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**Headline: In-House Technology in Asia Pacific | Revolutionising Community Connections**

## **In-House Technology in Asia Pacific | Revolutionising Community Connections**

Networking, as any diligent MBA-holder will tell you, is essential for an eye on corporate leadership. But finding the time to network is often the last thing on a busy lawyer's mind.

How things change.

Several months into lockdown, finding effective ways to network has become the only escape route from sliding into set ways of doing things. 'Remote work is the future of work', says Amar Sundram, head of legal for RBS India. 'That means we need to come up with new ways of forming and building relationship and keeping on top of changes in the way other organisations are doing things.'

Nowhere is this truer than the world of legal technology. For many GCs, keeping up with the pace of new technology was challenge enough. The pandemic has only made that job more difficult. As a result, a growing number of GCs are seeking out new forms of community building, networking and peer learning to help them cope. Suddenly, professional learning networks (PLNs) have become all the rage.

Across Asia Pacific, a raft of dedicated tech networks aimed at training and educating GCs has sprung up, from the Australian legal Technology Association (ALTA) to the Future Law Innovation Programme (FLIP) in Singapore. These organisations do many things, but all of them aim at a common goal. As Josh Lee Kok Thong, chair of the Asia-Pacific Legal Innovation and Technology Association (ALITA), puts it, they 'encourage lawyers to take learning into their own hands, to be more interested in the technology and other disruptive forces that can affect their work'.

As peer networks become an increasingly important way for GCs across Asia Pacific to engage with legal tech, we canvas some of the leading institutions, and their members, on what it means for lawyers' engagement with technology.

### **MASTER PLN**

Among the largest informal member networks is the aforementioned ALITA, a regional coordination platform that seeks to promote legal innovation and technology initiatives. The organisation launched in 2019 with a bold mission statement to make Asia a hub for legal innovation. It is, says ALITA's Singapore-based chair Josh Lee Kok Thong, the first truly Asia Pacific wide legal tech forum.

'This was a great chance to bring together a vibrant ecosystem and show the significant advances in the development of legal innovation and technology in all countries across Asia Pacific.'

'While each country has its own legal tech networks, we felt the cross-border interaction was missing. We wanted to give a voice to the region, to promote collaboration opportunities across the region. The results so far have shown just how much progress can be made when GCs and thought leaders from different countries work together to share experiences, context and opportunities.'

ALITA has grown rapidly to around 150 member organisations in 20 countries. The membership includes some of the world's largest law firms and technology companies, as well as universities, think tanks, legal tech companies, and governmental or quasi-governmental organisations. It is also fast becoming a leading platform for the region's general counsel.

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*Narae Lee, lawyer, Bliss Law Office*

Narae Lee is a Seoul-based lawyer at Bliss Law Office and an organiser at Seoul Legal Hackers, a separate discussion forum for issues arising at the intersection of law and technology. She recently joined ALITA's steering committee and says the regional focus will be invaluable to the GC community.

'Legal Hackers is an international organisation, so I already had the benefit of that cross-border perspective. However, when it comes to the use of legal technology there are nuances of context that matter. As counsel in Korea I will have a very different set of pressures, expectations and possibilities to someone based in Europe or the US.'

'Generally, it's useful to have a forum that looks at what other people facing these same issues are doing. The best way to learn about legal technology is to speak with others who are using it and know what it can and can't do.'

Though still relatively young as an organisation, ALITA is already expanding its activities to create what Josh Lee Kok Thong describes as 'probably the world's first legal tech observatory.'

'Just as an observatory contains a set of tools that help stargazers absorb data and information, draw patterns, and observe movement, we are creating a set of tools to help the legal community scan the Asia Pacific region. Above all, we want to make it a live observatory that feeds people with information on the initiatives that are taking place across Asia, so that actionable insights can be drawn.'

#### **STATE OF THE FUTURE: SINGAPORE'S BID TO BECOME A LEGAL TECH HUB**

The Government of Singapore has set its sights on a new and unexpected industrial development plan: developing the island state into a legal technology powerhouse. GCs speak to the people looking to make these plans a reality.

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has pioneered an economic model like no other. By combining a free market and open-economy with strong government involvement, the island state has grown at a breakneck speed to become, on a per-capita basis, one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

The lessons of this economic model, poured over by policy makers and business analysts ever since, break down to three things: decide what you want to be a world leader in, back the industry so it has all the conditions needed to thrive, and stay the course.

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Singapore's legal market has been following this rule book for at least two decades. First, in the early 2000s, foreign lawyers were permitted to set up Joint Law Ventures (JVLs) with local firms, a move then Attorney General Chan Sek Keong said would make it a 'one-stop shop' for cross border transactions. Since then, the government has been a staunch supporter of its legal industry, developing a world-class arbitration infrastructure and a judiciary that is unparalleled in the region.

When Singapore launched Asia's first legal technology start-up accelerator in 2019, it was legal tech's time to take the limelight. Backed by generous research grants, ambitious accelerator programs and direct financial support, Singapore's legal tech providers had become the latest champions of future prosperity.

If you build it, they will come

When it comes to legal technology, GCs often face a dilemma. While many know what they would like technology to do, they often find themselves disappointed by the marketplace. In short, there is a huge gap between the legal technology that is available and effective now, and technologies with the potential to be truly disruptive.

It was precisely this dilemma that led Singapore to establish The Future Law Innovation Programme (FLIP). Now under the aegis of the Singapore Academy of Law, FLIP first emerged out of discussions at the Committee on the Future Economy (CFE), a governmental body founded in 2016 to help Singapore's economy adapt to the market conditions likely to prevail over the coming years.

Paul Neo, Singapore Academy of Law's chief operating officer, says the initiative helped draw attention to the economic potential of legal tech.

'A lot of people knew there were all these bottlenecks in the legal market caused by poor adoption or adaptation of technology, but the hard evidence was missing. We needed to take the lay of the land and understand the market through surveys and discussions, which we distilled into our "101 Industry Problem Statements". That had a number of positive effects in terms of understanding the market, but it also allowed us to show potential investors the huge demand out there, emphasising the rewards available should these problems be solved.

'A lot of technologists focus on fintech rather than legal tech, so this initiative helped to display to them the opportunities available in legal tech innovation. While there were already a lot of tech accelerators in Singapore, none of them were focused on legal tech, which has its own unique issues. To build one, we had to partner with existing accelerators who knew how to scale companies and had general business know-how, to which we added in our legal expertise.'

That led Neo to found the Global Legal Innovation Digital Entrepreneurship Program (GLIDE). In its early days, the initiative was aimed at Singapore's investors, but the ambitious attempt to turn legal tech into an investment class has caught the attention of investors far beyond the island state's borders.

'Whenever I visit London, law firms and legal community builders want to know about the marketing work being done by the FLIP program', says Chan Zi Quan, co-founder and CEO of Intelllex, a Singapore-based law tech startup offering an intelligent knowledge management system that allows lawyers to search for, store and share knowledge. Quan, who sat on the minister's committee during the early days of FLIP. 'They can see the beneficial effects it is having and are interested in replicating its success.'

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Quan, who sat on the minister's committee during the early days of FLIP, says that while the idea of legal tech providers receiving state funding may seem unusual, it was exactly what the market needed to take off.

'The legal industry is rather fragmented when compared to other sectors. For example, in shipping or manufacturing there is much more consolidation and it is not at all unusual to see the government step in and offer support. But for a tech provider that caters to all sort of businesses, from SMEs right up to blue-chip global companies, it is much more difficult to make a case for that level of support.'

'This sort of government support has really boosted our legitimacy. The due diligence they conduct on suppliers has really helped grow community trust.'

While Intellelex itself was deemed too mature to benefit from FLIP or GLIDE – it was, says Quan, 'founded before there was even a term like "legal tech" to describe what we were doing' – it was recently approved as a preferred supplier by Tech-celerate For Law, a support scheme for the adoption of technology solutions launched by the Law Society of Singapore, in partnership with Ministry of Law, Enterprise Singapore and Info-Communications Media Development (IMDA). The programme aims to help Singapore-based legal entities compete in the global marketplace, underlining the government's commitment to its vision of a tech-enabled legal marketplace.

Under the Tech-celerate programme, Singapore-based legal practices are awarded 80% of the costs for any new technology implemented for the first year of use, allowing vendors much-needed time to establish proof of concept and refine their offering.

The infrastructure put in place by the government of Singapore has also attracted tech talent from other markets. Workflow automation software provider Checkbox was founded in Australia in 2016. It has since grown at an impressive rate, tripling its user base over the past year. But, says co-founder and CEO Evan Wong, its experiences in Singapore were transformational.

'We were part of a competition at TechLaw.Fest that involved a number of rounds of pitching at the conference after a rigorous vetting process. After winning this, it really helped to lift the profile of the company and allowed us to move into the GLIDE program. From there, things started to really take off for Checkbox in Singapore.'

The road ahead

Even more ambitious plans are underway to make sure Singapore is at the forefront of legal tech. The government has made a bold statement through its S\$15 million National Research Foundation grant to the Singapore Management University (SMU). This will see the creation of a new Computational Law Centre and research program at SMU, fulfilling SMU Principal Investigator Wong Meng Weng's strategic vision for the development of legal technology at the University.

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*Jerrold Soh, assistant professor of law,  
SMU*

The Computational Law Center ambitious flagship project will attempt to build a domain-specific language for law, something Jerrold Soh, assistant professor of law at SMU, says has far-reaching implications for the legal industry.

‘The analogy I would use is that we are doing something similar to what Adobe did with PDFs. Computational law is essentially expressing legal rules as computable units that can be calculated through logical operations. Our project starts with a basic tool, the domain-specific language, and builds legal tools on top of this. For example, someone writing a contract would be able to define the terms and mechanisms in a code-like language so it can be understood by the system. You could then run a check to see if it contains logical errors or has terms not defined’.

‘More importantly, you could also port this code-like language over to various natural languages. Once you have it in a condensed, pure logical form it’s easily translatable between different languages at once. Mandarin to English is doable, for instance, which will have many applications’.

These developments in computational law would not only improve the efficiency of legal tech, but could represent a sea-change in the capabilities of human-machine interfaces more broadly. But, as with most ambitious projects, it remains a moonshot. ‘It sounds like we’ve got it all figured out, but we haven’t’ says Soh. ‘It’s a big research project that will take a lot of time and effort to accomplish’.

With the Government of Singapore now backing legal tech, finding the resources to accomplish these ambitions should not be a problem.

These ground-up attempts to share information sit alongside more formal initiatives to develop awareness of legal tech organised by the region’s academic institutions. Perhaps the most advanced of these is The Future Law Innovation Programme (FLIP) run by the Singapore Management University and the Singapore Academy of Law. FLIP has issued a series of roadmaps on the future of legal innovation in the Asia Pacific region, which were highly praised by the GCs we spoke to for this report.

Australian institutions have also been notable for their activities to promote legal tech. The country’s largest postgraduate legal practice education provider, the College of Law, runs the Centre for Legal Innovation (CLI), a legal innovation and tech think tank focusing on emerging legal practice, future legal tech, innovation and entrepreneurship in the legal industry.

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The focus throughout these activities, says CLI executive director Terri Mottershead, is on practical actions, and while CLI is actively monitoring market trends, it is 'more interested in understanding how to those trends can be translated into solutions.' For example, CLI offers a programme called Reinvent Legal Business, which looks at the various changes that have been taking place in the industry, covering everything from in-house initiatives to the work being done by law firms and alternative legal service providers.' One of the biggest shifts across the profession, says Mottershead, has been the growing interest in technology among lawyers.

'We have seen a real shift in the uptake of technology, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. As part of our Digital Literacy series we are looking at how we can provide support for lawyers to use technology effectively and help them understand how it can be incorporated into their practice.'



*Sheldon Renkema, general legal manager,  
Wesfarmers*

CLI, which has branched out from Australia to establish bases in New Zealand and Singapore and, more recently, the UK, does not operate like a traditional network. It offers the bulk of its courses and services for free 'to help promote the sharing of information'. Recently, it has been devoting more time to vendor-led demonstrations of the newest legal tech from around the world.

'It's not intended as a sales pitch', says Mottershead. 'It is an opportunity for tech developers to explain the gap they sought to bridge and how they did it, while also giving them a chance to listened to the needs and feedback of end users.'

'In fact, we have noticed that many lawyers are receptive to seeing how the technology works. The demos have been popular, and we have been holding more and more of them to help meet demand. That suggests to me that lawyers have a big appetite to understand the systems and tools that are available to them.'

Sheldon Renkema, general manager for legal at industrials conglomerate Wesfarmers and the Australia regional co-lead for the Corporate Legal Operations Consortium (CLOC), has a similar take on the value of per-to-peer learning in a fragmented legal tech market.

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'One of the great things about CLOC is that you can very easily learn from what others are doing, so that you're not reinventing the wheel. You are learning from others' experiences so it's a really good forum for embarking on that journey, connecting with people who've been through similar experiences and being able to benefit from their experience [of] the things that have gone well or not gone well in that specific context'.



*Haebin Lee, research manager of the crypto finance division, Block Crafters*

'It's very difficult to actually objectively assess whether what [legal tech providers] are saying their product or service delivers is actually what it delivers. Being able to leverage the experience of people who have used those products and services to see what the actual output is very helpful'.

Across Asia Pacific, universities and academic institutions are rolling out a variety of courses that bring aspects of IT and computational thinking skills to a legal audience, alongside a much wider number of courses that teach lawyers about the business impacts of tech and innovation. Some, such as the Singapore Management University, have gone further and now offer combined law and technology degrees.

Haebin Lee, research manager of the crypto finance division at Korea-based Block Crafters, agrees, and gives weight to the idea that membership organisations are the best way for GCs to move the industry forward:

'There should be more a lot more discussion on how we should shape legal tech, and which direction we should take with new technology. That's what we've been striving to do through Seoul Legal Hackers and ALITA: open up a room for free discussion.'

### **PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE**

Free discussion and knowledge sharing are changing the way GCs learn about and interact with legal tech, but at a certain point this enthusiasm for change hits hard problems. As Nilanjan Sinha, head legal for Indian multinational banking and financial services company ICICI Bank, observes:

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‘Legal tech, perhaps because of the mindset of lawyers, is not as disruptive a space as it could be. The problems have been identified, and various solutions have been proposed by service providers. The hope is that as people become more used to using tech and working from home there will be a greater uptake, but there remain obstacles.’

‘Senior management needs to buy in to a particular way of working for new practices to become widespread. As GCs we have a big responsibility to oversee and facilitate that change within the team.’

An even bigger problem, and one identified by many of the regional organisations we spoke to, is that lawyers’ mindsets need to shift before the profession embraces technology. As Sinha notes, ‘It may take time but there will be greater efficiencies on an ongoing basis if we make the effort now.’

### **NEW WAYS OF WORKING**

Near universally, the global pandemic has forced a fundamental rethink as to how many of us live our lives, be it personally, professionally or otherwise. The legal sector in Asia-Pacific has proved no exception, with the past year providing an impetus for innovation and an acceleration of technology-based solutions.

‘Technology is not only changing how lawyers work on a day-to-day basis; it is reshaping some of the most fundamental aspects of law,’ says Vinay Ahuja, Partner – Indonesia, Lao PDR & Thailand and Head of Indonesia Practice at DFDL Tax & Legal.

‘Consider the huge changes that have taken place in courts across Asia. As someone who grew up and practised in India until 2010, I can safely say that it has come as a big surprise to see India’s courts embracing virtual hearings!’

While virtual courts may be one of the most immediately recognisable changes to legal practice – particularly for those outside of the legal sphere – for both in-house counsel and their law firm counterparts, the day-to-day differences in regular work habits are perhaps even more pronounced.

‘Today, law firms are typically arranging for client meetings and negotiations to be carried out via video conferences, while webinars are frequently being arranged for a range of purposes, including external seminars for clients, as well as internal training sessions for lawyers within the firm,’ says Zhuowei (Joyce) Li, partner at Han Kun Law Offices.

‘The COVID-19 pandemic has made organisations more reliant on technology than ever and as a result, when using technology tools for remote work, privacy and security have become a more critical issue.’

Concerns around privacy and security are unsurprisingly not limited to law firms. Cybersecurity was one of the most frequently cited concerns related to technology that the in-house counsel who took part in the research for this report raised, with the sensitive nature of legal work, in addition to the risks associated with data breaches, both front of mind.

‘With the emergence of new technologies and more broadly, changes in business trends, in-house clients are increasingly moving towards technology-enabled services,’ says Jane Toh Yoong San, partner at Shearn Delamore & Co.



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‘This has resulted in new and different inquiries coming from clients, with advice sought on issues around data security and risks associated with the use of technology-enabled services, as well as an uptick in the number of clients conducting risk assessments of third-party technology providers before consideration of services for contracting can begin.’

These issues speak to the need to establish new frameworks to deal with technology-related issues and are translating to a rise in new types of work for private practice lawyers. Multiple WSG member firms have reported that they are being instructed to advise clients on legal issues arising from the use of technology in remote working scenarios – including the issuance of guidelines for video conferencing software and collaborative working applications – a trend that all expected to continue to evolve as businesses and law firms alike come to terms with new ways of working.

There are signs that this resistance to change is slowly fading, however. Josh Lee Kok Thong, himself a millennial, says a new generation of lawyers across Asia is coming to the table with quite different expectations from their predecessors.

‘The millennial generation is going to be key. We are going to hold key decision making roles in organisations, law firms or in-house departments in a few years’ time. Once that happens there will be a fundamental shift in thinking in terms of how legal services are going to be provided’.

Besides which, the writing is clearly on the wall. Technology will play an increasingly important role in how lawyers deliver their advice, whether lawyers like it or not. But more importantly, when it comes to the law, the medium is the message. As Mottershead notes:

‘At the moment, we see legal tech as a tool that assists us in doing things more efficiently, but over time, that will develop or will actually provide different ways of delivering legal services altogether. It will inform decision making processes and create the opportunity for additional or new revenue streams.’

At which point, even the most conservative of lawyers will see their interest piqued.