

Seyfarth Develops Firm Science Fair to 'Drive Innovating Thinking'

By Andrew Maloney

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The race to develop cutting-edge ideas in tech and AI doesn't need to be complicated. Some law firms are turning to plain old competition within their own firms to generate innovation.

Seyfarth Shaw, No. 59 in the Am Law 200, held a literal science fair among firm employees in 2024 to solicit ideas, invest in a winning project it deemed useful, and ultimately "drive innovative thinking" throughout the firm, its leader said.

Plenty of firms are already developing new AI tech internally with hopes of wider use in the near future. Others have "reinvented" aspects of certain practices with internal tools that are powering more growth.

Seyfarth itself has a renewed push for innovation, leaning on its history of project management and process improvement to hire and allocate resources toward generative AI and other tools that can streamline work for lawyers and their clients.

This particular initiative, known at the firm as "SEYence Fair," was inspired by partners whose children were actually participating in school science fairs, firm chair Lorie Almon said. It quickly developed into an open call for projects that netted about 59 submissions from 84 total employees, ranging from partners to associates



Photo: John Disney/ALM

and professional staff, aimed at identifying a challenge the firm and/or its clients faced, and designing a workable solution.

Those partners as well as the firm's leaders "thought this would be a really interesting way to drive innovative thinking throughout the law firm," Almon said in an interview this fall.

Participants got about two months to come up with their ideas. Much like a school-sponsored fair, they weren't allowed to get expert help from the outside. There were multiple rounds of judging, in part because there were dozens of projects to consider. And some projects were similar enough that they were combined into joint submissions. Prizes included tech-related items like

solar-powered speakers and Apple air tags, plus gift certificates, state fair-style ribbons and a trophy for the top prize.

The projects didn't have to be fully functional to be submitted, just written proposals, Almon said, but ones that had quite a bit of detail.

"We asked them not only to come up with the idea, but how would you do it? What's it going to cost to do it? What kind of technology or skillsets would it require, to the extent you can answer that?" she recalled. "So they were pretty well-baked ideas by the time they got to us."

Some of the projects Almon noted included an AI-assisted pre-bill review tool, designed to ensure compliance with outside counsel guidelines, an AI-enhanced playbook for client/deal teams and on-demand contextualized guidance and training for associates.

She said there was no requirement that the tools use AI, though "a very solid majority" of them did, including all the finalists and the ultimate winner: a "scraping" tool that can target and collect information from multiple sources and aggregate it in a consistent and readily-understood manner.

Bots and other tools used to scrape websites or documents have existed for a while. But they usually take a lot of time to program or otherwise set up, and often the data sources are so specific, they need to constantly be studied and refined to be used again.

"So this is where AI, when really well-trained, combined with the bots, can do something very different," Almon said. "It can read 100 websites, all of which might be different, formatted differently, and pull the information the way a human could." She said the tool is being developed by Seyfarth Labs, its internal team of tech-fluent lawyers and engineers, and that it could be ready to use by early 2025.

But Almon said the fair is just as much about the process as the end product.

"As corny as 'SEYence Fair' sounds on some level, ideas like this are very important culturally to Seyfarth," Almon said, adding: "Your clients want you to look around the corner, help them solve their problems. And to get that, you have to have a culture that encourages collaboration, encourages thinking outside the box, and understands you can pilot and try things, and sometimes they won't work, sometimes they will work. I think we've done a good job of encouraging that culture at Seyfarth. But you have to nurture it every day."

Seyfarth's program stands out for its wide competition among lawyers and professional staff to generate innovative ideas.

But the law firm isn't the only one using an internal tournament to support innovation. Organizations like Diversity Lab have hosted hackathon-like events with law firm partners and corporate counsel leaders to crowdsource solutions.

Law firms have also hosted competitions among summer associates to generate ideas.

For instance, in recent years, Hunton Andrews Kurth sidelined its typical summer associate program for a firmwide virtual hackathon, aimed at solving the problem of young lawyer attrition. Ropes & Gray organized a summer associate hackathon to brainstorm the future of corporate compliance. And Dechert programmed a three-round competition that involved summer associates using generative AI to answer traditional law school issue-spotter fact patterns.

"We got so much knowledge out of people trying things in a competitive environment," said Thor Alden earlier this year, who was then associate director of innovation at Dechert.