

Justice for pennies: the surprising catalyst for social change no one is talking about

Forget self-driving cars or artificial general intelligence. The next seismic shift in society could come from an unexpected quarter: the courtroom.

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Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen recently predicted that legal costs could plummet dramatically—by as much as 1,000 times. While this may sound exaggerated, the rapid advancements in generative AI technologies suggest it may not be as far-fetched as it seems.

We don't need to wait for a 1,000x drop to see massive change, though. Let's explore a world where litigation costs fall by "just" 100 times. It's closer than you think, and the implications are already pretty big.

Access to justice: David vs. Goliath gets a rewrite

Today, justice often comes with a price tag only Goliath can afford. Reduce those costs significantly, and suddenly David has a fighting chance. This is a world where anyone is now able to challenge corporate giants, where small businesses can enforce contracts without risking bankruptcy and where marginalised communities can truly hold power to account.

This has other consequences: courts could be flooded with cases,

potentially bringing the system to a halt. To cope, a complete reimagining of how justice is delivered would be needed. Courts would need to evolve rapidly, adopting digital tools, streamlined case management systems, and alternative dispute resolution methods to keep pace. This would mark a new era of legal empowerment, where access to justice is no longer a privilege but a right accessible to all. If resources are used in the right way.

Business as unusual: when litigation becomes a superpower

In a world where litigation is so cheap, the rulebook gets rewritten. Companies that once settled out of court to avoid crippling legal fees will now be emboldened to fight hard for their interests. This could create a more litigious environment, where taking legal action becomes a strategic business decision rather than a last resort.

The increased ease of litigation could deter unethical practices, as companies become aware that consumers, employees, and competitors can hold them accountable in court without prohibitive costs. This could drive higher standards of corporate governance, encouraging companies to adhere to laws and regulations more diligently. When anyone can hold you accountable in court, cutting corners becomes much, much riskier - and transparency and compliance become much more than a marketing exercise.

Against all odds - and the current narrative that a lot of legal jobs will disappear because of generative AI - the industry could expand hugely as a result of growing demand. It would create opportunities for lawyers, paralegals, and legal tech professionals. Law schools and training programs might experience a surge in enrollment as more individuals pursue careers in this newly accessible field.

The drawbacks: baseless claims and system strain

While the benefits are clear, drastically reduced litigation costs aren't without drawbacks. Groundless lawsuits could explode, clogging up the system and potentially undermining the very access to justice we're trying to achieve. To counter this, we would need major legal reforms, including reimagining legal penalties, screening processes, and case management from the ground up.

Additionally, the influx of cases could strain the judicial system, leading to longer wait times and delayed justice. This highlights the need for continued investment in technology and reform, ensuring that the legal system can handle the increased volume without compromising on efficiency or quality.

The verdict: legal tech finally gets understood

For a few years now, we've heard all about how technology will revolutionise law. If you're in the industry, you might have glimpsed why, but for most people, "legal tech" still conjures images of expensive software that gives IT departments migraines and makes lawyers long for their yellow legal pads.

But in this new world of reduced litigation costs, suddenly everyone gets it. It's not about fancy algorithms or cloud syncing, but about AI agents sifting through millions of cases in seconds, spotting patterns human lawyers would miss in a lifetime. Smart contracts on the blockchain could make certain types of lawsuits obsolete. Virtual reality courtrooms might sound scarily impersonal, but could change the life of the rural plaintiff who can now face down a corporate giant without a 200-mile commute.

Of course, it's not all good. A flood of dirt-cheap lawsuits could clog the system and we will need some clever fixes to separate the wheat from the chaff without accidentally ignoring legitimate claims. But if we get it right, the payoff is enormous. It's a world where "equal justice under law" is actually an everyday reality. Where ethical business practices aren't just for PR spin, but a matter of survival.

So how do we ensure this tech-driven justice system remains truly just?

Technology alone will not, of course, be the answer. The true challenge - and opportunity - lies in how we wield these innovations. We must architect a system that leverages AI's power while preserving the irreplaceable human judgment at the law's core. We need to build safeguards that prevent a flood of groundless lawsuits while ensuring the courthouse doors swing open wide for those who've been historically locked out.

And technology leaps. We'll likely hit Marc Andreessen's forecast of drastically reduced legal costs far sooner than most expect. Lawyers, tech firms, governments, and courts need to kick off a serious dialogue now to get ahead of this AI transformation instead of watching it unfold haphazardly, as we've seen in too many other sectors. Because unlike customer service automation or speedy marketing copy, the transformation of our legal system by technology will profoundly impact human lives for generations. We need to treat it with the urgency it deserves.

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