Spotlight on Centre Board: Chris Povey

Creating Impact – A Balancing Act

"Social justice and human rights work is fundamentally about preventing suffering and damage. If we can listen to problems and systemic faults sooner, we will prevent that suffering and damage earlier down the line."

Improving access to justice, maximising impact and building effective systems are issues that Chris Povey, CEO of Justice Connect, has tackled throughout his career in social justice and human rights protection. Ying Yi Lim from the Australian Pro Bono Centre sat down with Chris for a chat about the precarious balancing act for human rights impact.

By Ying Yi Lim,
Secondee to the Australian Pro Bono Centre from Norton Rose Fulbright.

Ying Yi: Thanks for your time today Chris. To begin with, can you tell me about the career pathway that led you to your current role as CEO of Justice Connect?

Chris Povey: I started out by volunteering during university at a community legal centre. When I finished my law degree, there weren't many jobs in the social justice sector, so I started out in commercial litigation. In some ways it's not an obvious way to start your human rights career, but I've relied on the litigation skills and this experience in my different roles.

After that, I moved to the community legal sector working on consumer credit issues. This was helpful exposure to people who are on the edge and for whom legal advice and legal support is very meaningful. I felt that this was where I wanted to be: doing significant work that makes a big difference in people's lives and working with likeminded people.

After this initial role I ended up focusing on housing litigation. Housing and homelessness prevention has been one of my key interests. We know in terms of public policy that keeping people in housing is important as it impacts their ability to get an education, hang onto a job, and maintain family relationships and good health. For many of the clients, we were the last line of defence before they wound up homeless. I found housing and homeless prevention work to be engaging – they are legal matters where you can litigate and see a resolution in a short period of time, which isn't always the case in civil justice.

I've also worked in mental health and disability law. This work involved people who were required to accept compulsory mental health treatment while detained in a psychiatric facility. As a casework lawyer and later manager, my role was to ensure the law was being applied correctly when the compulsory treatment process was activated and represent people as their detention status was reviewed. It is so important to make sure that people have access to justice through these processes – being detained and having medical treatment forced upon you can be very distressing. The experience of having no one to support or help you is vastly different from one where someone is there to

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Justice Connect's Dear Landlord self-help tool

explain the law, test the evidence, stand beside you, and put arguments forward.

While I started my career as a casework lawyer and was in this role for many years, in the last 10 years I've been more involved in management and leadership roles.

YY: Thanks Chris. That ties in well to my next question about your work at Justice Connect. Could you tell me a bit about Justice Connect and what you have been doing in your role as CEO?

CP: Justice Connect is about increasing access to legal support and progressing social justice. This goes to some of the things that I have seen in my time as a casework lawyer. The rate of unmet demand for legal assistance in Australia is unacceptable, and Justice Connect is focused on addressing that issue.

We work with individuals and address the challenge not-for-profits face in accessing legal support. Not-for-profits help people experiencing significant disadvantage in our community and are often doing this with extremely limited resources. We support them with legal advice, information and training, and our work helps them to achieve their purpose efficiently and effectively.

The question is how we assemble all the components to maximise the impact and improve outcomes for people experiencing disadvantage and the not-for-profits that support them. We collaborate closely with our pro bono members and have been using technology and strategic engagement to answer this question. We use the insights we've gained through service design and delivery in order to develop better responses to legal need.

YY: Would you be able to give some examples of Justice Connect's ongoing initiatives to close the access to justice gap while achieving impact maximisation?

CP: Our work supporting people experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness is a good example of this. Historically, our Homeless Law program has been a "high intensity" service provision model. We have social workers, civil lawyers and criminal lawyers who ensure our clients not only receive legal services, but also receive support resolving other issues in their lives. Collectively, this works to prevent and resolve homelessness.

In addition to the importance of services, our strategy calls on us to stretch our reach and impact, and to deliver more help. We use technology to assist this client group and have developed a free self-help tool called Dear Landlord, which doesn't just provide information, but also helps tenants understand their rights and to effectively advocate on their own behalf. Dear Landlord reaches thousands of people every month. This type of early intervention means fewer people reaching crisis point and provides more capacity to provide high intensity supports to those most in need.

In addition to directly supporting people, we also use the platform to generate information and insights about what is going on in the system which we can then use to plan further strategic litigation to clarify the law, or to develop and update our online platforms. For example, last year we ran a case in the Supreme Court which clarified the operation of eviction moratorium laws for thousands of renters. Our pro bono members work with us across all this activity – casework, digital and strategic litigation - and are a significant part of our strategy in increasing access to legal support.

YY: It sounds like a balancing act between high intensity services that reach less people, versus low

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intensity platforms that thousands of people can access. Considering the recent challenges posed by disasters such as the floods and the pandemic, in what direction do you hope to take Justice Connect in the coming years?

CP: Our direction is the balancing act between how to deliver fantastic services at the same time as using a range of strategies to stretch our impact and reach more people. We have been working to scale our services through digital innovation and strategic engagement, to help more people experiencing disadvantage and more not-for-profit organisations that support them.

As part of this we want to tackle systemic issues and prevent demand - reduce the number of people who need help and reduce the pressure on the justice system and on not-for-profits. Ultimately this will mean that fewer people experience the negative impacts of legal issues, and more people will remain housed, healthy and connected with community. One of the flagship campaigns is #FixFundraising where we are advocating for a single set of national rules to make it easier and more efficient for community organisations to fundraise and ensure regulatory compliance. Given the pressure on not-for-profits, this work has never been more important.

We are also interested in improving disaster preparedness and response. We know from COVID-19, as well as from recent fires and floods, that disasters often impact people who are less familiar with using community services - creating whole new groups needing assistance. We need to invest in early intervention and prevention work to avoid the pressures and financial impacts of these disasters. We also need to explore how people can access help and build systems so that local people on the ground are supported to either deliver assistance themselves, or to connect to organisations that can provide additional support. If we can avoid the suffering caused by disasters and consequential legal issues, we can avoid all the downstream costs of the negative impacts of those issues.

This brings me to the last element of our strategy which is to be as effective and financially sustainable as possible. We have made big investments in people, data systems and building a theory of change for our organisation. We stay accountable to our purpose and strategy by building and applying a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.

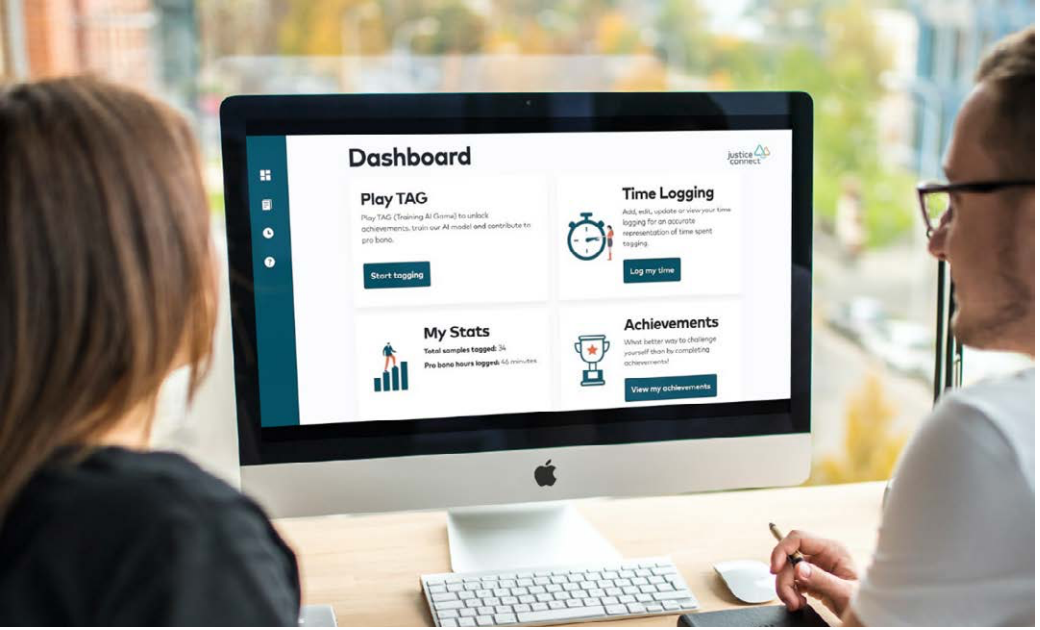
YY: I know Justice Connect has been utilising technology to address the access to justice issue – including a project involving artificial intelligence (AI). What is the AI project?

CP: That flows well from what we were just talking about: the huge amount of need within the community. We are grappling with the question of scale: how can we increase our reach and stretch our impact?

One of the pain points in the system is that people often struggle to accurately identify their legal issue. At the moment, people needing legal help mostly need a lawyer to identify their legal matter, which has a big impact on how many people we can help. This means that while we as a sector can invest in self-help materials and online tools, we cannot connect this information with the many, many people who need it most. The hand brake is on.

This is why we have been developing an artificial intelligence natural language processing model. We took thousands of samples of people describing an issue in their own language (rather than in legal technical language). We worked with pro bono partners to annotate and tag the samples to correctly match how people described their issue with the correct classification. And we've collaborated with The University of Melbourne School of Computing Science to build and train an algorithm to automatically process this information.

We know that AI systems often are problematically biased and can perform worse for under-represented or communities experiencing systemic disadvantage. Given this, we have been running extensive outreach to ensure we were capturing language samples from these groups using an inclusive design process.



Justice Connect's Training AI Game (TAG) tool records sample annotations from lawyers for training the AI model

The model is now built and highly accurate. Even if someone isn't able to pinpoint a legal issue, the algorithm can use how they describe the issue in their natural or 'everyday' language to correctly identify it. The next step is to apply this model to connect more people with the information they need, sooner. We'll continue to train the model to ensure it can be used in a number of contexts. We hope to share it with the rest of the legal service sector free of charge.

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YY: Finally, do you have any general advice to people looking to make a start in the pro bono/ human rights/ social justice sector?

CP: I would say: hang in there. For me it was not a direct path. I took a few zigzags, but every opportunity I had has enabled me to be where I am today. Different roles and opportunities, different contexts, and relationships - these all build skills and connections and ultimately a career path. We are privileged to have this skillset and do social justice work – the way we lawyers can grapple with ideas and language to help people and not-for-profit organisations is very important, and there is so much use for it.

Volunteering is also very important if you're looking to break into the social justice sector. And never say never! A lot of people are making career changes and there is a lot of movement and opportunities in the sector. ■

***Chris Povey** is the CEO of Justice Connect. He has worked for over 15 years with and for communities facing significant human rights issues including people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and mental health issues. He has worked in casework, policy and leadership roles with Tenants Victoria, Victoria Legal Aid, Consumer Action Law Centre, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, and Justice Connect.*

Through his various roles Chris has seen first-hand the impact of innovative and data-driven legal help, tools and services to connect people and community groups with the help they need and make systemic changes that progress social justice.

Chris currently serves as a member of the Victorian Federation of Community Legal Centres Management Committee, is Deputy Chair of the NSW Legal Assistance Forum and on the board of the Australian Pro Bono Centre. He previously served on the board of the Council to Homeless Persons, and in 2010, travelled to England, Scotland, the US and Canada as a Churchill Fellow to investigate programs to help high risk tenants keep their homes, and stop homelessness before it starts..

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