

Pioneers and Pathfinders: Zeynep Ersin and Kevin Young

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Zeynep: Welcome to Pioneers and Pathfinders—Seyfarth’s podcast about the people and ideas reshaping the legal industry.

Kevin: 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 do the same.

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

Zeynep Ersin: Welcome to Pioneers and Pathfinders. I’m Zeynep Ersin.

Kevin Young: And I’m Kevin Young. We’re your new co-hosts—and we’re thrilled to be here.

Zeynep Ersin: For over 300 episodes and 200 guests, this podcast has been home to some of the most important conversations happening in legal innovation—all guided by one voice. Today, we sit down with that voice. But first—a little about who we are and why we’re here.

Kevin Young: I’m a litigation partner in Seyfarth’s Atlanta office. Fifteen years in, and I still spend the vast majority of my time in the trenches—defending employers in wage and hour class actions, advising on compliance, the day-to-day work of practicing law. But alongside that, I co-chair Atlanta’s Labor & Employment team, I serve on the firm’s AI Task Force, I’ve helped launch our first firm-wide innovation fair, and I teach a course on innovation in the practice of law at the University of Georgia School of Law. I come at innovation as a practitioner first—someone who wants to know how it actually changes the work.

Zeynep Ersin: And I come at it from the other side of that equation. I’m Seyfarth’s Chief Innovation and Strategic Design Officer. I’ve been at the firm for well over a decade, and my career has spanned legal recruiting, talent development, practice development, knowledge management, and operations—all of it rooted in understanding people and how they work. Today, my focus is on embedding a culture of innovation across the firm—leveraging design thinking, AI, automation, and process optimization to transform how we deliver legal services and create value for our clients. I think of myself as a human-in-the-loop person. The technology matters, but the people driving it matter more.

Kevin Young: So, you've got a practitioner and a design thinker. Two very different lenses on the same mission. That's the idea.

Zeynep Ersin: And there's no better way to launch this next chapter than with the person who built what we're stepping into. Steve Poor led this podcast from the very beginning. Before we carry it forward, we wanted to start with him.

Kevin Young: This is the passing of the baton. Let's get into it.

Zeynep Ersin: Thank you so much, Steve, for joining Kevin and I today.

Steve Poor: Happy to do it. I'm sitting here in my rocking chair, so, you know, happy to have a chat.

Zeynep Ersin: Great. Well, we thought we would provide listeners with an opportunity to hear from you and your experience as leading the podcast, setting the stage for us, what you're thinking about for the future, and also to maybe provide an opportunity for the listeners to get to know Kevin and I a little bit as their new hosts. So with that, maybe I will jump in with a quick question and we can go from there. I'm curious, do you have a favorite episode in particular?

Steve Poor: Oh, stop it. Now asking me, that's like asking me, do I have a favorite grandchild? Which I do not. Okay. But even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. You know, I think for me, the interesting thing about as I look back over the last five years, every guest has brought their own special, unique style to the podcast and to the set of interviews. It's always wonderful meeting new people and hearing new ideas. But for me, probably the ones I've enjoyed the most are catching up with old friends that I've fallen out of contact with. I'll give you an example. We had Reena Sengupta on, and Reena and I first crossed paths back in 2012 when they're first starting the Financial Times Innovative Lawyers of America. And we've caught up to each other sporadically over the years, but it was great to catch her and just have a nice half hour conversation about what's going on in her life. And I can give you dozens of examples of that. But, for me, that's been the most gratifying piece of it, I think, that and learning something new every time I talk to somebody, these fabulous guests.

Kevin Young: Steve, I'm curious, you know, I think I'd mentioned this to you before. I started the firm in 2010. I was a baby lawyer at the time. I was basically a first year or second year, give or take. And I believe you were the chair of the firm at the time and had your fingerprints all over the firm's innovation journey, certainly at that time, and it's continued through now, albeit in a different capacity. As you've gotten the chance to really focus on the podcast and listen to different people bringing different perspectives and angles. I think for all of us, it seems like the pace of change has been just blazing fast. But does it feel that way to you? Does it feel like today is so much different than it might have been like in 2010, 2012, 2015? And kind of what's your perspective been on that, just how fast things are changing? Or does it feel like it's pretty much the same?

Steve Poor: No, it's not the same. I think the pace of change has picked up dramatically. I think the pandemic hastened change. Suddenly we're working virtually.

Suddenly we are working through technology, and finding that we could do things differently than we ever had before. Then, of course, you had the ChatGPT Big Bang, which has been a remarkable acceleration of technological development in the business. And I think the industry in general has adopted the mantra of looking for better and more efficient ways to serve their clients. That's not the way it was if you go back in 2010 or the early aughts, when we sort of started this journey, there was nobody along the road with us. Now, everybody's talking about innovation. How many people are doing it is a different question, but everybody's talking about it.

Zeynep Ersin: And as part of sharing innovation stories for individuals, their respective journeys, obviously, we've had the great fortune of leveraging a podcast to have those conversations. What do you think makes the podcast platform a nice way to get the word out and for folks to learn about innovation in ways that maybe weren't embraced 10 years ago, you know, before podcasts were as widely accepted or leveraged as a news or information source?

Steve Poor: Yeah, I think that it allows people's personality to come through. And every podcaster has a different style and a different approach. And I listen to a lot of podcasts. I know, Kevin, you do too. And so you've got to find the one that works for you. But for me, it was always about the guest and giving them the white space to be able to lay out their ideas and their thoughts and do that within a 30-minute span. And I think the people found that they were able to access that information from all sorts of media, whether they're driving in a car, whether they've got their earbuds in, whatever it may be. They're not having to read a transcript or read a dense article. You could follow up. So I think podcasts are a great way to get information. I don't know, as I said, Kevin, I know you listen to a lot of podcasts. Are there any that have influenced your way of thinking?

Kevin Young: Well, obviously the Pioneers and Pathfinders podcast, number one.

Steve Poor: Well, it goes without saying, yes, yes, thank you.

Kevin Young: Atlanta traffic creates a lot of time for podcasts, and I take advantage. A lot of what I listen to is in the legal tech and AI space. As you know, this space is changing by the day. There are so many smart people innovating, pushing boundaries, and doing really cool and innovative things. And I think the podcast format—in addition to being great for Atlanta traffic—is extremely well suited for meeting the pace of change because we can listen to a freshly recorded podcast on a brand new LLM that was released just a week ago. There's so much good, timely stuff out there. And a side benefit: my 8- and 10-year-old boys are in the car with me for a lot of this stuff, so it's a great way to get them started.

Steve Poor: Well, they do start young these days, absolutely.

Kevin Young: I'll tell you what, they start a lot younger. I tell people this story all the time of just how tech comfortable the next generation is from 8- and 10-year-olds in my

car to the students I've gotten to teach over the years. There's a very high level of comfort. It's exciting.

Steve Poor: To pick up on that point. I thought my kids were tech natives until I now have grandchildren that are just intuitive to them. And they just pick up the phone and they start swiping and pushing buttons. They know what they're doing. It's just sort of amazing.

Kevin Young: It is amazing.

Zeynep Ersin: I think what I've really appreciated about Pioneers and Pathfinders and what I think resonates with me when I'm listening to any podcast is walking away feeling like I've learned something new or that I have a new way of looking at something, both learning from someone's individual experience or, you know, a particular comment that they made. And I think that that's really part of what I'm hoping to accomplish and continue to do with the podcast is allow the opportunity for folks to spend time listening, but walk away with a takeaway or more, at least one, but something that they can either apply in their day-to-day, relate to, think about differently. But I think that it's just another great platform to learn, but you're learning from human beings and their own experiences.

Steve Poor: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's a great objective. How do the two of you plan on working together? I did it solo, so I don't have any expertise in doing it with co-hosts. How's this going to work?

Kevin Young: We're going to find out in part as we go, but I think part of it, Steve, for someone who had 200 guests and 300 episodes, we knew we needed some real bandwidth to fill the shoes. I think it's exciting for us. I think we come at it from very different perspectives. For me, 99% of my time is spent practicing still. I represent clients day in and day out. I'm a litigator. I have a heavy plate of class and collective action litigation. And my interest in legal innovation and the work I've done on it within the firm kind of is shaped through that prism, through the prism of just like getting the work done day in and day out. And Zeynep, who I'll let speak for herself, obviously comes at it from a very different perspective. And I think our real hope and optimism is around being able to provide different angles, different advantages, and looking at the same sort of waterfront and being able to provide a different and wide perspective into the topics we're going to look into.

Zeynep Ersin: I would agree. I think it'll hopefully be interesting for listeners to have those additional perspectives, certainly in tandem with guests who we have on sharing their own stories. Part of how I see myself is the emphasis of the human in the loop. My career trajectory has been very human focused in that it merged legal recruiting, talent development, practice development, and really understanding what drives individuals, both in terms of their legal trajectory, but part of that is how they embrace innovation and their thinking processes and how they ideate and how they create actionable, executable ideas from those brainstorming and those ideas. So, I'm really excited to have

those kinds of conversations to further understand the humans in the loop who are out there innovating and the things that they're creating and thinking about.

Steve Poor: So, you talked a little bit about what innovation embedded in that sort of comment was your own definition of what innovation means, ideating and executing all that kind of stuff. Innovation has become almost meaningless. It's tossed around so much in the legal industry these days. Well, what does it mean to you? What should the audience know about your approach to innovation?

Kevin Young: That's a great question. So, and I've got a few different thoughts on it. I think my view of innovation is shaped very much by what I've learned coming up at Seyfarth. I tell people, and the show is not a marketing show, and we're not going to do any marketing here, but I do think that the firm was very early on the innovation path. I think if you went to most of the AmLaw 200 firm websites now, there's some iteration of innovation on their website, but that wasn't the case back in 2010, 2011. One thing that is kind of infused into how I think about progress and innovation is what I've learned here, which for us, I don't think it was ever just about tech. Yes, tech is a big piece of innovation, but there's also process. There's also people. It's kind of leveraging, what do we do? How do we do it? Through whom do we do it? And tech would also be part of it where appropriate to really deliver value and to do things differently in a better way than we did before. So to me, it's kind of that broad, how do we do things better than in the past? Whether it's through technology, whether it's through people, whether it's through process or some mix of the three. Now, obviously AI and within the tech subset is all the rage these days. And I think rightly so. I mean, we are seeing things that even AI couldn't have done a year ago or months ago. They were waking up and seeing, man, it's got this amazing capability today. So I think we'll have a heavy focus on that. I think we wouldn't be doing ourselves or our listeners a service if we didn't do that. But I also think innovation's broader. It's definitely broader than AI. I think it's even broader than tech. And my hope would be that we can kind of continue a broad view of what innovation looks like and what it means and how it's shaping out day-to-day for attorneys, for people who support attorneys, and for everyone in between.

Steve Poor: Question for both of you, because I know you both interact with clients from slightly different roles. How have you seen the clients embrace technology and innovation? Because I think that's one of the, you ask about the speed of change, Kevin. I think one of the variables that's gone into accelerating change has been client pressure and client expectations. Have you guys seen that?

Zeynep Ersin: There's no question the pressure on in-house teams is significant—organizations expect them to be incorporating emerging tech, AI, innovating across the board. But what I think is really exciting, and more to your question, Steve, is that we're seeing clients who aren't just feeling that pressure—they're leaning into it. They're more willing to experiment than I think we've ever seen. And what's been really special is that they're choosing to do that experimentation with outside counsel, not just asking us to figure it out and report back. It's much more of a, "Let's try this together. Let's pilot something. Let's see what works." That kind of collaborative experimentation between law firms and in-house teams—I think that's a pretty unique moment for the legal

industry that we're in right now. Because both sides are learning from each other in real time. The clients are bringing their operational knowledge and their business contacts, and we're bringing our experience across matters and across industries, and together that's a pretty magical combination. So yes, the pressure is real, but what's encouraging is that it's actually producing a willingness to roll up sleeves and innovate together, alongside one another.

Kevin Young: Yeah, I totally agree. And I would just say what's interesting, I think we've all experienced some form of this, is just how quickly things have changed. And it wasn't more than a couple of years ago when we would get a sort of RFP from a client or potential clients who'd ask how can we support our legal needs? And as part of the RFP, two, three years ago would say, also please certify that you're not using AI for our work. And things have changed so quickly in a couple of years. Now, most RFPs, if they're going to ask about AI, it's saying, tell us how you're using it. How are you going to find value and deliver it to us as a client? So I think we've quickly hit a point where clients see the value. Risks in a lot of cases too, but the real value that the technology presents. And I think it's become increasingly kind of cost of admission of how are we going to use this technology to deliver value, which has always been the name of the game. How do we provide the utmost value to our clients possible? I've seen for us an increasing focus, and I think rightly so, on what are we doing, how are we doing it, to make sure that our value proposition is as strong as it can be. But on top of that, to your point, Zeynep, so many opportunities to collaborate, to partner with clients, whether on solutions we're building or even just sharing notes. Here's how we're using this. Here's what you might consider for your in-house legal department. You're really helping our clients to not just get good value from us, but to generate it for themselves where appropriate.

Zeynep Ersin: Steve, I had a question for you. When we're talking about innovation, broadly speaking, and you've had the opportunity to have so many conversations with truly innovative individuals who've come on the show, is there a specific attribute or characteristic or quality that you think innovators possess? And a second follow-up to that, is that something that can be learned?

Steve Poor: I think curiosity is the great trait. I think we understate the importance of people being curious. And I know in the legal profession, it's a quality that's at least not grown at the law school level. I think they tried to stamp it out, but I'll leave that opinion to the side. The answer to your question is, people who are curious and thinking about, is this really the best way? I wonder if there's a better way. I wonder if, what would happen if we did this? Now, there's a whole bunch of things that have to be embedded within that to execute on it. The ability to fail and not feel like you're going to get tossed out, et cetera, but curiosity is the great trait. I think it's something that can be supported and nurtured. I'm not sure it can be learned in that sense, but I think you can create an environment where the inherent capabilities of being curious can be supported and allowed to flourish more than we do. I mean, you can't hold people to a standard of perfection if they're going to try to do something differently. And I think that's one thing we've always tried at Seyfarth, to give people that feeling that it's a safe place to. Don't make the same mistake twice, but you can make it once and learn from it and iterate

and get better and ask yourself, wonder why that didn't work the way we thought it was going to work, as opposed to just running from it. So I think it can be enhanced. I don't know that it can be learned. If you're just not curious, I think it's an innate trait.

Kevin Young: Do you think (maybe you have one - I do not have a working crystal ball), but if you tried to look into a crystal ball, say 10 years from now, do you think what defines a really strong incoming lawyer, someone coming from like the law school ranks [has changed]? I feel like historically we'll look at things like are they a good writer? Are they resourceful? Good at doing the research? Are they hardworking? That kind of thing. Do you think the traits of what it means to be a very strong junior lawyer, strong at the junior ranks, does that change? And to be even more specific, do you think the profession's thriving more on incoming lawyers who also have a coding background, they understand Python or computer science background or anything like that? Or do you think it's not so much different than it is now?

Steve Poor: I think it's different than it is now. I don't think it's in the technical skills. Do I think people need to learn how to code in Python? I don't. And not just because I don't like Python, but because I don't think people need to learn to code. I think that if you think about what the value is, and Zeynep sort of made the point in a human endeavor, I think the practice is going to become oddly more human over the course of time because technology will take away those routinized matters, you know, that junior associates are doing now. And what will be valued in the marketplace are those human characteristics that can't be put into a computer—you know, empathy and judgment and wisdom and problem solving at a high, high level. And I think that that places an emphasis on multidisciplinary thinkers, right? People who have had experience, you got to be smart, and you got to work hard, and you got to have all the work ethic. That stuff won't change. But this ability to not lock into the silo that is the legal profession and be able to bring different perspectives and different experiences, I think becomes ever more important as the practice evolves.

Zeynep Ersin: I think, and I'll be curious, you know, to hear from both of you, if you agree, you know, I think to add on to that point, because of the speed of change and because of the volume of tech tools that are coming out, both very task specific and or broader solution specific, I think it's pretty important to be thinking about how you prepare incoming attorneys to be able to adapt. And we talk about this, being tool agnostic, right? So it's not so much about understanding the tech and the tool, but it's how you leverage it and in a way that's solution focused. But in order to do that, you need to understand the context of the situation that you're in, the problem you're trying to solve for, the risk appetite for the clients or the individuals you're working with. So there's so many of the human pieces that I think, you know, technology is going to continue to be very much part of the dialogue, but it is not so much the actual tools themselves as it is the experience and what you're hoping to do with them. Do you agree?

Steve Poor: I do. You also have to recognize that the legal profession covers a lot of area. We tend to view it from the big law perspective because I grew up in big law and I know you guys work for a big law firm. But technology plays a slightly different role in

the A2J space and expanding capabilities of people who are working in that space. It means something different in legal education. It means something different in government work. So I think there's a common theme between them that you hit on. But they're going to look, it's going to look a little bit different in each one of these sub-parts of the profession as the profession evolves.

Kevin Young: Yeah, that makes sense to me, which is why, I mean (coming back to the podcast) truly for *Pioneers and Pathfinders* and for the others I've listened to. I teach this class and it's innovation focused. It was never intended to be an AI class, but it kind of morphed into that because of when I launched it. It launched right around when ChatGPT hit the mainstream, and all of a sudden everybody wanted to talk about AI all the time. But I remember back then, like I used to confront the class (and maybe it was just to make myself feel more confident about it when I was first starting out) by saying, look, there's not a lot of right answers in this space. It's a future that's not yet written, it's for the lawyers to write it, and I still think that that's true for the most part. But I think that probably what's even truer is that exactly what you got to see, that there's so many different areas of change and it will look different and has looked different depending on where lawyers are, what they're doing, what pressure points they're facing. And it's where podcasts, like what *Pioneers and Pathfinders* has been. What I hope it will continue to be, to me, are so valuable. I think a lot about that, like the fable of like the blind men feeling different parts of the elephant. And one thinks it's a rope and one thinks it's a part in a piece of wood, and it just turns out they're feeling different parts of the elephant. They just haven't put it together, and I feel like the innovation space on legal is a lot like that where what it looks like is completely different depending on where you are and what problem you're focusing on. The point more is that everyone's got their own perspective and experience. To me, the best way to kind of keep up on what's going on is just to listen, you know, to keep eyes and ears open and to learn about not just what's happening in big law, but what's happening for public entities. For nonprofits, you know, what's happening in the legal deserts where you've got people who are like completely underserved when it comes to their legal needs. I think all of that is, number one, helpful just to get an accurate picture of what innovation is in the legal space. But secondly, I think keeping an open eye to what's happening elsewhere helps you think that much deeper and more creatively about your own problems. It's not above us to hear about what's happening in nonprofits and what innovations are happening there to say, well, is there something we could take from that into our space? If that makes sense.

Steve Poor: No, it does. And there's some really interesting stuff going on in the A2J space. They're just some fabulous, fabulous people working in that area and their commitment to change and help the lives of others is sort of what the profession is based on. It's not about how much money they're making. It's not about, you know, how famous they can make themselves. It's about how much they can help other people. And that's been a consistent theme in all the people in that space that we've had on over the years.

Zeynep Ersin: I'm curious, it certainly feels like with generative AI on the scene in particular, we seem to be in now this perpetual state of R&D and experimentation and

trying and exploring. Up until this point, there of course have been significant technological advancements that have impacted the legal industry, e-mail, moving into things like e-discovery, but those were kind of one-point specific solutions that solve a niche thing. This is so broad. Do you think that moving forward, we will be in this current state of R&D long-term?

Steve Poor: I do. Until the robots take over the world, I think we will. I think it puts a premium on people's ability to adapt and morph. And again, curiosity as to what's coming next and understanding it. I think it becomes more important than ever.

Kevin Young: Yeah, I think to me, curiosity, you hit it, and Steve, I might've learned it from you and started saying it myself, because I say the same thing. I think curiosity is one of the hallmarks I look for when I hire now for our Atlanta team. It's still some of the same stuff. Obviously, you want someone who's been right. You want someone who shows indicia of being a hard worker and being really smart. But to me, what really gets me excited is someone who feels curious, just curious about finding whatever it is, I mean, there's different ways to show it, but once they get into the profession, curiosity about how are we doing the things we're doing and how can we do them better? I mean, you asked the great question, what's innovation? To me, that's a big piece of it. It's just curiosity to find newer, better ways of solving old problems.

Steve Poor: Absolutely. I know we've gone for 30 minutes and Steve, I don't know if you have any tips on how to end a podcast episode.

Kevin Young: Awesome. I'll just say in closing for me, we appreciate what you've built. We're really excited to carry it forward. We've had a lot of conversation over the last weeks, months, really about kind of who we could bring on and some thoughts on guests, some that we'll bring back from before, some new ones, but we're really excited to take the listeners you've helped to cultivate a ride of a really exciting and evolving space and one where we aim to bring as much curiosity as we can, episode to episode, and we hope we'll do you proud.

Steve Poor: I'm sure you will. You guys will be great. I look forward to continuing to listen.

Zeynep Ersin: Thank you so much, Steve. And on a personal note, in addition to everything that Kevin said, you've been such an instrumental source of inspiration for me and mentorship and guidance. And I so appreciate all of the conversations that we've had, and we are really excited to bring this forward based on everything that you've done leading up until this point. And we want to do you proud, and we're excited for this next chapter.

Steve Poor: Well, thank you. That's very kind. I know you guys will do a great job.

Kevin Young: Thanks, Steve.

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

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