

KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF THE HONOURABLE **THE CHIEF JUSTICE YONG PUNG HOW**

justiceonline

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Enhancing access to justice

Justiceonline is another strategic IT initiative for our justice system. It is an application of broadband Internet technology and video-conferencing tools which was jointly developed by the private and public sectors. The product is a multi-party communication platform which connects the Courts, to the Attorney-General's Chambers, law firms, and other government bodies involved in the administration of justice.

2. Since January this year, *justiceonline* has been piloted at the Subordinate Courts. 18 law firms have been involved in the pilot project, which spanned various civil, family and criminal hearings. The Attorney-General's Chambers has worked closely with us in setting up the system for criminal pre-trial conferences and family division adoption hearings. Since March this year, the pilot system has been extended to the Supreme Court's pre-trial conferences for set-down and admiralty matters. Soon, all criminal pre-trial conferences at the Subordinate Courts will be conducted by videoconferencing. Settlement conferences, Registrar's Appeals, and contentious Registry interlocutory applications will follow apace. Also in the pipeline are virtual charging of accused persons and, through the work of the Attorney-General's Chambers, virtual interviews with accused persons in remand prisons.

3. *Justiceonline* is not merely an easily accessible videoconferencing system. It is a holistic delivery of court services through the web. Solicitors may book their online hearings on the web, queue virtually, appear at hearings from the comfort of their offices and check their bills on the web. For lawyers, State Counsel and Deputy Public Prosecutors, this has meant and will continue to mean substantial cost savings in terms of travelling and waiting time, heightening productivity and quality of work and of course, reducing stress. Thus, use of *justiceonline* lessens the traditional emphasis of the brick-and-mortar courthouse. At the same time, it allows us to extend the essential judicial traits of visibility and transparency, and access to justice, which engender public trust and confidence.

The need for a connected legal sector

4. Leveraging broadband Internet is a necessary development for our justice system. Today, close to half of our residential population are infocomm literate. 3 out of 5 homes have at least one computer while 1 out of 2 homes has Internet access. 1 in 3 Singapore residents aged 10 years and above uses broadband. Of the total local Internet users, 78.9 percent were aware of online government transactions and 31.9 percent transacted online.

E-commerce revenues in Singapore have grown steadily over the first three quarters last year. Businesses have continued to engage innovative business models which leverage Internet technologies. Government estimated that expenditure under the e- Government Action Plan is approximately \$1.5 billion. The Singapore Government network is now broadband enabled.

5. Our nation, and our private and public sectors, are moving rapidly towards and investing heavily in a Connected Singapore. Our judiciary has already introduced a number of IT initiatives to support this vision. A World Bank technical expert has commented that our strategic use of ICT is one of the most “salient experiences” in improving access to justice, resource utilisation and planning, administration, efficiency and transparency of the justice system. Intended claimants of small claims cases can e-file their claims via the Internet. According to Accenture’s recent publication “eGovernment Leadership - Realizing the Vision” which mentioned this initiative, Singapore is positioned together with the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia in strategic online applications. The Electronic Filing System, an integral part of the civil justice process, is now web-based. The Singapore Judiciary websites provide daily hearing lists and an assortment of justice-related information for the public. The Electronic Alternative Dispute Resolution (**e@dr**) regime offers dispute resolution services via email. Legal practitioners can perform legal research online and e-access LawNet services. 24-hour e-payment is possible with the Automated Traffic Offence Management System.

A critical opportunity for law firms

6. Now, with justiceonline, we are effectively the first cybercourt in the world to administer criminal, civil and family justice virtually. In so doing we are meeting the increasingly sophisticated needs of our community. Law firms, too, must awaken to the new reality. Law firms must begin quickly to harness the benefits of broadband Internet to stay effective and competitive. To compete effectively with local and foreign counterparts, they must upgrade their skills, develop a distinctive basis for competition, and reduce costs.

7. With the early success of the pilot scheme, the Infocomm-Development Authority has now approved a grant to subsidise the necessary infrastructure and a part of the recurrent costs of law firms if they become early adopters. There are several reasons why law firms must move decisively.

8. First, law firms could use broadband to re-engineer the way they communicate, market and deliver their products and services to their clients. They can develop multi-channel and multi-directional communications. Basic tools such as email accounts are essential for every law firm. I note from the Law Society website that not all law firms are equipped with email accounts, notwithstanding that subscription fees are negligible and can be absorbed as a firm’s recurrent cost. Another communication tool is video-conference capabilities. Justiceonline provides an existing architecture on which more applications can be built. Law firms should capitalise on videoconferencing technology to

communicate with the courts, and with business partners and clients, and utilise productive hours for more value-added work.

9. Secondly, law firms could use broadband to help manage some of their operations. In order to do this, they must be able to sense needs and opportunities quickly via channels open on the Internet. They could use the Internet to attract businesses and recruit talent. Almost all the Joint Law Ventures in Singapore have comprehensive websites to advertise and market their products and services. Their firms' history, practice or specialist areas, significant cases concluded, and recruitment information are readily accessible. Such information allows them to reach out to local, regional and even international communities to compete with foreign law firms. Smaller law firms can create integrated virtual communities and build web-based coalitions and partnerships. Like Group Law Practices, they can consider pooling together resources to set up and maintain similar websites with the assistance of the Law Society, which itself already has an impressive website.

10. Thirdly, law firms should also optimise web-based research tools to concentrate on intellectual development and expand knowledge. In addition to web-based legal research facilities on local law such as LawNet and Legis Online, there is an abundance of legal research and resources links on the Internet which can be bookmarked for reference. Continuing legal education via web-based learning can be encouraged, especially in areas such as ICT and e-commerce, cross-border e-banking and finance, WTO work, intellectual property and biotechnology. The Law Society can work with the Singapore Academy of Law, National University of Singapore, and the Board of Legal Education to structure relevant curriculum to upgrade our lawyers' professional knowledge in these growing practice areas. Law firms can also start web-based knowledge management systems to archive the institutional knowledge and experience of their human assets.

11. Finally, law firms must develop their own strategies of leveraging broadband Internet. In this regard, the Six Principles of Strategic Positioning suggested by Michael Porter may be useful. Law firms must first start with the right goal. Their strategies must enable the delivery of a set of benefits different from their competitors. They need to reflect the strategies in a distinctive value chain, performing similar activities in different ways. They may even have to forego certain services or activities in order to be unique. They have to ensure that all the activities within their firms are mutually reinforcing. There must also be continuity of direction.

The horizon ahead

12. The New Economy is informational, global, networked and rapid. The Judiciary and the Attorney-General's Chambers have led the way by introducing justiceonline in close collaboration with the IDA, IT and the legal industries. This new initiative will further streamline the administration of justice in a networked society, enabling our legal services to be more innovative, competitive, and value added. Many challenges remain, if we are to take full advantage of the early inroads that have been made. I am confident

that our legal sector will sense and respond well to the needs that lie ahead, and will not let up. Justiceonline is a first step, one of many in our exciting journey.