The 2019 AALL Innovation Tournament winners share their experiences and explain the benefits of participating in the tournament.

Andre Davison and Allison C. Reeve Davis were the winners of the 2019 American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Innovation Tournament. Davison received the Audience Choice Award and Reeve Davis the Judges’ Choice Award. Here, the two winners share their experiences as participants in the contest, their roles in the process of innovation, and their hopes to inspire readers to see innovation in their everyday work.

PITCHING INNOVATION

Leading Up to the Tournament

AALL’s inaugural Innovation Tournament took place in 2017 in Austin, Texas, and it was my first AALL Annual Meeting. The concept of an innovation tournament seemed exciting, yet intimidating, and I was eager to learn more. I had a conflict that prevented me from attending the conference, but I logged on to AALL’s website (AALLNET) to watch the recording of it later. I discovered that innovation was not as complicated as I had initially imagined: the tournament’s finalists had encountered issues at their respective institutions and addressed them with creative solutions. Ironically, a lightbulb, the most used symbol of an idea or innovation, appeared inside my head. I remembered that I had previously applied processes and technology to create an innovative solution to address a significant resource access issue at my firm.

A few years ago at Blank Rome, due to a massive reduction of the library print collection, attorneys no longer had access to secondary sources they could quickly retrieve from the library shelves. Attorneys would now have to rely on online legal research platforms such as Lexis Advance and Westlaw to access secondary
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resources. Most attorneys who used the print resources were not proponents of using the online legal research platforms. Often, they had to first obtain a username and password before being allowed access to the platforms, or they had forgotten their passwords and needed them reset. Another challenge was that the attorneys would waste unnecessary time navigating the platform to locate a particular treatise. Lastly, at Blank Rome, we required users to enter a client matter number anytime they logged on to Westlaw or Lexis Advance. This created a challenge as many attorneys did not want to charge clients for accessing a book they previously pulled off the shelf. Also, if they did not use a valid client matter number, they would also have to remember the non-billable practice group numbers.

Our technical services team met weekly to discuss this issue. We leveraged internal resources to create Seamless Access for Secondary Sources, allowing users easy access to secondary sources available on Lexis Advance and Westlaw. Technology would allow users to bypass password authentication, navigation of platforms to locate content, and client matter validation, and instead take them directly to the secondary source table of contents in curated non-billable zones. We used Security Assertion Markup Language (SAML) and Single Sign-On (SSO), in conjunction with our Lexis Advance and Westlaw eLibraries and an integrated library system (ILS), to accomplish this.

The Innovation Tournament Experience

I initially struggled with the notion of describing such a complex process, which was developed over two years, within the tournament’s allotted time of five minutes. I discarded my original presentation when I arrived in Washington, DC for the AALL Annual Meeting. It exceeded the time limit, and my pitch was not convincing. Three things inspired my new presentation: the Library of Congress Baseball Americana Exhibit; a conversation with a firm law librarian about a vendor product; and dinner with the founders of a legal technology company. My wife traveled to DC with me, and I asked her to pick up a baseball bat from Dick’s Sporting Goods. I was ready for my presentation. My pitch was simple.

I practiced the presentation multiple times the night before the tournament, timing myself each time. The closest I got to the time allotment was five minutes and 30 seconds. I figured I would ad lib some slides to save time. I spent so much time working on the project that I felt prepared for any question the judges would ask. Then, as I was presenting, my presentation clicker stopped working, so I was unable to advance my slides. Critically, 30 seconds went by before the timekeeper paused the clock so that the technical problem could be addressed. I restarted my presentation with a minute left but disappointingly did not finish my pitch. Later, I was both excited and honored to win the Audience Choice Award. The finalists were very gracious in congratulating me. Everyone had great ideas that added value to their organizations.

The Aftermath

My project continues to evolve. I shortened the name to Seamless Access and expanded the scope to include all information resources. I was able to work with vendors to address challenges that stalled the project. My goal is to launch Seamless Access firmwide in Quarter 1. I also set aside use of the award money to fund professional development opportunities that champion innovation.

READY TO RULE

Leading Up to the Tournament

Librarians at Littler Mendelson have been paying attention to the Innovation Tournament since its inception, wanting to be a part of the event. There was a lot of internal excitement surrounding our Santa Clara Tentative Rulings (SCTR) database, and we knew we had something special on our hands, so we decided to apply for the 2019 contest.

The SCTR database is a carefully curated, homegrown collection of the court’s rulings posted online each week. The goal is to offer crucial judicial insight. Knowing how a judge made a particular decision can be a powerful tool in preparing legal arguments and developing new client business. A librarian pulls all the orders posted for each court division and reviews them for relevance to our attorneys. Labor and employment decisions and applicable motions of any practice area, such as motions to compel discovery or certify a class, are retained. Selected rulings are uploaded to a SharePoint database of filterable and searchable fields based on analytics our attorneys need to know, such as judge, motion type, ruling, and case summary.

When the call went out for applications for AALL’s Innovation Tournament, the SCTR database had approximately 1,000 records. The team consulted with attorneys in the target jurisdiction, tested the product, and usage was steady. The Knowledge Management (KM) Innovations team was developing automated reporting using Contract Express to provide analytics and easy-to-read charts based on SCTR data. With limited resources and requests to add additional jurisdictions, we needed to automate processes or partner with the right third party. Being in this stalled state made the database an obvious choice for application to the Innovation Tournament.

Multiple librarians, along with Littler’s public relations team, collaborated on the database and tournament application to ensure our submission conveyed the value of our innovation. Once we heard we were accepted into the tournament, the database
management team, consisting of Director of Research Services, Cynthia Brown; KM Innovations Manager, Erin Cockman; Assistant Librarian, Autumn Collier; and I, met several times to discuss the features of SCTR that make it most valuable, map out presentation highlights, and brainstorm potential questions from the judges. By July, I had a succinct presentation, great visual aids, and was hoping to convey the value of the product and my colleagues’ dedication.

The Tournament Experience
Once the tournament gets underway, it goes fast. Each presenter receives five minutes to explain their innovation and its value, followed by five minutes of questions from the judges. That’s it! Just enough time to get your nerves racing, but not enough to drift your attention from the awesome tools your peers have up against yours. Being the last to present, I sat through two amazing pitches that had sold me on the value of their innovations and reinforced that I had my work cut out for me.

Of course, what’s a competition with all of its practice and anticipation without a few challenges? Getting over a nasty summer virus, I was not feeling my best that day. My hearing was muffled, and I was suffering from a bit of vertigo (and grateful for my flats). They say, “fake it ‘till you make it,” and I faked the picture of health.

Really, those five minutes were exciting and fun! I enjoyed the opportunity to show off SCTR and the work of my Littler colleagues. Fielding the judges’ questions was thought-provoking, generated ideas for next steps, and gave me some good practice in thinking on my feet. Of course, being announced as the Judge’s Choice Winner was icing on the cake. Having my supervisor and law library world friends around made the celebration even better.

What Came Next
Participating in and winning the AALL Innovation Tournament has provided many opportunities for the SCTR database team. Through the award funding itself and the spotlight our product received back at Littler, we have received monetary support to identify vendors able to supplement or partner with our data. Our product is highly specialized and provides a resource no third party has replicated, but new trial court databases are investing in these less often indexed and analyzed jurisdictions. We adopted Gavelytics and continue to monitor the offerings and discuss how we might leverage that data in ways most applicable to our attorneys.

One of the greatest advantages the tournament provided, though, was the sense of pride and validation of the SCTR database. Librarians and innovators at Littler contributed their time, expertise, and collaboration to build a tool highly valued by the firm’s attorneys. To have the product recognized by our peers and acknowledged as a worthy endeavor encourages us to keep going.

The Benefits
Our careers benefited from winning AALL’s Innovation Tournament, and the resulting opportunities have been limitless. Our names have cropped up in multiple blogs, articles, and emails. We have been invited to write articles, appear on podcasts, and present at conferences. Vendors are excited to partner with organizations supportive of innovation, and peers offer congratulations and ask for more insight into our experiences. We’ve received recognition in our firms. Allison was featured in Littler’s firmwide magazine, Rave, and Andre won Blank Rome’s Innovation Initiative contest in the Houston office. Our firms’ names are recognized as ones that encourage innovation and support librarian professional development. The Innovation Tournament win provided a platform to show the value of law librarians.

Innovation is analogous to the batter’s box in baseball. Law librarians are the batters and our goals are to hit home runs. Problems (balls) will be thrown our way and we have ideas (bats) to knock them out of the park. Sometimes we swing and miss, but to quote the great Babe Ruth, “Every strike brings me closer to the next home run.”

All law librarians benefit from AALL’s Innovation Tournament every year. AALL challenges us in the best ways possible, pushing us to look toward the horizon of legal information management, collaborate with colleagues, and build products meeting the needs of practicing legal professionals. Innovation is not synonymous with invention. It grows little by little through team meetings, solutions that help attorneys work more efficiently, and services that streamline resource access. In the end, we tend to take our innovations for granted, because they are just part of our jobs. We hope to inspire you to see the innovation happening in your day-to-day work and to share solutions with your peers. Support your colleagues and engage in the conversations about innovation and service solutions in law libraries. We all benefit from your great ideas!