

Business & Careers

Lawyers see need, design legal software



Luigi Benetton
Hi-Tech

Here's a recipe for change: Take one motivated, tech-inclined lawyer. Mix well with needlessly time-consuming tasks. Let frustration simmer. Throw in software development talent. Expected result: a start-up software company serving the legal industry. That's the recipe that baked three recent Canadian start-ups and their products.

Asim Iqbal, for instance, found himself spending countless hours manually creating books of authorities. So he and a software developer friend founded Blue Cloud App Inc. (boa.legal) and developed Easy BOA.

Brennan Sacevich frequently explores different sentencing scenarios for clients charged with criminal offences. He uses variables like age, date of offence and time served in custody. "It's at least 10 minutes of math in any criminal case," he says of what-if scenario work that would be familiar to spreadsheet jockeys. Jailbird, published by sacevichlawapps.com, turns phones and tablets into calculators to speed up these calculations.

Sahil Zaman left law practice to tackle the mess that is management of transactional documents. "E-mails and attachments were flying all over the place," he says of his articling days, so he developed Closing Folders (published by closingfolders.com) to be like

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Sahil Zaman
Closing Folders

"MS Outlook, MS Project and MS SharePoint rolled into one intuitive package for transactional lawyers."

As with Iqbal, both Sacevich's and Zaman's ideas needed a coder's help to get off the ground. Sacevich's cousin, Nicholas Sacevich, is a high school principal with a technology background (and two months during the summer of 2015 he used to start developing Jailbird). Zaman partnered with Gordon Cassie, another ex-lawyer and veteran of technology start-ups. Both Sacevich and Zaman call their partners the "brains" of the operation.

These developers create most features in-house, but sometimes they must integrate with outside systems. "We reached out to persuade CanLII to let Easy BOA use their API (application program interface)," Iqbal says. Zaman's clients told him that their clients wanted to use DocuSign, so Closing Folders acquired DocuSign certification.

Getting other lawyers to try new software can be a lengthy process. It took about six

months from the company's inception before Zaman could get another lawyer to try Closing Folders, and another 12 before other lawyers would pay to use it.

Sacevich finds some lawyers are leery of apps like Jailbird, though once they try it, they realize no app can replace lawyers. "It's only a calculator, but it does a lot," he says.

While the coders continue to develop the products, the lawyers demonstrate them to potential clients. Iqbal released a beta version of Easy BOA to the firm where he practices as an associate. Later, he started to present the software to other firms (often during lunch hours) where he had connections, all with the blessing of his bosses at his day job.

The lawyer in the start-up ought to demo if Iqbal's experience is any indication. "I'm a practising lawyer who assembles books of authorities," he says. He has seen receptivity tick up a few notches when his audiences perceive his deep understanding of what they do.

Business software developers want to create "sticky" products that become as much a part of the client's workflow as the computer or other device it runs on. That can mean focusing on doing one thing well, thus keeping complexity to a minimum.

The author verified the simplicity of both Jailbird and Easy BOA. Closing Folders is more involved, so Zaman or one of his staff provides after-sales training and support to help customers get comfortable with the system. "Training, expensive as it is, is worth every penny," he says.

Training and demos provide software entrepreneurs with immediate feedback from people who might not otherwise communicate with the developer. Iqbal claims to learn more during demos than from support messages. "Many firms want their own branding on their documents," he says, noting this demand may drive a value-added service. He's also encouraged by the quantity of manual work that still goes into preparing court documents; it spells opportunity for technology entrepreneurs to streamline this work by developing and marketing new systems.

It's not just desired features developers

hear about. Zaman changed the name of his product once he learned that people used "Closing Folders" for both the product and the company. "It was CF Dealroom," he explains, noting that he considered developing other products under the CF umbrella.

Zaman classifies clients into several categories. Some absolutely love the product and communicate often to help him and his team improve it. Others just use it but don't provide feedback. Another camp resists even trying the system.

"We wasted a lot of cycles trying to convince people (in the third camp) to use it," he recalls. "We finally realized it's better to service the people who love your product, to make them love it more."

That focus pays unexpected dividends. "By not trying to convert people who didn't want to use us, we converted a few of them," he says.

A software business can weigh down the lawyers involved, especially if they continue to moonlight. Sacevich, who divides his time between Sacevich Law Office, Sacevich Law Apps and his family, recalls the feedback flood unleashed when Jailbird appeared in beta. "At one point we felt overwhelmed with all the features people wanted," he says.

To maintain balance, Sacevich leverages the mobile nature of his work and his ability to keep odd hours. "Using a traditional business model for a law practice wouldn't work," he states, then admits, "Sometimes I don't get enough sleep."

Iqbal faces a similar "lifeload" with Blue Cloud Apps, his full-time job and young family. He doesn't have much of a social life, getting together with friends to kick back. "Something's gotta give," says Iqbal.

For all the extra work they've brought upon themselves, none of the three entrepreneurs would have it any other way. "When we started the company, we had a sense of purpose," Zaman says. "We weren't just shuffling documents for faceless organizations."

"I like how the apps help people change their practice, become more efficient," Sacevich says. "It's paid off to see that we have the finished product."

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