Ali, thank you so much for joining me on The Modern Lawyer podcast. It's a real pleasure to be here at the Sheppard Mullin office in downtown LA to speak with you about the future of legal.

Ali: Anand, thank you very much for having me. I want to also make a special shout out to Abby, who is the person behind the scenes making all this work.

Anand: That's right. That's right. Frequently, we talk about Abby as a producer extraordinaire. You just saw me futz around with various pieces of technology, and that's because Abby isn't in the room here with me.

Ali: It was not pretty.

Anand: I appreciate that. Thank you, Ali. Thank you. Ali, I want to start this by just asking a very broad question that I ask all of our guests on the podcast because all of our guests share something very, very common across everyone. And that is there an interesting positions and those positions give them perspective and insight on the future of legal. You are no different. You're the Chief Innovation Officer at Sheppard Mullin, a prestigious, prominent Am Law 100 firm based here in LA. How did you get into this position? And talk us through your career arc because it is fascinating.

Ali: Well, thank you very much for that intro. I feel very fortunate to be in the position I am. Because of the firm that I'm at, the firm's leadership I can tell you that it's one of the most innovative and forward-thinking leader among law firms that are really worth it. So I feel very fortunate to be here. At the same time, I want to say it was complete by luck, and by chance that has ended up doing what I'm doing now and I'm enjoying it every day.

I'm an engineer by training. I worked in several different industries, including entertainment, manufacturing, consulting, and somehow by the sheer of luck, I got a phone call on a Friday afternoon, like, "Do you want to work for a law firm?" I said, "Sure." That was 20 years ago, plus. I worked at 200 Am Law, big law firms and I've worked at very small boutique LA-based litigation firm, which I think that's where I got my most exposure to practice of law, the strong characters at play and people who are performing at the very high calibers of legal services.

Anand: Right. Right. Earlier we were talking about how one of your first jobs was, and correct me if I'm wrong, as an engineer at a startup. And it was a hardware engineering startup that made microchips.

Ali: You're right.

Anand: That's a big change from a hardware engineer to someone in charge of innovation and onboarding technologies in a large professional services environment. At what point did you even conceptualize making that jump? I mean, that seems night and day to me?

Ali: Well, it was a lightbulb moment. I think, for me, it was the limitation of being an engineer and working in a very structured environment where you don't get exposed to the human element, as opposed to the exact opposite of what I'm doing right now, that everything is focused on the human element. We have the technology piece, but what can make it successful is the focus on the use case and the people behind it who are going to use the systems.

The transition for me from a pure engineering background to that was the void I felt being an engineer and not seeing it being used by people. In this case, I enjoy having that interface and being able to see the results.

Anand: Talk us through that. I mean, you didn't just go from an engineer, obviously to a Chief Innovation Officer or leading a whole department at a big institution. Talk us through your progression from firm to firm to firm, and what ultimately led up to you gaining this position. I ask particularly about your current position because when I graduated from law school over 10 years ago, the Chief Innovation Officer role at a law firm didn't exist.

Ali: Exactly.

Anand: You are on the cutting edge of the CIO Innovation Officer position in law firms. I mean, you clearly have kind of invented in a lot of ways this role as your career progressed. How did that happen?

Ali: If you ask that question right now, just I think within Am Law 100 firms, there are maybe about 50 that have people in this capacity, where their actual titles is innovation officer or innovation knowledge or whatever it is, but there is an increasing appetite for experimentation in Am Law firms to meet several needs. One of them is high demands, one of them is internal interest in doing things differently. The primary driver for innovation I think has been consistently efficiency.

My career path, if I look back in the career path, is that when I started at the small litigation law firm in Los Angeles, it had a very much sort of feel to it. One small office, 40 attorneys operating at the very high level of high-risk litigation that your company type litigation. And they had the funding, and the interest and the intellectual capital to invest in the best technologies they could get their hands on.

So that kickstarted it all, and that led into knowledge management roles at Am Law firms, and eventually at the role that I'm in right now, which brings in the experience from both the legal side and the technology side, and now more so than before close collaboration with clients. Because the definition of innovation is going to be different depending on the audience you're talking to. From a client's perspective, especially from a legal buyer's perspective, their law firms are not the drivers for business innovation necessarily.

From the internal firm perspective, they need to have someone responsible for innovation. And it's not only technology innovation. I think you'll be surprised to hear that many of the projects that I'm working on do not have a technology component. They're either process innovation, they are talent innovation, they are innovations in business development, innovation in how we use the data.

So this role is definitely not technology-focused. This role is what I can probably summarize it in two words is collaborative innovation or innovation through collaboration. That collaboration could come with clients, could come with attorneys, could come from law school graduates who just onboarding, could come from business professionals, and it will mean different projects, it will mean different deliverables, it will mean different metrics. So I would say maybe these four buckets of audience.

Anand: This is why I wanted to have you on the podcast. I mean, there's so much that you went into right there. One of the things that you talked about, and I want to go all the way back to the 40 attorney firm and how they're operating at a very high level, and maybe the needs to operate at a very high level and how that ties into innovation. One thought I had was that a lot of innovation, I think right now is directed at attracting and retaining the best legal talent in a world where a lot of that legal talent wants different things.

Ali: I can tell you that's one of the projects that I'm working as a chief innovation officer with our management, with our talent group. And the innovation in that area is not only focused on let's say know-how legal expertise, but at the same time is very data-driven.

Anand: And what do you mean by that? How is that data-driven? What data are you processing or analyzing to get better outcomes?

Ali: Let me maybe talk about Sheppard Mullin as a firm. Sheppard Mullin has grown to 900-attorney firm organically, and they have been, if you will, the most successful in lateral integration among all Am Law firms by four - by a factor of two x. That basically tells you that the firm is really focused on integration of talent, and looking at metrics that drive...If you will, that's kind of the secret sauce of the firm.

These are not rocket science data-driven, if you will, factors that we look at. But it's an intentional - and I know you and I were talking about the Japanese culture, everything that is done here at the firm is by design and by intention. The decisions are based on historical data that we have basically gathered over the years that gives us guidance about what are the next steps to take. We take that approach with organic growth and lateral acquisition, and also with onboarding new attorneys.

Anand: I love that idea. How has innovation played into reshaping the actual way that business is done? I mean, so often we hear about this broken business model of law, the legal services delivery model, and how that plugs into recruitment. I mean, when you talk to a lot of millennials and millennial lawyers, I think it's safe to say generally speaking, and I know generalizing is dangerous, but they're less money motivated than the lawyers of the past, and they want more fulfillment, they want more control over their schedule, all of those things. How does innovation play into that?

Ali: You and I were at a meeting earlier today with the Public Counsel, the largest nonprofit law firm, if you will, in the States. And you could tell the energy that is flowing in the halls in there when those attorneys are working for a cause that they believe they're doing good for the society, really that resonates, they're happy, they can deliver. I think Sheppard Mullin has the same philosophy. We have paid a lot of attention to a couple of things: pro bono over the years and diversity over the years. And I can see the results when I walked the halls here.

In terms of attorneys of color, LGBT, male and female, it's an amazing environment to be in simply because the film was very by design and intentionally cared about those I would say philosophies. It has basically put me in a fortunate position to have diverse ideas, people who are passionate about what they do, and it helps talent retention because the firm provides those opportunities. I can say that's innovation in diversity or innovation in talent management that has brought it all together.

Anand: How do you approach your role, Ali? If I was looking at the job description of Chief Innovation Officer, what are we looking at? Look at the hardest challenges that are facing a law firm in staffing, in retention, in technology, in profits, in everything, and Ali, that's your to-do list.

Ali: It's funny that I don't feel like I'm the person who's going to innovate. I don't have the innovation hat on my head. All I'm doing is connecting people right now. That has been if you will demand. The job description is a white piece of paper, and on it are the names and the audience's that we talked about from clients to partners, to associates, and meeting their needs, and being able to bring the solutions together to make sure that...And these are innovative solutions. They're done not in the same way that they have been doing in the past, and with the conscious basically, with the conscious look into what their primary needs are and what motivates them.

Anand: So is it a direct link to the client - you figure out what the client wants, and then you try to connect or deploy resources to achieve that in an innovative way?

Ali: I would say it's a fairly simple discussion. I do talk to clients, but at the same time, I do also equip our partners, our attorneys, our associates to be able to converse with clients about how we can improve the delivery of legal services. And I had an anecdote for you that relates to Casetext, actually. It just happened last week. I don't mean this to be a commercial for Casetext, but it just happens to be that we rolled out Casetext a couple of weeks ago, I think maybe three-four weeks ago.

Anand: That's right.

Ali: And we'll receive, fine. There wasn't any surprises there. What surprised me the most was that a couple of our partners were talking to a client after some case that we had successfully completed for them, and they didn't mention Casetext, but they said, "Oh, by the way, you should know we have this technology that you can basically do legal research much more efficiently, and also you can upload your findings into your earlier pleadings and you can find out the irrelevant case law. You can also identify which cases you may not have cited there intentionally." They also mentioned to our client that, by the way, judges have access to this platform." And the client said, "Oh, we didn't know about this. Can you tell us more?"

So going back to answer your question, part of my job is giving the terminology the use cases, and how these use cases technologies can help our clients to our attorneys, so that when they're talking with clients they can educate them, and collaborate with them, and inform them about it. I think that's really the true innovation. That's where it comes where you can actually collaborate with your clients and offer them solutions that will meet their legal needs, and at the same time be more efficient.

Anand: Do you think the modern client is more interested in how the work gets done, not just that the work gets done? Or have clients been interested in that all along and we've just haven't paid attention? Because it seems like that anecdote, and I've heard many others like it, not just with Casetext, but with other technology. My takeaway is that the modern client actually cares about what tools you're using to get the work done because as you mentioned, they want to make sure and their mandate internally as a general counsel is to make sure that their work gets done as close to perfectly as possible and as efficiently as possible. So if you're using some old dinosaur era technology, they want to know. And if you're using the cutting edge kind of technology, and you've invested in it, they want to know that too.

Ali: I think the answer is yes, but at the same time, I think they want to be educated. They want to know that you're efficient. Do they really care about technology under the hood? I don't know. I really don't know. Some clients may, some may not. And to the ones that we can inform and educate about what's under the hood, we are more than happy to do so. Those who may want to stay at an arm's length and not talk about it necessarily but know that the law firm is being efficient about using the best tools, it should be given. It is given.

I don't think I can go out there and announce to the whole world we are using this tech, as a result, we are more efficient. It's being able to converse and identify the use cases and illustrate really on the ground what we can do for them?

Anand: I think you said something very articulately before in an earlier conversation. And that is that one of the things that you got to do in your position is talk to your attorneys and coach them on how to communicate the tech stack, if you will, at Sheppard Mullin to the outside world. And you coach them away from using terms like AI, right?

Ali: Yeah. It's funny that I asked a few people not to use the term AI. I've asked our vendors when they're doing demonstration if they walk into a room and say the word AI, don't.

Anand: Don't. Why though?

Ali: Because unless they're able to explain the exact use case, and the benefit, and how it does it, then it's a marketing gimmick. So we need to be really, really careful about technology, the terms we use, and how we articulate it and be able to easily tie to practical use cases for those technologies. It could be AI, it could be some crazy name. If it's a black box, I question.

Anand: I presented on this panel a few months ago with Scott Rechtschaffen, the CKO of Littler and the CKO's from Sibley and Wilson Sonsini. The title of the presentation was "Avoid the Shiny Object Prioritizing Use Cases over Technology." Another person who speaks on this very eloquently is Meredith Williams-Range, the CKO of Shearman & Sterling. She talks about prioritizing the use case, and approaching technology as a business person, and not someone who's waiting in line to get the new iPhone or something.

Technology is only valuable if it addresses a business problem. And it doesn't matter if it's the coolest technology, it doesn't matter if it's stolen from NASA and it's the hottest technology in the world if it doesn't address that technology that your clients are facing right now and that Sheppard Mullin can deploy.

Ali: That's true. I think that that also comes a challenge. Actually, maybe two challenges. One is the technologies may be too vertical. They solve one problem, and that's it.

Anand: Interesting.

Ali: And I think you have run into that. These products that are coming out, they're really good at doing one thing and one thing alone. Is that going to address the complex legal issues that our clients have? Probably not. The other one is, how do you scale this technology to apply to in more use cases? I think those are real challenges we are facing. Yes, we have had really good success with processes, innovations, technologies. There has been a lot of hype at the same time. So I'm very optimistic about what the future has, but I also want to be very cautious about promising what it can do, because the nature of legal work as you know is complex, and we need to show real value to clients before we show them technology.

Anand: I want to ask you a very open-ended question now. You mentioned that you're optimistic about the future in delivering legal services. I think especially in your place at a law firm that's growing and thriving and as the Chief Innovation Officer, that's a very kind of comforting statement for someone who is in a legal industry. So let me ask you why. There's a lot of doom and gloom kind of narratives about legal services. In fact, they're going to be kind of taken away as far as challenges by the big four, by the fact that law firm profitability will go down, by the fact that robots are taking everyone's jobs. There's all these kind of scary narratives, but you're optimistic. Why are you optimistic about the future of law practice?

Ali: I think all the doom and gloom discussions are good. They're actually beneficial because you can then separate what's practical and what's hype. It's good to talk about that. But at the same time, I think there are many factors at play. There is a big appetite for experimentation among both law firms and clients. I think there is big investment by law firms in technologies that they think it may not actually produce results.

So it's almost like an R&D, if you will, environment and interest in finding something that will work at the end. So there is no risk aversion as it used to be or it is prevalent in practice of law that you're always thinking about risk. Now, you are working in an environment where you're kind of rewarded for thinking outside of the box taking risks. Because innovation in effect, if it's too innovation, there is a risk component to it. You're taking risks.

The other side is, as you know, not only clients are asking for it, but also the incoming group of attorneys from law schools. And the environment that they are being brought up in, they demand to be more efficient, they demand not to do routine things day in day out. I think that we have many forces at play that are promoting that innovative thinking. Now are the doom and gloom stories about law from profitability or the big four, I think maybe that's a much longer-term discussion. I don't think there will be a significant change overnight, because we have been talking about it for the last 15 years.

It's almost the same rhetoric that I was hearing 15 years ago that law firm profitably is going to go out. That's not the case. Or, clients are not going to buy your services, they're going to source everything in house. I think the market is at an equilibrium. The good thing about it is that there is more collaboration between law firms and corporate law departments, kind of the buyers and sellers of legal services. And also other legal tech companies that are doing the services that everyone is talking about it. And I think that that discussion, whether it's doom and gloom, or whether it's optimistic, it's all for a good cause. That's why I'm optimistic.

Anand: What changed? I mean, you've been in the kind of law firm innovation game for you said, 20 years if I heard you correctly.

Ali: I wouldn't say innovation is the new thing, but law firms have been innovating. Now we have given it kind of discrete name - innovation. Fine. I think that's kind of the business environment we live in.

Anand: I mean, is that the answer that business environment changed, and so law firms had to take more risks and be more experimental? Is that the core of it? Is this client-led? Is this kind of bottom line dollars and cents thing? Is this a reckoning about the future of each individual firm and firms realizing that, as they say, the riskiest thing they could do is nothing at all?

Ali: I think you hit it right on point. I think the riskiest thing they can do is doing nothing at all. There are some firms that really don't have to do it. You can look at the Am Law range and kind of figure out who has to do it, and who has to do it to exist and who has to do it to sustain what they have. It's something that I would say law firm leaders are more and more thinking about simply because of all the business environment that we're living in are client driven, are driven by the philosophy of the firm. But I'm fairly optimistic at the direction that it's going.

Anand: What do you hear when you talk to clients about this? I'm sure a lot of clients are very happy when they realized, one, that the firm that they're providing legal work for, and that they're partnering with as outside counsel or in house has a chief innovation officer. I mean, what is the message that they sent you? What do they want you to kind of percolate?

Ali: I think you were talking about how did I get into this business, and I can tell you it was by chance. I think timing has to do a lot with where we are right now. The rise of legal ops has been so important in what I personally can do and cannot do and the level of collaboration that I can get through working directly with clients. Ten years ago, there was no official legal ops function necessarily in corporate law departments. Now there is.

Those are typically my counterparts, people that I talked to, and people that I collaborate with, people that kind of we talk about the technologies that legal tech vendors are offering, or processes or how they're being serviced by our attorneys. Those discussions are taking place. And it's simply because the rise of let's say, innovation in law firms, and the rise of legal ops in corporate law departments. Those are counterparts, and they're talking, and I think that really has to do with timing. I feel fortunate to have kind of landed in this role with this timing because maybe five years ago or 10 years ago, we would not have this discussion.

Anand: One of our recent episodes was with Augie Rakow. Augie is former Orrick partner and the Co-founder of Atrium in San Francisco. One of the things that he said that really stuck with me was that he's concluded - he's an attorney so he's kind of speaking against interest in some ways - he's concluded that oftentimes, the best people to go out into the market and secure new legal work are not necessarily lawyers. Lawyers are obviously the best situated to do it. A salesperson or business development person can't do the legal work unless they went to law school. But you in House counsel and legal ops internally, and the buyer and consumer of legal services doesn't always necessarily want to talk to a lawyer. Oftentimes, they want to talk to a business person. What is your take on that?

And do you see maybe the future of law firm rainmaking coming more from someone who understands, as they say in Silicon Valley, enough to be dangerous about law and law practice, but is really looking at this from a higher level as a business manager and a business leader, who could then connect with the general counsel or AGC at a big company who let's face it, oftentimes is more a business person than a lawyer?

Ali: I definitely agree with that. I think the timing, when that actually takes place when you see the market shift that direction, five years, 10 years, I don't know. But I do see more of that happening not only because the focus is on innovation, or technology or practice of law, but because there is focus on diversity. That's a major driver.

It is important, and I talked about this earlier, to educate attorneys that when they're talking to clients, and when they are marketing their services, to make sure they're hitting all those points. They're hitting diversity, they're hitting efficiency, they're hitting legal services. It's no longer, "I'm the best person who knows about this subject matter in law," but also about delivering the whole package.

I think legal services as a whole, they are going to be, if you will, solutions-focused packages of legal services that can be combined all together and offer to clients with an expectation of how much they will cost. I think clients more and more want certainty on the cost of legal services. Now, that goes hand in hand with efficiency. And that's why it's a big motivation, big driver for law firms to be efficient, and to make sure that they have the best processes, best technologies that can deliver that.

Anand: We've been hearing about doom and gloom stories for decades. We've also been hearing the same narrative about the death of the billable hour for decades. What is your take on the future of the billable hour? I mean, anyone in any decade, it's always dangerous to predict the death of the billable hour because you're probably going to be wrong. I mean people have been predicting that for a long time. But where's it going?

I mean, one of the things that we talked about earlier was that there's a firm that Microsoft uses, and that firm handles - and this is all publicly available - that firm handles Microsoft's litigation portfolio all on a fixed fee basis. Is that the future of legal is kind of a predictable way to bill and a predictable way to use data and analytics to really to a couple of thousand dollars provide a bid that you could stick to and provide legal services, even in the case that is complex?

Ali: I think we definitely going that direction. Our firm certainly has put a lot of resources into that data analytics to be able to provide better predictability for cost of legal services. The market is going that direction. Now, how fast is it going? It's not going as fast as everyone wants to, everyone talks about.

Let's see. If I had to guess, maybe 20% of legal services are on a fixed fee basis. Ten years ago, we were having the same doom and gloom stories. Maybe the back then it was 5%. So it is increasing, but increasing incrementally at a slow pace. I would just guesstimate maybe, this is an estimation, maybe at some point we'll get to a 50/50 kind of scenario, where half of services will be delivered on some kind of a solution - fixed fee or some alternative female model, and the rest of it would be the element of unpredictability of how legal services will have to be delivered.

I think if you could predict it exactly right, insurance companies would be in this business. They're in the business of predicting risk, and they can tell you exactly how much your insurance will be so that they can make a profit. I don't think law firms are in that position or legal services buyers are in a position to be able to do that.

Anand: From the perspective of a startup, I really view this shake-up, and this may be this tipping point to 50/50 as a golden opportunity for law firms, right? Because if you are structured and built to do work more efficiently, and you have processes and operations and technology in place to do work more efficiently, you can always underbid by 10% or whatever it may be, the lowest firm, right? And I'm not talking about a raise to the bottom. I'm just saying quality legal work. I'm not putting a Sheppard Mullin caliber firm against a low law firm. I'm saying Sheppard Mullin against its peers can always go X percent lower because from the ground up, it's just more efficient.

Ali: Yeah.

Anand: And doesn't this kind of move towards 50/50 alternative fee arrangement versus hourly billing really incentivize all law firms to have their own Ali Shahidis, to have their own their own people who could make kind of kind of rebuild this process from the ground up so that when that time comes, whether it's in the 2020s or 2030s, your firm is going to be able to get all the competitive bids, because you just do things better and do things more efficiently?

Ali: Well, I think the industry is moving that direction so it's a good thing. And this competition is a good thing. I don't think one firm is going to be able to stand out because the accessibility of legal tech, accessibility of knowledge. The fact that we are having these podcasts, I think we share best practices, and the ultimate people who will benefit from this transition are people who are both buyers and sellers of legal services.

We had talked about social justice earlier on too, but ultimately, not only people who have to pay for legal services, because they can afford it, but also this direction that we're moving will also help people who cannot afford to pay for legal services. I'm very optimistic about that. On the business side, I don't see myself as a person who's the innovator per se, I'm kind of bringing this all together, but each firm, I think, will have a need for forward-thinking solutions that they can offer to clients in a package that is cost efficient, it's client service focused, and ultimately addresses their business needs.

Anand: What advice would you give in your position to a firm that's let's say a 10th of the size of Sheppard Mullin? Not in the same competitive space. A hundred attorney midsize firm that says, "You know what, I've listened to Ali on this Modern Lawyer podcast, I'm inspired. Let's do it. Let's innovate." What do you do? What are your first steps? Let's say you're one person with 40 or whatever, 60 hours in a week, and you really want to kind of go ahead and pick up that innovation mantle. What is your playbook? I mean, where do you even start?

Ali: I will start with the clients. I think that's a very simple easy starting point. You will start with a client, and through that engagement, you can identify use cases and scenarios where you can really help them. Obviously, that discussion has to take place in a way that it's, if you will, sanctioned by the firm, but everything has to start with a plan in mind.

Anand: I like that. It's almost obvious, right? But I feel like so many attorneys, think about things from the legal solution, you know, just pure legal solution in mind without understanding the client's business, without understanding their client's risks, all of these things. Is that something that you did when you started at Sheppard Mullin, kind of go on a listening tour and join attorneys when they're talking to clients, and really get to the bottom of what clients really want? I think there's a lot of speculation about what they want. But I mean, you were obviously in this role where you could just ask.

Ali: We ask that question from clients. Kind of an open-ended question, "What does innovation mean to you?" and were be completely surprised by what it meant to them. A segment of the innovation meant good client service. Segment will say predictability and cost.

So each client will give you a different story, different priority about what innovation means to them, and how we can service them better. That's why I think going back to the earlier comment, it's that these vertical solutions will address one client specific need or one industry specific need. But in order to be able to scale it up to a large law firm, I think that's where the challenge comes in play. You'll have a few success stories, a few stories that they're learning lessons, but at the end of the day, the ultimate beneficiary of these solutions will have to be the client's funds only.

Anand: What are the advantages that a big firm like Sheppard Mullin has with respect to innovation? And what are some of the weaknesses and pitfalls a big firm like Sheppard Mullin has as it relates to innovation as opposed to let's say a 50-attorney firm or the 40-attorney startup setting that you referred to earlier?

Ali: Obviously, if you're a 40 attorney startup, it's much easier to move at a faster pace, then you scale. And I think that goes back to the earlier comment I made about how do you scale on a 900-attorney law firm. The challenge is - and this is a day to day challenge - it has to do with change management. The rate of change is so fast that you get fatigued, whether it's technology fatigue or process fatigue.

Being able to address that, as you're introducing new processes to your internal audience, to the attorneys and also to clients, you have to be extremely mindful of that change management aspect. And time it so that the business priorities, the culture, and the appetite for change, they're all kind of about the same level, and they're moving at the same pace. Otherwise, the same strategy could completely fail in another law firm was trying to do this if they haven't aligned their strategy, their thinking, their clients on the same path.

Anand: How do you innovate? We all know that getting new technologies is considered innovative, right? Deploying new technologies. But oftentimes the most innovative thing you can do is get attorneys to use it. What have you done at Sheppard Mullin to innovate on how attorneys actually use the existing technologies at the firm? What tactics, what techniques, what approaches have you used to change and rethink that kind of core problem?

Ali: We have brought the attorneys into the decision making process. It's a kind of a simple process of making sure that they have a vested interest in it, making sure they can articulate the use case, making sure that they are part of the pilots that we roll out, and they can provide input directly to, if it's a process change, if it's a product that they're being introduced to, they are heavily invested in it. I'm not going out there and marketing the process changes or the tools. They are the ones who are doing it for me.

I think that resonates much better than me talking to a group of attorneys as I have an attorney with a client who are going to come and articulate how we were able to solve their legal issue like introducing these innovations into legal service delivery.

Anand: I really appreciate that explanation. I want to shift now to things that worry Ali Shahidi. When you're up late at night, and you're concerned professionally about something at work in the industry, the future of where all of this is going, what is that thing? What keeps you up at night?

Ali: I think I'm a cautious, optimistic person. If something worries me, I find a good cause for it. Like it's a good thing that is worrying me. I would say...I guess I have to pause there.

Anand: That's fine. Good question.

Ali: I don't know if I'll get...

[crosstalk 00:47:03]

Anand: My next question is even better. This is all on the record. The next question is even better. This is all on the record. The next question I seven better. And that is, what is going to keep Ali Shahidi in 10 years up at night? That's where we go next.

Ali: I don't know.

Anand: I feel like I deserve a badge of honor for stumping the mighty Ali Shahidi. Let's pause five seconds, and then just start right after I ask the question, and we'll just splice it in.

Ali: Okay.

Anand: Well, Abby will.

Ali: Okay. Thank you, Abby. What worries me, what keeps me up at night I think is balancing the needs of clients, and the needs of our attorneys, and making sure that we hit it right on point. It's okay to have a few failures, I think, but we need to show quick wins and consistent results in the long run. I feel fortunate to be in a position right now that allows for that experimentation. So worrying about a project failing is completely okay, but in the long run, it has to deliver value. That's why our innovation program is very much metrics driven.

So we measure adoption, we measure the number of touch points with clients that discuss topics that relate to innovation. Our approach is very much metrics-driven, and we look at that to help make decisions on future projects. So is it keeping me up at night? I don't think so because we have a method for approaching the problem.

Anand: Are your peers at other firms approaching this the same way? I mean, you're approaching this like an engineer - conveniently because you're an engineer.

Ali: Exactly?

Anand: Is this rigor shared do you think among chief innovation officers? Because I think if you'd ask people about chief innovation officers, some people may say, "Oh, they're the guys who just got the flashy, shiny things." I don't think they know the approach and the discipline, and rigorous approach that you come to these situations with.

Ali: I think maybe my motivation here is that my first goal is to make others basically perform at their highest capacity. It's not about me, it's about the team that we have built here. Whether it's with partners, with attorneys or the [syllable?] that we have, the innovation again, it doesn't come from me. It's through the collaboration that everyone has. Collaboration with clients, collaboration on the execution part on the syllable, and collaboration on the partnership side. That's why maybe I'm not worried about having the responsibility of the innovation hat on, because innovation is not driven by one person. Innovation is a collaboration, collaborative effort among everyone who is interested in it, including the clients. And that's why that's kind of the approach that I'm taking.

Anand: In your role, do you face any pushback here? I'm not talking about naming any names or anything like that? Is there any pushback among your partners, your senior partners who say, "you know what, Ali? Nothing's broken for me. I don't need any innovation. Thanks, but no thanks."

Ali: I'd love that. If anyone comes to me and says, "Nothing is broken and I don't need it," that's my target audience. That's the prime person I'm going to go and have a drink with. I think that people who are easy to convince, fine. You can be talking about that for a long time, but people who question better, we need to do something, people who may not be interested in it, I think those are kind of the people that I'd really naturally gravitate towards because if I can convince them, and if I can show them how we can do something different or better, you feel much more accomplished. I'd love to hear that than we have people that may have an opinion.

Anand: What's your response to it? You really talked about a lot of things that are broken. What is your response? Is your response to simply say, "Well, look at the data. I mean, look at the data things are suboptimal?" I mean, what's your take of it? I mean, that might be kind of a harsh approach.

Ali: I think the data approach with people who are typically naysayers is not going to be a good starting topic because data could lie very easily. I think that's where I get down to the human element focus on the process side of things, and start asking about pain points.

Anand: Interesting. When you say it, it just seems so obvious. Start asking my pain points. Like what? I mean, all attorneys had pain points, but what kind of what kinds of general questions do you ask to tease these out?

Ali: Through the conversation, it comes out. I think you can start talking about the last case that they had to handle and what difficulties they run into? Did they get feedback from the client? I think that's something that we are trying to have here at the firm is that to consistently get feedback on the services you're providing to internally or to clients. And through that feedback, as long as it's true, consistent, and not polite, you'll be able to identify really easy opportunities for improvement.

Anand: I think that in and of itself is innovative. I was talking to someone the other day who said that law is one of the only professions where at the end of an engagement there's no real feedback. There's no feedback form. There's no, "Hey, how did we do?" There's no following up with them to see how it all went, checking back in a year and a half later, two years later, saying, "Hey, has anything similar come?" That's considered foreign to a lot of attorneys. A lot of attorneys just view practicing law as engagement to engagement to engagement, you hop from one thing to another to another.

So even that approach appears to me to be innovative. Asking the client what they thought about how you provided legal services. I imagine that.

Ali: I think the question that you can simply ask is that, did we provide the value that expected based on how much you paid us? That's an easy question. If you can get a no from them, that's a really good thing, because you can then have a follow-up conversation to find out "Okay, how can we improve better next time? How much would you expect to be paying for the service?"

I would say these are really easy strategies. These are not rocket science things. I mean, you can call it innovative, but I don't see it as innovative. This is just a process discipline that you have to have in order to be able to continuously improve.

Anand: You mentioned that you find that your counterparts at companies are typically legal ops people.

Ali: Yes.

Anand: Do you think that in law firms, innovation, knowledge management, maybe even like the Chief Information Officer kind of role are really just legal Ops with different title? Is this where this is all going? Whether you call yourself innovation or technology is in your title or whatever it may be, ultimately, what you're trying to do is take a process, in this case, the provision of legal services, and make it more efficient, more accurate, whatever it may be, from...I mean, if you look at it like a flowchart, you just look at a certain box and say, "I know what I could do there. I could make a people operation more efficient. I can make technological operation more efficient. I can streamline the next step. Ultimately, that's legal operations. Right?

Ali: Yeah. I mean, really the terminology is evolving every day. I can be talking about it as legal operations. It's about all the processes from beginning to the end and how you can make it more efficient.

Anand: I want to close out this podcast with a question that is related want to ask you earlier. Earlier, I asked you what keeps you up at night now, today. I want to ask you a question about Ali Shahidi in 2029. What is going to keep Ali Shahidi the Chief Innovation Officer up at night in 10 years?

Ali: So you're going to stop me again on this question. That's good.

Anand: I'm flattered.

Ali: That's good. I think that innovation, the term itself in its nature it means that it's going to continuously evolve and change. In 10 years, it's going to be completely something different. Now, is the rate of change between now and then going to be fast enough for me to worry about? I think the most important thing is to be adaptable, to be able to change the pace, to be able to change with the business requirements over time.

In 10 years, who knows what will happen? If I had to look into the glass and predict what will happen 10 years, I don't know. I don't know how to answer that question.

Anand: We were talking about earlier how we're in a golden age of change in the legal industry. That fact gave rise to this podcast. This podcast is about rapid change in the legal industry. If this was maybe, I don't know, the mid-1990s or something, this podcast would be boring. This podcast wouldn't exist. Right now is so exciting because there's all of these things happening. There's pressures from the client, there's new technology, millennials are demanding a different work-life balance and work experience. There's all of this movement, and you get to be on the crest of the wave. I mean, what do you see coming up?

Ali: Hopefully, what I'm very optimistic about is equal access to justice. That's what I'm hoping we'll get to. My background is from a different country that you and I were talking about this. The legal systems in different countries, different cultures really are fascinating. We should not be looking at legal services in a silo in the US. I think there are much higher causes on a global level that we need to worry about than really purely focusing on one siloed section of legal services. Hopefully, maybe in 10 years, we'll have an equal or more socially acceptable legal justice system.

Anand: Ali, I love that answer. I want to thank you for joining me on The Modern Lawyer. This has just been an extremely exciting conversation to me. You can probably hear it in my voice. At times I get very excited when I talk about this. Thank you so much for joining us. It's a real pleasure to have you on. Thank you very much for having me.

Anand: Beautiful, man. Beautiful.

Ali: All right. Good.

Anand: That was great. You struck exactly the right tone. I mean, this is perfect. Let me not screw up this part of it. There we go. 58 minutes. That is perfect. Okay, I'm going hit this. This part makes me nervous because...

Ali: Do you want to save it?

Anand: Exactly. I need to save it. See, Ali Shahidi Ed. Say, Okay. I think that is saved. Ali Shahidi, 58 minutes. Hurray, I didn't screw it up. You probably saw me nervously looking at the analogy. All right. Wonderful. Wonderful. That was awesome, man.

Ali: All good?

Anand: That was awesome. What we're going to do is...I purposely went over-

Ali: Do you need to edit some?

Anand: Yeah, there's going to be some... Let's see. Let me stop. Stop.