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Why a big Denver law firm created an in-house software team

“We are not looking for adoption. We are looking for evolution,” says Holland & Hart’s new technology innovation officer.

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Holland & Hart LLP has hired a techie to head up the Denver-based law firm’s Technology Innovation Center.

His mission is to reinvent how the firm does business – and, maybe along the way, disrupt the entire legal industry.

Duc Chu – who previously was vice president of information technology at First Data Corp. (NYSE: FDC) – will lead a team of more than 20 software engineers and developers at Holland & Hart.

It’s nearly unheard of for law firms to set up technology innovation centers, he said. In fact, volumes have been written about the legal industry’s reluctance to change. Even he shakes his head at the idea of going to work for a law firm.

“When I first heard about the opportunity to work at the firm, two words came to mind: stodgy and sedate,” he said. “But, I was interested in a law firm calling out innovation – that spoke to me about how they wanted to change things in the firm and in the industry. It got me excited.”

“We are not looking for adoption. We are looking for evolution.”

Holland & Hart chair Liz Sharrer admits the legal industry is not known for change. Lawyers, she said, are trained to be conservative and think through worst-case scenarios.

“It’s hard to take the leap – lots of things could go wrong. [Change] does not come easily for lawyers,” she said.

But Sharrer – and the executive committee at the 70-year-old firm – looked around and saw that other industries were leaping into technological futures. And the firm, if it was going to continue to represent these businesses in their industries, had to leap with them, she said.

Clients expect their lawyers and law firms to offer automated tools and other technology solutions that improve efficiencies,



Left to right, Jason Adaska, director of innovation lab; Duc Chu, technology innovation officer; and Liz Sharrer, firm chair at Holland & Hart.

communication and workflows, she said.

She supports that. But she wants more.

“While the firm has already created a number of market-leading technological solutions for clients, we know Duc will build on those successes and take us to the next level in support of the firm’s future business strategy,” she said.

Chu’s team will come up with ways to automate mundane tasks that add efficiency and save time and money for clients, giving lawyers more time to focus on the legal analysis that clients pay for.

But that’s not what makes Chu’s heart beat faster.

“I believe longer term, five and 10 years from now, lawyers will be closer to [software] developers than they would be to attorneys of today,” he said. “Where we are pioneering and

where we are innovating is in the people side of the law – the attorneys, the paralegals. That has the capability of moving us to that next level.”

The firm is not suggesting that robots represent clients in the courtroom, he said. But, he can envision a lawyer being able to crunch and interpret big data, use trial-graphic visuals and make their own 3D print-outs of objects being discussed in court.

Sharrer said everything that gets developed will start with the client – it won’t be cool whiz-bang technology for the sake of technology.

“I think the problems we are trying to solve by bringing this group together are issues facing every law firm. Every firm in the country is trying to figure out how do we do things differently, use technology in a different way.

“It’s a leap for us into a future we need to be in.”