Assisting both lawyers and the clients, SmartLaw builds the case for the use of AI in the legal field

In the future, thanks to AI, SmartLaw believes that the courtroom will see man and machine working side-by-side

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Dr Anton Ravindran, Founder, SmartLaw

The legal field is one where the implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be valuable — and is long-awaited for, considering the challenges faced by both industry players and clients today.

"Nearly half the world has no access to legal systems. Then in most countries where there is access, there is a huge backlog," Dr Anton Ravindran explains to **e27**.

"Thirdly, for most of us, litigation is both expensive and time-consuming," he continues.

Dr Ravindran is the founder of SmartLaw, a Singapore-based legal tech startup that utilises its team's expertise in data science, AI, and machine learning to develop solutions for both lawyers and individuals. In their work, the startup aims to digitalise the legal process to make it more affordable and accessible.

During our call, Dr Ravindran expresses how some lawyers were a bit reluctant when they were first introduced to the concept. "What if I am being replaced by AI?" was a common response.

But Ravindran points out that it will not be the case. "AI and machine learning, amongst other technologies, can mitigate these challenges and move the traditional legal system to online. It is very conceivable that in the near future, lawyers and machine will work side by side and the courtroom becomes man and machine intertwined."

Making legal decisions easier

So how exactly does the SmartLaw platform work? The startup helps law firms or lawyers, as well as the public or the clients, to make a better legal decision by using AI and machine learning.

So far, it has developed two key features –Predictor and eDiscovery– for two areas of law: Criminal and divorce matters.

The Predictor modules predict sentencing outcomes, Dr Ravindran explains. It extracts past precedents and verdicts which are relevant for lawyers to mount their defence.

The eDiscovery module extracts past precedents and verdicts which are relevant for lawyers to mount their defence. All of this process happens in just "split seconds," according to the startup.

It also has ancillary services that provide online access to features such as uncontested divorce, probate, Lasting Power of Attorney, and Deputyship Complex Wills for clients. In the status quo, to have these services done, clients will need to go to a law firm. But the platform enables clients to receive the legal assistance they need at home.

"For clients, when they are faced with a legal issue, they can leverage from legal tech solutions such as ours to decide whether they should pursue a lawsuit or not to resolve the dispute. They can even approach a machine in the first instance for confidentiality reasons, if charged with a criminal offence, by way of example," Dr Ravindran elaborates.

"This is because they can now predict the sentencing or expected outcome of a dispute resolution at the onset of the matter. Secondly, they can leverage from technology to resolve disputes without having to engage lawyers and/or going to court," he continues.

With this, the technology is expected to help lower the cost of legal options and reduce the lead time to resolve disputes.

At the moment, the startup is in the process of developing its third module, which will likely be in medical negligence or construction and real estate.

The past and the future

The idea for the SmartLaw platform came up when Dr Ravindran had a discussion with family and friends –who happen to be lawyers– about the potential of AI and machine learning in addressing the challenges faced by them. These challenges include the lengthy process of reviewing documents and extracting relevant precedents.

"Natural Language Processing (NLP) and semantic analysis can be used to address these issues hence allowing lawyers to spend their valuable time and expertise to focus on the real legal issues and in preparing their defence," he points out.

As a startup founder working in the intersection between tech and the law, Dr Ravindran believes that founders should work hand-in-hand with the experts.

"There are inherent complexities in the field of law and to develop solutions we must appreciate the nuances of the law, so that we can make the machine understand these nuances," he explains.

At the moment, SmartLaw is self-funding its operations for the past nine months and Dr Ravindran intends for it to "skip the first few steps" startups typically take to raise funds.

"We intend to develop the product, acquire clients before we look for the valuation of the company, and its future funding needs. Our focus is on product development and we will then be open to various strategic options, including a strategic alliance with law firms and/or VCs for further growth," he elaborates.

The company's next big plan is to explore other disciplines with the legal system as well as to regionalise its offerings by including the law from a jurisdiction other than Singapore.

"The pandemic, on one hand, has caused some delays in the progress as we wanted to regionalise our offerings and adopt other jurisdictions. But on the other hand, legal tech has probably got a shot in the arm because of COVID-19, as courts have moved to Zoom or online in that sense," Dr Ravindran says.

"Technology is probably the only winner in this pandemic. If not for technology, many functions of society would have been paralysed," he closes.

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Image Credit: SmartLaw

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