We recognize the world is changing, but sometimes it is hard to appreciate how fast. The telephone required 75 years after its invention in 1876 to reach 50 million users. The radio (1920) reached that same milestone in 38 years. The television (1938) took 13 years. Depending on your preferred origin date, the public Internet required anywhere from two to six years to reach 50 million users. The popular gaming app Angry Birds (2009) had 50 million users within its first 35 days.

The most recognized proponent of the theory that the technology's growth is exponential, rather than linear, is the arch-futurist Ray Kurzweil who has been expounding on his Law of Accelerating Returns for the last two decades. Unsurprisingly, Kurzweil now works at Google, a company that processed 200 million searches per day in 2004 and now processes that same number of searches every 83 minutes (3.5 billion searches per day). Google has also spread well beyond its original mission, "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," into areas like driverless cars, mobile operating systems, municipal fiber optics networks, and smart homes. Unsurprisingly, these ventures have kept the Google legal team extremely busy.

In 2001, Google hired its first lawyer, David Drummond, who remains its chief legal officer in addition to being a senior vice president for corporate development. In 2008, Google hired Mary O'Carroll as its first head of legal operations, technology and strategy, to help Drummond's ever-expanding legal department cope with the organizational challenges of scale. The core function of O'Carroll's legal ops team is "standardizing and automating manual processes, improving workflows, improving knowledge-sharing and collaboration, and gaining visibility into the information we have, so that we can leverage the data to make stronger business decisions." But what those challenges require from O'Carroll and her legal ops team has evolved with the department they serve.

O'Carroll's initial focus was external. Google necessarily spends substantial sums with outside counsel across the globe. O'Carroll was tasked with ensuring that Google approached its outside spend like a sophisticated consumer of legal services. That task began with establishing protocols to collect billing data and convert those large data volumes into immediate, relevant, and actionable information for use in retention decisions and fee negotiations. The digital manifestation of O'Carroll and her team's efforts is Google's spectacular Outside Counsel Dashboard (OCDB).

The instantaneous nature of the OCDB's impeccable interface obscures the many years of hard work that O'Carroll's team dedicated to refining the underlying data streams. O'Carroll calls it "the inglorious work of cleaning up the data, establishing standard categories for matters, vendors, and timekeepers, and creating consistent processes." Design is not just how something looks, design is how it works. And the OCDB, no matter how pretty, would never have worked with garbage or garbled data. The OCDB, however, is just one piece of the much larger Project Moonrise - you know a project is serious when it has a codename. Project Moonrise pursues the audacious goal of integrating all of the legal department's systems and then making the collective data accessible and useful.

Project Moonrise's internal focus represents another step in the evolution of the legal operations role at Google. Once O'Carroll and her team had completed enough projects to put outside counsel spend management on a stable trajectory, they turned their eyes inward. For the last few years, they have been revamping, reworking and reinventing the legal department's information infrastructure. For example, the team is currently developing Common Knowledge, a shared legal research and advice repository that is fast, easy to search and flexible. Common Knowledge lets users quickly contribute "rich" legal knowledge documents (e.g., outside counsel advice, product advice memos, best practices, etc.)
from various sources and in multiple formats. The goal of Common Knowledge "is to improve retention and usage efficiency of expensive knowledge capital."

With many of their infrastructure projects achieving maturity and entering more of a maintenance phase, the role legal ops plays within Google is evolving yet again. O'Carroll and her team are becoming internal consultants focused on strategic initiatives and continuous improvement. Having the right pieces in place is one thing. Putting them all together is yet another. In bringing operational excellence to the Google legal department, O'Carroll can offer a number of lessons, including:

Focus on the end user. Just because you build it, doesn't mean they will use it. O'Carroll and her team successfully adhere to the first dictate of Google's ten things we know to be true philosophy, "focus on the user and all else will follow." O'Carroll and her team think in systems but realize that, ultimately, the systems will be used by individuals. The user interface and user experience are essential.

Prioritize ruthlessly. In the planning phase, it is too easy to make "the classic database error of trying to please everyone by building a universal Swiss Army Knife -- a tool so robust that it could answer every question, be extremely customizable, and still be easy to use." In understanding the voice of the customer, it is critical to separate the must-haves from the nice-to-haves and focus intensely on the former.

Plan for the long term, adapt in the short term. Predictions are hard, especially about the future. "Adapting quickly to the changing legal industry and ecosystem is the hallmark of a truly innovative legal department. Legal services providers are changing, the technology tools are changing, the ways we communicate and collaborate are changing, the financial models are changing." Almost counter intuitively, one of the best ways to keep up and stay nimble is to consider the long term in every person, process, or technology decision you make. That is, "think about scalability and flexibility. If it is only sufficient for your current needs, it is not an improvement, it is a band aid."

A Conversation with Mary O'Carroll

Describe the Google legal department.

Our legal department is looking for solutions and outcomes that benefit users while allowing Google to maintain disruptive velocity. Tech sometimes outpaces law, and Google is frequently at the edge of legal evolution around the world, with the legal department in the midst of policy, litigation and commercial issues. We’re fighting for an open web, the ability to develop the next new thing, and for people’s right to use our products. All that puts us in the headlines as the company leading the development of information law.

Where does legal operations fit within the Google legal department?

As we grow as a company, the volume of work and issues that arise also grows. Like everyone else, we feel the pressure of this increasing volume, limited resources and the desire to do more with less. As a department, with this growth we increasingly struggle to manage and make sense of the tons of information we have. That’s where my team comes in. We seek and create tools to help us organize, track and collaborate on projects, improve our efficiency and help us scale. But doesn’t size impede adaptability? Yes, but it also makes it all the more vital. We are facing some unique challenges that result from hyper-growth. When you get bigger, communication is harder, collaboration is harder, and decision-making slows. We have really smart people doing amazing work, but how do you make it easier for people to share and find relevant information?

To address this, we’ve launched a long term initiative known internally as Project Moonrise focused on
knowledge management and how technology can enable better communication and collaboration. We talk about making the collective knowledge available to our users at the tips of their fingers — to us, that means Universal Search, where a user enters in some key words and — voila!— their pertinent results appear. This is easier said than done. First we have to collect or curate the information/knowledge, then we unify the systems and then we build interfaces.

What are your thoughts on legal operations as a vocation?

People who enjoy the position find the challenges of the job are part of its appeal. It is complex and diverse and takes someone who thrives on constant change and challenge. There are also few roles that are as broad as operations roles. We get to see every aspect and function of the department, and engage with an extremely diverse range of teams and stakeholders. Our role is to be the executor and a change agent and I enjoy being the person others look to when something needs to get done or improved. What I find interesting about this role is that success at one company does not guarantee success at another company. This is because of the large role of cultural and "GC fit" factors. It is critical to know your audience well and be able to adapt constantly to that specific, fast-changing corporate environment. Legal operations leaders must possess a mastery of influence and change to help translate their vision and ideas into action. It takes a deep understanding the culture of the legal department to do that successfully.

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