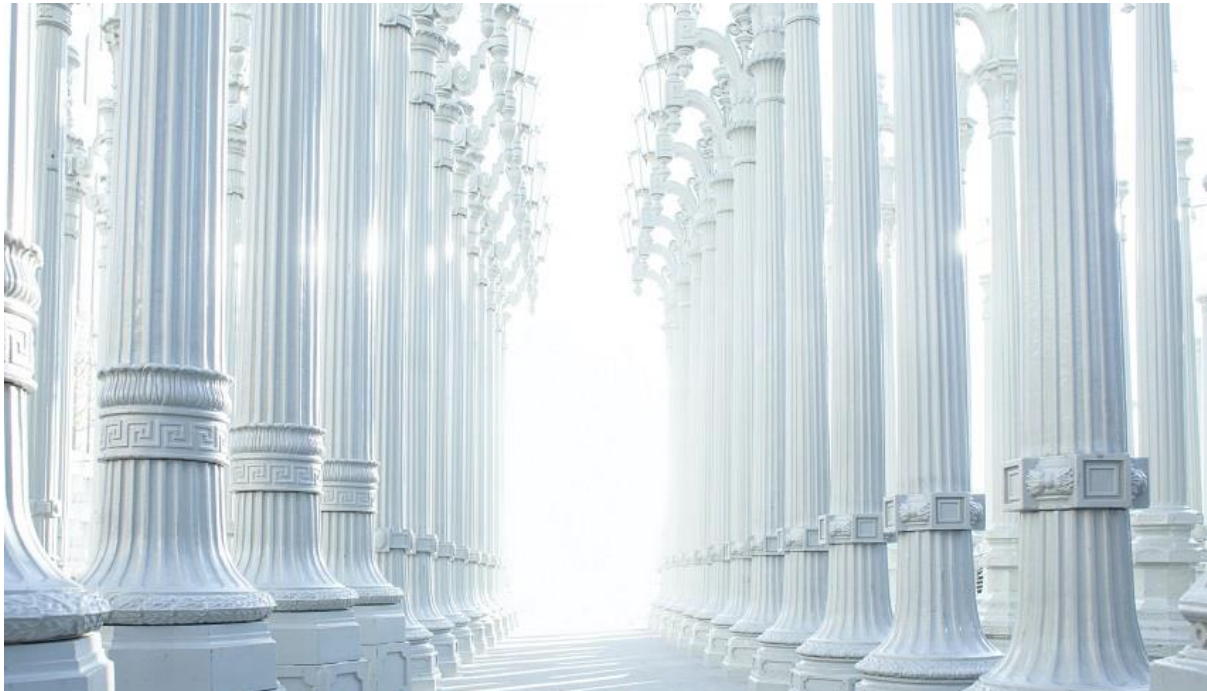


Publication: Gov Insider Online

Date: 23 November 2020

Headline: What Singapore's digital law future looks like

What Singapore's digital law future looks like



In his book 'Tomorrow's Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future', Richard Susskind paints a thrilling picture of future courtrooms, with virtual hearings and bespoke legal services galore. We're already seeing glimpses of this today – Hangzhou, China, has implemented asynchronous trials, where parties log into an online platform at different times to complete legal proceedings, wrote China Justice Observer.

Singapore is excited to get onboard with the digitalisation of legal services. It recently launched a Technology and Innovation Roadmap for the legal industry in October, to guide its tech adoption and innovation over the next decade.

GovInsider spoke with Chua Xin Juan, Acting Director of the Professional Services Programme Office at Singapore's Ministry of Law (MinLaw), to find out the country's priorities for boosting legaltech.

Make tech adoption easier

One of MinLaw's upcoming priorities is to make it easier for law firms to adopt technology. Cost and the sheer volume of options are two big barriers, Chua shares. "Given the fragmented legal technology landscape, law firms – especially the smaller firms – need quite a bit of help to navigate and wade through all the available legal technologies out there to know what is suitable for them."

MinLaw, along with the Enterprise Singapore, Infocomm Media Development Authority and the Law Society of Singapore, offers a funding scheme to help law firms get one foot in the legaltech door. Law firms can choose from a curated list of tech tools, and receive up to 80 per cent subsidies in the first year of adoption.

"Through this programme, we address both the issue about the lack of in-house IT expertise in law firms as well as cost," says Chua. "We've seen a marked increase in adoption under this programme since the start of Covid-19," she adds.

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The list of suitable tools were selected based on common needs in the law industry, especially in smaller firms. "They make up the bulk of our legal industry in Singapore," Chua explains.

On top of funding schemes, MinLaw is supporting the nation's move towards AI. The Infocomm Media Development Authority and research institute Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities are coming up with a guide to help companies use AI. MinLaw is working with them to contextualise it for law firms, she shares.

Cybersecurity is another key concern law firms have when adopting tech, notes Chua. The Singapore Law Society has launched a cybersecurity guide. "We'll build on that to make sure that law firms are kept up to date with the latest standards as well as guidelines," she says.

Innovation and education

Besides helping law firms adopt tech more easily, MinLaw will focus on encouraging legaltech innovation. It previously partnered with Create+65, international law firm Clifford Chance's first global innovation lab, shares Chua.

The lab has worked with local and global start-ups in Singapore to develop and test new legal services tools and solutions. "This is one example of how we have been working to support innovation activities for the legal industry," she says.

Education is also an important factor. MinLaw is working with law schools to ensure the next generation of lawyers are familiar with existing legaltech tools and are equipped with basic digital skills.

Improving MinLaw's services

Besides boosting law firms' tech adoption, MinLaw is working on digitalising its services as well. It launched an online chatbot in February this year.

The bot answers common queries on matters such as divorce, personal protection orders, and Covid-19 legal queries. Citizens can generate simple legal documents, instead of having to request for it in person, Chua explains.

MinLaw also offers online legal services through an applicant portal. Applicants can register a case, do a means test to determine if they qualify for legal aid, and receive legal advice – completely online.

This has saved precious time. "We realised that most of the time the applicants had to take leave from work just to come down," Chua says. The online applicant portal has saved MinLaw officers at least ten hours a month, she adds.

The ministry will launch Divorce AIDE (Asset Informative Division Estimator) next year. This is a tool that predicts outcomes of how assets will be split after divorce, Chua tells GovInsider.

The legaltech landscape

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What does the future of legaltech hold? Chua is excited about the possibilities.

For instance, the Singapore Management University has started a research programme to turn legal concepts into code. Lawyers can then use this code to generate contracts and legal documents easily, she explains.

Writing laws as code can also make finding loopholes in contracts easier, and speed up digital service delivery, co-founder of startup Legalese Meng Weng Wong told GovInsider. Countries such as France, Canada and New Zealand are already trialing this approach with their legislation.

In the US, lawyers have started using analytics to draft arguments, Chua shares. A software suggests relevant judgments they can cite as they type, so they don't have to comb through scores of past papers in the legal research library.

More generally, there are already programmes with built-in templates to make generating contracts easier, she notes. Some tools also help to compare documents and pick out most important clauses to save lawyers time on research. And of course, there are tools to help law firms with back end processes, such as billing, accounting, customer management.

Could tech one day replace human lawyers? "It's not something that will happen so quickly," Chua believes.

Tech can make legal services more accessible to the man on the street, but machines are not yet capable of communication and advocacy, she says. Explaining legal terms and outlining the implications of each decision are important help a lawyer provides. "The ability to apply that to business and cultural context is something that machines will not easily be able to do."

"Covid-19 has shown law firms that technology is not something that's just a good-to-have; it is essential for survival," says Chua. The industry is ready to step into a digital future, and MinLaw is eager to support the transition.