

China's lawyers network legal services status quo, problems and countermeasures

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Abstract: With the development of society, the concept of the rule of law has become deeply ingrained in people's minds, leading to an increase in demand for legal services. At the same time, the rapid development of internet technology has given rise to "internet + legal services." As professional practitioners who use their legal knowledge and skills to provide legal services to society, lawyers actively participate in public legal service networks for those who need help. They also utilize online resources to expand for-profit legal service networks, bringing legal services into the homes of ordinary people and promoting the rule of law and the construction of a harmonious society to a certain extent. This paper analyzes the development status of different forms and models of online legal services provided by lawyers, examines their advantages, disadvantages, and issues, and proposes countermeasures to improve lawyer online legal services in the new era.

Keywords: Internet + legal services, public cyber legal services, for-profit cyber legal services, issues, countermeasures

1. Introduction

One of the characteristics of the legal profession is service. "Internet+" technology has injected a strong vitality into the development of the service industry. "Internet+" can only realise its greater value when combined with other areas. At the national level, public network legal services play a comprehensive, fundamental, and supportive role in upholding the rule of law. At the private level, lawyers expanding their for-profit network legal services have brought breakthroughs and unlimited possibilities to the legal industry. Challenges and opportunities coexist, and problems and achievements go hand in hand. To better contribute to the development of society and the industry, it is necessary to explore and practice how we can grasp the pulse of the times and enhance lawyers' network services.

2. Lawyers' public web-based legal services

2.1 Background to the proposal for a public web-based legal service for lawyers

The State attaches great importance to the construction of a public legal service system and has proposed promoting its development to cover both urban and rural residents. The aim is to accelerate the integration of legal service resources, including lawyers, notaries, forensic examiners, arbitration, judicial offices, and people's mediation, into a comprehensive legal service network that operates across all time zones. Guo (2020) made it clear that by 2022, a modern and efficient public legal service system will be established, covering both urban and rural areas, and ensuring equal access for all^[1]. Furthermore, by 2035, a public legal service system that aligns with the goal of achieving a rule of law country, a rule of law government, and a rule of law society will be fully established. The Ministry of Justice published the Opinions on Promoting Lawyers' Participation in Public Legal Services, which further supports and promotes lawyers' participation in public legal services and accelerates the construction of a modern public legal services system. The Opinions advocate that each lawyer participates in no fewer than 50 hours of public legal services or handles at least two legal aid cases per year. They also advocate that lawyers rely on public legal services entities, hotlines, and online platforms to extend their service reach and provide more professional, convenient, and universally accessible legal services to the masses. As the practice of ruling the country in accordance with the law continues to deepen, the people's demand for the rule of law, fairness, and security is

growing, and new and higher requirements are being put forward for the promotion of public legal services. With the continuous development of "Internet+", the internet has become the primary channel for people to obtain information, and mobile phones have become an indispensable item for people when going out. The network platform has become an important way for people to inquire about legal issues, seek legal help, and receive professional legal services in a virtual network environment. It is a common expectation of society to access professional legal help in a virtual network environment. Most lawyers have graduated from law majors, passed the national professional qualification examination for lawyers, and become practicing lawyers after undergoing internships in law firms. They possess strong professional abilities and rich legal experience, and they are the main providers of public legal services on the network. This helps accelerate the construction of the public legal service network.

2.2 Cases of lawyers' public network legal services

2.2.1 Jiangsu Province to create "Internet law firms"

In 2013, Jiangsu led the national judicial administrative system in exploring a new model of "Internet + legal services". In 2017, the Jiangsu Provincial Department of Justice accelerated the construction of the 12348 Jiangsu legal network, which includes three major platforms: a website, a public WeChat account, and a mobile app. At the first China-Wuxi "Intelligent Legal Affairs" Development Conference on December 18, 2017, the "Internet Law Firm" was officially launched. Nearly 40,000 lawyers have registered on this platform, creating "unmanned law firms" that follow the "local lawyers first, supplemented by provincial lawyers, and supported by national lawyers" service supply mechanism. These law firms are small in size, equivalent to security guard booths, but equipped with tables and chairs, high-definition touch terminals, high-fidelity cameras, printers, and other equipment. The public can enter this relatively private space by scanning their ID cards, choose their preferred lawyers, and enjoy legal counseling, paperwork, and other services. The lawyers can also meet with clients offline to further address legal problems. This innovative approach facilitates the reasonable allocation of lawyers' resources and improves access to legal services for the public.

2.2.2 The Ministry of Justice consolidates country's excellent legal resources

On 20 May 2018, the Ministry of Justice launched the China Legal Service Network, adopting an overall structure of "one network, two-level platform." The network covers the entire territory and various legal services, while the two-level platforms operate at the ministerial and provincial levels. These platforms include a web portal, the "Palm 12348" WeChat public number, and a mobile client. With over 380,000 legal service organisations and more than 1.39 million legal service personnel integrated into the network, a resident service team comprising 925 selected legal professionals from across the country was formed. Lawyers accounted for a significant portion of this team. The China Legal Service Network allows the public to seek legal consultation and even hire a lawyer at any time, thereby addressing challenges such as difficulties in finding legal representation and navigating through the litigation process.

2.3 Reflections on public web-based legal services for lawyers

2.3.1 Lawyers' public online legal services are a boon for people

Li (2020) argues that one of the advantages of lawyers providing public network legal services is the effective integration of cross-regional legal service resources, which allows the public to access more convenient and efficient high-quality legal services. This helps address the imbalance and insufficiency in the allocation of legal service resources ^[2]. Zu (2020) states that because it is a public legal service platform, both the state and local governments invest a certain amount of money, ensuring its basic operation and building trust in the competence of legal service personnel. It also allows individuals to solve legal problems without leaving their homes, and for those who are not familiar with using smart devices, they can visit the public legal service centre in their region to seek assistance. This, to some extent, meets the people's demand for legal services ^[3].

2.3.2 The combination of the internet and public legal services: still in its infancy with many deficiencies

Currently, the number of practicing lawyers in China is insufficient to meet the enormous market demand. Although the lawyers registered on the platform are approved by the judicial administrative department, most of them work part-time. Due to the non-profit nature of the platform, it is challenging

to guarantee the quality of service. In Chinese society, people are accustomed to seeking help from their acquaintances to solve their legal problems. When it comes to lawsuits, establishing trust between lawyers and the public through the internet is difficult. Additionally, due to the uneven economic development in different regions, people in remote and impoverished areas may not be familiar with the internet, making it challenging for public network legal services to reach them. Consequently, these services may not fully cover the legal problems faced by extremely disadvantaged groups, and there may be a lack of personalised and targeted solutions. Improving the rural public legal service system is an essential element in promoting the rule of law in the countryside. In rural areas where legal awareness and literacy are weak, increasing the supply of rural public legal services can strengthen farmers' understanding and adherence to the law, safeguard their basic legal rights and interests, and provide strong support for overall rural revitalisation. Addressing the issue of inadequate supply of public legal services in rural areas requires a solution that starts with improving ideological consciousness. According to Ning (2020), it is necessary to improve the rural public legal service supply system by addressing organisational mechanisms, talent guarantee, and financial support. Doing so can help balance the imbalance between urban and rural public legal services and enhance the quality of rural public legal service supply ^[4].

2.3.3 Lawyers' public online legal services have a long way to go

At the national level, it is important to strengthen policy leadership and increase subsidies to encourage more lawyers to actively engage in public legal services. Judicial administrative departments should establish relevant regulations and improve their systems to support the provision of these services. In areas with limited economic development and internet penetration, it is necessary to establish public legal service centres that combine online and offline services. Additionally, proactive efforts should be made to implement "legal poverty alleviation" initiatives, which involve providing door-to-door legal problem-solving and conducting household investigations for special and vulnerable groups. At the social level, it is crucial to intensify publicity efforts to promote acceptance and recognition of public online legal services among the general public. A social culture that emphasizes learning, understanding, and utilizing the law should be fostered throughout society. At the individual level, people should actively seek out and learn about new technological products and cutting-edge legal thinking. They should also utilize the law to protect their legitimate interests.

3. For-profit cyber legal services for lawyers

3.1 Background of for-profit cyber legal services for lawyers

With the passage of time, individuals and groups alike are increasingly confronted with legal issues. Given the complexity of the legal provisions, it is challenging to draw conclusions without first acquiring a certain degree of legal expertise. This is precisely why professional legal service personnel are needed. Just as people go shopping, book tickets, and order food online, the internet has become an increasingly trusted platform for individuals seeking to resolve their legal problems. For young lawyers who have just entered the legal profession and have limited networks, the internet has become an important tool for finding clients and cases. By offering free legal services through online platforms, lawyers can build contacts, accumulate experience, and enhance their skills. As they advance in their careers, they can offer moderately priced paid services and eventually accept independent commissions. Wuxi Dongda Printing Co., Ltd. is a company that has been facing perennial copyright infringement issues. Due to the large number of vendors infringing on its copyrights, the company has had to allocate significant financial and material resources to protect its rights. However, it has been reluctant to take legal action due to the challenges involved. After Wuxi Dongda contacted the Click Law platform, the Click Law legal team promptly organised an analysis of the case. Leveraging the big data technology provided by the Click Law platform, they were able to contact law firms in seven provinces and twelve cities within two days to initiate legal proceedings. Within just 12 days, they successfully completed the forensic work for 120 cases involving a total amount of 20 million yuan. This effort has created a favorable legal environment for the survival of the company.

3.2 Main modalities and analysis of advantages and disadvantages

3.2.1 Law firms' own online service platforms

Whether it is a large law firm like Dacheng Law Firm, Zhonglun Law Firm, Jingshi Law Firm, or smaller law firms, they are all developing their own law firm websites. Some have even expanded their

platforms to include mobile apps and WeChat public accounts. These platforms generally provide some free legal advice but primarily offer paid, for-profit legal services. The websites list the personal information of the lawyers online, allowing web users with legal needs to freely choose and contact lawyers based on the provided information. The advantage of such websites is that users can evaluate and assess law firms based on their size and information, determining if they have the ability to address their specific legal issues. Essentially, these websites serve as the virtual frontage of law firms, making it easy for users to search and access information about them. As more law firms recognise the importance of website development, platforms like Bozhi Lawyers have emerged to help law firms construct their own websites. These platforms provide assistance in building law firm websites. The disadvantage is that it can be challenging to ensure the complete accuracy of the information on law firm websites. Operating and maintaining a website requires financial resources, particularly when it comes to generating traffic through search engine optimisation or paid advertising, such as "Baidu bidding." Additionally, it requires manpower, with legal counseling requiring professionals who possess strong business acumen. The operation of the website itself also demands individuals who have knowledge in both law and marketing.

3.2.2 Portal

Early websites like Zhongguo.com and findlaw.com were designed to provide a platform for both sides of the network users to engage in legal transactions. For instance, the Law Winning Hui, a legal platform, aims to let lawyers sit in their offices and wait for customers to sign up, making it easy for clients to find the most suitable lawyers at appropriate costs and allowing everyone to afford to file lawsuits. The Law Winning Hui acts as an intermediary, enabling practicing lawyers to register on its platform to provide legal advice to clients, draft legal documents for a fee, accept case commissions, become legal advisors, and offer various types of legal services. The advantage of this type of website is that it serves as a professional and authoritative legal platform, which increases its appeal to users. The website can enhance its professionalism and visibility through the accumulation of user resources over time. Lawyers can directly utilize this platform to acquire cases. However, the disadvantage is that lawyers often have to pay a certain amount of money to the website in order to be listed, which may lead to some lawyers being excluded or excessive emphasis on "star ratings" and excessive "packaging". Some websites are operated by network technology companies that excel in marketing but may not necessarily have a comprehensive understanding of the law. As a result, these portals may lack sufficient professional and comprehensive settings, which could result in a lack of cases for lawyers even after paying registration fees. Considering the cost of registration fees, quitting the website is not a viable long-term solution.

3.2.3 Zhihu, blogs, WeChat, microblogging, jittery voice, live platforms, etc.

With the rapid development of self-media, more and more lawyers are utilizing these platforms for self-promotion and marketing. They discuss current hot legal issues in society, provide updates in the form of articles and videos, and present legal concepts in an enjoyable way that is even suitable for children to learn basic legal knowledge. Lawyers interact with netizens through self-media platforms, and some good platforms can attract a large number of fans who help increase traffic. This not only provides a way for netizens to solve legal problems but also helps lawyers to acquire new cases and showcase their professional abilities. However, there are certain disadvantages. The self-media platforms have a low threshold for qualification and content audits, which may allow individuals without proper qualifications to present themselves as "legal practitioners" and provide misleading information to the majority of netizens. Additionally, maintaining and updating a self-media platform requires constant effort; otherwise, there is a risk of losing followers and decreasing engagement. The operation of a self-media platform is a long-term endeavor and may only result in a few significant cases. For example, a platform focusing on simple questions such as "What is the legal age of marriage?" can easily be answered through a simple search, making it difficult for lawyers to generate substantial income from it. Out of every 100 questions, only two or three may lead to a significant source of revenue for lawyers.

3.3 Reflections on for-profit cyber legal services for lawyers

3.3.1 Lawyers' for-profit online legal services enhance the core competitiveness of law firms

The expansion of the business scope in the lawyer service market is primarily achieved through the lawyer's popularity and good social relations. However, many law firms lack accurate positioning, struggle to identify the right market target, and fail to develop a unique core competitiveness.

Additionally, they often lack suitable marketing strategies that align with the characteristics of their own law firm. As a result, the industry competition remains passive. One way to address this is through the construction of a lawyer's office service platform for network marketing activities. Customers can use the online platform to download necessary documents or make online payments, resulting in reduced costs for legal services and offering a more convenient and reliable payment method. The sharing of the network also standardizes and makes the charging process more transparent, providing assurance to customers. Moreover, it eliminates time and area restrictions, allowing businesses to be conducted anytime and anywhere. The openness of the network facilitates public supervision and evaluation of the legal service industry. Users can share their consumption experiences and satisfaction levels, providing references for potential consumers when selecting services. User evaluations also serve as feedback to law firms, enabling timely communication and improvement of services. This not only helps maintain customer satisfaction but also encourages law firms to enhance service quality, attract more clients, and establish low-cost effective supervision mechanisms for the lawyer's services, ultimately reducing management costs.

3.3.2 At this stage, the legal services industry has not been able to make full use of the advantages of the internet to promote the growth of the industry

Firstly, the network platform of law firms has not fully covered the entire industry. Some law firms are lagging behind in terms of marketing awareness and still rely solely on traditional marketing methods. They are unwilling to spend the necessary energy, manpower, and funds to build proprietary portals. They see the establishment of a website as a burden since it also requires the establishment of a network technical department and the hiring of relevant professional and technical personnel, which can be costly for the law firms. Secondly, most law firms' website constructions are merely formalities. They do not recognise the fundamental importance of network marketing and fail to make full use of network resources. Some law firms establish portals simply to follow the trend, hastily building websites without fully considering the content and application of the website. As a result, they fail to effectively and reasonably use the resources of the law firm's network to carry out good publicity and do not fully utilize internet technology to build an effective promotional platform. Furthermore, law firms have also failed to fully utilize internet technology to establish effective communication channels between customers and themselves. For instance, some customers visit a law firm's website with the intention of finding suitable lawyers, but the information provided on the website is incomplete and outdated. Additionally, the response time from the online consultation window is slow, lacking timeliness, which results in customers not being able to obtain detailed information about the law firm. Moreover, law firms' network marketing strategies lack a core brand. Their business scope is often too broad and does not align with the actual capabilities of the law firm. Instead, they engage in soliciting any type of business out of basic survival motives. This approach fails to establish long-term core competitiveness for the majority of lawyers, who end up spreading themselves too thin. To truly develop core competitiveness, lawyers need to specialise in their areas of expertise and focus on building their main strengths. Law firms should also prioritize human resources in designing their core brand. Small and medium-sized law firms are better off adopting a focused strategy to break through and occupy market segments, rather than trying to be a jack-of-all-trades (Yuan, 2017)^[5].

3.3.3 Develop a more targeted strategy to improve the status quo of law firm online marketing

On the one hand, establishing trust between lawyers and clients requires additional efforts (Song, 2019) ^[6]. After the establishment of a comprehensive physical platform, it is crucial to center around the internet and develop and optimise online platforms. Simultaneously, it is important to consider offline legal services and construct a "Internet + legal services" platform across multiple platforms and channels. Ultimately, this approach aims to achieve synchronous development both online and offline. On the other hand, maintaining strict protection of customer privacy necessitates a secure internet environment. If a customer's information falls into the hands of malicious individuals, it poses significant risks that can result in substantial financial losses for both lawyers and clients. Moreover, it may lead to emotional distress. In such cases, it becomes essential to establish and improve relevant laws and regulations for network legal services in the new era. This will ensure the security and stability of transactions in this mode.

4. Conclusion

Although there are still many shortcomings in the current stage of "Internet + law," the trend of networking, digitisation, and intelligence cannot be halted (Yu, 2020) ^[7]. With the widespread adoption

of the internet in the information age, the "Internet + law" online service platform has emerged. By effectively integrating legal resources through a combination of online and offline methods, it improves the efficiency of legal services and provides a more targeted approach to address differentiated legal needs. This will become an effective means to assist social governance in the future. The future of network legal services should be based on the concept of "Internet +," incorporating the Internet of Things, big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and other technologies. It aims to closely link the physical world with the virtual "cloud" to provide personalised legal services for all individuals. The future is in front of us (Wang, 2019) ^[8]. In contemporary China, the Internet is actively attempting to transform various aspects of society. This not only represents the pursuit of business opportunities by countless entrepreneurs but also reflects society's desire for a convenient, efficient, and scientific governance system. Legal services, with their numerous pain points, crave this development more than any other field. China's legal service market is undergoing significant change. A new era is emerging, leveraging the power of the Internet, backed by big data, and focusing on customer-oriented, high-quality, and affordable legal services (Wu, 2016) ^[9].

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