Big Data and Its Impacts on the Legal Profession

Summary: Once the legal industry fully embraces the positive changes Big Data can bring, the profession may be revolutionized—for the better.

According to a recent article by Forbes, the legal system generates a tremendous amount of data. The 350,000 cases brought to court every year in the United States bring a slew of data with them—such as witness statements, court logs, electronic filings, and rulings and precedents. These pieces of data often contain the keys to winning a case. However, until recently, not much progress has been made as to how law firms use Big Data.

The earliest Big Data tools focused on billing, time management, marketing, and client care. However, attorneys are now creating tools to assist with research and case preparation, the heart of practicing law.

LexisNexis and Westlaw are the two primary research engines attorneys use in their daily practices. These platforms contain case law, statutes, and a variety of other documents that attorneys use in their research. However, these platforms are primarily search engines, and offer few advanced analytical tools.

Ravel Law provides a new outlook on research. It was established in 2012 by two attorneys with analytical backgrounds. Ravel Law provides services that are geared toward helping the legal profession draw insights and connections using advanced analytical algorithms.

For example, Judges Analytics allows attorneys to search through every decision that has been made by a particular judge to discover which one may be receptive to their arguments.

Daniel Lewis, Ravel Law’s co-founder and CEO, said, “When Nik [Reed, the other co-founder] and I met at Stanford, we had both come from previous work where we’d been exposed to how Big Data was playing a big role in changing other industries. Nik had come from politics and worked on election campaigns with Obama, and I had worked in policy, as well as played baseball through college, and I’d seen how Big Data had really changed the world of sport … We realized that the legal field had not really been touched by Big Data at all – so we designed Ravel to reimagine the search process and give lawyers data driven tools to sift through millions of documents to see what’s important, and understand how they can use it effectively.”

Ravel Law has actually teamed up with Harvard Law School with plans to digitize the faculty’s entire US case law library. The school’s is the country’s largest such library outside the Library of Congress. The goal is to make it accessible online—for free—by 2017.

This is no minor undertaking. Every page of every document must be scanned and converted to computer text with optical character recognition technology, which means it will also be available for analysis through Ravel’s software, which are modeled around natural language processing and machine learning capabilities.

Although the legal profession seems to refrain from change at times, Lewis said, “It’s become a lot more receptive and interested in technology over the past several years … In part it’s being driven by a new
generation of attorney[s] who have entered the law in the past 5 or 10 years and have high expectations about what technology should do for them.”

Reed added, “One of the most exciting moments for me starting at law school and having come from working on Wall Street was realizing I wasn’t alone – the days when lawyers were all English Literature or philosophy majors are behind us now, my classmates included a lot of people from finance and one who had a PhD in bio chemistry from MIT. These are people who are familiar with quantitative analysis and datasets, and they are yearning for richer information sources and better analytics technologies. It probably wouldn’t have gone down very well 30 years ago with the kind of people who were lawyers back then.”

Overall, embracing new data measures should lead to more efficiency within the practice of law, which will save attorneys time, reduce bills, and create greater access to the justice system. Judgments and rulings will likely be more accurate, reducing the possible need for appeals and retrials.

Datafloq adds a few other ways that Big Data can assist law firms. For example, with technology that can make predictions on how cases may turn out based on prior decisions, firms may only have to spend 20 minutes deciding whether they will take a case, instead of the traditional 20 days.

Additionally, Big Data will lead to enhanced transparency within the profession. For example, thousands of invoices worth billions of dollars in legal fees will help firms determine the right price for their services. In addition they will also be able to benchmark their spending better. One app, RateDriver, allows consumers to determine what they should be spending for legal representation.

Big Data will also be beneficial to firm human resources departments. They can run numbers on potential applicants and use data to determine which attorneys they would like to recruit to their firms, based on their past performances in the courtroom, for example.

Ultimately, Big Data has the potential to reinvent the legal field for the better, if attorneys and other legal professionals are open to changing decades of practice.

Source: Forbes

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