Pioneers and Pathfinders: Evan Wong
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Kevin Young: Welcome to Pioneers and Pathfinders, Seyfarth's podcast about the people and ideas reshaping the legal industry. I'm Kevin Young, an employment litigator and counselor, and I've spent my career putting new tools and ideas to work in client service and helping colleagues and clients to do the same.

Zeynep Ersin: And I'm Zeynep Ersin. I lead innovation and design thinking at Seyfarth, focusing on reimagining how legal services are built, delivered, and experienced.

Kevin Young: Each episode, we sit down with someone on the front lines of legal innovation to unpack what they're doing and what it means for where our industry is headed.

Zeynep Ersin: We'll keep it fresh, we'll keep it fun, and we'll keep it to 30 minutes. Let's jump in.

Kevin Young: AI is reshaping the possibilities for work, prompting the legal profession in particular to think not just about the tools that we utilize, but about how work gets done and where people bring the most value.

In today's episode, Zeynep sits down with Evan Wong, co-founder and CEO of Checkbox, to talk about his journey as an entrepreneur, the evolution of legal tech, and why the opportunity ahead goes beyond simply making existing work faster.

Zeynep and Evan also explore what innovation means in a rapidly changing environment and the skills that will matter most for the next generation of legal professionals.

Zeynep Ersin: Hello, Evan. Thank you so much for joining us today. We are absolutely delighted to have you.

Evan Wong: Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure.

Zeynep Ersin: A couple of questions to get us started today. Could you take us back to the beginning? What were you seeing or observing at UNSW that made you think there's got to be a better way to do this?

Evan Wong: I started Checkbox right out of college. I went to law school at UNSW, the University of New South Wales, all the way back in Sydney. I say "all the way" because I'm dialing in from New York right now, where I live. At the time, I was a law student who had just graduated. Coming out of law school, I felt like a lot of legal and compliance was still very, very manual, complicated, and difficult to navigate. So I had this idea—a very vague idea—of how we could make it more personalized, more digital, with a better user experience. That was really the inception of Checkbox. Since then, it's taken a lot of twists and turns to get to what it is today. We still have that North Star, but I think we

now have a better idea of who our customer is. We're really focused on in-house legal departments and giving them time back through a better operating system.

Zeynep Ersin: So what would you say has shifted along the way, from where you started or where you thought things might go to where they ultimately landed today?

Evan Wong: Funnily enough, one of the first customer profiles we thought we would build the product for was actually law firms. We ended up with a handful of law firm customers, but they used our product to build solutions for their clients, which are, of course, in-house teams. That was okay, but at the time we were a little nervous about law firms basically trying to build solutions with our no-code products. I think what attracted them was that firms without a big developer team could just use drag and drop to build these automated workflows for their clients. But then we realized: why are we going through the law firms when we should just be building for the end user? So we pivoted away from law firms. Funnily enough, some of the ones in Australia are still our customers today after all this time. They know we focus on in-house legal, but they get a lot of value from the product, and we're very grateful for their support for such a long time. Since then, though, we've been really focused on in-house legal.

Even then, our initial vision was: wouldn't it be cool if legal teams and lawyers could build software without coding, without having to join the long IT line? That's the queue we never get to the front of, because people just don't prioritize legal when it comes to IT projects. So we went from empowering law firms to build client solutions to building a no-code workflow tool for in-house teams. That was actually pretty successful. The challenge we found with that version of Checkbox was that workflows are almost too open-ended. You tell a lawyer, "Hey, we can automate manual workflows," and they'll say, "Well, what's a workflow? Give me some examples." You give them an example, and you're thinking, "Yeah, but that's just one example. You can solve hundreds of problems with this." It's like handing someone a Swiss Army knife that's too powerful or too broad, so people don't really know what to do with it.

After all of that iteration with the market, in the last few years we found a wedge: a hero use case that was really unsolved in the in-house market. That's the legal front door. It looks at how the rest of the business gets legal help, whether they're in finance, HR, sales, or marketing. Today, those requests come through Slack, emails, and Teams messages. It's all siloed and stuck, and everything hits the lawyers. They absorb all of that demand, and there's no triage, no prioritization, and no reporting. So how do we organize all the requests coming in from the business and create self-service journeys and deflection, so that lawyers only work on the most important things that actually need their attention? For the work that does need their attention, we create the matters automatically so they can manage it and collaborate with the business. And the GC gets reporting on every single piece of work that comes in.

One very important thing I'll add is that this problem has traditionally been solved with really heavy forms experiences. We all know that legal departments don't want to become an IT ticketing system. They don't want to erode the relationships they've built with the business over so many years. So we take a very novel approach. We use AI

agents that live in Slack, in Teams, and in email, and we meet the business where they work. There's zero change management for how people come to legal, and the relationship is preserved. In the background, the agents make the magic happen. They handle the deflections, the reporting, and the matter lifecycle management, so there's no data entry at all. So it's been a bit of a journey. We went from law firms, to workflow for in-house teams, to solving a very important but very specific problem: the legal front door and the operating system.

Zeynep Ersin: So cool. Was there an aha moment that got you to the legal front door solution while you were exploring all these different kinds of self-serve legal workflows? How did you land here?

Evan Wong: Yes. When we were more of a general workflow automation tool, we analyzed all the use cases our customers had built on our product. They ranged from NDA automation to compliance processes, automated approvals, and policies baked in so things were compliant by design. But the use case that came up the most was legal intake and triage. One of our first in-house customers was Telstra, one of Australia's biggest telecommunications companies. They built their entire intake and triage process, their legal front door, with Checkbox, and they had about 200 lawyers at the time. Part of the reason they engaged Checkbox was a necessary and pretty significant reduction in force. They cut about 40% of their legal team, and this was a three-digit legal team, so it was a deep cut. It's a classic story: they were still expected to produce the same output and handle the same volume of work with a team 40% smaller. Checkbox was how they could keep producing the same amount and serving the same business, without losing quality of service, while losing headcount. Intake, triage, and prioritization of incoming work became very critical for them. So that was the inspiration. We analyzed all the use cases across our customer base, and some of these hero early customers like Telstra almost became design partners for us. They helped us understand that this was a very important use case to solve. In fact, it's not just a use case. It's an entire product category, which is what we've come to appreciate.

Zeynep Ersin: I'm wondering if you might share something with our listeners. I've seen you speak. You're a wonderful presenter and I find your presentations so engaging, especially the analogy you usually kick off with. I'd love it if you could share that analogy with our listeners and how it connects to what you've created.

Evan Wong: Absolutely. If you think about a legal department, is it more like an emergency room, an ER at a hospital? Or is it more like a construction project, where you have a project plan and blueprints? There are arguments for both, but the overwhelming consensus is that a legal department looks more like an ER. There are a lot of similarities. People come into an ER looking for help. Some come in with minor injuries and some with things that are quite serious. Some problems can be solved on the spot, and some might require hospitalization for a while. Legal is similar. Some people come in with very basic, simple requests, and others come in with really serious requests that have high impact and high strategic weight. Some requests can be solved in a minute or five minutes, while others may take weeks, as with litigation. On top of that, you can't control the demand, and it's hard to forecast how many requests will

come in. An ER might be quiet one hour and very busy the next. A legal department can be very quiet for a week, a month, or a quarter and then really busy for another stretch. And behind all of that, you have very specialized, expensive people: doctors on one end, lawyers on the other.

When you look at that dynamic, legal departments can learn a lot from the process design and experience design lessons hospitals have learned. Hospitals faced a strain where there was too much demand and not enough doctors. So they introduced a whole bunch of technology to make doctors faster, like decision support and scribing tools. But the research found that while this lifted productivity, it wasn't the needle mover. The needle mover, which is almost famous at this point, was medical triage. At the end of the day, it's not about how fast you make the doctors. It's about deciding what reaches them in the first place. So hospitals introduced nurses to help with triage, ways to solve some problems on the spot, and telehealth. There are all these different tracks for meeting patients depending on what they need, and you reserve the doctors for the really gnarly, serious, urgent cases.

Right now in legal, many legal departments are still fielding everything that comes through. It doesn't matter how small or big a request is, which part of the business it comes from, or whether it could be self-served. I think that's because, as lawyers, we want to be helpful, and we really value our relationships with our business clients. So we tend to become the help center of the organization, even when people bring us things that aren't legal issues at all, like HR, billing, or finance questions. Lawyers become the default: if you don't know something in the organization, just ask legal. I think something is deeply missing in how legal departments are structured today, and that's triage. It's the ability to deflect what shouldn't come to legal. There are so many fantastic AI tools today for contract review, drafting, and legal research. But they should be in the hands of attorneys only after an operating system has handled the intake and triage and filtered out all the noise and everything that shouldn't reach them.

Zeynep Ersin: Yeah, absolutely. It's an example of design thinking at its best: looking at an experience and dissecting it. Lean Six Sigma and process mapping are also near and dear to our hearts at Seyfarth. They let you look at something holistically and think through each stage. What's duplicated or redundant, what can be delegated, and where are we creating value? Who needs to be involved, and when? I think there are a lot of assumptions behind how we're automatically trying to plug in generative AI based on how the work has traditionally been done. But is this a moment to rethink the process entirely? I'm curious what you think generative AI means for how legal work will be done compared to the traditional steps and stages.

Evan Wong: I remember your talk at the conference we were both at recently, and you made a really good point. You asked the room to think beyond doing the current work faster with AI. There's merit to that, but your point was to ask what the work should look like now that we have AI, and it may look very different. I think that's true. As a software company, we have front-row seats to how much software engineering has changed, and it's changed dramatically. For people who aren't aware of what's going on: traditionally, software engineers spent many years learning to code in multiple languages and

learning best practices in architecture and engineering design. They spent their entire careers honing their craft of writing beautiful code. "Beautiful" means that out of the thousand ways to get to an answer, you write it in a very efficient way that's scalable and well thought through.

Then in January 2026, this year, Claude released Claude Code. That was really the breakthrough where AI truly wrote better code than humans, and the entire profession changed overnight. Developers no longer write code. At our company, humans write zero code today. It's all written by AI. It's funny, because sometimes people ask, "Should we buy a solution, or should we just vibe code it internally now?" What they don't realize is that a lot of vendors, including software providers like Checkbox, have the same tools you do. Our developers also use vibe coding tools like Claude Code, and we use them to go 10x or 20x faster and build really special products. But their job has changed.

So the question is: if AI is now writing the code, what are the software engineers doing? That used to be their whole job. Well, they get pushed to the bookends, where most of the expertise is actually needed. The front bookend is having really good customer understanding and empathy so you know what's valuable and what's actually worth building. It also involves taste or style, meaning how to build it. So it's what to build and how to build it. Then you give the AI the clearest instructions you can through prompting, and the AI writes the code. At the back end of the process, you need really good discernment to judge whether the output is actually good. It's no longer just about hallucination. We've moved beyond that. If you've been an expert in a profession for 10, 20, or 30 years, you know what great looks like. So the skill is getting AI to iterate and telling it when it's wrong. That's where a lot of the value has gone: to the front and the back.

I think that's a really good crystal ball for legal, because lawyers will matter most at the front end. As lawyers, we always talk about how important our client relationships are and how we need to be true counselors. AI actually gives us an opportunity to do that even more, because we get to spend more time understanding our clients at the front end. For a law firm, that means understanding your clients. For in-house teams, it means understanding your business. It means being better integrated so you understand the strategy, what matters to the business, and what has business impact. That helps you figure out how to work with AI and how to apply it, whether you're drafting an agreement, working with case law, redlining, or anything else. Then, at the back end, you bring the discernment of an experienced lawyer to judge what good looks like. I think that's how legal work is changing.

I don't think we're there yet, by the way. So if you're listening and wondering whether you're behind, no, you're not behind. We're not there yet, but I think we'll end up there. As we think about generative AI and making things faster, I'd really challenge people to ask: What's the current process, and will it still hold true two or three years from now? If it won't, it might be wise to start thinking about what it will look like, designing your processes for it, and upskilling your people. That future is as much a people issue as it is a technology issue.

Zeynep Ersin: Absolutely. That's such a valid point. On the law firm side especially, knowing your client's business is critical. You need to understand their values, what's important to them, their appetite for risk, their history, where they've been, and where they want to go. And yes, we're not yet at the point where lawyers are involved only at the beginning and the end. There are still a lot of necessary touch points in between to provide oversight, make sure things are moving in the right direction, and use AI to augment the work. But I think the default assumption right now is often that AI will make something faster, and it shouldn't have to be. So many things haven't even been considered yet. I'd encourage others to ask: What haven't we considered? What new information can we glean? How can we use the technology to create more opportunities and more value in ways that never occurred to us or were never viable before? It will be interesting to see how this goes over the next few years. We're all kind of holding our breath.

How would you say the definition of innovation itself has changed as the technology and tools available to people have evolved so much?

Evan Wong: I feel like innovation has become a bit of the standard now. With things changing so rapidly and such a boom in new capabilities, it's just become the baseline. To be fair, it gives everyone in the market a lot of whiplash. I know it's very hard to stay on top of what's new, and even to decide on the right architecture, tech stack, or vendor. I acknowledge that this is a very challenging time because things are changing so quickly. In a market like that, you always want to go back to the fundamentals that will always be true. When there's so much innovation and excitement, it's tempting to get caught up in the capabilities and features and focus on whatever solutions are at hand. But fundamentally, you want to peel back the marketing and the hype and ask yourself: What problems are you trying to solve? What will actually add value for your clients or your business? What will make a real impact? Start there and work forward from the problem to the solution. Don't buy the noisiest, shiniest thing, or the thing you know best, and then reverse engineer it, squeezing it into some application to drive adoption when there was never really a problem to solve. That would be my advice at a time when innovation has probably become the baseline. I think it's hard to define innovation today, because by old standards, everyone is innovating.

Zeynep Ersin: As you've continued to grow Checkbox and the team, what skills and attributes do you look for as you keep moving forward? What would you like to see in people who are interested in joining a company like yours?

Evan Wong: More than ever, I think soft skills have become even more important than hard skills. It goes back to the example I shared earlier about engineers. You could spend decades honing a hard skill that then gets completely absorbed by AI. So soft skills are paramount now. One that's really front of mind for me today is adaptability. The world is changing so quickly, and technology is evolving faster than we can wrap our heads around or keep up with, so adaptability is critical. If you think about adaptability as a human concept, survival of the fittest is the most raw, biological version of success through adaptability. The same is true in the business and professional world. As new tools and capabilities come out, who knows what tools we'll be using? Just a few years

ago, everyone was using ChatGPT, and then all of a sudden it was Claude. It may not be Claude next year. Who knows, right? So the ability to learn very quickly, take in new information and context, and apply it in new places has become a really important skill that I look for.

Part of that is also how curious you are as a person. Curiosity goes beyond reading about things. It's about how willing you are to get hands-on with tools, start tinkering, and prove things for yourself. There's a lot of hype, and it's easy to read about what is and isn't possible. It's also easy to build up a lot of assumptions in your mind. It's not until you get your hands on the tools that you realize, "Oh, these are the boundaries of the technology today. This is possible, but with all these limitations." So I look for people with adaptability and curiosity, and that curiosity carries through into some level of initiative. And one old-school quality still hasn't changed: passion. I look for people who genuinely love what they do. If they love what they do, they'll do it because they enjoy it and take pride in their work, not because you told them to. Naturally, the work will be higher quality when people love what they do. So those are the soft skills I look for.

Zeynep Ersin: For people thinking about law school, how would you rank those skills now compared to maybe five or 10 years ago?

Evan Wong: Here's the thing. I've been thinking about this a little, and I don't have a perfect answer: what happens to the younger generation with AI? I hosted a dinner last night in New York, and we talked about this too. It was a table of general counsel and legal ops leaders. We talked about how all of us who've been in our careers for a while learned how to do the job as junior associates, or in whatever role, because we were given the opportunity to do it. That let us develop slowly, and "slowly" is the key word, because it takes time to truly understand something. With AI especially, we get impatient. The time it takes to learn compresses, but the learning isn't as deep. People like you and me spent a long time learning deeply, feeling it, and experiencing it. People coming out of law school today don't get that, because AI now does a lot of what junior lawyers used to do, and does it better and more cheaply. So the question is, how will they learn those skills and progress in their careers?

When I step back, I think about it this way. People further along in their careers have tenure, experience, judgment, and discernment. In the past, juniors added a lot of value by doing the low-value work that AI is now taking over. So where else can juniors add value beyond what more senior, tenured people bring? I'd say two places. First, young energy, hunger, and grit will always count for something. Second, and more importantly, think about the senior people who are busy applying their discernment. If you're a junior who doesn't have that discernment and can no longer do the low-value work, what's your competitive advantage? People like me, along with many executives and probably many law firm partners, know the power and impact of AI, these tools, and new ways of working. But we truly don't have the bandwidth to follow my own advice from before: get curious, get hands-on with tools, and build. Maybe we tinker a bit, but we can't go that deep because we're busy applying our judgment and discernment, running businesses, and managing teams. As a junior, you probably have a surplus of energy and time, so you could become the expert in this new way of working, whether that's in operations,

technology, or AI. The people who invest in those future skills will have something to bring to the table. AI becomes a tool rather than a replacement, and senior people will value that dearly. So that's my advice to young people coming out: really think about what your competitive advantage is in this new world. You have time, you have energy, and you have a fresh way of looking at problems and solving them in new ways with new technology. People like us who are more senior don't have the time to go as deep as you can.

Zeynep Ersin: So how important do you think it is for young, incoming attorneys to have some humility about that too, and to acknowledge that there's a learning curve? They also have so much information at their fingertips, and intelligent information at that. How do you reconcile the two? What do you think they should be thinking about as they enter the workforce?

Evan Wong: Well, I think the answer is partly in the question. I think the best people early in their careers are extremely humble. Being humble means having a very strong learning attitude and recognizing that there's a world of knowledge and skills you don't have yet. Even if you're really smart and top of your class, you can always learn a lot from anybody, no matter who they are. That mindset is really important. I remember interviewing for this role before I'd even graduated. At the end of the interview, I asked the person, "If you were my AGM, what one piece of advice would you give me?" He said, "Evan, my advice would be to be a sponge. Be a sponge and absorb as much as you can." That stuck with me, and I truly believe a lot of my success today comes from taking that advice to heart. I had an extreme hunger to learn and be curious, and I treated every interaction with anyone as a chance to learn something from them. Today there's such a strong intersection between technology and the practice of law. If you're coming into the industry, having a hungry, curious attitude and learning both sides will be key. Again, go back to my earlier advice and ask what your competitive advantage is. Technology, sure. But if you want to be a lawyer, you'll also have to learn discernment, meaning what high-quality legal work actually looks like. There are plenty of very talented lawyers who trained before AI. You can absolutely learn from them, and they can be your mentors and teach you what great legal practice looks like.

Zeynep Ersin: Okay, I'm going to move us into some rapid-fire questions. I'll give you a prompt, and I just want a quick one-word answer, the first thing that comes to mind.

Evan Wong: One word only. All right.

Zeynep Ersin: Data centers.

Evan Wong: Oh my God. NVIDIA.

Zeynep Ersin: Token maxing.

Evan Wong: Expensive.

Zeynep Ersin: Data lakes.

Evan Wong: Not water.

Zeynep Ersin: AI ROI.

Evan Wong: Hard to measure. That's not one word, but...

Zeynep Ersin: Yeah. And last but not least, the billable hour.

Evan Wong: Oh, oh my God. Very durable, I would say. Yeah, I'm on the durable side, I think.

Zeynep Ersin: Thank you. Thank you for indulging me.

Evan Wong: That was tough.

Zeynep Ersin: On to some of the fun stuff. What's got your interest right now that our listeners should know about?

Evan Wong: Professionally, I've been thinking a lot about ontologies and context layers recently. Intelligence has now become commoditized, right? Everyone has access to the same models. So where do you get the next level of accuracy, reliability, and speed of output? It comes down to context and understanding really deep context in a particular domain. For us, obviously, that's in-house legal. So I'm thinking a lot about legal context layers, knowledge graphs, and the ontology of legal work.

Zeynep Ersin: What's something that lawyers, law firms, or legal departments do today that you think will be badly outdated in 10 years?

Evan Wong: Anything that doesn't involve relationships or judgment, going back to what I said earlier. Anything manual, really arduous, or inefficient will definitely be gone in 10 years.

Zeynep Ersin: Have you read any books or articles, or watched anything, lately that made you think differently? It doesn't have to relate to legal innovation, but it can.

Evan Wong: I watched that Netflix documentary about AI gone wild. I can't remember the exact title, but it's about the importance of putting guardrails around AI and some of what's happening at the labs level. But we can solve that. Another thing I noticed recently was at a conference. We talk so much about innovation, AI, and the future, but some of us are in a bubble, I'm going to be honest. When you look at the rest of the market, people are still trying to figure out the difference between "agentic" and "AI," or what an MCP is. Some of them heard these terms for the first time literally this week. You realize that a big part of the market still needs to go from zero to one. That's okay, but it was a bit of a wake-up call to realize how much of the market is just starting its journey.

Zeynep Ersin: And then a fan favorite: what's your favorite album of all time?

Evan Wong: Okay, this is an interesting answer. I'd say it's a Justin Bieber album called *Purpose*.

Zeynep Ersin: Okay.

Evan Wong: Yeah. It's my favorite because Justin had such a rough start to his career, right? He got so much hate in the beginning. If you remember, "Baby" was obviously the most viral video on YouTube of all time, but a lot of hate came with it. Then he released *Purpose*, and I remember the whole world's sentiment shifting from bullying him to "Oh my God, this is great music." Everyone was singing it. He just bounced back, and I think it was an incredible rebound by someone who was deeply talented. So I think that album in particular was really good music. It also came out right around when I finished college, so it's tied to an important moment in my life. And the story behind Bieber is just phenomenal. So yeah, *Purpose* by Justin Bieber.

Zeynep Ersin: All right. I love it. Thank you. Well, Evan, thank you so much. It was such a pleasure to have you on and to learn about you, Checkbox, your journey, and your perspectives. It's been hugely insightful, so thank you so much for your time.

Evan Wong: Awesome. All right. Well, thanks for having me, Zeynep.

Zeynep Ersin: Thanks for spending time with us today on Pioneers and Pathfinders. I'm Zeynep Ersin.

Kevin Young: And I'm Kevin Young. We'll see you next time.