

S'pore needs to regain edge in legal tech, says CJ

He cites advances in China's courts, says law academy working on initiatives to close gap

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Singapore is no longer a world leader in legal technology, but the Singapore Academy of Law will strive to get the legal profession to step up in this area, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon said yesterday.

In his speech, he noted how artificial intelligence-assisted transcription, two-way translations facilitated by technology and virtual courts feature prominently in some Chinese courts.

"However, we are some way from implementing these in our courts," he said, addressing 700 members of the legal fraternity at the academy's 25th annual lecture, held at the Supreme Court Auditorium.

Chief Justice Menon, who is president of the academy, is the first Singaporean to deliver the lecture. Previous lectures featured foreign chief justices, among others.

He discussed how the institution, which marks its 30th anniversary this year, will have to remain relevant as the legal profession faces oncoming challenges, including the advent of legal technology which has already resulted in the loss of 31,000 jobs in the British legal sector.

"Regrettably, our response to legal technology has been lukewarm," he added.

In January, the Future Law Innovation Programme (Flip) was launched here to help law firms integrate baseline technology into their processes and to encourage an exchange of ideas between the technology and legal sectors.

Successful change, he said, will require a mind-set shift. While investment may be expensive, it will be "integral to future-proofing our profession".

The academy, which unites lawyers, judges, academics and legal service officers, was created in 1988 to promote a collegiate spirit through social interaction.

Among efforts to develop the profession, the academy has launched the Singapore Academy Of Law Journal, organised annual lectures and advanced computerised legal research.

In tracing the history of the academy, Chief Justice Menon gave anecdotes of how new technology was received when the academy introduced them.

In 1997, when the Electronic Filing System was launched, members of the academy gathered to await the transmission of the very first document, he said.

"Champagne was on hand to await the moment of arrival. However, growing impatient at the lack of activity, the team decided to start on the champagne first.

"After two hours, they'd seen the



(From left) Judge of Appeal Andrew Phang by the Singapore Academy of Law. Chief

bottom of the bottle but no sign of the document," he added to laughter from the audience.

Moving forward, the academy has signed a memorandum of understanding to partner with the Singapore Management University in examining issues relating to legal innovation and the future practice of law.

Despite the challenges, the Chief Justice noted the profession's track record of rising to the occasion. In 2003, the abolition of conveyancing scale fees and the entry of foreign lawyers sent the profession into "deep despondency".

"We have been here before and overcame; we are here again and we shall overcome, provided we summon a new spirit of unity, honour and service, and rededicate ourselves to the cause of justice."

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(From left) Judge of Appeal Andrew Phang, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon and retired solicitor-general Koh Eng Tian before the start of the 25th lecture organised by the Singapore Academy of Law. Chief Justice Menon is the first Singaporean to deliver the lecture. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

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