Pioneers and Pathfinders: Michael Afar
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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. I've spent my career putting new tools and ideas to work in client service and helping colleagues and clients 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.

Today on Pioneers and Pathfinders, we're joined by Michael Afar, a labor and employment partner in Seyfarth's Los Angeles office, a 40 Under 40 honoree and one of the legal minds behind the winner of the firm's inaugural SEYence Fair.

Kevin Young: SEYence Fair is a firm-wide innovation competition designed to surface, test and scale ideas that improve how we work and how we serve clients, and to shape the future of legal service. For Michael, what started as a frustrating, time-consuming litigation problem became an award-winning idea. SEYscraper went on to earn recognition from the *Financial Times* for transforming how legal teams analyze litigation data.

Zeynep Ersin: In this episode, we talk about turning ideas into reality and how lawyers can use AI and data to create better outcomes for clients.

Kevin Young: We also explore the power of experimentation and collaboration, and why some of the best innovations come from the practitioners closest to the work.

Zeynep Ersin: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today. We're thrilled to welcome our colleague Michael Afar, a labor and employment attorney in our Los Angeles Century City office. Mike, welcome.

Michael Afar: Thank you very much. Happy to be here.

Kevin Young: Glad to have you, Mike. To kick things off, we'd love to hear about you and your career path. You've spent most of your professional career at Seyfarth. How has that long-term perspective shaped the way you think about innovation and client service?

Michael Afar: I'm very lucky to have spent my entire career here. It's nice to be considered a lifer, even though I'm still a teenager in the relative course of life here.

Kevin Young: Mike, I'd call you a litigator, but a very forward-thinking and innovative one. I know a big part of what you do is weaving in data analysis, and you focus on technology to get the best out of your team and yourself on your cases. How did those things come together for you?

Michael Afar: I'm mainly a wage-and-hour litigator on the class action and PAGA side. A lot of people don't think it's exciting because of all that data. But unlike traditional single-plaintiff cases, these cases don't really turn on low-level, micro-level differences. We do use those in our cases, but mostly you're looking at trends, the data and widespread metrics. You're looking for ways to paint with broad brushstrokes to make the arguments you need to win, and also to find unique individual differences. So it's always going to be very data-heavy.

I remember my first case as a clerk, almost 17 years ago now. I was working with one of our partners, and we were getting data from all kinds of sources: badge swipe records, garage entrance records, computer boot-up times. I was 21 years old and thought, I don't know anything about the law, but I sure as heck know how to put all these pieces together. When you put it all together, you can see that the time this person spent going from point A to point B to C is so short that it completely eviscerates their case. That was the first time I saw data as an integral part of forward thinking and of being innovative in how we defend cases.

That's the reality of class and PAGA litigation in California. The data is going to come out, and you have to figure out the best way to use it and harness it. From that point on, it's about what we have access to and what's out there. We're in a new world of data overload and information overload. With AI especially, the data is a lot more accessible, and we have to synthesize it more than we've needed to in the past.

Zeynep Ersin: Mike, you're touching on something that shows in the fact that the idea you submitted for yourself and the team, SEYscraper, won our inaugural SEYence Fair. What's especially interesting is that you took a pain point and thought about it in a very entrepreneurial way, using data and technology to improve how legal services are delivered and experienced. I'd love to hear how that idea came about and where you connected the dots.

Michael Afar: SEYence Fair was a ton of fun, as I'm sure you saw firsthand, Zeynep. It's not often that a firm encourages people to just send ideas its way and makes that a unique, collaborative process. The credit isn't just mine. A team of six or seven of us all had similar ideas that came together in SEYscraper, starting with its first phase, our settlement database tracker.

The idea came from a work assignment I had years ago—decades ago, really. A lot of these cases settle, and along the way clients and partners want comparables. They want all kinds of metrics, and they don't just want to know the data is out there. They want to know how to use it to benefit our clients and get the best results we can. Back in the day, you had to research all of that by hand, and it took hours and hours. I did that

work myself, and once I became an attorney I handed the same assignment to other associates, case clerks or whoever it might be.

When SEYence Fair came along, the focus was on using the new generation of innovation, AI, which didn't exist 10 or 15 years ago. We decided to approach it as a tool for aggregating and synthesizing data. Settlement data is out there. You just have to find a way to collect it and then analyze it, and that's what we were able to do. Work that used to take four or five hours now takes minutes.

We've spent the last year developing it, with credit to our Innovation Strategic Design office, our Labs folks and everyone else who's helped. We now have about 17,000 or 18,000 settlements in it, and we're always looking for ways to add new data. It's been an incredibly powerful tool for us, not just as litigators but for anyone on the client-facing side.

Kevin Young: That's awesome. I'm always interested in how ideas come to be, how they grow and how they get better when you bring together people with similar or different experiences. You mentioned there were five or six others with similar ideas. How did y'all come together, and what happened to the idea once you were in the same room, virtual or otherwise?

Michael Afar: We had three different ideas. I'm a California lawyer, so I immediately think about what I'm dealing with in California. Another team, Chicago lawyers, deals with EEOC charges and consent decrees. And New York lawyers were trying to find a way to aggregate data for what they handle regularly. So at submission time, it was, "Hey, the three of you have similar ideas. Let's package them into something that can be a beast of a submission."

Over a few meetings, we worked out the common core behind the idea, which is data aggregation and data synthesis. That's where the name SEYscraper comes from: figuring out what's out there, scraping that data and feeding it into the in-house tools we've built.

Even now, for the second and third rounds of SEYence Fair, I hear ideas where the data is out there and we could access it, aggregate it and scrape it for our own use. SEYscraper has all the potential in the world to play a part in those. We worked through which ideas within SEYscraper should go first, which was easiest and how to develop it. We also wanted to get something to market first, partly to put the rest of the law firm world on notice that we're doing this. That matters, and I think the innovation awards and recognition we've received reflect it. Now we're on the second and third uses of the tool, and more and more people see how accessible it is and are finding ways to use it in their own creations, through AI agents or however else.

Kevin Young: That's interesting, because with a lot of innovation ideas in a litigation practice, you assume plenty of people must have the same idea. You do the same things over and over and spend a lot of hours on them, and it's hard not to think there has to be a better way, especially when technology is changing so fast. Watching your

idea hatch from afar (no pun intended), I noticed that what's under the hood can differ from what you first pictured. Other people bring ideas you hadn't formed in your own mind. Was there some of that for you?

Michael Afar: The funny part is I came this close to not submitting it. I had the idea in my head, and you tend to assume lots of people have the same idea and someone else will do it. But you'd be surprised how many people never think to put their thoughts into action. Maybe that's because before SEYence Fair, there wasn't a great path for putting an idea into motion. It unlocked a lot of ideas about what we can do that weren't accessible before the AI world we're in now. So I'm really glad we did it and really glad it turned out well.

Kevin Young: Even if you get it in before the buzzer, it still counts.

Michael Afar: It turned out to be an idea that represented a lot of different people, practice groups and ways of thinking. The team behind it was incredible at bringing it to life. I won't pretend I understand a quarter of what they did behind the scenes to make it work. I just see the final product and think, "Wow, this is amazing." I think it's a testament to the team we've built.

Zeynep Ersin: I love hearing about your ideation journey. You took an experience you found time-consuming and clunky and looked at it through a human lens: what it was like for you, and how clients would benefit on the receiving end. Keeping that human perspective is critical in design thinking. The idea then naturally grows and improves when you open it up to others and ask, "How do we make this real?" They bring new perspectives and you work on it together. That's what I love about SEYence Fair and similar initiatives. People get to think out loud, brainstorm and develop ideas, then crowdsource ways to improve them and actually make them happen.

It's been so rewarding to see the variety of submissions since we launched this a couple of years ago. Mike, I'd love your take on the ideas you've seen come out of it. What are your takeaways from that variety, both from the finalists and from this broader culture of brainstorming and bringing ideas to the table?

Michael Afar: I think a lot of people have embraced the idea of taking 30 minutes to step back from their day and think about the one process that drove them crazy. Maybe it should have been simple but wasn't, or maybe it's something they repeat all the time. This round of SEYence Fair is focused on agents, but the point is the same: think about a problem you keep running into. I recognize that even carving out 30 minutes a week for that is a win in itself. People who do it start noticing all sorts of things in their day-to-day, which helps them get creative about possible solutions. Then they just play around with the tools. When people have done that, we've seen all kinds of ideas come out.

You've been a judge too, Zeynep, so you've seen the submissions. I'm always surprised at how simple many of the ideas honestly are. People listen and say, "This is amazing. Why didn't we already have this? What did it take for someone to come up with it?" That makes these competitions really hard to judge. People have learned to look back at

their own work, find where the problems are and turn that into an idea for a tool that can draw on our innovation teams and AI platforms.

Kevin Young: Can you talk a bit about execution? You worked with the Labs team, and as you said, you're not a computer scientist and weren't the one writing the code. What was it like partnering with them? What roles were involved, and what was it like to see the project go from an idea to a living, breathing tool our attorneys can use?

Michael Afar: It's really about having people who can turn the idea into a product. It almost felt like talking to some otherworldly source. I'd say, "This is what I'm thinking," and a week later I'd have a draft concept and think, "How did you even know this is what I wanted?"

Kevin Young: You can do that?

Michael Afar: Yeah. You need the right people, and they have to straddle both worlds. Purely technical people aren't enough, which is why attorneys have to be involved. We spent hours on calls: "This is what I'm thinking, this is what I envision, this is how it should work. Let's test it and reconvene." A lot of that work happens up front. Once the concept is down, it's so exciting to actually see it. It's like watching the baby form. Then you mold it into a full-fledged tool everyone can use. You decide how to tweak it, what you want people to see and what layers to add. A lot of that is trial and error. How much is too much? Should we scale it back? What would make it hard to use?

No one person drives that. I worked a lot with Reid, Jared and Byong on our Labs side, and they deserve credit. The tool is still a living concept that's meant to be modified and improved in many ways, including through feedback from the people using it. I'm still hearing from people across the firm, and I encourage it: "Tell me what needs to be better. Let's make this as good as we can." Creating something doesn't mean it's finished and forgotten. We've invested a lot of time in it, and we'll keep investing to make sure it stays as good as it can be.

Zeynep Ersin: Whether it's 30 minutes a week or a day, how can people in a law firm or corporate legal department balance experimentation and innovation with quality, reliability and the pressure of all their other work? Any suggestions?

Michael Afar: One thing I've started doing is setting aside 30 minutes once a week just to play with the tools for whatever idea I'm working on. To be honest, I don't even know what these agents can and can't do or what all the options are. That's terrifying in a lot of ways, but it's also really motivating. And it can't be two minutes of experimenting. You have to really dive in and see what the tool can do. I've found that dedicated time really helps. You shut out everything else, focus on the tools and figure out what you can do with them. When you come up with something, use it as much as you can and find ways to make it better.

Kevin Young: Not to generalize, but to generalize: lawyers tend to be perfectionists. You file the brief once it's perfect, and discovery responses have to be spot-on and

precise. Was this kind of iterative work a different mindset for you? Was it hard, or did it come naturally?

Michael Afar: In my kind of work, I've had cases that lasted 10 years. So my brain and my practice have always had to assume that you don't do something once and then never think about it again three or four years later. What you do will always have an impact down the road. A case might go up on appeal, come back down, and suddenly you're litigating again. You have to remember what you've got, make it better, try new arguments and do things differently. We're always tweaking.

If anything, the AI side is really exciting. When you tinker with a tool, you're not losing track of things, you're making it better and you're in control. That's a big change from litigation, where I often don't get to choose what I improve because so much is outside my control. Here, I can. To some extent, I think it's made me a better lawyer, because I'm always thinking about how to modify, tinker with and improve the tools.

It does force you to stay on your game and stay focused on something much longer than you otherwise might. That can be hard for a lawyer who wants to wrap up a case and move on to the next big thing. This is almost like a sourdough starter, for lack of a better word. You just have to keep feeding it.

Zeynep Ersin: I think the art of lawyering is being flexible and adaptable, because a new decision could change precedent at any time, or legislative or regulatory changes could affect how you practice. Even when something was done a certain way, you can't always shelve it completely. A lot has to be black and white, but a lot can also be unpredictable. So, to your point, you keep feeding the beast. If you're willing to be flexible, you can be flexible in how you find solutions or new ways of doing things, and now you have generative AI to lean on.

There's an assumption that attorneys are wired not to rely on technology or innovation. But much of what they do requires them to be nimble and adaptable. Maybe technology is simply what's opening more doors now.

Michael Afar: AI has given us back a lot of time to focus on the real litigation work, which is exactly what you described, Zeynep: critical thinking and strategy. How do we pivot? How do we adapt? What's coming our way on a case? When we don't have to spend hours analyzing data, we free up a lot of time for the more important parts of a case, at least at my level. Our associates benefit too. Instead of being bogged down working through everything, they can get answers, review them, synthesize the information and then ask, "Okay, now what? How do I use this to advance the ultimate goal of the case? How do I think more strategically, instead of seeing myself as a tedious piece of machinery in a long stretch of litigation?"

For me, that's been much more effective in getting people to adopt the tools. Say we had a call last week and the client gave us all this information. I can put it into Copilot, and Copilot can give me exactly the data talking points I need. In five minutes, I have the output I wanted. Then, before the next client call, we can think about how to use it in

the strategy we recommend. That's empowering in a lot of ways. It gives us time to focus on what really matters.

Kevin Young: As you've worked with the team to build SEYscraper and watched other technologies come online, has anything surprised you? Any lessons about driving attorney adoption of the great tools we have now?

Michael Afar: Let me put it this way: I've been really impressed by how associates have adopted many of these tools. We need to lean into the excitement among our younger attorneys, who have really embraced these tools and are pushing them forward. For partners and more senior attorneys, I think tapping into that excitement will help drive our own adoption and wider use in our practices.

There are hackathons, and there are people who can demo what they've built even if it isn't at the level of a firm-wide competition like SEYence Fair. Let's be honest, a lot of people with great ideas shy away from the spotlight or don't want to put themselves forward, but they're doing this work day to day. How do we encourage those people to share? Someone sees an idea and says, "That applies to my case," or "I could absolutely use that." Suddenly that person feels much more connected to the overall fabric of our AI and innovation work. They're not just using the tools. They've become mentors and teachers. They're not handing out fish, they're teaching people how to fish. I think that makes them feel part of something bigger, and when you get that buy-in, adoption follows naturally.

Kevin Young: As you're saying, a huge benefit of SEYence Fair, like a hackathon, is bringing people with different perspectives and levels of experience under one tent. Some people have dealt with the same problem for 20 years and can clearly explain what it is, why it's a problem and where we're losing time. Others haven't dealt with it as long, so they don't have the same inertia, and they may be very comfortable with the technology available. Part of the brilliance is getting people with a similar idea into the same room, because the execution is what really needs to be worked out. Does that resonate?

Michael Afar: Absolutely. It sounds like the start of a bad joke: put seven attorneys in a room and see what happens. It's impressive we executed anything at all, let alone what it became. The difference is that we all shared a common goal and a common vision of what we were trying to accomplish. Focusing on innovation and AI is a nice way to break up the monotony, and getting that energy back helps us as lawyers. So I think a lot of people will be excited to stay involved.

Zeynep Ersin: To build on what you said about change management and getting people to adopt and experiment, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. You have to create different opportunities. Some are small groups, some are larger. Some people learn by reading, others by listening to a podcast, for example. The more ways you create for people to come together, think out loud and share ideas, the more likely you are to get widespread adoption.

We're all going through this right now, trying to figure out how to bring others along. We want people not only to experiment but to share what they learned and how good the output was. That's why we keep pushing our initiative of simultaneous advancement. We're telling people to get together and join forces, even on writing a prompt. Someone with more or different experience might help you refine a prompt in a way you hadn't considered. So I love what you said about people thinking out loud together, sharing experiences and building on one another. It's so important.

Most people remember an AI eureka moment. What's yours?

Michael Afar: I clearly remember emailing Byong on our Labs team, at least 10 years ago, asking, "Can't we use bots to do blah, blah, blah?" So maybe that was the first "Can't we use this?" moment. It was AI before it was AI. I was thinking, why am I spending all this time on a manual task when it's just a matter of finding the information, reading it and parsing it into various outputs? Why can't somebody other than me do that? That was my first real AI moment.

Fast-forward to when the idea took shape and I saw the sheer power of the tool. Over two years of my own work got me maybe 1% of what we accomplished in one month with the SEYscraper platform. It's inspiring to see, and terrifying in a lot of ways. But that was my eureka moment: there's unlimited potential in how we can use this. I still have a lot to learn about other ways to build it into my platform.

Kevin Young: If someone hasn't said this yet, they should: good innovation can be born out of frustration. You bang your head against the wall and think there has to be a better way. It's great that we live at a time, and work at an organization, where we can voice those frustrations and find people who say, "Yeah, we can probably find a way around that." And right now there's no shortage of ways to get to something better. It's really cool to hear. Mike, thank you for being on.

Michael Afar: Thank you, guys.

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.