

Keynote address by Professor David B. Wilkins:
“From ‘Law’s Empire’ to ‘Integrated Solutions’: How Globalization, Technology, and
Organizational Change Are Opening ‘New Frontiers’
For Lawyers, Clients, and Society”

“The Next Frontier of Lawyering: From ESG to GPT”, a YPHSL-SAL Conference (3-4 Aug 2023)

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On 3 August 2023, the SMU Hall was abuzz with activity as legal practitioners, academics, judges and professionals from around the globe gathered for the long-awaited conference titled “The Next Frontier of Lawyering: From ESG to GPT”. This conference is co-organised by the Singapore Management University’s Yong Pung How School of Law (“SMU YPHSL”) and the Singapore Academy of Law (“SAL”).

Welcome Remarks and Opening Speech

Following the welcome remarks of Professor Lee Pey Woan (Dean, SMU YPHSL), Mr Calvin Phua (Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Law) kickstarted the conference by delivering the opening speech.

In his speech, Mr Phua set the context of the conference by providing some insights on how Singapore can continue to thrive in today’s “broken”, “balanced” and “borderless” world, highlighting three “R”s which has served the nation well, namely, (1) our strong *rule of law*; (2) our *reliable* government, economy, society, transportation system, etc., as well as (3) the strong *relations* between our government, our judiciary and our industries.

He cautioned, however, that we cannot rest on our laurels, and that we must continue to be careful of and actively address the “headwinds” ahead of us, before concluding by expressing his optimism about the future of Singapore’s legal industry and legal profession.

Keynote Address

Against this context, Professor David B. Wilkins (Lester Kissel Professor of Law, Vice Dean, Global Initiatives on the Legal Profession, Faculty Director, Center on the Legal Profession, Harvard Law School) then delivered his keynote address.

Professor Wilkins started by highlighting the “interesting times” which we live in today, which have transformed the legal services market, and, more importantly, the world which our clients inhabit. For example, domestic legal markets are increasingly becoming shaped by global markets and foreign investment, though local institutions and cultures remain critical.

These changes have also, in recent years, become “turbocharged” by three related crises: (1) the recent global health crisis, (2) the volatile global economic system (exacerbated by the recent Russian-Ukraine conflict) and (3) the increasing global focus on sustainability, stakeholders and social justice.

Professor Wilkins then observed that these have made the law more important than ever. At the same time however, Professor Wilkins emphasised that the issues of today have challenged our traditional understandings of law and the legal practice. Instead of being mere legal technicians, lawyers must now see themselves as problem solvers.

This is because the law, while necessary, is not the only thing which is needed to solve the complex problems of today; other stakeholders would inevitably be involved. Lawyers must thus start to embrace legal work as a collaborative enterprise in which they work alongside other professionals to harness technology, strategy, project management, psychology and other tools to develop integrated solutions to tackle the critical issues of the day, which have become increasingly “legalised”, but yet extend far beyond the law.

Nonetheless, Professor Wilkins continued, many fundamental aspects pertaining to legal work will not, and should not change. For example, the legal business will, at least for the foreseeable future, continue to remain one which depends on human capital, rather than one which is replaced by technology. Lawyers must therefore learn to integrate these competing forces of change and continuity.

To end off, Professor Wilkins stressed that to address the “disruptions” in our world today, we must harness technology (even though technology is itself also becoming increasingly disruptive). After all, although technology is new for lawyers, our clients have been living with digital transformation for years. The law is, Professor Wilkins emphasised again, only a part, and often not even the most important part, of what is needed to solve the problems in today’s world.

Panel Session

Following his keynote address, Professor Wilkins continued to share his insights on the legal profession through an interactive panel discussion moderated by Professor Lee with co-panellist Mr Ng Joo Khin (Director, Morgan Lewis Stamford LLC).

Addressing questions from Professor Lee and the audience, Professor Wilkins and Mr Ng shared their thoughts and insights on issues such as the greatest challenges faced by and opportunities presented to the legal profession today, the skills needed by lawyers to remain globally competitive, how the curriculum in law schools could be tweaked to better prepare students for practice, the future of smaller firms, as well as the desirability of having law firms pursue social goals and social justice.

The conference continues, and will continue to feature panel discussions and talks on issues related to the next frontier of lawyering.