

Pioneers and Pathfinders: Fourth Anniversary

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Steve Poor

Hi. This is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

Welcome to a special edition of Pioneers and Pathfinders. We're celebrating our fourth anniversary of the podcast. Now, before we dive into today's episode, I want to take a moment to express my deep gratitude. First, to all of you who listen to this podcast. Your engagement, feedback, and curiosity are what make this community so special. I also want to thank our incredible guests over the years who've been so generous in sharing their time, their insights, and their bold ideas. And of course, a special thanks to the Seyfarth team that supports the podcast, especially our producer Ethan Lapitan, whose behind-the-scenes work makes these conversations possible. Finally, I want to take a moment to honor Molly Porter, who stood beside me when we launched this podcast four years ago. Her passing was far too soon, a loss that still weighs heavily on us. But Molly was more than a co-founder. She was a driving force, a wellspring of creativity, a legal pioneer, and a fierce advocate for elevating innovative voices. Her spirit continues to guide and inspire everything we do here. Molly, we miss you deeply, and this episode is dedicated to your memory, your vision, and the incredible mark you left on all of us. Now, as we look back, one thing stands out: Our guests come from a wonderfully diverse set of backgrounds--it's been one of the objectives of our podcast. But they have all shared a common thread, a belief that the legal profession can and must evolve to meet the challenges and opportunities of our time.

So, let's start at the beginning with a foundational belief that came up time and time again: There's tremendous room for improvement in how we practice law and deliver legal services and serve our clients. Former Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court and now CEO of the American Arbitration Association, Bridget Mary McCormick, who, by the way, is putting on a master class in innovation and change management at an established, successful organization. Anyway, she put it bluntly:

Bridget Mary McCormick

Even in the business of law today, without any disruption from the new technological innovation that we're going to be seeing, there's a lot of room to do better. And just because you're doing well compared to lots of others, doesn't mean there's not a lot more upside potential.

Steve Poor

That sense of opportunity was echoed by Dean Andrew Perlman of Suffolk Law School, who framed this interestingly, as an incredibly exciting time to enter the profession.

Andrew Perlman

I might be biased here as the dean of a law school, but I think there's never been a more exciting time to think about going into the legal profession. Anyone who's interested in making a difference and

embracing change ... This is the moment. And it's not just technology. It's not just the innovative ways of delivering legal services, like we've been talking about. But I also believe lawyers are going to be at the forefront of so many pressing issues that we're facing in society. Lawyers are the people who really are at the forefront in protecting values that are critical to all of us.

Steve Poor

Now, of course, capturing that upside potential means embracing change and technology is a huge part of that equation. As Marla Crawford, General Counsel at Cimplifi, reminded us the legal profession's relationship with technology has never been linear.

Marla Crawford

Sometimes we make a step forward and a step back. Sometimes we do something fantastic, and then it loses its funding. Sometimes we bump against somebody who is a skeptic. But I think that it's prudent to just keep going on this path, because history has shown us that technology is here to stay, and the more you adopt it and the more you learn it and are a champion of it, the more successful you'll be in the long run.

Steve Poor

But innovation can't just be about technology. Another recurring theme was well being and the need to prioritize the human beings behind all the innovation. Heidi Alexander, executive director of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Standing Committee on lawyer well being, quite the mouthful, I know. Put it this way:

Heidi Alexander

There's also a huge movement in the profession to focus on mindfulness and how we can be present and how we can focus and tune out all those other things. And that also impacts the way that we respond to people—not as emotionally, not taking on our clients' emotions, and not responding emotionally to an adversary. I think it's a really difficult subject that we haven't exactly figured out how to address.

Steve Poor

It was also refreshing to hear some of our guests flip the narrative, reminding us that technology doesn't have to be a threat to well being in fact, it can support it. Kris Niedringhaus, Associate Dean at Georgia State University Law School, highlighted that potential.

Kris Niedringhaus

It's great to learn technology, so you can be that person in your firm who's the expert in technology, and you can help that way. But you can also think about how you might be able to use technology to make your life better as an attorney so that you don't have to spend as much time working, and you can make choices and have a different work-life balance than maybe you've originally thought about.

Steve Poor

Another related theme that came up over and over again was the importance of community and belonging, particularly as more lawyers work remotely or in hybrid environments. Denise Robinson, Founding Principal at The Still Center, made the connection clear.

Denise Robinson

We cannot be well—at least not in a meaningful way, in a holistic way—if we're missing the piece of belonging, if we're missing the work of helping people feel included. I think that they are necessary for one another to exist.

Steve Poor

Leah Molatseli, founder of Contract Alchemist in South Africa, offered a complimentary perspective, focusing on how community fuels professional growth.

Leah Molatseli

With community, what you get is a sense of belonging, which is important, especially in our career. Law can be extremely lonely. It's also important, just from a professional growth perspective, because once you start sharing ideas, start sharing strategies, there's a way that it actually helps the community around how to maneuver certain things. What the legal tech community has done well though here locally is exactly that—a sense of collaboration, that form of comradeship, looking out for each other, sharing opportunities, and all of that.

Steve Poor

What is clear is that innovation can't happen in isolation. Whether it's building networks within firms, creating legal tech communities, or fostering stronger peer connections, collaboration and belonging are essential parts of the innovation process. Closely related to community is the question of purpose, a recurring theme among guests who stepped off the traditional legal career path to pursue something more meaningful to them. As Kimberly Fine, co founder of ex judicata, put it:

Kimberly Fine

People need to have a way to move forward. We get one life. You don't want to spend it being miserable. So, if you're such an accomplished person that you've earned a JD and have the expertise that the legal industry brings, why not take all of those tools and move them or pivot to a different job where there might be more passion and purpose?

Steve Poor

This diversification of opportunity puts the profession at an enormously exciting moment used correctly, the use of advanced technology can give people paths forward that enhance their work lives, whether they're practicing law, developing solutions, looking to help solve the A2J crisis, or in other parts of the profession. Given the rapid advance of technology, however, the profession is grappling with the human-technology relationship. Nicole Morris, professor at Emory University School of Law, made the following observation:

Nicole Morris

Not all law firms are built alike. You have some firms that are embracing the technology and use of it within their associate practice or within the practice at the firms. So, it's an easy transition if I teach you how to use generative AI to do some legal writing, some research, some other things. I know you will elevate that when you get to the law firm. Not everyone is leaning into the technology in the same way. So, we're in a storm, and I think we'll get through the storm because we have to ... Because clients are going to mandate it. Legal departments don't have the constraints that law firms do, so they're going to use technology as they need to be more efficient. So, we're just working out the kinks right now, I think.

Steve Poor

There's no question but that the opportunities for the use of legal tech is tremendously exciting. Ned Gannon, co-founder and CEO of Coheso, expressed it this way:

Ned Gannon

I've never been more excited about the opportunities in legal tech. I think if you're a technologist, an engineer, there's few industries where you can have as great an impact as within legal. And then for folks that are like myself, attorneys by training, I think the domain expertise is now more critical than ever because you really want to be developing products that are going to add value for attorneys, and not just be AI in search of a problem, but really have a problem that's been scoped out within an attorney workflow, and then apply the technology to address that.

Steve Poor

Okay, so, we're excited about the evolution of technology. That's not new news, but how do we think about the intersection with humans? The profession is still largely a human enterprise, and we need people in the loop, not just because of the current deficiencies in the technology, but because it is our innate human characteristics that inform and enrich the revision of legal advice. As Sanjay Kamlani, founder and CEO of Maker5 and a pioneer in the offshore professional support services industry, noted:

Sanjay Kamlani

Business folks need solutions that include a combination of a legal expert—a lawyer—using automation tools to do the work in a much more efficient way: more comprehensive, high quality, and much lesser cost. Because they can spend much less time doing the work. I think most of the market is focused on automating law and not really taking into account the need for a solution that combines the attorney, a new kind of workflow process, and the automation tools.

Steve Poor

There's a profound shift happening across profession for a long time. Certainly, when I started, a law degree meant one thing, you practice law today, legal careers are more flexible and creative than ever before, something we saw reflected in so many of our guests personal stories to fully embrace this moment of change. However, our guests reminded us that lawyers themselves need to rethink how they approach problem solving. Several highlighted the value of design thinking, an approach that places human needs and creativity at the center of innovation, the need to think of ourselves in a broader, more holistic way, as Ilona Logvinova, currently Director of Practice Innovation at Cleary, so eloquently put it:

Ilona Logvinova

Design thinking teaches us a way of framing a problem statement. And through framing that problem statement, we are focused on the human at the center of that problem statement. I think, as lawyers, we tend to not think in these ways. We don't think of ourselves as designers. We don't think of ourselves as content creators. But we are all of those things. And the more that we assert that and that we practice that and take that shape, I think the better off we'll be and the better off our clients will be too.

Steve Poor

Steve Harmon, COO and general counsel at Elevate, also challenged us to rethink perfectionism, the ingrained lawyer mindset that can sometimes be innovations, biggest barrier.

Steve Harmon

Every system has an error rate. Part of the challenge is lawyers often don't view themselves as part of a system. Every system may have an error rate, but if you ask an individual lawyer what their acceptable error rate is, the answer is zero. Lawyers need to remember that we are part of a system. We're not an island. We can't measure ourselves that way, and we need to remind our clients that it's not in their best interest to measure ourselves that way.

Steve Poor

Now, if lawyers need new skills and new mindsets, that transformation has to start early, which brought us to several fascinating conversations about legal education. Zack DeMeola, Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives at LSAC, highlighted a fundamental disconnect.

Zack DeMeola

We know concretely what it is that lawyers need to be successful in practice, to be effective for their clients. Are we teaching to those things? And the answer to that is no, because we created a model for education that predated all of this evidence and all this other assessment of what we were able to do in later years. Education has had to react to the circumstances around us in society, but it has done so slowly, and it hasn't really ever truly transformed the framework. Instead, we've been playing within the framework that we inherited ... That emphasis on thinking like a lawyer—It's not that that isn't important; it's that it's not the only thing. And law schools are having a tough time understanding how to integrate these other things to really transform legal education.

Steve Poor

Damien Riehl, Vice President at vLex, had a similar case for blending liberal arts thinking with legal education.

Damien Riehl

The whole point of a liberal arts education is to connect disparate topics, and to be able to make connections where other people don't necessarily see connections. So as large language models are able to write at a postgraduate level, and maybe be able to do science better than scientists can do it, we need our liberal arts education more than ever. We need the creative thinking, the connecting of

disparate things, music plus science, plus mathematics, plus law, plus the other social sciences to make these kinds of connections that large language models and others can't yet make. But for a while, we can use the liberal arts to be able to make those otherwise unknown disparate connections.

Steve Poor

The wonderful Jordan Furlong went further, as he often does, challenging legal education to think far beyond the traditional three-year model.

Jordan Furlong

Why are you forcing everybody to spend three years gathering knowledge which only represents a percentage of what they're actually going to need? But also, are there other ways they could get this knowledge? Are there other places that they could go? Are there organizations or entities or other providers who might be able to give people this knowledge that they don't already have? Can they deliver the competence to the person who needs it to become a lawyer? That question alone—really considering it just shakes the foundation of everything we've been doing in lawyer formation for decades.

Steve Poor

And finally, Jen Leonard, founder of Creative Lawyers, put it simply: creativity matters.

Jennifer Leonard

I don't think many lawyers think of creativity as being important at all...I think the future requires us to teach creativity the way that we teach other curricular aspects of what we're doing to prepare people for the profession...And I also love helping lawyers reconnect with their own humanity. We are all naturally creative at birth. We do things our whole lives that bring us joy just for the sake of doing it. And I think the further you get into the profession, starting in law school, the more we get away from it, because we just don't have the time to engage in it. Engaging this other side of our brain not only feels good and elevates our well-being, but actually can help us respond to what is a really nebulous future.

Steve Poor

Which raises the question, what role does technology itself play in the teaching process. We had a fascinating conversation with Dr. Megan Ma, professor at Stanford Law School, and Associate Director of CodeX, about the work they are doing to use AI to train lawyers beyond simply technical programming skills. She described the challenges in the following way:

Dr. Megan Ma

There's always been a gap between law school and practice. In law school, you focus on the analytical skills, the critical thinking. You're taught to think in edge cases, and then you get to the law firm, and you're faced with brute force, just by the sheer volume of the same type of work that you're doing. And I'm trying to hit two birds with one stone, where not only are you teaching them how to use these tools, but you're teaching them in a way that actually hones their legal skills.

Steve Poor

Now there's a reason we call this podcast *Pioneers and Pathfinders*, because every guest who joins us is helping carve out a new future for the legal profession, whether they're exploring well being, technology, diversity, or legal education reform, they're showing that the future of law won't be shaped by single innovation, but by a collection of people willing to challenge old assumptions. As we wrap up this look-back, one thing is clear: the legal profession is in a moment of profound change. Technology is reshaping how we work. Leadership is being redefined, and talent development is evolving to meet new demands. The conversations we've had on *Pioneers and Pathfinders* reflect both the challenges and incredible opportunities ahead. What stands out most to me, though, is that innovation in law isn't about technology alone, or leadership alone, or education alone. It's about weaving all of these threads together into a profession that's more responsive, more inclusive, and more creative. What our guests made clear is that there's no single innovation that will transform law. The future belongs to those who can combine technology, well-being, inclusion, creative thinking and education reform into a more human, more effective profession. The great Richard Susskind summed up this moment perfectly.

Richard Susskind

The best technologies still await us. We're in the grand arc of human history, and our work in information technology, in the broadest sense. We are very much at the beginning of the story,

Steve Poor

And that's what keeps me excited to host this show and to bring you conversations with the pioneers and pathfinders who are driving that change. Thanks for joining us for this special retrospective episode, and as always, we'll be back next week with more insights from the trailblazers shaping the future of law. Thanks for listening.

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