

Riding the entrepreneurial wave

With an increased entrepreneurial spirit driving growth in the legal industry, **John van der Luit-Drummond** wonders who the real innovators are and if they will succeed in implementing real change to the profession



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Nowadays, you cannot turn on the television without having your senses subjected to wannabe Donald Trumps, Lord Sugars, Duncan Valentines or James Caans declaring, on shows such as *The Apprentice* and *Dragons Den*, that they have the next big idea for business.

Likewise, on any of the most popular social media channels, you can't throw a metaphorical stone without hitting someone with the word 'entrepreneur' appearing in big, bold, uppercase letters on their digital profiles. From bakers to nightclub owners and IT professionals to graduates, people label themselves with this most popular of modern honorifics, even though it is often the case that these individuals demonstrate little evidence to back up their innovator credentials.

The perception of lawyers as being risk-averse, reserved, set in their ways and traditional means they are rarely thought of as innovators in their own right. But now, even members of one of the oldest professions are getting in on the entrepreneurial act. Or at least, that is what many of them claim.

Perhaps this is a way for lawyers to make themselves stand out from the crowd of other practitioners who jostle for recognition in an already overcrowded market. After all, who wouldn't want to take their highly complicated legal matter to an 'entrepreneurial lawyer'. Surely, a solicitor with entrepreneurial credentials is more likely to understand a complex commercial problem and solve it. The problem, unfortunately, is that with so many lawyers claiming to be entrepreneurs it no longer appears to be a unique selling point for members of the profession.

Earlier this year, a new study found an increased entrepreneurial spirit is driving the evolution and growth of the independent law industry. The 'Bellwether Report 2014: Brave New World' found that half of all independent and sole practitioners would describe themselves as 'entrepreneurial' and are planning changes to their businesses to accelerate expansion. Some 65 per cent of those surveyed said they were investing in technology designed to grow their practice and 68 per cent

actively enjoyed the business management element of their role.

But who are the real legal dynamos that are summoning up their entrepreneurial spirit? How are they spearheading the profession in new ways of working? And why is it important for them, and the profession, to be more than just a mere lawyer?

Eureka moment

Recent SJ author and *The Apprentice* contestant, Lauren Riley, chose to specialise in family law after qualifying as a solicitor. She told SJ in November's technology supplement that she wanted to make a "real difference" and was passionate about achieving the best outcome for her clients: "I was prepared for being put through the mill emotionally, especially when dealing with cases involving children. But the amount of time spent on keeping everyone 'in the loop' came as something of a shock. It was a daily battle to keep up with the constant emails, phone calls – even letters going back and forth."

Riley clearly has an underlying interest in business, having completed a business graduate scheme prior to qualifying as a solicitor: "I see myself as a bit of an entrepreneur and was using these skills to dramatically increase turnover of my department. I was convinced there must be a better way for lawyers to communicate with their clients. After all, this is the 21st century. After listening to the continued grumbings of my colleagues I had my 'eureka moment' and The Link App was born."

Marketed as the "ultimate tool for busy law firms" looking to thrive in an increasingly competitive industry, Riley's app has been making a lot of noise in the legal press off the back of her unsuccessful stint as Lord Sugar's prospective next apprentice. This tidal wave of publicity, ridden since being told she was "fired" has, without doubt, done more for Riley and her tech offering than any number of speculative press releases fired off to legal hacks across the country.

Cherry picking

Someone who has been innovating without the advantage of more than six million weekly viewers is Mark Needham, a senior associate at boutique City firm Bargate Murray. Far from just being your average, run-of-the-mill junior lawyer (he qualified in November 2013), Needham is also a director of LegalProposals.com, a website that connects clients looking for legal services with solicitors who are able to assist them.

The online service works by pairing up clients with practitioners based on the price of work to be undertaken. Potential clients answer a few questions about the work they need, which helps solicitors estimate the fees they need to charge. Practitioners can cherry pick the types of clients and work they

want, quote for that work (by paying LegalProposals a nominal fee) and know they will be only one of three other firms bidding for each potential client.

The service is already live and functional, with members of the public successfully using it to obtain quotes and connect with solicitors. However, Needham advises that further design and development works are ongoing to improve the service.

Explaining the origins of LegalProposals, Needham said it all came about as a result of "careful crafting and design" rather than being suddenly struck with inspiration as Riley was. "My co-founder (a non-lawyer techie) and I realised most people feel that finding a solicitor is not easy as there is a lot of choice, but how do you know who to go with?" he said. "Some people still feel intimidated by having to call and speak with a lawyer. Plus, everyone wants rapid interaction and feedback. Everyone wants to know, with the click of a button, how much something is, where they can buy it from and what is included in the price."

Needham is convinced that his offering will address these issues and create something functional for the profession: "We hope to radically change how solicitors find and engage new clients. We want to pull the legal services industry into the 21st century. We find most solicitors have limited skills in digital marketing and need help navigating online. If you ask most lawyers how they find new business, you will no doubt hear: 'I attend networking events,' or 'the partners of my firm find the work' and, perhaps more worryingly, 'I don't.'" The question Needham is keen to pose is: why in the age of information and connectivity should these answers be acceptable?

Iron Maiden effect

As a solicitor, Needham uses LegalProposals to keep one eye on the ever-changing legal market. As an entrepreneur, he uses it to develop a business that he thinks will change the industry for the better: "I don't view being a lawyer and having other business interests as mutually exclusive. I hate the idea that we can only be good at one thing. Bruce Dickinson, the lead singer of Iron Maiden, is testament to this. On top of selling 85 million records he is a professional airline pilot, an Olympic level fencer, a bestselling novelist and radio DJ.

"In the same way that other solicitors may own shares in a plc or own a rental property portfolio, I have shares in an online web platform. It just so happens that the platform has been created by me and my business partner," he expounds.

For Needham, LegalProposals is not a means to an end. He has no intention of changing his career. "I love being a lawyer," he enthuses. "The intellectual challenge, the ability to help others and fight for people's rights, but I am also interested in entrepreneurship. I have no intentions of leaving >>

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>> the legal profession. In fact, I think this helps me to be a better lawyer in that it develops my commerciality."

Considering the long hours usually associated with the practice of law, one might ask where Needham finds the time to work on his pet project: "Weekends and evenings, when time permits. It's tough, that's for sure, but that is also the benefit of having a business partner; you share the workload and help each other through the tough times."

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Needham's moonlighting is supported by his firm's senior partner, Quentin Bargate. "He is very much an entrepreneur himself. He started the firm from scratch ten years ago, wrote a bestselling book on micro-stock photography and is also involved in his own start-up project for the legal profession. He encourages everyone in our firm to think commercially, which is something I respect a lot about him," says Needham.

But is it important that more young lawyers embrace an entrepreneurial spirit? For Needham, it is absolutely essential: "Law firms are businesses and if you can't think laterally, commercially and entrepreneurially, how do you expect to keep pace with your competitors who can?"

Naked lawyerism

Chrissie Lightfoot, author of *The Entrepreneur Lawyer* and *The Naked Lawyer*, is in agreement with Needham: "I hear mantras such as 'more than just a lawyer' daily. To which I respond, 'you never were, by the way'. Lawyering has been and always will be more than being just a lawyer; that is, going about your daily work drafting and advising. You are a hybrid technical lawyer and 'social human,'" she explains.

As someone whose name has become synonymous with being an entrepreneurial lawyer, Lightfoot argues that in order for practitioners and firms to provide outstanding legal advice and bespoke customer services, lawyers must both possess solid legal knowledge, and be highly skilled in "emotional intelligence, marketing and networking".

"We must truly understand and engage with our clients, prospects and peers, and if at all possible become entrepreneurial. We must be able to 'stand in the shoes' of the person in front of us, or at the end of the telephone or email."

However, from her extensive networking in the

global legal profession, Lightfoot believes that creativity and innovation is often stifled by law firms. "Many lawyers, particularly junior lawyers, have to 'toe-the-line' and are not encouraged to do anything apart from make sure they hit their targets by keeping their head down. This is a real shame because it is these bright, young, dynamic and energetic lawyers who have the spirit, intelligence and 'digital skill-set' to be the much-needed breath of fresh air the business of law requires to grow."

Creating new projects largely sits within the purview of a law firm's strategy board, which, as Lightfoot explains, confines innovation to the few rather than the many: "There is no reason it could not be inclusive. Great companies manage to achieve this, such as Apple and Facebook, as they encourage all their employees to proffer ideas to benefit the customer and company."

For Lightfoot, it is crucial lawyers have an innovative spirit to survive in what is a highly competitive and challenging market. "We are transiting towards the 'age of un-lawyering', she warns. "Accordingly, it is imperative we learn how to become entrepreneurial. People may say that entrepreneurs are born. I say they are created either due to burning desire or necessity. This requires a paradigm shift in addressing what one's everyday role is."

Changing world

Riley and Needham are just two examples of the young practitioners finding fault and opportunity with the legal market and trying, in their own unique way, to solve it. There are many others just like them, yet the proof of entrepreneurship is in the pudding – so to speak. Whether or not The Link App or LegalProposals succeed in changing the way the profession works remains to be seen.

But with innovative new entrants and investors joining the legal market every day, you cannot fault the spirit of the current generation of practitioners. New offerings should force the rest of the profession to look up from their collective and serial navel-gazing to realise things will not stay the same forever.

As the vice-chair of the Sole Practitioners Group, Sukhjot Ahluwalia, recently said: "New lawyers coming through realise success means not just being good at law, it is about being good at business. The world is changing." **SJ**

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