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Maybe AI Can't Do Everything, but Corporate Legal's Still Trying to Adopt

Legal operations directors from Walmart and Nationwide gave their artificial intelligence adoption strategies at the 2018 CLOC Conference.

By [Zach Warren](#)

When looking at instituting artificial intelligence in the legal department, there's one objection that's perhaps more common than any other: "We don't need that much complexity." But there's one issue with that, said Tariq Abdullah, senior director of legal operations at Walmart Inc.

"Every company's a technology company, whether they realize it or not," he explained. "And if you don't realize it, that's a problem."

The entire economy, and furthermore the world, runs online and with technologies that seemed inconceivable 50 years ago. And every corporate legal department needs to be forward-looking to keep up with the change, which today means understanding AI and other automation technologies.

Operations directors from Walmart and Nationwide gave their strategies for getting ahead of the curve at the "It's Here & It's Real: Next Generation AI Litigation Solutions Essential for Legal Department Saving" panel at the 2018 CLOC Conference. And they all agreed that it's important to recognize what AI actually is and what it's not.

Moderator James M. Lee, co-founder and CEO at AI software company LegalMation, noted that widespread AI marketing like IBM's Watson on "Jeopardy!" may have actually done a disservice, as it "sent the wrong message to the public, because people think that this black box can do anything, and that's not true."

Lee said AI is "nothing more than a pattern recognition machine. That's it." He added, "When you drive into work, your mind's wondering half the time. It's because you've been driving so long that it's second nature to you. So it makes sense that driverless cars are one of the first applications of AI."

Still, disinformation remains, even among those well-versed in other types of technologies. Indeed, Tom Paider, associate vice president, BSA Leader, OCLO & HR IT, Nationwide, noted that his first task when instituting a new tool is spending "an inordinate amount of time in the technology shop explaining what it is and what it isn't, and what it's actually going to replace."

To make this case, Nationwide has developed a spectrum of implementable technologies, ranging from common applications like Word and Excel to full AI. He explained that it's often best to start somewhere in the middle when driving change, to get internal clients used to new technologies before moving on to full AI.

"I know business process management and robotic process automation aren't AI," Paider explained. But "sometimes those things give us entry points with our customers."

Alan Bryan, senior associate general counsel, Walmart, added that at his company, encouraging adoption is a matter of demonstrating value. "I'd rather the attorney spend four more hours preparing for the critical deposition and adding value that way," Bryan explained.

This value is easier to demonstrate if it's connected to other parts of the business, Paider noted. He explained that he took a cue from both Nationwide's internal IT and R&D departments to foster a culture of exploration and discovery within legal as well.

“My advice would be, especially for those of you in big corporations, save some of your R&D dollars for pure play,” he added. “Some of the things, you just have to explore. AI’s not going away, it’s just going to get more and more advanced. So the more your company can get ahead of that curve, the better.”

This type of intellectual curiosity is paramount, Abdullah agreed, saying, “It all starts with that curiosity mindset, of what if?” Without having the curiosity to want to change, new technologies like AI will never be able to get a foothold.

“There’s almost a renaissance that’s happening now, and it’s happening whether people want to admit it or not,” Abdullah said. “They need to embrace it and part of the leadership in that change, or they will be run over by it.”

And of course, this change is most effective if it comes from the top—Abdullah joked, “You’ve heard this a million times, but it’s really true.” Paider added an analogy, saying that legal works similar to medicine in this way: “If you’re in a hospital, the easiest way to make a change is to get a leading doctor on board. ... Same thing in a legal department.”

So, are you ready to implement AI? Perhaps not. Ultimately, though, AI may be necessary rather than an option, especially as companies like Walmart are seeing 60 to 80 percent time savings on routine tasks, according to Bryan.

And the change may not be hard if you draw an analogy to something already known—human attorneys. Paider said Nationwide views some of its more robust AI systems as “digital workers,” requiring the same thought and care as human attorneys.

“You have to manage those just like your human workers,” Paider said. “If they were to not ‘show up to the office’ one day, it would be a big issue.”