

Author Insights

Information for, and about, the Wolters Kluwer LRUS author community

WINTER 2019

Innovation

Legal Hackathon signals profession's embrace of technology



Christian Zust

What happens when you put lawyers and coders in a room for three days with instructions to build an innovative legal solution? Improbable as that scenario may seem, this very experiment happened around the world in late February. More than 6,000 participants competed at [Global Legal Hackathon](#) events across six continents, 46 cities, and 24 countries, making it the largest legal technology innovation event in history. Wolters Kluwer played a

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leading role as a GLH global sponsor, hosting or sponsoring nine venues including Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and New York.

Collaborating on several fronts with Wolters Kluwer is Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP, a global law firm that hosted the GLH event in St. Louis. We spoke with [Christian Zust](#), Director of the firm's Client Technology

Group, to get his take on the hackathon. Here's what he had to share.

Why did Bryan Cave sponsor the Hackathon? What did it hope to achieve?

Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner has a track record of innovating in law and St. Louis has wonderful startup and tech communities. We hoped that the event would highlight what St. Louis has to offer when those communities come together, and that the city would send a strong contender through to the semi-finals, which it did.

What prompts, if any, did Bryan Cave give participants to help focus the ideation process?

For the most part, participants came with ideas they wanted to “pitch” for 60 seconds at the kickoff. We actually had more great ideas than teams to tackle them and I would

love to see one or two of the pitches that weren't taken up come back as hacking topics in 2020.

Describe the participants (backgrounds, skills, roles, industries, etc.)

We had a nice cross-section of attorneys, law firm business professionals (with strengths in marketing, legal operations, programming, etc.), law students, and technical business consultants turn up for the event. The winning team combined a practicing attorney with a law student who has an engineering/IP/business background and a team of software engineers adept at creating business solutions for clients in the St. Louis area.



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Was the merging of technical and legal backgrounds successful?

Absolutely! A key strength of the winning team was its ability to keep the coders and those working on the business plan moving forward in lockstep. They held “stand ups,” a software development term for brief touchpoint meetings, every couple hours to make sure everyone was on the same page and that all activities were aimed at tasks on the critical path to a viable prototype. This allowed teammates to focus on their core strengths while keeping all activities pointed at common goals.

“Some ideas are more technical, others rely on industry expertise, but all benefit from a diversity of skills at the table”

Describe some of the ideas, including the winning idea

One idea was to design a web application to help same-sex couples who are expecting a child get correct, easy-to-understand information about their rights as parents, ability to obtain a gender-neutral birth certificate, and/or a second-parent adoption. Much of the information out on the internet is dated, difficult to navigate, or simply wrong. By answering a few simple questions—like “Where you plan to deliver the baby?” “Do you want both parents on the birth certificate?” etc.—the application generates pointed information specific to the same-sex parents’ situation, eliminating the need to conduct extensive research that can be confusing and frustrating.

The winning idea also focused on creating better societal outcomes. Through the use of smart-phone location services, voice-to-text, and facial recognition, the winning team, “Freecog,” attempts to give judges an additional layer of confidence and increased ability to allow those accused of low-level crimes out of jail on their personal recognizance in lieu of cash bail as they await trial.

The Freecog application constantly monitors a phone’s location and can be set up to send real-time alerts if the phone either enters or leaves an area it should not. To

combat the potential for one to leave their phone in an acceptable area while traveling somewhere else, the application sends a random simple text phrase to the phone at random times throughout the day. The Freecog user then must submit a video of themselves saying the phrase back to the app, where background processes ensure that the phrase spoken in the video matches the one sent to the phone and that the person who said the phrase is the same person who has been released subject to Freecog monitoring. If the app detects any anomalies, it sends an alert to the parties designated by the court.

This technology could allow judges to release people struggling with alcohol addiction on their own recognizance, but under the condition that they remain in their

home, at work, or receiving treatment for alcohol abuse as trial approaches. Freecog could be set to monitor compliance and give the judge and prosecutor confidence that the terms of bail were being followed. If the trial was three months out, the accused would be able to show up to court while still gainfully employed and having completed 90 days of a sobriety program instead of losing his or her job and costing the municipality money to house the accused in jail—a far better outcome for all concerned.

Did some otherwise great ideas come up short on the business model or validation front?

Fortunately, each team scoped its minimal viable product such that they had something to present on Sunday. To at least one judge, a key difference between the first- and second-place teams was the amount of thoughtful consideration the winning team put into their business model. Having members of their team focused on the model most of the weekend allowed them to present a more easily understood pricing and go-to-market strategy, which is critical to the app’s viability.

Highlight of the event?

For me, it was when I returned to the event Sunday morning and heard one of the winning team’s developers had

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gotten facial recognition from video working at about 4:00 a.m. the night before. I was absolutely amazed they were able to build that into their prototype in such a short time. That it was able to integrate with the application's other components in time for their presentation was a testament to how well the team worked together over the weekend's development period.

Overall assessment and takeaways?

I couldn't be happier with the way the teams rallied around their issues and the creativity and ingenuity applied to

their prototype solutions. Leading up to the event, I heard several potential hackers wondering if their skills would be useful in a legal hackathon. After seeing the teams in action over the weekend, I can unequivocally say yes, regardless of background or skillset, all participants can contribute meaningfully to their team's solutions. Some ideas will be more technical, others may rely on deeper industry expertise, but all benefit from a diversity of backgrounds and skills at the table. From students to attorneys to application development architects, every participant played a valuable role on their team and made for better solutions. ■