Pioneers and Pathfinders: Dr. Roland Vogl

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Steve Poor
This week's guest, Dr. Roland Vogl, is a leading voice in legal education and the legal profession. He is the Executive Director of the Stanford Program in Law, Science, and Technology, and a lecturer in law at Stanford Law School. Dr. Vogl also co-founded and leads CodeX, the Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, where he drives cutting-edge research for the application of technology in the legal profession. In addition to his work at Stanford, Dr. Vogl serves as a visiting professor at the University of Vienna, where he teaches US intellectual property law. He is also a co-founder and board member of Merico, Inc., a platform focused on software engineering metrics. Dr. Vogl plays an active role in the legal tech ecosystem, advising legal tech and legal generative AI companies. Since 2022, he has served on the executive committee of the International Association for AI and Law.

In this episode, Dr. Vogl discusses his journey from legal practice to academia, offering insights into the unique culture at Stanford Law School that helped spark the creation of CodeX. We also explore how CodeX selects its projects and how it's adapting to the transformative rise of generative AI.

Roland, it's great to see you again. I saw you out at the 20th anniversary celebration for CodeX, and it's good to see you again today. Thank you for making the time to chat with me.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Great to see you, Steven, and thank you so much for having me. It's a real pleasure.

Steve Poor
So let's go back in the way back machine to the early 2000s you're an associate at Fenwick and West, and you make the move to Stanford talking about law and informatics and technology. What is it that sort of sparked your interest in this intersection between law and technology and entrepreneurship that it's more prevalent today than it certainly was in the early 2000s so what is what is it about your background that sort of made this interesting to you.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, this is a great question. So I came here originally from Austria. I did my masters at Stanford, and my plan was to go back to Europe and start a career in a law firm. And I was fortunate to find a job at Fenwick. Here was, I thought, I started to really enjoy being in California, especially Silicon Valley and I wanted to...

Steve Poor
What's not to like about living in Silicon Valley? It's beautiful.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Before I came here, I was living in Brussels, working as a law clerk at the European institutions. And, there's a lot, a lot of partying, really, in Brussels. And I came here, and I thought, like, wow, the

students here are awfully serious and, and there's no partying in Stanford. And, and I said, well, after a year, I was just actually starting to enjoy the American way of being. I thought, that's like, just a very optimistic culture, and anything's possible. I thought, wow, this is what I've been looking for. And it was just markably different. So that was some kind of, the beginning wasn't that easy. But then, after some time, I just like, oh, okay, this is how we live here, and it's actually kind of fun. And so I looked for a job. I was lucky to get one at Fenwick, although, it's sort of like I was there for just about a year, and then their business was wiped out by the burst of the bubble.

Steve Poor
Right, this is the tech bubble in the 2000s.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah. And then it was just after 9/11 that they basically had to let the entire first year class go. And I found myself out of a job. And so what Stanford was looking for was a teaching fellow for the program, a new LLM program they started in law, science and technology. And then doing this at Stanford, I felt like, wow, that there's sort of a spirit that, you could build things right. You could start new things and try things out. And, as long as you bring sort of energy to something, and you bring good ideas, and you're willing to carry them through, and you find people to work with you on interesting things, then at least that was my experience with my bosses at Stanford. They let me do things and so I enjoyed that kind of freedom. And so I built that. We started building this LLM program. LLM as in masters in law, and we got that kicked off with this kind of international cohort of lawyers. And sometime into that job, they asked me to become Executive Director of the umbrella program, the Stanford program in law, science and technology, and we started the Center for the Digital Economy that's focused more on all the legal questions surrounding doing business online. And that was all interesting to me, all these, because that's what I've done before: high tech law, law of technology. But then, through a series of coincidences, I connected with some folks. Mike Genesereth in computer science, a professor in computer science, a logic expert, and Peggy Radin, who was my boss at the time, she had been teaching some sessions with him. And then there was Josh Walker, also, who's who was, I think, at Orrick at the time, who had built legal databases in Rwanda, that had to do with a genocide in Rwanda. We decided to have this workshop on bringing technology to legal questions and so with that workshop, we felt like there's an opportunity to build a kind of a lab that will really dedicate itself to advancing research into technology for the law. And I enjoyed, sorry for rambling on, but we really enjoyed that. I really enjoyed that applied nature. That you could actually work on legal problems, but there would be a real, tangible solution to it, a technology that would solve some legal information problem, and that that I found really inspiring. So this is a long way of.

Steve Poor
No, no, no. It's fascinating. We're in a time period we're in sort of the mid 2000s right?

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yes.

Steve Poor

Yeah, which was the start of sort of E discovery and technology assisted review and that kind of stuff. But the environment wasn't as robust as it is today in terms of use of technology and the implications of technology for the practice of law. Stanford must have been one of the first law schools to sort of do this law, science, and technology mix. What was it about the culture of the university, the leadership, the people that sort of allow that spark to happen, which has turned into 20 years of CodeX.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, that's a good question. We instituted the center, and I soon pitched our dean at the time, Larry Kramer, for some money. I said, "Okay, Larry, we need to, like, hire some people to do research in this area." And he shared that vision and saw this opportunity, right? And in a way, it was kind of out there. It was sort of, looking to the future. But, in a sense, there's also been a bit of an AI winter in law already, right? Because legal informatics goes back and AI for law goes back into the early '80s, right? Or even further, right, and so we had to basically convince him that there's a new opportunity, right? There's an inflection point. And, through the internet, through new legal modeling technologies, through legal databases and so on, where we felt there's new things that can be accomplished in law with technology. And Larry Kramer shared that vision. He became a supporter, Mark Lemley, too, who came to Stanford from Berkeley at the time. He's a preeminent IP scholar, and then also became a legal tech entrepreneur. He's behind what initially was called the Intellectual Property Litigation Clearinghouse, and then became the LEX machina spin off, first spin off from Stanford Law School. Now it's part of LexisNexis. And there was some early precursor, I mean, some early projects, legal database projects, too. We had Joe Grundfest, who's a securities lawyer, a professor here, former SEC Commissioner, who started the Securities Class Action Clearinghouse. So there was kind of like a model that we had already, and it's the Stanford way. mean, I guess this entrepreneurial spirit is a little bit in the water here, right, like Stanford, Silicon Valley, and so they didn't put a whole lot of barriers in front of us and were encouraging, by also allowing us to spend a little bit of money. One of our first fellows that we hired, Harry Surden, now professor in Colorado, UC Boulder, and now he's Associate Director of the Center. He was at the first fellow we hired. This must have been in 2005 or so.

Steve Poor
Law schools are not known for experimenting with stuff. So it's, it's sort of an amazing story you're telling about it. I get it. Stanford has always been innovative, and in Silicon Valley, and you're dealing...a lot of factors contributed, but obviously it was the team you put together that's made it so successful over the last 20 years. Talk to us a little bit about that journey. Sort of you start from a workshop, you then get a center and sort of talk about your path for the last 20 years.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, thank you. So I think I work best when I have a specific project that I can get excited about, and then I can really sink my teeth into. And the first project that really got me going was a project that came in through the MediaX Center at the University at the time. In the mid 2000 early 2000s, a whole bunch of centers started at Stanford with an X in them, BioX, the BioX center, the MediaX center, and CodeX, right? And for us, the X, obviously, is the intersection of legal code and computer science code and MediaX had this request for proposals for legal ways for what they called consumer produced content, or something like that. It wasn't even called user generated content yet, but behind it was an outside industry partner of MediaX, which, at the time, was AOL Time Warner, and they said, Look, there's all

this copyright piracy going on with our content. This was, just before YouTube was started. And they hadn't invested in Hulu yet. And so I said, that's it. That's it in its essence, it's a legal transaction cost problem, copyright piracy, it's too hard to get licenses to this content, and if it was frictionless, then people would not pirate. And so we came up with this idea of what we called a copyright clearance engine that would make it easy to make transactions for even small snippets of content, be it music, be it video, and we would make that a marketplace, and we came up with this idea of, like the Stanford intellectual property exchange, and that sort that then took on different directions, but that was the original project, where we created, started with a white paper and a prototype, and then teamed up with other partners, applied it in the educational content world, trying to get all the rights for the materials that are distributed at a university for teaching that's also, full of transaction costs and inefficiencies. And we felt like there's a technological, legal technology that can help solve that problem. And it's these kinds of projects that really, that get me up in the morning and really excited. Sometimes, they allow us to advance research and insight into some complex legal tech problems. And sometimes an opportunity to test these ideas in the marketplace. And, we find other entrepreneurial types, either at the Stanford Business School or somewhere else, at the law school or somewhere else, and they're interested in testing it out in the marketplace, and they're creating a spin off. And so CodeX, also the Stanford intellectual property exchange, also became a spin off, which was later acquired by a publishing platform. But that's why sometimes CodeX is associated, I guess, with early stage companies and startups. Sometimes people think we're like an incubator of sorts. We call ourselves an incubator of ideas. We're not an incubator in a sense, like Y Combinator or so, where they invest money and take equity.

Steve Poor
Have little spaces where everybody huddles around the computer with the five people startup and everything.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, exactly. So, we have lots of folks. And just to kind of go back to your question, what happened in those 20 years, right? Like I would say, in the late 2000s, around 2000, we had the recession, obviously, we saw more and more students come to us saying, "Oh, our mentors in our ecosystem here, like, Larry Kramer or Mark Lemley." They were directing students with interesting ideas, also to CodeX. And they were saying, "Hey, what do you think we have this new idea, right. These search tools seem a little antiquated at this point. There's a better way to bring web 2.0 technologies to the space." And then folks like the folks who started Ravel Law, folks who started Casetext, came to us, and we tried to help them along the way and in a surface, a sounding board, as a place for them to test their ideas. And so this was, there was a lot of entrepreneurial activity happening that was driven really by students in our ecosystem, and some of them became trailblazing legal tech companies like Ravel and Casetext and others and but it was never a part of our charter to have this kind of ecosystem of startups around it. And it was also not part of our charter to become kind of a hub for this growing legal innovation community. So that's just sort of happened, and it's now, I think, an important part of what we do, and something that I think really enriches the center, because, we learn from people like you, in the trenches, into these are the problems we are facing. And let's talk about, how we could work together on these projects. So I think that that's an asset to CodeX, to have this community around it.

Steve Poor
And it's an amazing community. It really is. And I think it's one of the things that makes CodeX so unique in the industry and in the profession, and I know a lot of work went into that, but it's sort of amazing.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I would have never expected this. And it was really in the early days, and again, around the late 2010s, when it's just people, initially students, and then other folks from the industry, people were working on interesting things in their garages. They said, oh, okay, so there's a couple of people who are struggling or trying to tackle the same problems. A similar problem. And then we said, okay, let's bring them together in let's say, a weekly meeting. And that already, just bringing them together at the same time on a regular basis, this started to get its own momentum. And then we started FutureLaw conference, which was a one day thing. Now it's a whole week thing. And it's something where I enjoy people, seeing people come together, and just enjoying the ideas that are being exchanged, making connections. And so I think that's a that's an important part of what we do, and we really appreciate having this community.

Steve Poor
Yeah, you just had your 20th anniversary celebration. You said you had future law, which went on for a week, and then you had a big celebration on Thursday, I think, if I recall correctly, which just had all kinds of wonderful people in it. Great presentations and the connections were wonderful. It was really an exciting opportunity to participate in that. So thank you for that. So what do the next few years hold for CodeX? Okay, you've had these 20 years of success. You've spun off, you built this community, you've spun off various startups, you've helped others. What's left to do?

Dr. Roland Vogl
That's a really good question. So, I sometimes say, I feel like there's so much more to do, because there are still all these legal information problems that remain unresolved. And the center's motto is "legal empowerment through information technology." We're here to advance the state of the art, and we want to help all stakeholders in the legal system get access to the law and be technology empowered players in the legal system. There's a lot more to do, thinking about it in that way. And I think we've only started to scratch the surface, but we also sometimes say, well, what's the next big thing? We had three-year deep dive into computable contracts. I mean, there's a lot of projects going on under the CodeX umbrella, and they're very different. There are some people working on generation of legal content. Others working on the future of legal education, the future of the law firm, a whole series of projects, but we had a big deep dive into the computable contracts in the insurance industry. That used a lot of our resources here. I think we made some important advances in terms of the research, and we're wrapping up this deep dive. There may a spinoff coming out of this work. I'm surrounded by all these people with great ideas, and some people working on what's a better way for the for the legislators to publish the laws that's more accessible to computers and as a whole, computable contracts, obviously, is a big one. Blockchain is a big one. Gen AI is huge, obviously, at the moment. And I'm at a point, where we have a lot of different projects that I think are very promising, and we want to support them and advance them. And the same time, I'm always looking for, what's the next big thing. We have industry partners who are affiliates of the center. We are also in a constant dialog

with them to understand, what are the problems they're facing, what are the contributions we can make as a research institution? It's hard to say, this is like, the number one priority. One answer is to say, more of the same, right? But at the same time, we're constantly iterating and open to new ideas. And to some degree, I feel we have product market fit, in startup parlance. But, I also want to see how we can keep evolving with where are sort of the biggest problems, where we can have the biggest impact, what are the needs of the community? And, what's our contribution to that? So, so that's a long-winded way of answering your question, and maybe I haven't really answered your question, but...

Steve Poor
No, you know, it's fascinating. The want to pick up on something you said. You sort of live in an embarrassment of riches in terms of ideas and people, and you have stuff coming over the transom all the time, in a practical sense, though, resources are not infinite.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah.

Steve Poor
Time is not infinite. Money is not infinite.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah.

Steve Poor
You have to make choices.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah,

Steve Poor
What variables do you weigh, whether it's in products that take on projects take on for CodeX, or if you're looking to invest in companies? People have great ideas. How do you how do you filter through and figure out the ones that are going to have the most impact, the most impact, that are that are investing in?

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, that's a great question, too. We have our guiding theme, that's a general theme: legal empowerment for information technology. So it has to have a legal component and a technological component. So outside of that, we will probably not be interested. But then we're also opportunistic, sometimes there are partners who can bring funding to a specific project. And we need funding for students. If you hire students here, we have to pay for them. We absolutely need resources. If you bring together stakeholders, which is part of what the university does, right? We do three things, basically, we do research, we teach, and we convene stakeholders. Those are the three kind of levers we have. And you're bringing together the stakeholder. All of these actually cost money, right? And there's always, like you said, there's a lot of shiny objects out there, and I have my own advisory board people who I've

met over the years, whose judgment I really trust. And I say, hey, look, I've been talking with this person about that. And what do you think, is that something we should like, give some oxygen to. And so, yes, it's this constant process. But, I see how VCs approach these problems. And, they're more sort of bottom line oriented, right? Like, is this gonna 5x my investment or not, right? We have a little bit more amorphous ROI kind of analysis. If it's project that can inspire people that will advance insight into legal tech, that's a valid ROI for us, right? And it's not even if the project is not a billion dollar company at the end, And so that's the luxury of being at a university and not at a VC. But if I look at my VC friends, they look into, who are the people, it's usually, it's the entrepreneur, right? I talked to this VC the other day. I said, how do you pick your winners and/or the people you invest in? And he told me that the new VCs say it's all about the entrepreneur, right? And those that are a little bit more seasoned say, it's all about certain metrics. And for the really seasoned VCs, it's all about the entrepreneur again. It's full circle. So it's all about the entrepreneur and I feel the same way. I really enjoy these folks, these legal innovation people who are really inspired by the same thing, that have their hearts in the same place. They really inspire me. And so, and sometimes, you sort of bet on these people who you feel like, they see something that I hadn't seen before. They have that kind of drive to make that happen. And so, it's those folks, if it's students or outside people from the outside world, or people who are working at a different company, doesn't matter. I want to make something happen with them and see if we can get something going.

Steve Poor
So I'm curious, you've got a you've got a portfolio of research and products and services under under support from CodeX. As you look at the portfolio, do you try to balance it between technologies that can help consumers, technologies that apply in the legal education, technologies that apply in the corporate world, the judiciary? Because they're are all sorts of, if you think about the legal profession, it's all sorts of science segments in it. You try to balance it across the segments. Is there a particu lar...?

Dr. Roland Vogl
No, I think I should be more intentional about it. I think there are interesting things coming to us from all these directions. And again, if it's a group of people that seem to have really interesting ideas and the right talent, we really want to try to make something work. But again, I think it'd be nice to have sort of a master plan to say, Okay, we want to advance technology in the judiciary and in private practice and consumer facing things, and if we had some kind of plan around it, but quite frankly, we don't, we should be more intentional about this. I totally agree with you.

Steve Poor
Time, time is the enemy of us all. There's more to do than there is time to do it. Yeah,

Dr. Roland Vogl
Exactly, and some pruning is necessary, right? We let 1000 flowers bloom. But you can't carry everything with you at the same time. And so sometimes you have to do some pruning. But to your point, I think, some of the technologies that maybe firms try out first, right? Because they have the resources, and they're ahead of the game in some ways. That not obviously the first move, of course, but they have more resources than maybe some legal aid group. But eventually, you need one of those

different groups to advance a new approach, and at least in theory, that should then spill over into some of these other areas.

Steve Poor
I know we're running over a little bit of time, and I apologize, I don't want to impose on your time, but I do have one sort of last question, picking up on something else you said, couple things you said, because there's a there's a law now that every podcast has to talk about generative AI, so I need to meet my legal obligations. You made the point that AI has been around for a pretty long time, and you've been involved with it for for a long time. Then of course, we have the big bang of ChatGPT and generative AI. And for those folks who are not in deep into technology, it was like a rude awakening to what technology can do. How did it impact CodeX? Were you guys surprised with the impact it had on the profession? Did you see it coming? Talk a little bit about that.

Dr. Roland Vogl
This is a great topic. I think we're all surprised in terms of the natural language processing capabilities that ChatGPT had, even from the beta model, and GPT two to three, 3.5 was just astounding and inspiring. And so a lot of people got really inspired. And a lot of people within our group, some people at Casetext, they were in the bar exam study too. And I had been talking to folks from large Fortune 100 companies, GCs - legal tech used to exist in in sort of its own domain - and all of a sudden, it's like something at C-level, and we have to embrace this. Now, this changes a lot. So yes, we had people who were early on, and we've known a lot of players early on, in machine learning and law and applications of that in the legal domain, but most of us were pretty surprised about this explosion. So we've tried to embrace it, and we have a lot of interesting projects going on in this domain. We have some reservations, too. I think this hype is problematic in some regards. And we've tried to stay somewhat neutral. The machine learning driven, data driven approaches, and the large language models, they're great for some things, but they also have flaws. And we see new importance in the narrow computational law, the rules driven, computational law that's deterministic, that gives you reliable answers to questions, and not like, 80% sometimes it's correct, but then sometimes it just makes up stuff. That's really problematic, especially in the legal domain. So, we have a research group that looks into what we call the neuro-symbolic bridge, that looks into how symbolic AI and deterministic systems and knowledge graphs can be used to guide large language models in legal settings. So that's an important area that we're focusing on right now. But there's some real, real issues and people, it'd be interesting to learn more about what the experiences are with folks in firms as they're ingesting, Gen AI based technologies right now, and what they felt.

Steve Poor
it's interesting. And I want to pick up on something you said, because when ChatGPT first hit, of course, a lot of us go to various seminars and try to learn what is this. Of course, from the very beginning, people are saying we don't actually know how it works, and you're sitting there as a non technologist, going, Well, how did it get built? Well, wait, what? How you How did you put it together? And don't know how it works at, I don't recall the gentleman's name, but the presentation at 20th anniversary that sort of led off about your research. Oh, okay, on that was just, was, was just fascinating, because you're sitting there thinking, we need to do research for how these machines actually process information that we made. Yeah, it's just, it's disconcerting,

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yeah, that's the part of the deep learning. It's so deep you don't know anymore how things happen and certain outputs are created. So now there's a whole field of study trying to understand and make it explainable, right? Explainability is so critical in a legal setting.

Steve Poor
Yeah, it is. And I think that's been one of the challenges in terms of the products and applications of it, from the early hype cycle, for those of us in the practice. It hallucinates, it doesn't always explain least early on, the products. They couldn't explain how they got the result, made lawyers very antsy about that.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Yes, exactly, and that's part of the value proposition that lawyers provide. To give explanations, to be able to cite back the reasons, and the underlying system that created a legal decision. That's the critical part. The buck stops with the lawyer, right? And, you're only willing to take that risk if you can actually explain yourself and your reasoning.

Steve Poor
No, that's right. We're all we've run over time, and I apologize to you for imposing your time, but it's been a fascinating conversation. I really appreciate you joining me. There's so many other things we could talk about. I could keep this conversation going for hours, but you've got other stuff to do.

Dr. Roland Vogl
Thank you so much. Yeah, it's been, it's been a real pleasure. I really appreciate the opportunity.

Steve Poor
Thanks for listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders. Be sure to visit thepioneerpodcast.com for show notes and more episodes, and don't forget to subscribe to our podcast on your favorite platform.