

What we've learned over 10 years in Legal Design: an Australian studio's experience

Simon Goodrich, Luke Thomas and Emily MacLoud

[Portable](#) is a purpose-led design and development studio based in Australia, interested in how we can respond to social needs and policy opportunities, placing users in the centre.

Over the past 12 years of working in legal design, we've learned a lot about how the access to justice landscape in Australia has changed. In this paper, we showcase how Portable has responded to these shifts, highlighting key projects, methodologies, and the impact of these innovations on communities so that others in the field can learn from our experiences and drive further advancements in access to justice globally.

The Early Days of Legal Design at Portable

In 2012, when Portable began its work in access to justice, we were at the cusp of the digital revolution with the advent of smartphones and digital technologies. There was an urgent need to modernise websites, many of which had not been updated since their inception at the turn of the century. Social media was gaining prominence, and people in courts and legal services were exploring technology in varied ways. However, the way people accessed court services remained largely unchanged, relying on traditional, physical entry points controlled by the courts. This created a growing disparity between the modern, digital service expectations set by other sectors and the outdated delivery methods of justice and legal services. The belief that building an app could solve any problem was prevalent, leading to several

underutilised and unsustainable tech investments. As Simon Goodrich, co-founder of Portable, recounts, “It was like Kevin Costner in the *Field of Dreams*, ‘...if you build it and they will come’. But not everyone got the opportunity to build it because they didn't have access to funding.”

We recognised the need to move beyond just creating digital noise in these early days. There was a sentiment that innovation looked like building things, building technology. There was also a push towards standalone native apps. But our focus instead was on how to use emerging skills to build meaningful, sustainable solutions that truly address people's needs. This looked like not necessarily making decisions on which particular technology to use, but the recognition of the design has a role to play. We recognised the importance of creating the right *environments* and the importance of *investment* not only up-front to kick start these new services and innovations, but ongoing investment to keep them going. This led us to help organisations design services more holistically, and recognise the integral role of human-centred design in improving access to justice.

Our first Legal Design project

Our first exploration into design thinking for legal services was with one of our neighbours. It started with a meeting with the director of a local court near our office who was interested in us helping her to build a website to help drive innovation. She told a story that resonated with us:

"I got my iPhone fixed this morning and it was a beautiful experience. I was able to register before I went in, they knew my matter when I got there, I was updated on what was happening throughout the process and everything was resolved quickly. Your phone not working really can throw you, you get pissed off about it, but they were able to turn what is a bad experience into a really good one. I reflect on the difference when you walk into my court, we're still basing the experience on processes put in place in the 19th century. People come in with similar emotions, but we don't do anything similar to make it

better. What can you take away from the experience of getting my phone fixed and bring to my courtroom?"

The court, named the Neighborhood Justice Centre,¹ established in 2007 and modelled after New York's Red Hook multi-jurisdictional community court,² needed modernisation to secure ongoing funding and better serve its community. Their holistic approach sought to deliver justice through unconventional means.

We never built that website (they kept the old one). Instead, we focused on creating the first online form to generate a Family Violence Intervention Order.³ The work was a subsequent recommendation in the Victorian Royal Commission⁴ and highlighted that design and technology can be used for change. Innovation is not about the newest use of technology. It is about improving an experience, and finding a new solution that is so good it becomes standard.

The project laid the groundwork for further innovations. The work signalled that co-designing with communities, prototyping and eventual piloting could actually lead to structural reform of the system. It led to us questioning more and more, How do we create those experiences? How do we create the prototypes, the proof of concepts that actually make that change? How do you create those environments to enact that change? How do we go about doing that more?

Our passion for improving the experience of people seeking help for legal problems started here and led to us getting involved with legal aid institutions, government departments, nonprofits, low-bono law firms, and law schools around the country.

¹ See Neighbourhood Justice Centre <https://www.neighbourhoodjustice.vic.gov.au/>

² Centre for Justice Innovation (n.d.) 'Red Hook Community Justice Center' *Centre for Justice Innovation* <<https://www.innovatingjustice.org/programs/red-hook-community-justice-center>>

³ See Portable (n.d.) 'Delivering the first online family violence intervention order' *Portable* <<https://portable.com.au/work/first-online-family-violence-intervention-order>>

⁴ See Recommendation 74 in Royal Commission into Family Violence (March 2016), 'Summary and Recommendations' <http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV_Full_Report_Interactive.pdf> p 174.

Case studies

Using technology to scale our impact in Legal Design

While technology is just one way to approach legal design innovation and something we use alongside other approaches like service design or policy reform, we've found it's been an invaluable tool to amplify our impact in the legal sector.

One of our best examples in using technology innovation to produce greater impact has been our journey in creating amica,⁵ an online platform to help couples who are separating or divorcing in Australia to divide their assets or create parenting plans.

Challenge

Disputes arising from the breakdown of a relationship can be particularly expensive for people with relatively few resources, especially for those who don't qualify for legal aid. In early 2018, the federal government provided funding to National Legal Aid (NLA) to investigate how to create "a simple, cost-effective and innovative way to negotiate Family Law issues online".

Approach

The Legal Services Commission of South Australia (LSCSA) led this project and partnered with us to bring this idea to life. We developed amica by working iteratively through different sections of the process with a cross-disciplinary team of researchers, designers, and developers, all in collaboration with the lawyers and the leadership at LSCSA and NLA.

We redesigned the existing DIY Consent Order form provided by the Family Court of Australia to create an accessible, user-friendly question flow that can be completed on mobile phones at the user's convenience. If there's any disagreement between the parties, they can message each other on a guided platform that uses smart

⁵ <https://amica.gov.au/>

technology to prevent abusive language and prompt collaborative responses. We also use an AI model designed with family lawyers to help guide the monetary negotiation when dividing their assets, based on what is considered fair in Australian law.

For more information about how amica was conceived, designed and created by the team who brought it to life, see *Designing and developing amica, a digital solution for separating couples*,⁶ and for more information about our latest developments, see *Making separation guidance even simpler with amica one*.⁷

Solution

amica went live in February 2020 with a limited rollout in South Australia. It is now part of a coordinated effort across all legal aid jurisdictions to refer clients and increase their online service delivery. amica provides a low-cost alternative to private family lawyers and increases access to legal services for couples who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford legal help.

Impact over time

Each year, Amica assists approximately 5,000 people, generating around 2,500 new matters. These include developing parenting plans, property agreements and consent orders. The platform has experienced consistent and steady growth, yet there remains much potential for further expansion.

A review of Amica's first three to four years revealed that if users had paid for these services out-of-pocket, the cost would have been around \$30 million. The government's investment, a fraction of that amount, demonstrates the high return on investment and significant engagement achieved. Despite this success, we acknowledge that we are only scratching the surface of what is possible.

⁶ Portable (n.d.) 'Designing and developing amica, a digital solution for separating couples' *Portable* <https://portable.com.au/work/amica>

⁷ Portable (n.d.) 'Making separation guidance even simpler with amica one' *Portable* https://portable.com.au/work/amica_one

To fully realise Amica's potential, it is crucial to establish robust referral pathways at both federal and state levels, positioning amica as a trusted brand within the government framework. This trust is vital for ensuring continued growth and broader access to justice for all Australians.

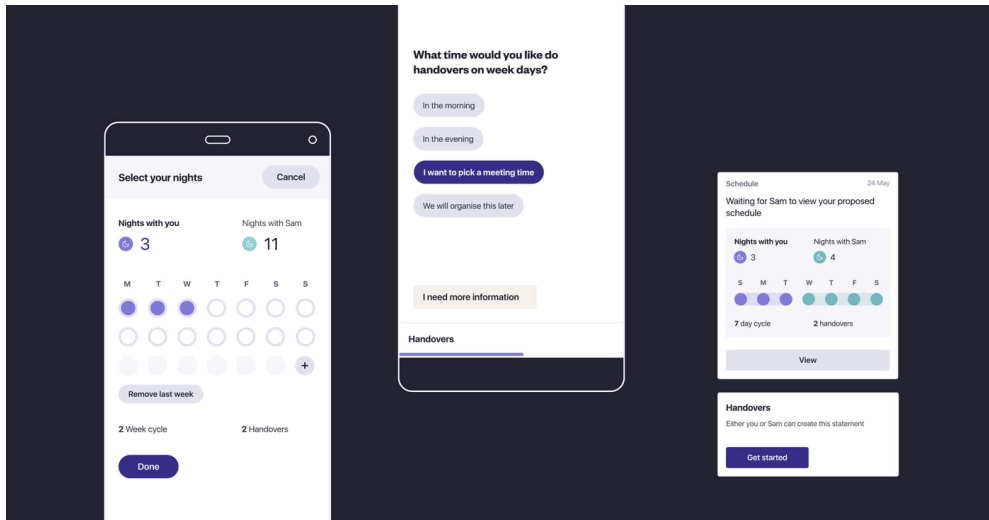


Image Conversational interface with supportive messaging, updates, and subtle nudges to help people fill out simplified forms and negotiate agreements that work for them

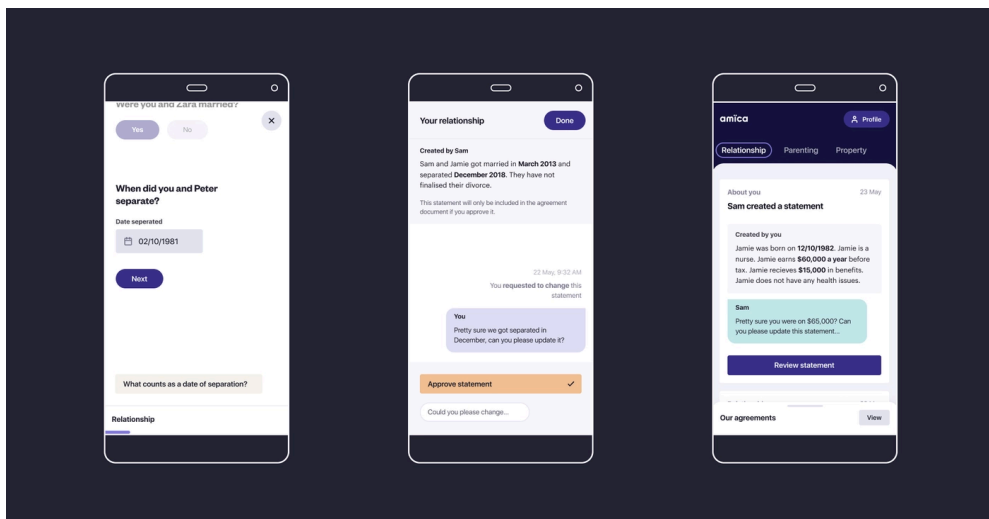


Image Sentiment analysis to prevent parties from using abusive or profane language

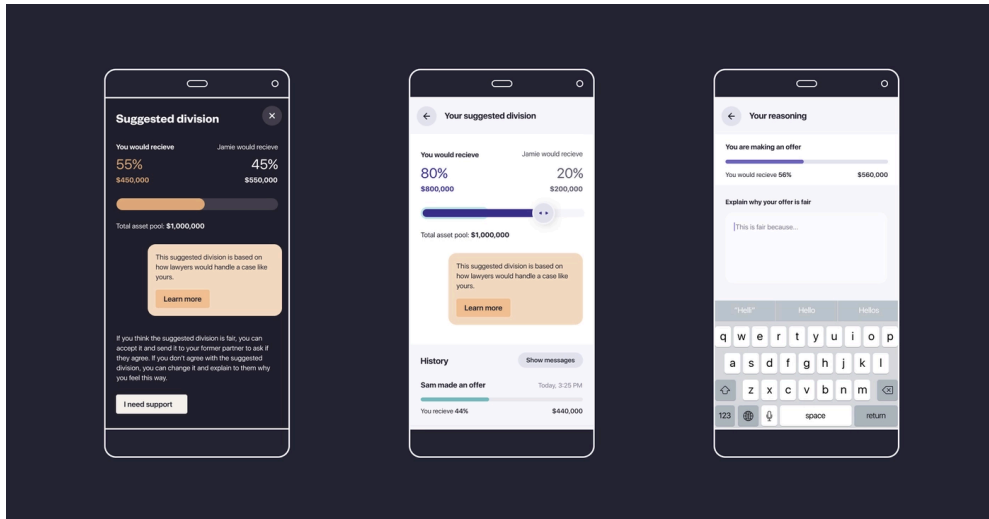


Image Artificial intelligence provides a suggestion of what a lawyer would consider a fair division of their assets based on the information they've entered.

Using technology to prioritise quick wins

Challenge

Another example of using technology to scale our impact was working with Legal Aid NSW to create a text message notification that connects legal aid clients to information and support when they apply for legal aid. In 2019, the application review process could take up to 6 weeks to complete, during which time anxious applicants would have to call the grants management team to ask for updates.

Approach

We ran 3 co-design workshops with clients of LANSW, prototyped an interactive online tool and tested it with users with 8 users at Legal Aid NSW to develop early-stage designs and identify quick wins. It was from this user research that we determined that the grants tracker could be a low-cost, effective, and user-friendly way to meet an urgent client need. This meant we could provide a technology solution to meet people's needs without having to wait for larger digital innovation and technology updates across the organisation.

For more information about the design process and phases we went through, see *Improving the experience of applying for legal aid*.⁸

Solution

The Grants Tracker provides applicants with up-to-date information on the status of their application and greater clarity on the process. We have seen a 70% reduction in call volume to the LANSW admin team, reducing the burden on their staff and providing clients with immediate access to their information and the status of their applications. A lot of the usage is happening outside of office hours, which offers services that people want from legal aid and doing it at a time that works for them.

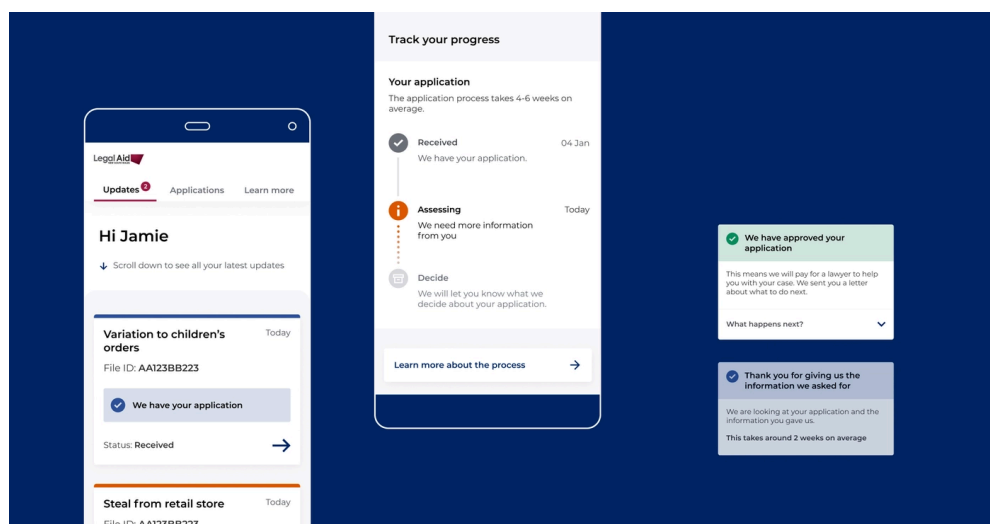


Image Once a client receives an SMS notification, they can log in to the grants tracker (using a code they've been sent in a separate SMS) and view a webpage which lets them know the status of their grant application, any important messages and answers to FAQs about the process.

It's not just what we do, it's how we do it

A strong commitment to people-centred inclusive solutions also characterises Portable's approach to legal design. This commitment manifests in various ways. In every project, we begin by understanding the lived experiences, needs, and

⁸ See Portable (n.d.) 'Improving the experience of applying for legal aid' *Portable* <https://portable.com.au/work/legalaidnsw-grants-tracker>

challenges of the people we are designing for. We work to ensure that the services and products we develop are usable by people with varying levels of ability and from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Challenge

In the "Making Space for Families" project, Portable focused on understanding the needs of parents and children seeking legal advice at West Heidelberg Community Legal. They identified that parents and carers had difficulty concentrating during appointments or were leaving early because their children became unsettled. This led to the parents and carers becoming frustrated or embarrassed, which often resulted in them failing to attend future appointments.

Approach

After on-site visits, a literature review, engagements with previous clients, and several workshops, we co-developed a roadmap of activities that covered the resources required for each solution, the limitations and risks associated with each solution and the possible success metrics.



Image Using the *Ideal Future State* as a basis for discussion, we generated ideas and validated whether some of the suggested ideas were feasible.

For more information about the design process and phases we went through, see *Making Space for families in legal services in the West Heidelberg area*.⁹

Solution

As a result of this project, West Heidelberg Community Legal now has an evidence-backed plan to make space for parents seeking legal advice and create opportunities for their children to engage in positive developmental-based activities.

The importance of a Trauma-Informed approach in Legal Design

In the realm of legal design, particularly when addressing sensitive areas, adopting a trauma-informed approach is crucial. This methodology prioritises the emotional well-being of individuals who are navigating challenging and often distressing situations. By integrating empathy and support into the design process, legal services can better meet the needs of those they serve, ensuring that interactions are not only efficient but also compassionate. This principle is exemplified in our work with the Coroners Court NSW, where we focused on developing solutions that are sensitive to the grief and trauma experienced by families.

Challenge

The Coroners Court NSW ensures that sudden, unexpected or unexplained deaths, suspected deaths, fires and explosions are properly investigated. Families experience delays trying to find accurate information regarding the location and progress of their loved one in the coronial process. Collecting and sharing coronial information between agencies and families is outdated, time-consuming, and relies heavily on manual tasks.

Approach

⁹ See Portable (n.d.) 'Making Space for families in legal services in the West Heidelberg area' *Portable* <https://portable.com.au/work/making-space-for-families-in-legal-services>

We developed a set of grief-informed design principles, content and UX design principles, concept recommendations and considerations that could form the basis of any future solution design.

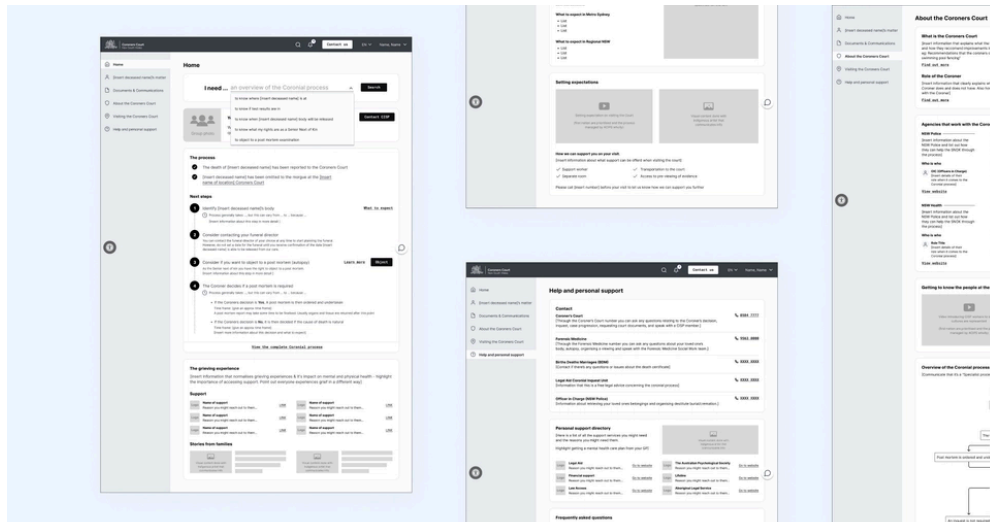


Image Portable's designers created a low-fidelity digital concept to test with families and partner agencies.

For more information about the design process and phases we went through, see *Using human-centred design to explore digital improvements to the coronial pathway*.¹⁰

Solution

This project emphasised the necessity of a trauma-informed approach. Portable developed grief-informed design principles and digital prototypes that addressed the sensitive nature of coronial proceedings, ensuring that the solutions were empathetic and supportive of grieving families.

Collaboration is key

None of these projects would have been what they were without the trust and collaboration of the service beneficiaries who shared their lived experience, the legal

¹⁰ See Portable (n.d.) 'Using human-centred design to explore digital improvements to the coronial pathway' Portable <https://portable.com.au/work/dcj-coronial-pathways>

professionals who invested their time in workshopping solutions with us and providing critical feedback along the way, and the operational staff who ensured the projects continued to run effectively and efficiently. At Portable, we foster such partnerships through cross-disciplinary teams that bring together diverse expertise to tackle complex legal challenges. By involving end-users in the design process, we ensure that the solutions we develop are not only innovative but also relevant and effective. This community engagement is key to our approach, as it grounds our work in the real-world experiences and needs of those who will ultimately benefit from our solutions.

A prime example of successful collaboration is the amica model, developed in partnership with the Legal Service Commission of South Australia, and exemplifies the tripartite concept we advocate for which involves a problem owner, a problem solver, and a funder. According to Goodrich, "it was the start of what's been a really great and probably my most proud partnership of the last eight years... a mechanism of how we can work within government effectively... a symbiotic relationship that has evolved over time." The amica model worked well because it leveraged the strengths of different stakeholders: the Legal Service Commission as the problem owner, the Attorney General as the funder, and Portable as the problem solver, providing design, research, and technical product development.

The success of the amica model demonstrates that collaboration works best when distinct roles are clearly defined and fulfilled, ensuring a comprehensive approach to problem-solving. For a project to be scalable and attract proper investment, the issue at hand must be significant enough to warrant such attention. In this case, family law, governed by a federal jurisdiction, allowed for the utilisation of federal funding. The Legal Service Commission of South Australia, being smaller in scale compared to other regions, lacked duplication of roles in technology and design, which is where Portable's agility proved invaluable. We were able to bridge these gaps, providing the necessary technological and design expertise. This collaborative effort resulted in a robust solution that met the needs of Australians and showcased the power of interdisciplinary teamwork in advancing access to justice.

Future trends in access to justice

To systematically change and humanise the justice system, we must address the significant gap in legal service accessibility. A recent survey by the Victoria Law Foundation,¹¹ revealed that more than two-thirds of people aren't receiving the legal services they need, highlighting a massive underserved market. The challenge lies in reaching these individuals quickly and effectively, as there is no established playbook, and no one has successfully cracked this issue on an international scale. Efforts tend to be either very small-scale or extremely large-scale, with little middle ground.

We predict that several key trends will shape the future of access to justice. People will increasingly seek to resolve their legal matters independently, necessitating accessible and trustworthy online resources. Just as Google has become a go-to source for medical information, the legal sector must develop similar trusted platforms. However, the complexity of legal jurisdictions poses a unique challenge. Initiatives that succeed will be those that provide reliable, jurisdiction-specific information. Leveraging data will be crucial in improving service delivery and user experiences. As technology costs decrease and data management capabilities increase, the power of data to drive efficiency and personalisation in legal services will become increasingly evident.

Portable is proactively preparing for these trends by innovating with AI, exploring applications to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of legal services, providing users with more intuitive and responsive solutions. We are also focused on building trust by developing trusted sources of legal information to empower people, ensuring they have access to accurate and relevant legal guidance. Through these efforts, we aim to be ready to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Conclusion

¹¹ Nigel J. Balmer, Pascoe Pleasence, Hugh M. McDonald and Rebecca L. Sandefur (2023) 'Everyday Problems and Legal Need' <<https://puls.victorialawfoundation.org.au/>>

The evolution of legal design over the past decade has demonstrated its potential to transform access to justice. Portable's innovative projects and people-centred methodologies have made significant strides in addressing legal challenges. As the access to justice landscape continues to evolve, Portable remains committed to leveraging design and technology to create impactful, scalable solutions that meet the needs of all.