

Lessons
in Leadership:

**An Interview
with
David Wheeler**

#BakersDozen
on
High Performance
Counsel



HIGH PERFORMANCE COUNSEL

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

#BakersDozen is a series of interviews with leading professionals in the fields of law, consulting, finance, tech, and more.



David E. Wheeler:

Assistant General Counsel, Verizon

Tell us a bit about yourself and how you came to be in (or a customer of) the legal business?

I was a philosophy major. It was the first time I had done something just because I loved it and not because it fit into a grand plan. Then one day as I neared graduation, I woke up and thought, “Uh, what am I going to do with a philosophy degree?” I didn’t want to earn a Ph.d. in philosophy, so I went to law school instead.

What do you do for a living right now?

I am an antitrust lawyer for Verizon, which gives me a great vantage point. People mistakenly think we debate the nuances of Supreme Court cases and economic theories all day. But for in-house lawyers, facts matter. I’ve spent my entire career learning about our business and industry. I have the rare opportunity to see across all of Verizon’s segments – wireless, wireline, IoT, digital advertising, consumer, enterprise, SMB, etc. – and understand how they knit together.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

What has been your greatest triumph and your greatest success in the legal services field and what did you learn from each?

I don't spend much time thinking about my triumphs and successes, and I try to be honest about what I should have done better even for projects that succeed. But I am proud of the careers of my direct reports. Many have been promoted. All have evolved into excellent attorneys, and their careers will ultimately outshine mine. I'm proud to be a part of that.

Do you think the legal industry is headed in the right direction, the wrong direction – or which direction?

The practice of law is morphing, and the industry is adapting. But I'm not sure law schools are. Although applications are down, law schools continue to push out thousands of graduates each year. Meanwhile, technology is eroding the need for many legal functions. That's not to say Skynet will take over the world. But law schools must recognize that technology will inevitably change our profession, and they should admit and graduate fewer students. Otherwise, we risk creating a Hunger-Games generation of graduates saddled with unthinkable debt fighting for fewer and fewer jobs. We actually may already be there.

Who – or what – inspires you – and why?

My wife. She keeps me grounded.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

What advice would you give to the younger generation contemplating law as a career?

To parrot Jeff Immelt, learn to code. It doesn't matter what field you hope to enter. Every job will require an understanding of coding.

Information is always good. We should not be afraid of informed consumers.

How ready for change do you think the legal industry is?

It's easy to cast the industry as a caricature of old stodgy lawyers afraid of change. Lawyers may be risk adverse, but they're not stupid. It's a competitive market, and lawyers understand they must evolve to remain competitive.

Is more – or different – leadership required? In what ways?

I don't know that a change in leadership is required. But I'm confident the leaders of tomorrow will be those hacking Minecraft mods today rather than those joining debate clubs.

How deep do you think will be the inroads of technology in the industry?

These days, I focus on technology evolutions like blockchain. Blockchain is a distributed, unhackable (we hope) ledger that provides transparency for transactions. For example, when someone buys a house today, there's a title search, title insurance, escrow account, etc. In the future, every transaction related to that house – liens, settlements, quick deeds – will be part of that title's code. Banks already use blockchain when exchanging financial instruments. Walmart uses it to track pork in China. Some may use it to repossess a car's title for nonpayment.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

Why does this matter for the legal industry? Because many of us currently perform these functions. Whether it's a transaction lawyer protecting her client or a title company performing a title search or a litigator suing for non-performance, blockchain will reduce society's reliance on the legal industry by building the veracity of transactions right into the code.

In ten years, do you see an industry much as it is – or do you see new players, new technology and an altered state?

It may not be ten years. But in twenty-five years, the legal profession will look very different. We'll still have prosecutors and public defenders. We'll still have great orators who argue before the Supreme Court. But technology will analyze and maintain records better than humans, and the jobs that revolve around those tasks will be gone.

Are consultants and lawyers looking increasingly similar? Should the distinction continue?

There's definitely a blurring, but we should maintain the distinction. First, we can't extend privilege to the world else privilege becomes meaningless. Second, consumers should know whether they're getting advice from a barred attorney. State bars aren't perfect, but they provide assurances to consumers that an attorney meets minimum qualifications.

What are your thoughts on the increasing availability of data to guide client-side procurement of legal services?

Information is always good. We should not be afraid of informed consumers.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

Lawyers have typically regulated to keep non-lawyer investors out but that's a two-edged sword these days. What are your thoughts?

I don't have a problem with non-lawyers owning part of a law firm. But I can't imagine a16z or the like ever investing. The economics aren't attractive enough. Where I draw the line is a non-party who testifies at trial having a vested interest in the trial's outcome. Non-party witnesses shouldn't share in contingency fees even as investors.

What's the one most significant factor that will drive change in your view?

Technology.

Are we seeing the demise of the "profession" and the real emergence of the "business" of law?

The profession of law has always been a business. What matters is whether one is professional. That's an individual choice.

What do you consider is the greatest challenge facing the industry?

Technology.

What do you see as the greatest opportunity for the sector looking forward?

Technology.

I know my answers to 14, 16, and 17 are a bit cheeky. But technology, more than anything else, will bring significant change and opportunities for the industry while at the same time present new challenges, many of which are still unknown.

Do you think law can improve its track record on diversity and inclusion? How?

The world is diverse, and the legal profession – whose mandate is to represent those in the world – should reflect the world.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

Diversity evolves from education, opportunity, and empowerment. Exposing kids to the possibilities of their future is key. Programs like Street Law are wonderful. But we should expand that approach beyond just lawyers. Look at the wealth of experiences among the contributors at High Performance Counsel. The legal profession includes far more than just lawyers, and kids should be exposed to all the wonderful opportunities in the legal world.

Will the current regulatory framework around law help or hinder it in the future?

When state bars started, lawyers were generalists and hardly moved around. Technology did not blur borders. And knowing the basics of a state's laws was straightforward. Since then, clients are around the world; attorneys can work from anywhere; and legislation and regulation has exploded to the point that no one can know a state's laws anymore.

Passing a state bar exam no longer means one is well-versed in that state's laws. We should have a national certification that is supplemented by state specialties (tested by state bars). Those who want to hold themselves out as family-law specialists in Maryland, for example, must pass a Maryland family-law exam.

The profession of law has always been a business. What matters is whether one is professional. That's an individual choice.

Who do you think are the greatest influencers on the industry these days?

Traditionally, the greatest influencers of an industry are the old guard that rose up through the ranks. But I see more change – and thus more influence – coming from outside than within. Technology companies are changing the legal industry far more than lawyers.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

If you had to do it all over again, would you? Or what would you do differently?

If I were to go back in time, I would do it all over again. I'm enjoying a wonderful career. But if I were in high school today, I'd choose coding and robotics over law. Technology has a better future.

If a law firm was a startup pitching for investors, would you be an investor?

No. It's too hard making money by the hour.

Wildcard Questions

If you weren't doing this, what would you be doing?

Working for a company in a startup or growth stage. And not necessarily as a lawyer. I've spent more time gaming out business strategies than debating case law in my career, and I enjoy the challenge of building and growing a business.

What would you like to be known for?

Being trustworthy.

What would surprise everyone if they knew (they may now).

I didn't join social media until a few months ago. I figured no one was bored enough to follow my life. What I didn't realize – and what I'm truly enjoying – is how much I learn from other people's posts.

What's your favorite hobby or activity outside of law?

Spending time with my family.

What's your favorite sports team?

The Washington Nationals!

Whats your favorite city?

Maui . . . which I know is not a city, but it's close enough.

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler

What's your favorite food?

Having grown up in Southern California and attended school in Arizona, I love authentic Mexican food.

Whats your nickname – and why?

Wheels. See my last name.

David is enjoying a wonderful career and has been blessed with opportunities for which some wait their entire careers. He's marshaled several multibillion dollar deals through the regulatory processes. He's argued at a European Commission oral hearing and presented at the OECD. David has led scores of teams ranging from 350 attorneys to three...David advises senior leaders at Verizon, and clients have relied on his data analyses for more than just legal advice.

This interview reflects the opinions of the author, and not of their affiliated organizations, or of High Performance Counsel

Interview with Verizon's David Wheeler



HIGH PERFORMANCE COUNSEL

Welcome to High Performance Counsel

High Performance Counsel provides a valuable sounding board for legal sector leadership on the issues and opportunities facing the legal sector in the next decade. We call on a diverse spectrum of thought-leaders to share their perspective on what works, what doesn't and where it's all headed. Join us.

[Learn more](#)