

2018 Hawaii Access to Justice Conference
“Fighting for Access to Justice for All”
Friday, June 29, 2018

Workshop summary:¹

“Incubating Innovation in Access to Justice Through Technology: The Microsoft Legal Access Platform”

Presenters: Nalani Fujimori Kaina, Executive Director, Legal Aid Society of Hawai‘i (facilitator); Carly Ichiki, Senior Program Manager, Microsoft Corporation; Suzanne Brown-McBride

Nalani Fujimori Kaina, Executive Director of Legal Aid Society of Hawaii and the state’s lead on this project, opened the session by introducing the key public/private partnerships involved in the development of the Microsoft legal Access Platform (“Platform”). Microsoft and the Pew Charitable Trusts (“Pew”) were represented by panelists Carly Ichiki and Suzanne Brown-McBride respectively. In joining the team, Pew identified this project as a promising area where their charitable investment in civil justice and focus on scalable solutions like technology would make a lasting impact. Kaina briefed session attendees that the two states selected to participate in this pilot phase, Hawaii and Alaska, pose a unique governance angle as they represent very different types of grantees: a non-profit legal services organization, Legal Aid Society of Hawaii, and a public judicial entity, the State of Alaska Court System.

Enlightening the audience of the project mission to connect people to local, legal, and human resources, using AI and machine learning principles that will learn, and dynamically evolve over time, to meet the needs of the people we serve, Kaina expressed the magnitude and need of such a groundbreaking initiative. She went on to cite a national study on access to justice conducted by ABF faculty fellow, of which findings suggested that 80% of people who actually have a legal problem don’t seek assistance because they don’t know where to go, they don’t know how to access assistance, they face barriers of trust and other issues that come into play when trying to get help. The idea of the Platform is that it can be “some place for most people to go to at least get a starting point and foot in the door about where to go next.”

Ichiki, lead Project Manager with Microsoft, a major partner committed to providing funding, technical support, and project management services for this project, shared the replicable approach of developing the Platform and envisioning its long-term benefits. Ichiki talked through some of the main guiding principles that Microsoft has prioritized in this process including creating a single access point that can be used anytime, anywhere, and across devices, utilizing artificial intelligence wherein the system learns and gets

smarter over time, connecting statewide resources and local providers through integration to surface solutions for multi-dimensional legal issues, storing data in large silos in the cloud, defining personalized solutions for user scenarios through curated experiences, and providing greater transparency and step-by-step information for court and non-court solutions.

What exactly is artificially intelligence? AI is what machines use to show capabilities similar to human intelligence: reasoning, understanding, and interacting. Ichiki demystified this technical buzzword explaining that machines learn and form conclusions with incoming data; they interpret meaning of that data; and they interact with people in ways typically associated with human intelligence. Specific to this project, there are three aspects of AI that Microsoft is employing in the backend of the system: LUIS (Language Understanding Intelligent Services); Azure Cosmos Db; and Bing Custom Search. LUIS is natural language processing that will assist the Platform in determining a user's intent or legal inquiry based on his/her description of the issue. Azure Cosmos Db is a case management warehouse that stores smart information such as the curated experiences and their relationship to keywords like "eviction" or "divorce." When an intent is mapped through LUIS and gets a match through Azure Cosmos Db, the system surfaces the associated curated content. If the mapped intent doesn't get a match (the system doesn't know what the user is asking for), the secondary route to surfacing information is through Bing Custom Search, a search based on a list of trusted sites determined by the Hawaii and Alaska partners.

Consistent with the conference theme, session attendees were curious about language nuances and how the system might account for the use of "pidgin English." Ichiki stressed that the Platform will run on a machine that learns and is trained by the data it receives, and if exposed to certain terminology over time, it will theoretically be able to pick up on these unique language distinctions. Brown-McBride from Pew chimed in to address a few more audience inquiries around the scope of the system and its ultimate aim. In a field that is already strapped for resources, Brown-McBride explained that the Platform is really meant to identify and hone in on a short list of steps and resources for folks to get a focused handle on proactively resolving their legal issue.

Ichiki shared the timeline, origins, current status, and future looks at the project. After a series of events including a requirements gathering workshop, project planning, immersion study, a design ideation workshop and usability study, the technical team is currently at work on the design build phase that is slated for a beta launch at the end of the 2018. The pilot launch will take place after evaluations and findings at the end of Quarter 1 of 2019. Following a period of further testing, Quarter 2 of 2019 will make way for a transfer of knowledge, expansion, and replication across states.

Looking back since the project kick-off in Quarter 4 of 2017, panelists shared highlights from the immersion study and ideation workshop, which comprised of community navigators, potential Platform users, and subject matter experts. With the backdrop of inclusive design (one of Microsoft's core methodologies of creating a product that meets everyone's needs) used in the development of the Platform, these activities helped to define and prioritize user needs and wants, the look and feel of the site, and pathways users can follow to find solutions. Following a period of design sprints engaging broader community partners, the mockup of the site includes three high level pathways: a guided assistant that corresponds to the curated content being mapped by Hawaii and Alaska, a search by topic option, and a general search function.

The main challenge of the project has been and continues to be seamless communication between two worlds that speak very different languages. Merging the legal and technology fields has been a uniquely confusing yet exhilarating experience for all panelists. Likewise, Ichiki closed by recognizing that the process has been very collaborative in nature across all of the partners. The progress made and future launch are testaments to what amazing outcomes can be achieved when a group of people from diverging backgrounds come together with a common vision.

¹ A draft was prepared by Kara Doles, Technology Project Coordinator, Legal Aid Society of Hawaii and reviewed by the presenters.