

# Best of Pioneers and Pathfinders: Leah Molatseli

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## **Steve Poor**

Hi. This is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

*This week, we're revisiting our conversation with Leah Molatseli, formerly of Contract Alchemists. Since her appearance on the podcast, Leah has taken on a new role as Country Liaison in South Africa for the legal tech company Saga, where she is still helping lawyers navigate technology, innovation, and more recently AI.*

*In this wide-ranging episode, Leah shares her perspective on the South African legal community, her passion for writing, and the importance of purpose-driven work. It's a conversation full of inspiration and forward-thinking ideas.*

*Thank you for listening. We will return next week with a new episode.*

This week, we welcome Leah Molatseli, founder of Contract Alchemists, a company with the goal of modernizing legal teams through legal operations, agile methodologies, and technology. Leah has over 10 years of experience in the legal field, and has a certificate in Entrepreneurship and Innovation from the University of Notre Dame. After practicing for a few years, she co-founded Lenoma Legal, a virtual legal tech startup aimed at helping small businesses in South Africa. Prior to starting Contract Alchemists, Leah was head of business development at Legal Interact, a legal tech company. She is also a speaker, a published author, and a council member at the University of the Free State. Additionally, she recently joined LexisNexis South Africa as an author and became a Voice and Brand Council Member at the Corporate Legal Operations Consortium (CLOC).

In today's conversation, Leah discusses the legal community in South Africa, how she approaches her writing, the TV shows that inspired her to become an attorney, and how being purpose-driven shapes her decision-making. Thanks for taking a listen.

Leah, thank you so much for joining welcome to the podcast.

## **Leah Molatseli**

It's great to be here late, but good. It's a great way to end the week.

## **Steve Poor**

I know we're catching you in Johannesburg, and I know it's late there, so we appreciate you staying up. I assume the kids are in bed.

## **Leah Molatseli**

Yes, it's all quiet now. So yeah, I'm ready, or as ready as I can be.

## **Steve Poor**

Well, you're you're an author, you're a speaker, you're a lawyer, you're a professor, you're an entrepreneur, you're an innovator. Let's start with a simple question. You've got a family, how do you

find the time? How do you balance for people listening who may have similar desires to have this kind of complex contribution to family and work? How do you balance it? How do you find the time?

### **Leah Molatseli**

I think the biggest turning point for me was accepting that there actually is no balance. Other times I will win in one area and other times I will lose so there'll never come a point where there's equilibrium. And so whenever I'm in a particular role, whether it be doing what I do right now, or teaching or writing or being a mom, being present, I have to commit to myself to be there totally like 200% present in order to actually give of myself the same way that one people to give to me.

### **Steve Poor**

That's awesome advice. That's That's well said. Let's start with talking about, you've got two new ventures this year, and I want to go back through your journey that got there and some of your prior actions here in a minute. But let's start with talking about, sort of the two newest contributions you're making, contract alchemists and your work as an author at LexisNexis South Africa.

### **Leah Molatseli**

Yeah, so I left corporate last year. I mean, I'm a typical millennial, so I maneuver through my career in terms of what feels right in a particular moment and ways within which I feel I can actually have a bigger impact. So contract Alchemist, which was actually supposed to be contract Canva, but someone took that name from me, was it is really just a combination of all of my work through all of the years. It's a consulting firm focused on legal teams and trying to get them ready, future ready, ensuring that their processes make sense if they want to venture into some form of tech. What does that look like? Because the problem that I realized is because I've been on both ends. I've been a lawyer in practice, and I've also been in tech selling. The problem is there's a huge disconnect between the two. And lawyers speak their own language. Techies speak their own language. So it kind of makes sense that you actually would need someone in the middle who can navigate the journey, because both ends are actually overwhelming. Because when you look at Tech and the number of tech available, it's crazy. Every other day there's a new startup, there's something that's happening. So it can become quite overwhelming for a potential client or lawyer firm or in house legal team that's actually looking for a solution that makes sense for them. And the biggest problem that I also realized is a lot of clients think that tech can actually solve broken systems. So they think, oh, geez, this looks cool. Let's jump on it. But then you'll find that the adoption just goes to the pits purely because. Is actually not solving the core problem, and it's a lose, lose on both sides. So mine is really just to figure out, diagnose the problem, make sure that you're actually solving for what you want to solve within your particular budget and make it work for you. So I work with a bunch of partners through that, especially if they want a technology solution.

### **Steve Poor**

Give us a little sense of the legal tech community in South Africa. I think most of our listeners are probably US based and may not be that familiar with the legal community down there. Give us a little sense for the legal tech community and what types of problems are they trying to solve through technology. Geez.

### **Leah Molatseli**

So I've been around in this space for seven years now. And I must say, I love how far we've come as an industry, but also as a community. For example, there's a recent I typically call these organization ecosystem builders. It's called salt. It's South African legal tech network. So it's just a community of lawyers really just passionate about legal technology, and they combine everyone from the tech providers to lawyers to the in house teams. So things like that, moments where you find people are

actually understanding that there's real need for this, and creating communities around a particular problem is always a good indicator for me, because I'm a huge, huge fan of really advocating for change collectively, because it doesn't happen in isolation. You can jump all you want and look, I've tried it. That's why, like, I'm doing a million things, but I've always said it's all connected. You look at the problems that they're solving from being able to build our biggest market right now is probably still in the traditional sense around practice management software, because when you look at our data, the majority of our firms are still the SMB types. So it's only the top tier guys, which are typically very global. So you'll find that they're headquartered maybe in the US or somewhere, and they have an office here in South Africa. But from a licensing and tech perspective, they're typically led by head office, in terms of what that looks like. So they're solving those type of problems. We're having recent additions into the Contract Lifecycle space, and that's good, because I think that's such I know it's huge in other areas, but I feel like it can be huge here in South Africa too, if it's done right. And e discovery is a huge thing, because we've had huge cases, like ridiculously complex cases from the state, from whole lot of things, and that's been a very, very good way to actually see the impact of legal tech, particularly in the E discovery space.

#### **Steve Poor**

No, that makes a lot of sense. It was, it was, we see the same dynamic here in the States with E discovery and the building, I think a lot of times legal tech don't realize, or don't acknowledge that they're building on the work done by the eDiscovery vendors, in a lot of sense.

#### **Leah Molatseli**

But I mean, it's always good, I always say, especially like yesterday, I was having a talk, and the biggest thing was always Oh, but we thought that you needed to be in a firm in order for you to either innovate or to get into the legal technology space. But I think another indicator, just to show that we're actually growing as a market, is they've always been there. We've always had knowledge management lawyers, even in small towns like Bloemfontein. I mean, people will know from the podcast, but, yeah, it's very small town in South Africa. Even the law firms had knowledge management lawyers, so it's always been there. But I think right now, with everyone being more aware, and we're talking more about it, it just amplifies the work that has been done internally, you know, in law firms, but also for people like us who are on the outside but want to have a broader type of impact.

#### **Steve Poor**

Absolutely. Tell us a little bit about your work with LexisNexis South Africa. You're an author for them. What? What's your focus? I assume, legal tech, legal innovation.

#### **Leah Molatseli**

Yeah, so this will be my second book. So I published my first book a couple of years ago with a local publisher, and I was solely focused on legal tech and startups, and what I've always done is I tried to mesh whatever it is that I'm writing with what I'm currently busy with. So back then, I had a legal tech startup. Everything was legal tech, legal tech, legal tech. So it was a natural progression that I would document the journey and when I'm learning and share it with the community too, while also obviously trying to get credibility. So it's the same thing right now, seeing as I've. Fully transitioned into legal ops. So I'm merging all my talents from legal tech and working with teens and figuring out how I can help them. So this particular project, which I'm excited about with Lexus and Nexus, is focused on equipping legal teams, basically making them tech savvy. So it goes through understanding legal ops, because in as much as we know that it's there, particularly in our market, we don't have any academia around that academic text, something that there's a point of reference to. And I'm a huge advocate of really owning our stories as Africans, and I feel like there's a story to tell around how we do what we do, and it's only fair that someone documents it. It just so happens I like things. So, hey, I'm doing it. So yeah, it's, it's

really, I'm pretty much excited about it. It's all about how to make teams more tech savvy. I'm very practical in what I do. So there's a bunch of stuff in there, around checklists, around guidelines, like practical things that teams can actually get their hands dirty with. So yeah, I'm looking forward to seeing it come to life and in stores.

**Steve Poor**

When can we expect to be able to see the in store version?

**Leah Molatseli**

Probably September. Thereby, September, that's what we're hoping for. But, yeah, I'll release further details on my socials as I move.

**Steve Poor**

We'll keep an eye for that. You mentioned legal ops. Tell me about the legal ops community in South Africa. It's obviously been a huge growth profession, at least in the States, and I know in Europe, I'm not that familiar with it. In Africa.

**Leah Molatseli**

You know the thing about all of this? I mean, even with when you look at legal tech, so, for example, some of our oldest companies, legal tech companies, have been around for, like, 40 years. So it's not to say that they're not around or that we don't have legal ops professionals. It's just a branding question, if I can put it that way around them actually seeing themselves as, Hey, I am, let's say, a legal service delivery professional in the law firm. That actually makes me part of the legal upside. So it's just about branding and association around that. But in terms of a community itself, it's not that strong yet. I mean, we recently had the birth of an organization, so our version of Clark, which is the Africa, I think it's Africa, corporate government council forum that solely focused specifically on heads of legal, legal operations, you know, trying to create and build a community around them. So there's an opportunity for growth, but I think it's more so also an identity thing for people to say, Oh, I'm actually part of legal ops community because they have been doing it. There are professionals that are really working hard in terms of assisting and moving things along, whether it be in corporate legal teams or in law firms. But I don't think they've actually really owned it and said, Hey, I'm a legal ops professional.

**Steve Poor**

That mindset, though, is important, isn't it? That sense of identity helps form a sense of community and helps people move their career forward.

**Leah Molatseli**

I agree, because, I mean, with community, what you get is a sense of belonging, which is important, especially in our career. Law can be extremely lonely. It's also important, just from a professional growth perspective, because you know, once you start sharing ideas, start sharing strategies, there's a way that actually helps, you know, the community around how to maneuver certain things. What the legal tech community has done well, though, here locally, is exactly that, a sense of collaboration, that form of comradeship, you know, looking out for each other, sharing opportunities and all of that.

**Steve Poor**

That's great. Let's talk a little bit about your journey, which has been fascinating. What made you want to be a lawyer?

**Leah Molatseli**

Sheesh, I'll always blame my parents, because they decided to have an only child.

**Steve Poor**

It's always a good place to start blaming the parents. That's always I always start there myself.

**Leah Molatseli**

Yeah, I generally blame them. So I'm an only child, and despite my very outward appearance in terms of what I share online and all of that, I'm actually very introverted. I'm actually very reserved, very quiet as a person. So growing up, I was always alone. I had a very, very strict mom. I could not play with other kids. So that meant, obviously books, music, guest at TV. I was obsessed with TV growing up, so much so that when I saw it was actually two of them. It was Ellie mcbeal and the practice, I don't know, something just said, Hey, this would be cool for you to be a lawyer. And I mean, obviously it's when I started practicing. It was nothing like that.

**Steve Poor**

I wouldn't think it would have been.

**Leah Molatseli**

Absolutely nothing like that, but it gave me the idea around, oh, okay, let's do that thing. So ever since then, I mean, that was like 13 or something, and I decided, You know what? I want to see myself, because here in South Africa, we wear court robes, like they do in the UK. Yeah, they do in the UK, yeah. So I always saw myself in a court robe, yeah. So that's how it started, basically.

**Steve Poor**

And you practiced for a while, yes. Then you moved into sort of the startup entrepreneur world. What caused you to make that change?

**Leah Molatseli**

I think what is not spoken about enough, or maybe back then, I think now people are a bit more vocal. And you know, covid helped in terms of trying to make things a bit more flexible for people, but for me, because I had my children very young. So I had my twins in my second year of law school, I was like 19, so my priorities when I started practicing law was very different in terms of how I wanted to manage my time and being available and all of that. And unfortunately, traditional corporate law is not very kind to mothers who want to be present, and I literally could not live with myself being able to leave the house while they sleep, come back and they sleep on weekends, I'm exhausted, I'm irritable. It was no longer sustainable for me. So I thought to myself, You know what? It was good while it lasted, you got to, so start something else. So that's actually what led me to get out of traditional law, and then I started, actually, the startup was, it started as a consulting thing, because for us here in South Africa, so there are two streams. If you want to practice and litigate, you'll have to be in practice, so have have your own firm, or be under a firm, or be an advocate, and they practice at the bar, whereas with consulting, you don't litigate, but you actually still get to do legal work, so you can give advice, you can draft contracts and all of that jazz. So I decided to take that route. And being from a small town, I thought to myself, Oh, this is cool. I think I can manage. But then, as life would have it, I could not get a sitter. One day, I had a meeting with a client, and we actually had to figure out, Oh, what do I do? And the babysitter didn't come. So I'm like, okay, you know what? Let's rather Skype. And that, for me, was actually what was the turning point, because I always knew I wanted to do things differently to accommodate my preferences, even though I'm a professional, I'm still a human, I'm still a mom, I'm still, you know, a person. And so that transition, it was like a light bulb. It's like, oh, I can actually do this thing without leaving the house. I can still, you know, like it was, it was such a Ethan moment for me. And then I went in, because I have this obsessive thing about figuring stuff out. So I just went in, started doing research. And then that's when it transitioned to a legal tech startup.

**Steve Poor**

And what was the legal tech startup? What was the solution they were bringing to market?

**Leah Molatseli**

Yeah, so lenoma legal, very yellow, very bright. I wanted to be a rebel, go against traditional law. It was really focused on small businesses and startups only because during my transition, I took a lot of business classes, because you go to law school and all those things, but they don't teach you certain things. So I did not know what I wanted to do back then. But once talking to my fellow students, we then discovered, well, I discovered I'm like, oh, lawyers are we're not all that amazing. We think we are, but we're not, because sometimes they don't understand us. Sometimes we're unapproachable. We're expensive. So very like key problems around how people interact with lawyers. And so Lenovo, for me, was an answer to those pains to say, You know what? Here's an online platform. You can book a consultation online, you can draft your agreement online. You don't have to pay exorbitant amounts of money in order to get quality legal services. So yeah, I think it was a good idea. I might, I might restart it. I think I'm a bit more wiser, because there's a bunch of mistakes that you do as you're trying to figure things out. But yeah.

**Steve Poor**

We do. We do learn from our mistakes, don't we?

**Leah Molatseli**

Yes, we do.

**Steve Poor**

I've heard you describe yourself as being very purpose driven. Do I have that right? And if so, what do you mean by that?

**Leah Molatseli**

I mean that nothing is ever straight. You know, we never get a straight line to our version of happiness, to our version of career fulfillment, our vision of motherhood, or whatever that looks like. And having a purpose actually gives you that innate strength to keep going even when it's tough. You know, there's a lot of things that happen that obviously we are not public about, because of how people will see us and all of that, but it's so important to have that one core purpose because it actually will inform everything else. I don't know there are other people who think differently, but I function from even when I get like a task or a project at work, I need to understand the end goal first, and then I'll actually map out the next steps or the tiny little details around how do I get there? And so for me, how I live is very, very purpose driven, in a sense, for me, what that looks like is actually legal tech, because that actually informs certain decisions. It means I won't accept every offer that comes. It means I won't align myself to certain things that do not speak to my core goal. It means that I'll actually hold myself accountable for my own dreams and say, You know what I've been wanting to do, this is this actually in line with what you've been wanting to do? So it's like a constant pulse check to say, Hey, are you on the right track? Because sometimes we get so lost in the most randomness of things, you know, living outside of your purpose. So for me, I always hold that, and I don't know life is more fulfilling. I can't imagine not waking up and thinking, hey, I'm gonna change the world. I don't know. I don't know how people do it. You just wake up and I mean no judgment. I mean each to their own. But for me, that's what I need. I need to be able to believe that this interview that I'm having today will have some form of impact to someone somewhere.

**Steve Poor**

Absolutely, absolutely, I completely understand that you talk about living in the in the tech world, living in the world where technology can change and make things better for people, for lawyers, you can't have a podcast anymore without talking about generative. Ai, I think, I think there's a law somewhere that says you have to do that. Yeah, and I know you wrote an article recently about things to think about in South Africa for lawyers beginning to use generative. Ai, what's been the impact of this? You talked about Skype having a big impact on your mindset. And then I assume the pandemic also played a role in shifting people's mindsets towards technology. And then you have this generative AI wave. What impact has this wave had on the on the tech and legal community down there?

### **Leah Molatseli**

There's a lot of excitement for those who understand, so we have two crops, so we have the guys who are very excited about the possibilities of AI, and they're more than willing to actually uptake and assume some form of risk around let's try this. Let's try a new solution. Let's try something different. Then there's another crop. They're like, No, no, this is not for us. This is too risky. What about the profession? What does that mean for us? But I must say, what generative AI has done, in general, by actually democratizing access to AI has been extremely empowering for builders, for people who actually want to start something, even on a small scale, internally in legal teams that want to try tiny projects, it's actually a bit more accessible for people to actually try things. The only flip side is that, for some reason, people have the sense. Because I know you guys also had that situation where lawyers were citing incorrect cases and so forth. We've had the same here too.

### **Steve Poor**

The technology is agnostic. In that sense, it doesn't really care where it goes.

### **Leah Molatseli**

It really doesn't care. And you know, I was saying actually, literally, just the other day, yesterday, during that talk of mine. Because for us as attorneys. What we do? We have a two year period, or one year, depending on which course you take, where lawyers are trained. So it's maybe the USS version of a legal intern. So we call them candidate legal practitioners, or back in my day, candidate attorneys, but during this time they have to be changed so you, as a principal, the one who's admitted, you actually have to take them along. And then after that, they write their bar exam and all of those good things. I've always said that we need to treat AI like those legal interns, because you know very well that if they've drafted something of their. Done something you're actually going to oversee and check, okay, is it right? Is it correct? Like, does it make sense? It's the same for me with AI, you can't just take it as is. It's still learning. It's still training. It even has a disclaimer, you know, when it starts saying, Hey, I'm learning. So for me, I think it's both a good and a bad thing in the sense that, and that's why, even though I'm not a huge fan of over regulation, but I think, I mean, even in that article that I mentioned earlier, there's a need for regulators, specifically in our space, we call them the legal practice Council, to actually come in and step in, have an opinion, provide some form of guidance, because right now, everyone is just doing whatever they want, their own conscious or their own company policies, actually the ones that dictate how they engage with generative AI. But I think it would be stronger for the community if it came from, you know, such bodies.

### **Steve Poor**

Yeah, I think, as a general proposition, I agree with you. I think the risk is people tend to react to those outlier situations. So you give the example of the technology hallucinating of case and the person not looking at it to me, that's a that's a human failing, not a technology failure. And yet in the States, that's resulted in a number of courts saying you can't ever use generative AI, which, of course, is an overreaction and one that's not sustainable given the incorporation of general AI and everyday work products.

**Leah Molatseli**

It doesn't make sense, because, I mean, even look, the tech vendors are also excited about everything. I mean, we now have some form of version of AI in almost every single tool that we use. So it's not it's no longer practical to say, no, don't do it. I think it would be a bit more practical to actually just give a note, have have some form of guidance to say, You know what? Do this. Don't do this because I'm a huge fan of lawyers getting into technology only because there's an ethical obligation on us to be well versed of the latest legislation, case law, and whatever that looks like for the benefit of our clients, for the benefit of our profession, but for us here in South Africa, there's still no ethical obligation to be kept abreast of the latest technologies. And I think for me, that's a mishap. There needs to be a level of tech competency around how we maneuver it, if it's also for the benefit of our clients. Because if, let's say, someone is not engaging in AI or some form of tech, and it actually leads to, I don't know, some form of detriment to their client. Who's at fault? Is it the lawyer? Is it the client? Like, you know? So sometimes I grapple with those very simple ideas in my head. I don't have an answer, putting them out there. Hopefully, you know, much smarter people will come through the answers here.

**Steve Poor**

Well, they are. They are complex issues. You're right. We need to be having discussions on and finding some common ground among them if we're going to move forward. Sure. Well, Leah, we've, we've run out of time. I want to thank you very much for the conversation, and I appreciate you staying up late at night to talk to me.

**Leah Molatseli**

Thank you. It was a great conversation. I enjoy these mental gymnastics.

**Steve Poor**

As do I. Thank you very much.

**Leah Molatseli**

Thank you.

**Steve Poor**

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