

# **LAWNET 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION DINNER**

Friday, 16 October 2015

S.E.A. Aquarium, Resorts World Sentosa

## **KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY GUEST OF HONOUR**

**THE HONOURABLE THE CHIEF JUSTICE SUNDARESH MENON**

Ladies and gentlemen.

### **I Introduction**

1. It is my pleasure to join you tonight to celebrate the twenty-fifth Anniversary of the LawNet service. As I listened to Justice Chan's narration of LawNet's history and the accomplishments of LawNet over the last quarter century, I could not help but be struck by the distance we have travelled with LawNet and its progression from a small system existing within the AGC to the legal portal it has become today serving our entire legal profession.

### **II Opportunities and Challenges of Legal Sector in Singapore**

2. This being Singapore's jubilee year, it is inevitable that we look back on these developments in the context of our country's progress. Indeed our legal system has evolved in step with our nation building efforts. Over the last fifty years, the legal system has gone beyond meeting the basic need to uphold law and order and assure justice and liberty within our society, to count itself as one of the leading centres for dispute resolution and legal services generally in Asia. Because of our resolve to initiate change, we were among the pioneers in the field of incorporating technology

in the administration of justice. We developed platforms that enabled parties to file their documents electronically; allowed court administrators to monitor and manage the judicial case load; and empowered lawyers to conduct research online.

3. We did all this perhaps anticipating the onset of the digital revolution which is now very much upon us. As was the case with the industrial revolution, the digital revolution will bring about fundamental changes in our economies, our lifestyles and in the nature of our jobs. We are all already witnessing this. Where in the past, machines replaced manual labour, creating more higher-value jobs, now *smart* machines are putting pressure on what were once thought to be value-added knowledge-based jobs. The verdict is still out as to whether smart machines will create more jobs than they will displace. Just google “future of jobs” and you will find many arguments for and against either view.

4. The digital age is characterised by the confluence of smart machines, high bandwidth communication, information availability and mobility. Other sectors are already experiencing its effects. The legal sector may be a little more shielded but we are not immune. Writers have noted the disintermediating nature of IT as it applies to the legal sector. In this context, disintermediation connotes the displacement of lawyers as the intermediaries between clients or the traditional users of legal services and the ends they wish to achieve. For example, lawyers are disintermediated when companies invest in in-house e-discovery and analytical tools to defray the cost of engaging external lawyers. Another example is the emergence of self-service websites such as LegalZoom, Shake and Rocket Lawyers, which offer to churn out standard legal documents at very low cost.

5. But inevitably, these changes will also generate opportunities. With the increasing digitisation of our physical world, the rate of cross-border crime involving technology is bound to increase. The Mid-year Crime Brief 2015 released by the Singapore Police Force reveals that cheating involving e-commerce has increased by 65.6% from 2014 to 2015. The recent cases of Edward Snowden leaking classified information online and Volkswagen using software to evade emission standards are other high profile examples. In this setting, there is already evident an acute shortage of professionals who possess the knowledge to search, preserve and present digital evidence. This is an area with considerable potential and scope for specialisation. When Richard Susskind visited Singapore recently, he spoke of the dire need for technologists who understand law and for lawyers who truly understand technology so that we can harness the potential that the coming together of law and technology promises.

6. The truth is that we have no choice but to move up the value-chain and make the smart machines work for us. Competing with computers for work that involves handling masses of papers is futile and a lost cause because a computer *will* do a much better job at such things than a human ever could and at lower cost! Conventional wisdom tells us that if you can't beat them, join them! Technology and smart machines are here to stay and our challenge is to raise our game so that we can use technology and all the capabilities it brings.

### **III Imperatives for LawNet**

7. All this brings me to the present and the role of the SAL which is to drive legal excellence through developing thought leadership, world class infrastructure

and legal solutions. Among the organisational changes we have implemented within SAL is to place LawNet in the Legal Technology Cluster helmed by Justice Lee Seiu Kin along with Justice Chan Seng Onn. The mission statement of the cluster is “leading the exploitation of technology to enhance the performance of Singapore’s legal sector”. This seems to me to encapsulate what we must do to prepare for the dramatic changes in our operating environment.

8. Looking ahead, I can already see some potential areas where LawNet might have a vital role to play. For instance, in an area of law such as international arbitration, where the relevant precedents may come from many different jurisdictions, there is potential for LawNet to provide the connectivity and devise algorithm-assisted searches across jurisdictions to deliver results that meet our needs and demands. Perhaps closer in time than this, LawNet might look into providing collaboration or project management tools for lawyers who have to manage complex cases.

9. I am therefore happy to note that the Legal Technology Cluster is in the midst of planning for a Retreat to be held in early 2016 that will form the basis of a Five-Year Technology Masterplan for the legal sector in Singapore. This Retreat will bring together leading participants in the legal as well as the infocomm technology sector. They will consider new applications for existing technology in the next five years so that we can maintain our lead in this area. They will also gaze into the crystal ball to anticipate future technology so as to enable us to better prepare for what should prove to be a promising and exciting future for the legal sector in Singapore.

#### **IV Conclusion**

10. Like the story of our nation, the next twenty-five will be even more exciting than the years that lie behind us for LawNet and for all of us. LawNet served us outstandingly well when we entered the swell of this digital age. The surf is now truly up and I have every confidence that LawNet will continue to lead the way in developing new capabilities to meet our needs. Congratulations and thank you to all those who have played a vital role in getting us to this point!