Generative AI could ease access to justice: High Court judge

Tech could help unrepresented litigants navigate the legal system better, he says

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Generative artificial intelligence (AI) could soon be used to help unrepresented litigants navigate the legal system better and improve access to justice, said Justice Aedit Abdullah in a panel discussion on technology and the legal profession on Thursday.

Generative AI refers to deep-learning algorithms, such as ChatGPT, that can generate high-quality text, images and other content based on the data they were trained on.

Justice Aedit's comments came at a two-day conference, The Next Frontier of Lawyering: From ESG to GPT, organised by the Singapore Academy of Law and Singapore Management University.

When asked by moderator David B. Wilkins, Lester Kissel Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, how he and the Singapore courts viewed the role of generative AI, Justice Aedit said the technology provided a tremendous opportunity to ensure a proper mode of legal representation for people who might not be able to hire lawyers due to reasons such as financial difficulties.

He detailed what he called a "gold standard" for a service in the courthouse that would help those who are unrepresented to file necessary claims of defence, identify strengths and weaknesses of their case, consider the necessary evidence they can present, or nudge them towards a settlement or resolution out of a courtroom.

"We are working on multiple streams with different project teams... and some of the discussions are more advanced than others. We hope, before too long, you'll at least see some of the early stage progress we can make. We are very excited, and this will mean a tremendous shift in power and capability," he said.

Justice Aedit also commented on how generative AI has been used elsewhere to give judicial officers recommendations on setting bail and sentencing, and to help lawyers analyse which arguments have the likeliest probability of success before judges.

Describing a situation where technology may be able to highlight the questions that opposing counsel may ask a witness, and the essential points a judge may take into account in coming to a decision, Justice Aedit said: "Will we reach a point where everyone knows what is happening, and really what is the point of cross-examination then?"

"It may not be a bad thing, it will be an interesting point to see how it plays out in terms of what the impact will be on the business of litigation and judging," he said.

Other panellists taking part in the discussion included Mr Eric Chin, Asia-Pacific director of NewLaw at PwC; Mr Adrian Fisher, Asia head of technology, media and telecommunication at Linklaters; and Assistant Professor Jerrold Soh from the Yong Pung How School of Law.

The discussion spanned how technology would reshape the role of a lawyer, and how lawyers can add value to their profession.

The conference was held at the Yong Pung How School of Law and was attended by 170 people including lawyers, academics, in-house counsel and students from the region and China.

On whether technology would replace the role of lawyers, Mr Chin said it was not possible for now.

"Generative AI is what a calculator is to maths. It's just really useful in calculating something really fast, but you still need subject-matter experts to provide the structure and contextualise the information that gets generated," said Mr Chin.

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