

LAW PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

The Law Society's Colloquium on 'The Role of Lawyers in the Age of Disruption: Emerging Regulatory Challenges' will be held on 19 May 2020, bringing together legal practitioners, emerging scholars, industry experts and students to contribute to developing thought leadership on topics relating to the ethical and regulatory challenges arising from technology's impact on the legal profession.

In the next few weeks leading up to the Colloquium, the Legal Research & Development department will be bringing you an exclusive series of quick chats and interviews featuring some of our panellists, who will share their perspectives on the topics they will be speaking about at the Colloquium.

*In the third edition of **Future Lawyer Bytes**, we explore briefly the future of work together with Alvin Chen, Director of the Legal Research & Development department at the Law Society of Singapore, who will be a panellist for the session on "Law Practices and the Future of Work".*

*Do also keep a lookout for future editions of **Future Lawyer Bytes** to be released after the Colloquium that will cover burning issues and hot topics discussed by our moderators, panellists and participants at the Colloquium.*

What will the future of work be like - more work or less work for everyone?

Well, no one can predict the future although technological advances and globalisation pose real risks to the labour market, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ("**OECD**") pointed out in an employment outlook report published in 2019.

In Daniel Susskind's recent book, *A World Without Work: Technology, Automation and How We Should Respond*, he suggests that we may be faced with a world with less paid work, as machines and artificial intelligence ("**AI**") gradually take over tasks performed by human beings in the labour market. He calls this phenomenon "task encroachment" and argues that our manual, cognitive and affective capabilities may be taken over by robots and machines in the future.

That sounds scary! Can robots actually take over humans' affective capabilities, such as empathy?

Daniel Susskind cites social robots as an example of machines that are able to "recognise and react to human emotions". A World Economic Forum report has listed social robots as one of the top 10 emerging technologies of 2019. According to the report, social robots can assist the elderly and perform customer service functions. One example cited in the report is a robot called Mabu (Catalia Health) that helps elderly patients by acting as a "wellness aide, reminding them to take walks and medication and to call family members."

In my view, it may not be too far a stretch to consider the robots deployed in our parks to encourage social distancing amongst joggers and other park users during the current pandemic as social robots too.

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How is the legal industry affected by the growing sophistication of AI?

There is obviously the implication that AI will continue to encroach on tasks that lawyers perform, especially those relating to cognitive capabilities e.g. reviewing and drafting contracts, or predicting the outcomes of legal cases. The concern, as the victories by AI over humans in the games of chess and Go have shown, is that AI will not need to think like lawyers to outperform them. Instead, AI will rely on vast amounts of data with massive computing power to develop their own capabilities. Daniel Susskind refers to this as the “pragmatist revolution” in his book.

Are there any solutions to the potential displacement of humans in the future of work?

The OECD had opined in its 2019 employment outlook report that doomsday scenarios are “unlikely to materialise”, but workers will need to upskill and reskill to deal with “deep structural changes” that are likely to occur in the market. In Singapore, the Committee on the Future Economy as well as the Working Group on Legal and Accounting Services had published reports in 2017 that made a number of recommendations on how workers and lawyers should adapt to the new world of work. For example, the Working Group observed that lawyers would need to become trusted business advisers who can “bring value and help clients shape business strategies”.

What are the regulatory challenges facing the legal profession in the future of work?

Regulatory challenges in the future of legal work are multi-faceted, involving multiple stakeholders not limited to only regulators and lawyers. I will share more at the Colloquium about recent regulatory developments in the United States and the United Kingdom that offer learning points for Singapore.

Note: The Colloquium will be conducted as a live webinar on 19 May 2020 from 9am to 4.30pm. Visit <https://bit.ly/3aYB85e> for more information, including programme details and how to register for the event.