ALA headquarters was proud to be a host for the Global Legal Hackathon. The team's idea has made it to the next round of judging on March 11.

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Global Legal Hackathon Comes to ALA Headquarters

Three days, long hours, fair amounts of coffee and lots of brainstorming and legal camaraderie set the stage for the Global Legal Hackathon's stop in Chicago, February 23–25. Hackers converged on ALA headquarters to use their collective skills to home in on one problem facing the industry.

ALA hosted the event. Comprising Team ALA were 2018–2019 President-Elect James L. Cornell, III; Region 3 Director Debra L. Elsbury, CLM; Past President Teresa Walker; ALA Executive Director Oliver Yandle, JD, CAE; Chicago-based Attorney Adam Scavone; and ALA's User Interface Web Developer Bert Saper. Serving as mentors were David Berger, Chief Technology Officer of Integra Ledger, and Matt Heck, President of Hard Problems Group, LLC.

"There is nothing better than a deadline to force action," says Yandle. "The dedicated time during Hackathon weekend was a great chance to focus on an issue that has proved challenging for our industry."

The goal was to have a viable solution for the challenge by the end of the weekend. The challenge of choice: It's an incredibly competitive legal market, and clients demand more efficiency and price predictability. While firms are adept at tracking many staffers' and lawyers' time for billing, a lot of the necessary behind-the-scenes work isn't as easily categorized and tracked. So many processes and tasks that support the delivery of legal services are not being captured — mostly because they aren't billed to the client. But they still have costs associated with them that need to be accounted for.

The solution: Team ALA focused on how the Uniform Process Based Management System (UPBMS) can play an integral role in capturing this back-end data.

"Working on a solution to integrate the UPBMS codes into a technology solution that applied the codes to the processes our firms engage in when delivering client services really gave me a perspective of them I did not previously have," says Cornell, who's Executive Director at Graves Dougherty Hearon & Moody, PC, in Austin, Texas. "I now see how powerful and valuable the UPBMS codes can be to help our legal organizations analyze our processes so we can become more efficient in delivering them. I believe there is broad applicability of the codes sets in all our organizations, regardless of size or practice focus."

One complication the team needed to address was how difficult it can be to get some lawyers and staff to adopt new technology.

"The law firm/lawyer's perspective is typically 'I'm not using anything that slows me down, I have to learn, I don't already feel comfortable with [it], even if I know it will help me,'" says Walker, Chief Operating Officer at Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis, LLP, in Nashville, Tennessee. "Technologists just assume people are waiting on pins and needles for the next product out of the box."

MEET LEXI
To help bridge that divide, the team came up with an option that would work with technology that a growing number of lawyers are used to working with — Slack.

Lawyers and staff working on a particular matter would communicate electronically per usual via Slack (or other communication platform). What the team devised is a bot named Lexi to work in collaboration with these platforms. So while the usual work goes on, Lexi monitors the conversations taking place in Slack. It picks up on key words and phrases, and, using natural language processing and contextual clues, automatically takes various actions or asks confirming questions.

Lexi then assigns the UPBMS codes to those actions. The team believes that this recordkeeping — and subsequent analysis — could have practical applications that range from business development to human resources management.

"The chatbot in Slack allowed us to develop a pretty simple solution to a complex problem," adds Walker. "Bingo! That's

very important in this industry. To get user acceptance, the solution has to be as simple as possible."

"We were able to demonstrate the application in real time and it worked!" says Yandle. "We got great feedback from the judges on the presentation and will advance to the next round of the Hackathon competition. Although we were the only team, the Integra mentors believe that our solution is one that will compare very favorably in later stages of the competition."

One of ALA's strategic goals is to deliver thought leadership and innovation to the legal management industry. The weekend was a way to reach new audiences and exhibit the collective knowledge and skills of ALA membership.

"I couldn't be more proud to have been a part of Team ALA," says Scavone, Founder and Managing Attorney of Scavone Law Firm. "We got lucky with a group that brought a diverse set of legal skills, viewpoints, and experiences, and great mentors from Integra Ledger. We identified a real problem with capturing all the costs of service delivery that affect every firm — from solos to BigLaw — and our prototype brought the industry one step closer to a solution."

Winners from each of the Global Legal Hackathon sites will submit updated entries by March 11, and eight semifinalists will be chosen to compete in the final round, April 21 in New York City, where four winners will be selected.

"I made a decision to participate in the Global Legal Hackathon without knowing how I would contribute to creating an innovative solution for a challenge our industry is facing," says Cornell. "What I learned over the weekend was that our experiences and perspectives as legal management professionals matter, and when we are given a chance to create solutions to challenges there is no limit to the possibilities of what we can accomplish." ■

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