

From Statehouse to MIT, guru tackles e-signatures

Neff, Todd

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FULL TEXT

The summer after he graduated from Suffolk Law School in 1995, Daniel Greenwood spent several weeks at a Buddhist temple outside Bangkok. The idea was to meditate and do menial chores.

Greenwood meditated... and then he networked the temple.

As an undergraduate at Clark University in Worcester, he studied liberal arts, played guitar in a Rock band and was enchanted with the Internet. For the political action committee he led in the years immediately following, Greenwood - by then active in the Boston Computer Society - introduced contribution-tracking and pagelayout software to state Senate campaigns. While at Suffolk Law, he created one of the first Web sites for an ABA-accredited law school. Now 32, Greenwood is president of nascent information technology consultancy CIVICS.com, director of MIT's E-Commerce Architecture Project and a former deputy general counsel for the state of Massachusetts' IT division. A lawyer by training and a computer guy at heart, Greenwood's combination of IT and legal skills place him among the few fluent in the arcana of both law and computer science.

While interning at the Massachusetts state House during law school, Greenwood was asked by Ray Campbell, the general counsel for the state's IT Division, to work on some Internet-related projects.

"It was going to be a short-term consulting gig," Greenwood recalled. "Four years later, I was still doing it."

Greenwood found himself structuring contracts between various levels of government and the state as well as between business and the state. "I spent a lot of time with disclaimers and terms and conditions and educational content for citizens who were doing business online with the government," Greenwood said.

Success in government required different stuff than success in business. "They don't make a profit, so it's like all they have left to fight about are the rules," he said. "So process design is about rules and statutes and regulations and policies. It's very hard to do things unless you have a clear understanding of what the rules are, and it requires a lot of creativity to interpret them in ways that are friendly to electronic methods."

The role of interpreter appealed to Greenwood, who retooled words like writing" and "signature" to include electronic methods, electronic signatures and authentication. His background in both law and technology was a major asset.

"I could turn to the technologists and say, 'Here's what you need to make your contract enforceable.' Then I could turn to the lawyers and help them understand what's in the realm of the possible," he said.

His responsibility grew with his expertise and also as a result of the subject of his work. "E-commerce is multi-jurisdictional and people that are implementing policies and applications need to be very cognizant of the big picture," Greenwood said.

Greenwood chaired the American Bar Association's cyber-law committee, and the E-Transactions. Committee at the National Electronic Commerce Coordinating Council. He co-chaired a 45member task force of the National Automated Clearinghouse Association that established ground rules for digital signatures.

Greenwood was also active in the development of the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act in mid-1999. The UETA is a Uniform Commercial Code-like set of best-practice policies to be enacted across all state governments. It has

been adopted by 22 states and is slated for filing in Massachusetts at the beginning of the next legislative session in January. Greenwood also provided frequent testimony and served as a subject expert for the federal digital signature bill that was passed earlier this year.

According to Greenwood, the Massachusetts government position on e-commerce was established during the Weld administration and has remained consistent: "There was a sense that the needs of business are paramount. So the question was how to jump out of the way to let citizens and businesses just do stuff electronically."

In addition to serving on a number of committees, Greenwood currently splits his time between running a research group at MIT and launching CIVICS.com.

His work as director of MIT's E-Commerce Architecture Project began when he met William Mitchell, dean of MIT's School of Planning and Architecture, while on a BCS panel discussion virtual reality in 1996. By 1997, he and Mitchell were co-teaching a

course. "We saw that automated business took a new kind of information architecture that everyone had a hand in. We're focusing like a laser on this at MIT right now," he said.

Greenwood is also the self-described "leader and chief bottle washer" of CIVICS.com, a vehicle for his consulting services. "I called it CIVICS.com because policy and law have become the source of so many inputs in a company's information architecture. These things weren't always a concern, but they are now."

A recent project incorporated authentication and electronic signatures into an existing electronic contract system.

Greenwood also sees an emerging need for the Web-based dispute resolution.

"You should be able to use the same technologies that enable ecommerce to solve a large portion of disputes. But right now, we're still learning where this fits. It's somewhere between the helpdesk and the courts," he said.

Wherever CIVICS.com ends up, it will likely be at an intersection of law and technology. Said Greenwood, "It's like Adam Smith's invisible hand pushed me there,"

DETAILS

Subject:	Personal profiles; Computer service industry; Corporate presidents; Electronic commerce; Automation; Information architecture; Digital signatures; Law schools
Business indexing term:	Subject: Computer service industry Corporate presidents Electronic commerce Automation; Industry: 45411 : Electronic Shopping and Mail-Order Houses 54151 : Computer Systems Design and Related Services 61131 : Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools
Location:	Boston Massachusetts; United States--US
People:	Greenwood, Daniel
Classification:	8331: Internet services industry; 9190: United States; 2120: Chief executive officers; 9160: Biographical; 45411: Electronic Shopping and Mail-Order Houses; 54151: Computer Systems Design and Related Services; 61131: Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools
Publication title:	Mass High Tech; Burlington
Volume:	18
Issue:	41

Pages:	28
Publication year:	2000
Publication date:	Oct 09, 2000
Publisher:	CityMedia Inc.
Place of publication:	Burlington
Country of publication:	United States, Burlington
Publication subject:	Technology: Comprehensive Works
ISSN:	87502100
Source type:	Trade Journal
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	221301444
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/s-tatehouse-mit-guru-tackles-e-signatures/docview/221301444/se-2?accountid=12492
Copyright:	Copyright CityMedia Inc. Oct 09, 2000
Last updated:	2022-10-20
Database:	ABI/INFORM Collection,Advanced Technologies &Aerospace Collection

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