

WHAT IS A DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION PROGRAMS?



BY JOE DAVIS



In the second of our series of articles examining new job titles in legal, we explain the role of director of innovation programs.

When Ginevra Saylor talks about her new role as director of innovation programs for Gowling WLG, she borrows the idea of ‘delighting customers’ from consumer-facing technology companies like Apple. ‘It’s exciting to be exploring ways that we can really delight our clients, which I don’t think is something that lawyers were thinking of doing 100 years ago,’ she says.

Gowling’s roots date back at least that far, and it has now grown to over 1,400

legal professionals with offices in 18 cities across Canada, the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Saylor, who works out of the Toronto office, started her career as a practising lawyer before moving into knowledge management about 20 years ago. In the last few years, she has seen a change in the nature of client requests. ‘My work started to shift to more client-facing solutions—ways of delivering our services differently that would be more appealing to clients—and so it really took on this

innovation focus,’ she says. ‘And I soon realized that was the part of my job that was exciting me the most.’

When the opportunity arose to join Gowling in a newly created role, it was a natural fit. Working closely with the executive leadership team, Saylor has been tasked with creating a framework and processes around innovation. ‘Even though the whole idea of structure and discipline and pragmatism seems at odds with the concept of innovation,’ she says, ‘innovation tends to go nowhere if you don’t have all those features around it.’

Innovating around the client’s needs
Some lawyers, however, are still getting

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used to the idea of innovation. Aligning them is a key part of Saylor's challenge. 'Lawyers generally know that clients are demanding a different approach to legal services delivery, but shifting away from familiar practice models can be uncomfortable,' she says. 'When they realize clients really mean it, and that there's a team of people who understand and can offer solutions, my experience has been that lawyers get excited and involved because they see the potential to really satisfy their clients' needs.'

She offers one example where clients need information at their fingertips to make critical decisions as they work, based on a relatively contained area of the law requiring deep expertise to walk through the relevant factors that must be considered. 'In the past, we typically would have created a manual, either in a physical binder or in more recent years in digital format,' she says. 'Either way, it was a long document that presented what action to take in the case of different circumstances, jurisdictions, timing and other factors.'

Instead of this, Gowling has now developed an application where its clients can click on an applicable scenario and get a succinct answer, with the ability to drill deeper and read more, Saylor explains. 'When lawyers see that, and see how a client reacts, they get really excited. They start to see potential and they start to come up with ideas of their own. That's been my experience—it's been really positive. I think lawyers get it. They do want to excite their clients.'

As deliverables change, the teams that create those deliverables are likely to

change too. Saylor foresees teams made up of both lawyers and non-lawyers. 'These mixed teams are going to be handed a matter, and they're going to view that matter as a problem to be solved, and they're going to marshal their resources to solve that problem,' she says. 'I think it would be good for that mixed team to sit down with a client—not just one person, but a group of people from the client—to determine collaboratively what the deliverable should be. It's funny—we rarely, as lawyers, offer anything better. We feel that if we do what the client asks and we do it well, then we've succeeded. Maybe there's something better we could do.'

The right environment for innovation

Innovation requires flexibility, agility, and moving fast on a good idea, Saylor says, and her experience is the bigger the organization, the harder it is to see a good idea and just go with it. 'There tends to be more bureaucracy to go through,' she says. 'On the other hand, diverse groups are really important for innovation, so it's harder to innovate if you're by yourself or with four other people who are exactly like you. So the ideal scenario would be small groups that come together within a large organization and are given the ability to act on something very quickly. I think that's what most large firms are trying to achieve and that is the framework we are building at Gowling. We're trying to build that core that can see a good idea, pitch it, and then deliver on it in a short timeframe.'

Even once the team size and structure are in place, firms will still need to incentivize those teams properly. 'I think

an organization that is really interested in creating an innovation culture has to recognize what things are conducive to innovation, and demonstrate that the organization's people not only will not be penalized for challenging the status quo and asking provocative questions, but also will actually be rewarded for it,' Saylor says. 'I think a lot of places have gotten to the point where people feel they're not going to be penalized, but I'm not sure people feel like the rewards are there yet. That said, firms are beginning to build in rewards for innovative ideas through points systems and gamification.' She also points to firms offering attorneys credits towards billable hours and bonuses tied to innovation projects. 'I think we're getting there,' she says.

The discipline of legal innovation is still evolving. 'I think all of us are kind of wondering what's going to happen in the next few years because things are changing so quickly,' Saylor says. 'It's hard to predict how fast this is all going to happen now, especially with AI and machine learning. It's going to be hard for us to keep up with it, and I think clients are in the same position, so they're going to be putting a lot of pressure on all their professionals and people who support them—not just lawyers. I think in the next 5-10 years, clients are going to be asking for things that are really different. There are going to be whole new areas of law that we have to figure out. We're going to start doing a lot of different work that is unfamiliar. And that's what excites me—I want to be one of the people who figures out what that is.'

Joe Davis has spent 20 years in legal technology, and is a member of ILTA's Program Planning Council. A frequent speaker and author on artificial intelligence and enterprise content management, Joe has led applications teams at several law firms and recently completed a multi-year consulting engagement with a large corporate legal department. Prior to his IT career, Joe was a teacher, an entrepreneur and a DJ in a flea market. Contact him at joe@josephpdavis.com