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AI + LEADERSHIP

We Have to Rethink How Work Is Created and Done, Rather Than Improving Old Processes

With **Bill Ryan**, Senior Vice President and Chief Compliance Officer at AT&T, and **Darrell Guy**, Senior Vice President and Assistant General Counsel at AT&T

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Bill Ryan, Senior Vice President and Chief Compliance Officer at AT&T, and *Darrell Guy*, Senior Vice President and Assistant General Counsel at AT&T, shared timely insights with David Reimer and Adam Bryant of The ExCo Group for the AI + Leadership series. Key themes include launching an AI-first legal unit with conviction instead of a pilot, the four stages of AI transformation, and why curiosity and human judgment matter more as AI makes knowledge a commodity.

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Reimer: You launched Legal Edge as an AI-first solution to handling in-house legal work. How did that come about, and what was your sense of the challenge early on, especially in light of how much hype there is about AI?

Guy: There definitely was some skepticism a couple of years ago in our function, where we lead legal operations. We started talking with our General Counsel about how we would chart our path. We knew AI was on the horizon, but we didn't know how it would evolve.

But he set a marker, in which he acknowledged the uncertainty and hype around AI but said that we were going to fully commit to being the best in-house legal department in terms of how we use AI. That was our North Star, and the rest of our steps progressed from that point.

> **"We really should be rethinking how work is created and done, as opposed to improving a pre-existing process."**

And within our Legal Operations, the foundation had been laid because we had a culture that was embracing this notion of taking on new initiatives that would help move the needle for us as a team. So the tone was set for us to embrace what was unknown at the time. As we pressed more and saw models changing and the tools improving, there were fewer horror stories. That helped build momentum that led to Legal Edge.

Ryan: You can't shake the idea that AT&T's been around for 150 years. It is continuously reinventing itself, and that absolutely penetrated the legal department. We also had a culture in the department of not just transformation but continuous improvement. And we saw the capabilities of AI not as a threat or risk, but as an opportunity for improvement. That mindset was a key element.

Part of identifying the opportunity was the conviction that a significant portion of the work being done by outside counsel was work that could and should be done more efficiently and consistently by our in-house team leveraging AI. Instead of waiting for that to happen, we said we're going to build this entity to take control of that work.

We looked at years of data on outside counsel billings, and it became clear that there was a fair amount of work that could be disrupted if we did it ourselves. So there was a specific problem that we were trying to solve, and we built a team that was going to be solely dedicated to disrupting this model. We started ideating in late August of 2025, and we announced the launch of Legal Edge in January 2026.

The speed and the conviction behind that were essential to gaining credibility, both externally and internally. We said, here's an entity. It has a name and purpose, and we have such deep conviction that we're not going to pilot it. We are going to launch it. That was significant in how it was perceived by the market and by our teams. It was a signal that we're owning this change, so get on board.

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I also can't think of a professional moment over the last 25 years that required such direct and deep personal engagement with the technology, and it started by using AI for basic personal tasks, like planning a vacation and budgeting, and seeing the benefits.

You realize pretty quickly in conversations about AI that some people have actually used the tools and understood them, while others talk about them generically without really understanding their capabilities. For me, that was a massive shift, and I started moving from trepidation to seeing the opportunities.

Bryant: So what are the key lessons that other companies can take away from your experience?

Ryan: I believe you have to self-assess where you are in the four stages of this AI transformation journey. The first one is tool awareness, which is really understanding what AI tools exist: their capabilities, their limitations, and what's required in terms of governance.

The second stage that many organizations are in is using AI to increase personal productivity. Stage three is process disruption, which is when you have a workflow or a process that you will never do the same way that it's been done historically.

The fourth stage really is a white space. AI is being used a lot right now to optimize pre-existing workflows. But our toolset is so much greater and more varied than anything we've ever had, and we really should be rethinking how work is created and done, as opposed to improving a pre-existing process.

Most leaders want to be in that fourth stage, which is AI creating the opportunity to redesign or reimagine how work is done. But you have to go through those first three stages to feel comfortable in that fourth stage.

Somebody said that AI transformation is almost a mirror on organizations right now, because it's really forcing them to figure out how work is created, what's the associated knowledge, what's the associated prioritization, what's the output, and how do you compound the learnings from that? To really be effective with AI, you need to be able to identify the core issue you're trying to solve.

Guy: I want to underscore the importance of creating a group whose leadership had a clear purpose and a remit to pursue this goal as their top priority every day. That was the differentiator for us in terms of driving transformative change, as opposed to trying to move the entire organization, which would have been much harder.

And we are now seeing leaders across every function taking on similar discrete projects, so there's been a drafting effect that Legal Edge has paved the way for us. Every leader at every meeting is talking about AI: what are we doing in our teams to make sure that we are using AI and learning from it? One of the critical benefits of starting Legal Edge is the momentum it created.

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Reimer: Part of the role of general counsels and in-house lawyers is to look for risks. And yet innovation is inherently risky.

Guy: The key reason we've seen improvement and progress is that there was engagement from the very top of the organization. At our leadership retreat this year, we talked about how you can't lead change in AI if you're not immersed in it yourself. Everyone is engaged personally with the technology.

When you have an organization that sees its senior leadership personally involved and engaged in this transformation and the technology, it sends the message that everyone should get on board. We were encouraging people to embrace this, to come along for the ride and make themselves more valuable to the organization.

Ryan: I was doing a lot of reading when we were launching Edge about disruptive organizations within larger organizations, and the key lesson was about the importance of people trusting the mission of that disruptive entity. When you have senior leadership showing their conviction and being personally involved in the disruption, it's harder not to trust that, because everyone sees the authenticity when they talk about it.

The other side of this is the reality that the barrier to entry to AI is non-existent. There are competitors and bad actors that have access to it and are trying to maximize it for their own gains. I'm an optimist on the opportunity-creation side, but the reality is that the risk side is growing at the same rate that any efficiencies are gaining.

This isn't all puppies and great outcomes. The world is shifting. So how are we, from a legal and compliance side, going to match that? If you don't buy the fact that we're going to change how law is practiced, then buy the fact that people are trying to disrupt what we're trying to achieve from an AT&T mission perspective. We have to meet that challenge.

And we're not saying that AI tooling will or should give us the best answer based upon an average response. But it can provide all the information I need to exercise my decision or my guidance or my counsel. There is incredible opportunity for greater efficiency in that information side of things.

That said, that can lead to a blurred line at some point. When does information output become a decision? That's why we're really focused on the leadership skill of creating curiosity. Because curiosity, in my mind, is an essential precursor to the exercise of judgment. You need to keep asking questions to get to the best answer to exercise judgment. Otherwise, you're just left with everybody dealing in normalized outcomes.

Bryant: One of the bigger questions and concerns about AI these days is about "cognitive offloading" and "cognitive surrender." How do you create a counterweight to the tendency among many people to use AI to do their jobs for them?

Guy: People are looking to us to help them answer the question, where is my value? Where is the value proposition for me in this new world where AI makes knowledge a commodity? There's a lot of angst. People read stories that run the gamut from AI will replace you to you will always need people in that loop.

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It's hard to say exactly how this plays out, but what will always matter is human judgment, our network of relationships, the trust that is built from the human connections that happen when we sit across from each other and have conversations.

When you are making the most important decisions and sorting through problems, even after you gather all this information, you still want that human connection, judgment, and experience that you overlay on top of everything else to give you the confidence to press forward. It's a delicate balance we're doing here, in terms of helping our people identify what their value is going to be as these tools get better and better. Where do people come in and bring the value that the company really needs?

Ryan: I was up at UC Berkeley Law School recently at a conference on AI, and the consistent, overwhelming theme in the last couple of sessions was that never in the collective careers of the leaders who were presenting has there been more of a need for emphasis on EQ when hiring leaders.

And it's for that exact reason: the importance of creating teams, human connection, inspiration, and curiosity. Societally, there is a drive to reach the end state as quickly as possible. We want to achieve the goal.

But there needs to be an increased emphasis on the process of things, the creation, the journey. The journey is just as significant as the output, because output is now easier with AI. This goes back to the importance of creation, curiosity, and questions. How do we encourage the process side of things and not just the output side of things?

For me, that's where the personal satisfaction comes from. It's not the output. It's actually the process of creation. And so the question for organizations is, how do we identify and highlight examples where the process of creation is as significant as the output?

Follow us for more insights from the AI + Leadership series, real-world conversations about the intersection of leadership and AI, led by Adam Bryant and David Reimer.

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In this conversation



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David Reimer is a recognized expert in the leadership development of the C-suite. A former operator himself, David brings hands-on knowledge of leadership, strategy, operations, and mentoring to the subject of accelerating top executives' impact. He is consulted by boards, operators, and senior HR leaders on developing leaders for an era of disruption.



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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the "Corner Office" series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including "The Leap to Leader" and "The CEO Test," both published by Harvard Business Review Press.

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