

Session 1a: Innovation in the Delivery of Legal Services and Access to Justice

Summary of Proceeding by Burke Findley

Featured Speakers: Tabrez Ebrahim and Walid Romaya

Moderated by Steven W. Bender, Associate Dean for Planning and Strategic Initiatives and Professor, Seattle University School of Law

Abstract: With a dual focus on achieving a broader access to justice and in providing matchmaking services for legal professionals looking for a larger client base, Vikkoria aims to disrupt the legal services industry through its mobile app. Based in California, Vikkoria has begun to expand to various metro areas around the country and hopes to provide broader access to justice by giving those with little to no legal knowledge an easy way to find a local attorney, book an appointment, and receive counseling on their issue. Vikkoria aims to solve the current mismatch between potential clients and overworked attorneys by redirecting clients to experienced lawyers in smaller firms who have the availability to take on new cases.

I. Introduction

In Session One of the SITIE 2023 Symposium: Innovation in the Delivery of Legal Services and Access to Justice, Vikkoria Cofounders Tabrez Ebrahim and Walid Romaya presented background research on current issues in the delivery of legal services. They believe their company will bridge the gap that exists in the delivery of legal services by expanding access to justice for underserved groups. They began their presentation with a broad overview of the problem. Then, they explained the two-sided market model their business uses. In doing so, they walked through how each side has a need and how they will be able to solve both market problems by bringing together lawyers and clients through their legal matchmaking app.

II. Market inefficiencies in the acquisition of legal services

Tabrez Ebrahim began the presentation by walking through the research he has done in association with his professorship at Lewis and Clark, which focuses on access to justice issues and market inefficiencies based on current methods for retaining legal services. With sixty percent of calls to lawyers going unreturned, and with forty-five to fifty percent of consumers feeling anxiety over their legal issues, there is a clear market demand for a way to connect individuals with local lawyers who can help them in a timely manner. Despite this need, however, there is no easy way to navigate the marketplace and find the right lawyers, which forces many people to attempt to find firms or providers on their own. Further complicating the issue, individuals who lack legal knowledge often struggle to articulate their legal needs because, while they often know that they need a lawyer, they don't know exactly why.

While large firms don't struggle with advertising or client retention, they typically serve clients that are large government or business entities or clients who have the means to access better resources. Clients who lack the resources or means to retain an attorney from a larger firm must find smaller, specialized lawyers who can serve their legal needs. These small firms, however, struggle to advertise and retain clients. These struggles are often compounded by the fact that these firms are specialized and spend seventy percent of their time on one type of issue.

In short, clients need an attorney, but they have limited resources. There are attorneys willing to help, but they are unable to market themselves in a way that enables these clients to find them. The resulting market failure is not a small one: eighty percent of the poorest individuals in America and sixty-seven percent of middle-income Americans have unmet legal needs. This market failure also shows how the most vulnerable Americans are the ones with the least access to legal services.

Tech platforms have recently established ways to quickly break through and disrupt existing industries. Through its free and easy to use mobile app, Vikkoria hopes to foster the same types of industry disruptions that other tech platforms have achieved, but in the context of legal services. It hopes this disruption will open the door for new and easy to use ways for those with low incomes or those in underrepresented groups to find legal resources.

III. The Uber of legal services

Individuals in the legal industry have referred to Vikkoria as the "Uber" of legal services. While Tabriz Ebrahim and Walid Romaya discount this comparison, they also acknowledge that it has some accuracy. Uber is a two-sided marketplace that connects consumers who want a quick and easy way to get a ride from A to B with drivers who have vehicles and time but otherwise lack a way to advertise or monetize their capabilities. Similarly, the marketplace Vikkoria targets is also two-sided. It consists of clients who want a lawyer but have no way to retain one, and lawyers who have the time and resources to provide legal services but are unable to effectively market those skills to acquire clients. Just as Uber revolutionized the ride share system by allowing individuals who do not have a car or the ability to get a taxicab to request a direct ride, Vikkoria strives to do the same for legal services.

Ebrahim and Romaya distinguish Vikkoria from Uber, however, in the context of what Vikkoria's service provides. Simply put, legal service acquisition is more important than ride sharing services. Legal service acquisition can revolutionize housing access, family law and stability, estate planning, bankruptcy protection, and other legal areas that usually present high-cost barriers to access.

As the importance of access to justice is greater, so too is the complexity in providing it. When consumers acquire a ride share, all they need to provide is their name and location. The matchmaking sophistication is nowhere near as complex as it is in the legal services industry. In the legal services context, service providers don't only need to find a local lawyer with availability. Rather, service providers also need to assess the lawyer's price point, specialization, and whether the lawyer can handle the full scope of the issue.

To further complicate matters, lay people often don't know how to correctly communicate legal questions and issues. For individuals of low income or underrepresented groups that also lack familiarity with the legal system, this may prove to be an impossible hurdle. Accomplishing a match between client and attorney in this realm requires the ability to acquire information from clients in a way that can then be compared and sent to attorneys based on their specialization and practice area. For example, a client may have a need relating to housing. The underlying legal issue may be a specific federal housing law issue, with only one local attorney able to assist with the relevant federal law. Few clients are likely to understand and recognize the nuances between practicing under federal law or state law, but an effective matchmaking service would need to identify the nuances so lawyers can make an informed decision to accept or reject the client's issue. All these complexities differentiate Uber from Vikkoria. But Vikkoria, as did Uber, has the potential to immensely disrupt its respective industry.

IV. Expanding the capabilities of small firms

While Vikkoria's access-to-justice capabilities alone are revolutionary, so too is its expansion of marketing for small firms. Currently, while small firms can differentiate themselves from large firms based on their local experience and their availability, they are limited by their advertising capabilities. Whereas large firms can spend greatly on advertising and readily hire new attorneys to match incoming demand, small firms are usually left to rely on minimal advertising and less effective forms of matching demand. While small firms and solo practitioners have distinct features that large firms lack, like the ability to establish bonds with clients, they struggle to adequately advertise those features. The other half of Vikkoria's marketplace will provide smaller firms with a steady stream of clients that they would otherwise be unable to obtain.

As previously mentioned, sixty percent of calls for legal services go unanswered. While there is no direct explanation for this, it can be surmised that it is in large part due to the time-consuming nature of fielding calls, especially where a large portion of calls are not related to a lawyer's specialization. A matchmaking service using AI would screen the clients and their needs, allowing the attorneys to focus on legal work. Furthermore, by providing smaller firms or solo practitioners with an easy way to advertise, these firms should be able to increase their flow of clients, which in turn should improve the financial state of these firms.

Technological disruption is making the back-end processes of legal services easier. These efficiencies will only improve as the production of legal services increases. Vikkoria's matchmaking capabilities will enable small firms to further utilize these efficiencies and disruptions as these firms gain more clients. Studies have also shown that referral sources such as Vikkoria's greatly benefit the financial wellbeing of small firms and solo practices.

V. The future

Small firms are often engaged in David versus Goliath style fights against big law firms. With the ability to access the advances in AI and legal technologies like Vikkoria's, however, small firms will be able to better compete with large firms and advocate for their clients. Also, because small firms are more likely to provide services to marginalized and underrepresented

groups than are large law firms, these advances in technology will give historically powerless groups effective legal representation and increased bargaining power. Because nearly all areas of life involve legal issues—such as renting an apartment, starting a business, or borrowing money for a car—having ready access to competent representation is necessary to effectively combat discrimination and to ensure fair opportunities to all.

Tabrez Ebrahim and Walid Romaya are cognizant of the challenges they must still overcome. Currently, they are expanding access to Vikkoria metro by metro, with a large focus on ensuring access to local counsel. They have stated that their goal is to lead people to an attorney within a half hour of their location. While the platform has not yet fully targeted consumers, they are ready to begin that push within the next two months. They have effective video and advertising campaigns planned and are ready to help make everyone aware of how much easier it is to find an attorney through Vikkoria. Their current focus is on Vikkoria's mobile app, but they plan to make it available on desktops as well. Furthermore, with their planned price points, they will help individuals who are either unable to pay or with moderate means find attorneys who can help them. As new technology continues to evolve and as AI enters the legal workspace, the future of expanded access to justice will hopefully continue to allow effective representation for every person, regardless of their means.