

Alston & Bird Partners With Georgia State University on Legal Analytics | Legaltech News

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Georgia State University College of Law. (Photo: John Disney/ALM)

Alston & Bird is headed back to school. The Atlanta-based firm is partnering with the Legal Analytics Lab at Georgia State University to receive some hands-on tutoring in data analytics and related tools such as machine learning and text mining. In return, the firm's attorneys will guest-lecture in graduate-level classes and participate in analytics programs on campus.

Beyond the mutual educational value, the partnership grants Alston some independence from the whims of the legal tech marketplace, where attorneys can sometimes be at the mercy of vendors. As law schools dive deeper into the technology sphere, a symbiotic relationship with firms could combine the practical experience and scientific exploration needed to refine the next generation of legal technology.

While Alston won't be turning its back on third-party analytics products any time soon, the firm's senior director of legal technology innovation Nola Vanhoy said they are looking to dive a bit deeper with their approach to tech.

"I don't think we just want to limit ourselves to waiting for the market to try and deliver to us. We want to think more about it," Vanhoy said.

Alston had a preexisting relationship with GSU that included internships with students who had a strong background in analytics. Fresh blood—even temporary fresh blood—helped keep the firm abreast of technological developments and other potential advances worth watching.

Vanhoy said the presence of those people kept Alston fresh. Without an influx of new ideas or concepts, it's easy for a business to fall into a rut.

"People who work together all start using the same kinds of tools together and we do things a standard way. Every business does," Vanhoy said.

Fortunately there doesn't appear to be a shortage of tech-savvy law students approaching any time soon. In December, Legaltech News reported on first legal analytics course held at the University of Kansas School of Law, where students got to try their hand at solving complex problems with data analysis and artificial intelligence tools. A similar effort involving AI and text mining was undertaken at Columbia University last fall with the legal tech startup Evisort.

As for GSU, the school's Legal Analytics Lab is a collaboration between the university's College of Law and Institute for Insight, a data analytics unit based out of the J. Mack Robinson College of Business.

Per Charlotte Alexander, an associate professor of legal studies in the Department of Risk Management and Insurance, the institute routinely does what it calls "sprints," which are really just opportunities for faculty and students to work with outside corporations or law firms on real-life problems. Finding a willing partner has never been an issue.

Alexander thinks that because law schools exist separately from some of the day-to-day business demands that drive law firms or tech vendors, they can focus on "bench science," a.k.a. the scientific research experimentation that's being used to generate new insights into legal tech.

"A university doesn't have the pressure of bringing a tool to market like a startup might, and so we're able to really experiment at the cutting edge of what analytics might be able to do in analyzing judges' opinions, for example. We're able to push the limits and really serve as a laboratory," Alexander said.

On the flip side, relationships with a law firm can provide university-based researchers with a working knowledge of how analytics are being applied practically by lawyers and their clients. Vahnoy said Alston has previously looped the institute in on cases involving clients who are interested in leveraging analytics to better understand their own business practices or litigation history.

As for the firm itself, the training from GSU could help attorneys gain a better handle on everything from variables that could impact trial outcomes to how many people are actually opening their client advisory emails.

Vahnoy expects to see more team-ups between firms and law schools in the future.

“I think other law firms will catch on. They’ll go, ‘Wait, why aren’t we doing something like this?’” Vanhoy said.

<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2019/02/08/alston-bird-partners-with-georgia-state-university-on-legal-analytics/>