

Women of Legal Tech: Nicole Clark Explains That, If You Want a Seat at the Table, You Might Have to Make the Table Yourself

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By Habiba Cullen-Jafar



Nicole Clark, CEO of trellis. Courtesy photo

Q&A

Nicole Clark, CEO of Trellis, discusses why legal tech has reached a tipping point, how women can combat sexism in the workplace through sponsorship, and why a great tech company can never be “done” innovating.

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8 minute read

Q&A

By Alma Asay | September 26, 2022 at 10:00 AM

There's a shortage of women in science, technology, engineering and math. But within the legal tech community, there are many women with thriving careers. Legaltech News presents our latest "STEM Cell" profile. Alma Asay recently interviewed Nicole Clark.

This profile is a continuation of the Women of Legal Tech series originally published by Editor Monica Bay <link> "in order to inspire girls, women (and men)." From July through September, we'll feature women who have founded legal tech companies.

What is your name and role?

Nicole Clark, CEO of Trellis

What is your company's origin story?

I was a litigator practicing in state trial courts and couldn't believe how difficult it was to access information on state trial court judges or get better insights on opposing counsel's prior cases. I began aggregating data in the courts across California in which I was appearing. Armed with this data, my motion win rate improved dramatically. It became obvious that I had stumbled upon a massive opportunity. I jumped from practice in 2018 to devote my full-time effort to building Trellis—a single, structured, unified system to search and gather insights across the US State Trial Courts.

In our experience, most people experienced at least a bit of serendipity to end up where they are. What serendipitous experience (no matter how far back in time) contributed to you ending up as a legal tech founder?

As a founder, a big part of your job is to ensure that you have as many opportunities as possible for serendipity to occur. If you give yourself enough shots, enough rolls of the dice, you'll have better odds of getting really lucky at least once.

One example is meeting my current co-founder Alon Shwartz. Had the timing been any different, I wouldn't have been looking for a co-founder, and he would have been busy building any one of his prior startups. We happened to get introduced to each other at exactly the right moment for both of us to be open to the partnership.

When I look at my journey, I can identify a lucky experience that led to every milestone in my life. Interestingly, if you asked me at the time, “was that event lucky?”, I probably would have told you, “No.” Perhaps even the opposite. Some of the most serendipitous events occur as a result of what feels at the time like “terrible luck.”

What was your “first seat at the table?”



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I had to make my first seat at the table. I wasn't invited. I had to make the table in the first place.

I worked as an associate at a variety of law firms before launching Trellis and, not only was I nowhere near the table, I didn't really see a clear path to getting there. I didn't see a ton of female partners, let alone equity partners, decision-makers. I didn't see many women in leadership with families. In the few instances that I did see women in leadership positions, they had started the business themselves.

Describe an experience where you or someone you observed served as a role model for how to counteract sexism in the workplace?

Sexism is more discreet and pervasive than we think. It's not necessarily overt acts—it's not seeing women in leadership positions, it's getting asked to bring a lawyer back into the room when you're already sitting down. The best way to counteract unconscious biases is to keep elevating women into leadership roles.

Another way to have an impact is for women to do less “mentoring” and more “sponsoring” of other women. Mentorship is giving advice alone, while Sponsorship is using your own social capital to help your mentee. Sponsorship is going out of your way to make introductions, submit for promotions, angel invest in ideas, etc. Women who have a seat at the table should Sponsor, not just Mentor, other women in the industry.

Where do you envision yourself, your company, and legal innovation in five years?

Many legal technologies are in their infancy in terms of value creation. I believe we are reaching a tipping point now, crossing the chasm from early adopters to broader industry-wide adoption. At Trellis, we’re seeing wider adoption across firms of all sizes, but especially an increase in the speed of adoption at larger, slower moving firms.

For Trellis, I believe the type of legal research and analytics we provide will become table stakes for litigators. A new generation has grown up with technology integrated into every part of their life and they will have an expectation of access to data and innovative legal tech tools.

I see my role largely unchanged. I’m devoted to continuing to build an industry-defining legal data company.

How do you identify potential risks and mitigate those risks in the design of legal tech?

Assessing risk in a business context is similar to assessing risk in a lawsuit context. Think through all potential outcomes, what are the risks? Then, make the best decision you can (often with incomplete, or imperfect data) and stay agile enough to change course. The bigger the risk, the more you should think through outcomes and collect more data. The smaller the risk, the faster you should make a decision and see what happens.

What are three things law firms should be doing to foster innovation?

Law firms should look to their younger lawyers and tech-savvy employees for recommendations. They should ask their employees questions about what the most mundane, rote tasks are, and then assess those tasks for potential technological solutions. Firms should empower people to identify inefficiencies, and to make technology recommendations.

What resources and connections do you need to take your vision to the next level?

Engineering talent. Legal minds to design and build for the customers. Customer feedback.

It takes a massive team effort to create anything meaningful. The entire design iteration feedback loop is necessary to solve pain points. The faster the industry agrees to try new technology and give feedback, the faster founders can iterate, and innovate, to solve pain points.

Reticence to use a product that isn't yet "perfect" stifles innovation at its earliest stages, so many companies can't even get off the ground. What lawyers need to understand is that building an incredible, game-changing product is not binary. A great company is never "done" innovating, a great product is never "finished." Change occurs through partnerships, commitment, and various iterations. Be a part of innovation by trying new tech and giving feedback directly to the founder.

Please give a shout-out to a future Woman of Legal Tech—someone who, currently, has been in the industry for fewer than ten years?

I've been really impressed with Dorna Moini of Documate, Jacqueline Schafer of ClearBrief, and MC Sungalia of The Portia Project.

Who is someone famous (dead or alive) that you wish you could meet? Why?

Ruth Bader Ginsburg. As a female founder innovating at the intersection of law and tech (two entirely male-dominated industries), I know what it's like to push boundaries. RBG blazed a trail so much earlier. I'd love to learn and understand what lessons she took away, what she might tell her earlier self about the journey.

What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given? How have you applied that advice to your own life?

One that stuck with me is to avoid wasting emotional energy on regret. We're making a lot of decisions every day—these decisions are usually made with inadequate or imperfect information. Decide, learn, and then move on. "Should haves" are wasted energy. You either win, or you learn.

If you had a week to do nothing but binge, what movie(s), tv show(s), podcast(s), book(s), or video game(s) would you watch/listen/read/play?

I'm a huge fan of the Knowledge Project. It's a podcast where Shane Parish interviews experts from every industry to ask what it's taken them a career to learn.

If a book were written about your life, what would the title be—and why?

Maybe "Trials and Tribulations—A Life of Law and Learning." Or "Free Trial." Or maybe "Justice for All." I think I still need to workshop this one.

What is your go-to dessert, flavor(s) and all?

I'm a sucker for popsicles—basic frozen fruit juice (no sugar added).

Next quarter, we are going to focus on Women of Legal Tech in corporate legal ops. What question would you like for us to ask them?

What are the biggest pain points they face in the role? What can we, as legal tech companies, do to foster wider acceptance and adoption of technology? What successful (and unsuccessful) large scale rollouts of technology have they been a part of and what were the learnings and take-aways?

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