Session report: Uberisation of the legal profession: where are we in Asia?

Summary:

The US – and gradually Europe –, are experiencing daily the signs of a material change in the legal profession’s landscape following an unprecedented combination of economic, market and technological factors. The purpose of this session was to examine how those dramatic changes have affected if at all the region with a particular focus on Japan, Korea and the neighbouring countries.

1. We started with a general introduction referring to other sectors such as music companies, travel agents, newspapers, taxi drivers that have been ravaged by the internet, mobile phone apps and people’s ability to find free information that they used to pay for.

Conversely, Law appears to be still at the artisan stage. Lawyers craft individual advice for clients whereas the way to bring cost down is to industrialise much of the process.

Much of the technology that is used in the legal field seems primitive compared to what has happened in other industries. But those who believe in it think it can go far beyond digitising everyday routine processes into doing the kind of complex work that lawyers think only they can do.

“People have been talking about this ever since I’ve been a lawyer,” says one New York lawyer. “I’ll believe it when I see it.” Well, we have been seeing it in the US and Europe at least: what about here?

2. Dr. Masahiro Kotosaka, Associate Professor at Keio University (Japan) explained from the economic perspective how the uberisation phenomenon develops and the reasons for its successes in a free economic market; he then went on to share some of his own views on what lessons can be learned for Asia.

3. Koki Yamada, a partner at Hibiya-Nakata in Tokyo, described the situation in Japan explaining in particular how Japanese Bar rules interfere to some extent with the development of legal techs in Japan.

4. The highlight of our session was the part led by Yoshikazu Tagami, general manager at Bengo4.com, one of the first and most successful legal tech company in Japan that has been recently listed in Tokyo. Mr Tagami gave the audience a live demonstration of how the site “Bego4” worked and what services it offered to the general public, particularly in respect of identifying relevant lawyers for specific requests in a country where seeking the services of lawyers is often considered as unaffordable for individuals.

5. Chunghwan Choi ended the session with a view from Korea with particular focus on landmark cases that have come to the fore front of the debate on pros and cons of legal techs in Korea. The audience was to some degree surprised to learn that the Korean courts had adopted a very progressive approach and allowed law digital offering to carry on their activities as long as they did not reveal private data (which as deemed not to be the case about the background of professionals in the legal profession – be it judges, lawyers or professors at law -). Chunghwan impressed also the audience with his description of how Korean courts have adopted digital solutions allowing cases and hearings to be carried out entirely virtually in some areas.
The audience had many opportunities to share their own experience from other Asian countries such as India and Singapore and to raise questions to Yoshikazu Tagami on how Bengo4 worked and the recipe for its success.