word document and messing around with all the terms in it, you can answer a set of questions that will generate that document for you."

Maddyness spoke to David Howorth, Codirector, and Giles Thompson, Head of Growth, at Avvoka about transitioning from the law to legal tech, convincing people to take the automation leap, and sealing deals with clients from HSBC to McDonald's.

[Maddyness] You're both former

lawyers. What inspired you to go into the law in the first place, and then what brought you to the legal tech space?

[David] That's something I've not actually thought about for a long time – why I went into the law in the first place! I really liked problem-solving… at school I didn't want to become a scientist; I had a failed dream as a sportsman; but one thing I really enjoyed was puzzles. Law stood out as something that would give me the opportunity to do that – how can you solve a case in a creative way? How can you look at the facts and then apply some logic to it?

And then in terms of what made us make that leap, both myself and Elliot have very similar back stories. We both did law at university and joined very similar firms – I joined Linklaters; he joined Slaughter and May.

It wasn't that we didn't like what we were doing – we both enjoyed the day to day and it was an interesting job to be in – but we spotted an opportunity to marry our entrepreneurial interests with an industry that hadn't really seen its fair share of tech and innovation.

The opportunity came about because we'd seen another business in the States that basically allowed you to sell your car on your mobile phone. It was like a contract on your phone; I could come to you and say 'sign your name here and take my car'. We thought it was a cool and novel idea – and wanted to do something similar and better over here. We knew we'd always regret not giving something like this a go and it spoke to both our interests in the profession and more generally in business.

[Giles] In my law interviews I probably said I was fascinated by the intricacies of black letter law – but that's completely untrue. In reality, what I was interested in and remain interested in is two things: meeting really smart people who have interesting ideas and are working on cool news things – and

that's why I did a lot of IP litigation, but I think it's true of any tech-specialising lawyer: you meet people at the cutting edge.

And in addition to getting to meet those people and translating their ideas, the other thing is facilitation. So facilitating what they want to achieve in the world and removing barriers for them. I endeavoured to do that while I was in practice, and it's also where the connection for me with Avvoka worked.

We're meeting really fascinating people everyday, people who are innovating both within law firms and private companies. And we're also facilitating them –transforming the role of a lawyer into a much more strategic thing than it even already is.

What makes Avvoka better than similar tools?

[David] In the automation space, the idea of answering questions and generating a document has been around for decades now. The thing we try to make different is democratising the skill of automation. The best analogy I can give is website design. Ten years ago, the only people who could build websites were coders. Now you have all these amazing tools like WordPress and so on.

We are doing the same for automation; you used to have to have coding ability to turn your document into that questionnaire, and we've got rid of that skill barrier. Now anyone, within an hour, can learn how to start automating their own document. It's the ease of use we've tried to embrace – and also the wider concept of self-service. People want to be able to do things themselves, to get hold of something and have a go.

I guess when you sign up to be a lawyer you don't necessarily sign up to have a deep knowledge of technology. Have you come across some people who never factored tech and automation into their working routine? Have they been

put off by how difficult it's been in the past?

[David] Fortunately, not many of them have had a go at it because it was perceived as being *so* difficult and outside their comfort zone. In some ways that's been helpful because a lot of people are starting at ground zero.

As much as it's about people being willing to give it a go, it's also difficult to work within the frameworks of organisations that aren't set up with a 'tech stack' to help them use the newest and most innovative products.

[Giles] I'd also say the perception of what is and isn't technology isn't constant either – it's quite fluid. Even email at one stage would have been considered very high tech. It's important to remember as legal practice moves on it's changing at a rapid pace and what people consider legal tech changes.

One of the things I would cite as a specific example is e-discovery. The idea of going through physical rooms worth of hard-copy documents for massive commercial disputes, thankfully that's now a thing of the past because of those types of tools. We're hoping to do a similar thing when it comes to document automation. It's going to be standard that people do their first draft using document automation.

Do you engage with the next generation of lawyers as part of your growth strategy?

[David] It's actually something we're incredibly passionate about. Just before lockdown we launched the Avvoka Academy, to teach people how to use automation. Like Giles said: to make automation be thought of as a skill. We've been hosting completely free workshops for over six months. Anyone can join

and we just teach them how to automate. One of the biggest problems with technology in legal is that people find it difficult to get their hands dirty.

We've been going to universities and focus groups. We're really keen on trying to make sure the next generation of lawyers understand how this technology can help them. They even get to automate their own certificates at the end of it!

You work in partnership with many big organisations, like McDonald's for example. How have you gone about targeting those organisations and closing those deals?

It's taken a long time and it's certainly not easy. You use the perfect word, which is partnerships. Because even if they're a client, they're viewed as partnerships, because you're working so closely with these organisations to get to know them. You're ultimately becoming a technology that's a critical part of their organisation; they're powering their entire sales contracts through your platform. You need to understand it, and then there's the whole set-up phase. It can easily be 18 months before you're actually working together.

A lot of what we do is focusing on businesses that we think could definitely use the tool: on companies that have got high volumes of fairly standardised documents, that have perhaps worked with analogous companies before. You can't just go out and assume that everyone's sat there waiting for automation; you've got to do your research and understand the needs of the person you're about to contact.

[Giles] Frankly, doing stuff like this is a really important way for us to get our name out there. Although the academies don't have a sales motivation, we

can't pretend we're not in a situation where everyone has the full picture of document automation. We understand it's our job to educate.

And then onto COVID-19. Giles, could you talk about being a new joiner in the COVID era? And David, how has COVID impacted the business overall?

[Giles] I would say it's the ideal team to join remotely! Everybody has very little patience for inefficiency and collaborating in a poor way remotely – because of our company mission. We also have a highly international team, in terms of where people are working from and also their families and approach. We have a Singapore office as well as a London office and we work seamlessly between those two. We've also had a couple of staff members stuck around the world and we haven't missed a beat. The fact that I'm sat in Norfolk today, not in London, doesn't matter at all.

[David] I'll never say that COVID's helped the business as such, because when it happened everything was put on hold. Everyone was reassessing their priorities. But we were quite fortunate that a lot of our projects had been ongoing for 18 months already.

The only lasting benefit of this will be people embracing digital. Overnight, firms have kitted everyone out, and people now have to know what Zoom is, what Teams is. This would have taken years and years to slowly integrate. A great example is e-signature. Docusign and other tools have been trying to get people to use electronic signatures for years now. No one ever bothered doing it, even though it's an absolute no-brainer. Yet the second COVID happens, everyone is e-signing.

Now the dust has settled, people are thinking 'this tech was really great; it did really improve what I was doing; how else can I do that?'

[Giles] I think we'd be very remiss not to mention that COVID's also been really tricky for a lot of our clients. One thing I've noticed speaking to people is that they're under more pressure to do more with less than they ever have been before. So people are really appreciating some of the corners we're allowing them to circumvent.

And finally, a more personal question! We've started asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

[David] It sounds really cliche but trying to do some exercise every day to get me out of the house – whether it's a ten minute run or a Joe Wicks YouTube video. Something to stop you feeling sedentary. Trying to not eat lunch sat at a laptop – you can just be consumed by staring at the screen! And also, at the end of every day I write down what I need to do tomorrow. It's a small one but it helps you separate between home and work.

[Giles] Everyone's got things going on in their life that are really important to them in addition to their work – and that brings more purpose than serving as a distraction.

My resolution has been, regardless of what call I'm on, I'll always pick up the phone to family or friends. Although you've got work on, it's important to answer those calls because you don't know what's going on at the moment.

It only takes 20 seconds and everybody gets it – and I think people find it refreshing, to be honest.

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