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Holland & Hart Wants a Revolution

Firm's recently launched innovation office has sights set high

BY TONY FLESOR
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Holland & Hart isn't looking to change the way the firm does business. They're planning to change the legal industry.

The 70-year-old law firm announced last week that it is taking a solid step into the future by creating an innovation office. The move is rare in the legal industry and even more so in the Denver area. With a dedicated innovation office, as well as the addition of a technology innovation officer, Holland & Hart is putting an emphasis on technology in order to improve attorney efficiency and provide service to clients at a lower cost.

The idea of an innovation office is still new in the legal industry. Few firms have adopted the idea of having an innovation office or officer — in Denver, Bryan Cave's Katie DeBord has the title, and nationally, Dentons and Portland, Oregon-based Stoel Rives list innovation officers among their ranks as well.

The announcement of Holland & Hart's innovation office comes with the announcement that the firm is welcoming a technology innovation officer. Duc Chu joined the firm from First Data Corp., where he was vice president of information technology. Chu heads the office with client innovation officer Paul Ward, who provides the client service perspective to innovation.

Although the firm is now officially launching its innovation office, the move is described more as a formalization of its existing efforts to use technology rather than a first step. The firm has already had a "dev ops" team in its Boulder office working with patent prosecution lawyers. The team has seen success already, partner and firm chair Liz Sharrer said, and the firm is now looking at how to change how it provides services to clients on the whole as well as how to bring in others throughout the law firm.

"That concept — seeing how successful it's been and how that can absolutely change the way services are

delivered — got us asking, 'how can we expand on that? How can we make that more of a market-facing product available to others? And how do we grow that to other areas?'" Sharrer said.

The team points to its past successes in areas ranging from trial graphics to e-discovery as areas where it was an early adopter and now looks to automation to make attorneys more efficient in the future. Simply adopting new technology isn't enough, though. The firm is looking to connect technology and client service.

"We believe the future involves integrated solutions for clients that are much more technologically driven than the way we've been practicing for decades," Sharrer said.

With that goal in mind, the firm brought in Chu, who has experience not only in leading companies in their IT initiatives, but doing so in professional services in the financial and health care industries.

Chu made his transition into the legal world because he saw an industry on the verge of change. "Having a team that is very focused on what I believe is a very stoic, sedate industry, and revolutionizing it, changing it and implementing things that will help move the legal world forward by leaps and bounds is what drew me to this organization," Chu said. "We're not looking at evolution in slow, geologic time. We're looking at putting a catalyst in this and revolutionizing it."

His goal for change isn't on an office or firm level, but an industry level. Sharrer said that through much of her career, the legal industry saw few changes. "We got PCs on our desks finally — that was a big deal — but you still did things the same way." But in the past five years, clients began driving change similar to what has happened in other industries. And client driven change is part of the plan.

Going forward, the innovation office looks to implement iterative changes — experimenting with clients and seeing what is successful and then looking for how those changes can be rolled out



Client innovation officer Paul Ward (left), firm chair Liz Sharrer (middle) and technology innovation officer Duc Chu hope to increase client value through technological innovation. / HANNAH BLATTER, LAW WEEK

to other teams or to the firm as a whole. Ward describes how this is expected to allow the team to stay agile and to stay efficient, in terms of cost, in order to find what is successful.

Ward also said that the team's structure is set up with security in mind. The legal industry's reputation as slow moving is out of concern for client safety. With Ward's career in legal services, Sharrer's oversight and Chu's experience in professional services, the team is moving forward with client service in mind.

"You can take every bit of data we have and put it into a large data warehouse ... and then have any number of different data scientists go through it with AI, and you will have something that comes out of it, but it's absolutely the wrong way of going about doing things," Chu said. "For us, we want to be able to do the right thing for our customers while enabling them to move faster and knowing that we have their security always at the forefront."

And although technology is top of mind, the office is pursuing innovation through non-technological means, as well. Ward said they're also looking at processes in order to find areas where money can be spent more wisely in order to give clients what they need, whether that involves hiring specialized attorneys or using data to pinpoint repetitive areas of the legal work in order to predictively price services.

"That's the future. That combo of

legal expertise with technology and some other component, depending on the need," Ward said.

While concepts like automation and efficiency sound like they're designed to remove the lawyer from legal work, the team said that is not the goal. Chu described the mission of the office as "Repetition, automation, speed and value." Identifying repetitive tasks, finding ways to automate them, reducing the amount of time lawyers need to spend on those tasks and then allowing them to spend that saved time on tasks that provide value to clients.

"I don't think it will ever replace lawyers," Sharrer said. The goal is more to find more efficient ways of doing typically inefficient tasks and to think more creatively about how to price those services. "Yes, do I think overall, the number of people involved in a task will shrink? For some tasks, that's going to be true. But it leaves lawyers and the people who work with them free to do other creative things ... to think through other issues."

While the innovation team has lofty goals in terms of revolutionizing the industry, they see it as a continuation of what they've been doing thus far. For now, it's still early days, though.

"There are more opportunities than we could handle from an automation perspective in any short order," Chu said. "There is plenty of work yet to be done." •

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