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Why Are So Many In-House Professionals Joining AI Contract Startups?

They helped transform the legal departments at Microsoft, Google and Hewlett-Packard. But now they're looking to make a bigger impact on corporate law by joining legal tech disruptors.

By Rhys Dipshan | September 21, 2018

Flush with investment cash, artificial intelligence (AI) contract technology providers like [Seal](#)



(<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/06/25/seal-software-secures-30-million-in-latest-ai-contract-market-investment/>), Software and [LawGeex](#)

(<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/04/18/contract-review-tool-lawgeex-takes-12m-in-series-b-funding/>) have started staffing their ranks with former corporate

counsel, legal operations professionals and in-house technologists from some of the biggest technology companies around, including Microsoft, Google and Hewlett-Packard.

So what's behind this recent migration to the legal AI startup scene? For many former corporate professionals, it's all about the desire to have a hand in shaping the future of legal operations and to work in more creative and fast-paced environment.

Lucy Bassli, Microsoft's former assistant general counsel who became chief legal strategist at LawGeex in February, [told](https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/sites/legaltechnews/2018/02/20/more-than-a-magical-automation-answer-former-microsoft-agc-on-her-move-to-lawgeex/) (<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/sites/legaltechnews/2018/02/20/more-than-a-magical-automation-answer-former-microsoft-agc-on-her-move-to-lawgeex/>) Legaltech News that she moved to the AI company to help legal departments turn innovative ideas into reality.

"I hope to be able to inspire a lot of companies who LawGeex plans to engage and is already engaging with to think of holistic solutions and think about the best way to implement the technology within the totality of their resources, both human and technological."

A desire to take a hands-on role in helping legal departments innovate also pushed Nicole Arbiv, who worked in various legal operations roles at Hewlett-Packard Enterprises for over a decade, to join LawGeex as its onboarding director in April 2018.

"For me, it was really around the notion that legal tech has become the up-and-coming thing that is driving the change of the legal profession, and you really see the true impact we are able to have on the legal profession as a whole," she said.

To be sure, the AI contract market is a competitive space, and corporate professionals are discerning in joining only the startups they believe will have the biggest impact on the legal industry.

[Dave Pasirstein](https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/09/14/a-pharma-tech-leader-sets-his-sights-on-disrupting-legal/) (<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/09/14/a-pharma-tech-leader-sets-his-sights-on-disrupting-legal/>), who was the director of the in-house tech incubator lab Horizon 3 at pharmaceutical company Merck, for instance, joined Seal Software in August as its new vice president of pharma, life sciences and health care. He said he did so because he believed in the company's vision.

"It's a rapidly growing company with some outstanding existing technology and a vision that, if we're all executing on all cylinders, can really change the legal tech space," he told [Legaltech News](https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/09/14/a-pharma-tech-leader-sets-his-sights-on-disrupting-legal/) (<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/09/14/a-pharma-tech-leader-sets-his-sights-on-disrupting-legal/>).

The sentiment was shared by his colleague, [Julian Tsinin](https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/08/31/former-google-legal-tech-manager-dishes-on-move-to-seal-software/) (<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/08/31/former-google-legal-tech-manager-dishes-on-move-to-seal-software/>), who was senior program manager of legal technology at Google before becoming vice president of legal at Seal in August. Tsinin believes Seal's recent [acquisition](https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/07/19/seal-solutions-acquires-apogee-legal-ramping-up-analytics-legal-industry-footing/) (<https://www.law.com/legaltechnews/2018/07/19/seal-solutions-acquires-apogee-legal-ramping-up-analytics-legal-industry-footing/>) of Apogee Legal and its subsequent addition of legal subject matter experts in-house will be a key differentiator in Seal making change a reality in the legal industry.

Of course, there are other reasons besides wanting to impact legal's future that can factor in a corporate legal professional's decision to jump ship.

Stuart Brock, who was previously senior vice president and assistant GC at Bank of America Corp. before becoming a director at Apogee Legal in 2017 and Seal in 2018, said the top reason he wanted to join a legal tech startup was creativity. "I am a creative [person], and I have much broader options available to me in this industry versus in corporate America."

While he had to be somewhat creative in figuring out how to manage legal risk at his in-house job at Bank of America, Brock noted he still felt he was "just repeating the same processes over and over again."

Working at Seal, however “is very different,” Brock said, explaining that he is now working with legal departments to help them understand how to implement contract technology in their operations. Since each client’s demands, goals and resources differ, the approach he takes differs each time.

For LawGeex’s Arbiv, it wasn’t so much the creativity that she enjoyed out of her new job as it was the faster and more streamlined workflow.

“If I’m speaking with a client and they’re telling me there’s something in the product they would like to see ... I can turn to the product team, which sits behind me, and ask them to get it done,” she said, adding, “I just love how quickly we could get things done.”

Indeed, Shmuli Goldberg, LawGeex’s vice president of marketing, said the ability to really have an impact on legal and work at a faster pace is a big part of the pitch his company makes to in-house professionals thinking about joining their team. “The message I try to convey is that by working in-house you are working for a company which is typically, but not always, relatively slow moving.”

Whether more in-house professionals soon fill more positions in AI contracting startups remains to be seen. But given how many of these startups are focusing more on in-house clients for their technology, it’s likely they will want more people in their own offices who understand exactly what legal departments want and how they work.

“We believe the in-house market is one that is a lot receptive to efficiency and automation than law firms,” Goldberg said. “And our goal always has been and always will be to get the best possible products for our customers.”

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