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Dr. Amy Neustein, whose personal history of having lost complete contact with her only child due solely to the vagaries of the New York City Family Court system is well known in the Jewish and secular community, has a record of taking her personal pain and transposing it into activism for the general good. After decades of helping other vulnerable parents and children—Jews and Gentiles—deal with the perils of oftentimes capricious family courts and, in the process, winning accolades from social scientist, lawyers, and children's rights activists, Dr. Neustein has taken her role as scholar, editor, and writer on a new path. She is now the founder and CEO of Linguistic Technology Software (LTS), Inc, a Fort Lee, NJ-based company that combines higher-scale natural language understanding with computer technology to build a radically different kind of user interface for the kinds of websites that are frequently accessed at home, in the office, in healthcare settings, and in the car.

Recently, Michael Leshner, a Passaic, NJ-based attorney who has co-authored an academic text and several articles and chapters on family courts and child-abuse issues with Dr. Neustein, sat down with her to discuss LTS's newest offering, namely native-driven platforms.

"In particular, I wanted to ask her how her past work of helping parents contributed to her new company's innovations, which are designed to improve website performance for the average user, as well as for banking institutions, brokerage houses, medical offices and hospitals, call centers, and homeland security," said Mr. Leshner, who is also a well-regarded journalist.

Creative Juices

Dr. Neustein explained that her "creative juices have been in high gear since 1986," which she called "the unwanted defining year of my life."

That year, Dr. Neustein, then a single mother of a six-year-old little girl, suddenly found herself in a battle against the family courts and the OHEL Children's Home and Family Services. The daughter of an Orthodox rabbi from Brooklyn, Dr. Neustein had left her little girl with her parents when the grandmother walked in and, according to the grandmother's testimony, found the child's father sexually molesting her.

"Within weeks of my mother's report to local police of the alleged sexual-abuse incident, my whole world turned upside down. The Ohel agency seized my daughter as the result of a court order that Jeremiah B. McKenna, chief counsel to the New York State Senate Committee on Crime and Correction, characterized as "false and defective," said Dr. Neustein.

Denied Visitation

At first, the court allowed Dr. Neustein supervised visitation with her daughter, which was overseen by a local Brooklyn rebbetzin. On one occasion, Dr. Neustein and the rebbetzin decided that the child's physical deterioration merited an immediate trip to a local Emergency Room. Although the judge had forbidden Dr. Neustein to seek medical care for the child without the father's permission, she and the rebbetzin felt vindicated testified—that the little girl was suffering from life-threatening anorexia nervosa, dehydration, anemia, hypoglycemia, and hyperthermia.

Dr. Jeffrey Birnbaum called the child's case "by far the worst case of emaciation I have ever seen," and he told Dr. Neustein that if she had not been hospitalized, the child could have died.

Nevertheless, the family court judge accused Dr. Neustein of defying his order and stopped all visitations between mother and child. Dr. Neustein never saw her child again.

"Feroocious Behavior"

Years later, then-NY State Senator and later New York Governor David Paterson spoke out about the "ferocious" behavior of the courts and the Ohel agency toward Dr. Neustein and her little girl.

"At the minimum, the removal of [Dr. Neustein's child] from her home violated the Constitution, our state statutes, decisions of our highest court, and decency," wrote Mr. McKenna his 1987 report to then-State Senator Christopher Mega on this issue.

"But, at the time, I was just a 29-year-old mother without political clout or tons of money to fight the system," said Dr. Neustein.

Although her daughter is now an adult, the young woman, despite the efforts of many rabbis and others in the Jewish community, has declined any contact with her mother.

"Like Joseph, who was thrown into a pit and had to interpret dreams to gain his freedom, I had to tap deeply into my creativity to fight the forces that were threatening me and my daughter," said Dr. Neustein.

Fruit Born of Pain

For more than 20 years, Dr. Neustein led a movement to reform family courts, appearing on more than 400 television and radio programs and quoted in hundreds of newspapers and wire services.

She takes some consolation in the fact that her efforts bore fruit, if not for herself, then for others. New bills on her issues were introduced by the New York State legislature and signed into law. Rep Donald Payne (D-NJ) publicly commended Dr. Neustein for having brought family court problems to Congress, "stirring interest in all of us" to hold a hearing on the injustices in cases such as Dr. Neustein's.

She also crafted legislative proposals that were adopted into the "Committee Views" of the Children and Families Subcommittee of the US Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee.

Ready to Move On

Two years ago, she decided to hand the reigns of the struggle to Sienna College Professor Maureen Hannah, a move which, she told Mr. Leshner, "left me with an overflow of creative juices."

A sociologist who had earned her doctorate in the field from Boston University, Dr. Neustein had long been involved professionally in conversation analysis. She decided to indulge this interest and coupled it with a passion for developing a "native-driven platform," which she described as "a radical alternative to the conventional browser-based website."

"Today, websites are generally designed to do all their interactions through interfacing with a web browser, an approach that complicates the process for the users in all sorts of ways, often leading to long waiting times while pages load, only to find disappointingly limited information on the next page. Then there is that taxing of the brain, trying to remember what had appeared on the prior page that is no longer in view when the current page is open. And what about those annoying pop-ups and crashes of websites that we seem to experience more and more? In contrast, the native design allows the customizing of all web interactions by allowing the user to perform all the needed actions on one single screen display. In effect, this native approach puts the user at the wheel instead of in the back seat of the car," she said.

She said most people understand that user interaction is one of the keys to making websites effective. "But users are held back by the clumsiness of the in-and-out process where each page must go through the browser, which acts as a 'gatekeeper,' to load up its content. In the loading of web content, there is a huge amount of date, often unnecessary, that makes pages load slowly as the browser stops and starts repeatedly," she said.

She recognized the need for "a better sort of platform for running websites so that they can be free of 'traffic jams.'"

Helping the Non-Technical

Her years of advocacy led to her thinking about the need for this technology, especially when parents had serious issues with procedures which the "so-called experts considered mere technical details." This, she said, sensitized her to the needs of people "who don't always have time to master special technical skills."

As an example, she recalled some contentious divorce cases in which judges sometimes order parents to communicate with each other by means of special programs.

"Not everybody could master the program right away, and this made some parents look bad in the eyes of the court system," she said.

Helping "Non-Experts"

The same is true of people in other situations, such as when non-experts are "shut out" because they do not understand the technical details when trying to use patient-intake forms on healthcare sites.

"What happens to you when you have to use a website to upload a medical history, but you cannot figure out how to get all the information you need to give the doctor into the right places on the site? Call-center agents who lose time hunting for needed information on today's browser-based interfaces are facing similar problems, too. Many of them have difficulty mastering the technical details of how to navigate their company's website to find things like special promotion details for earning bonus points on a credit card," she said.

LTS's native-driven environments can solve these problems because the technology addresses a broad range of issues, she said.

For example, because a native-driven user interface can navigate more quickly than conventional systems can, a call-center agent will have direct views of various databases, allowing the agent to answer questions quickly without having to place callers on hold.

"With this native architecture for running websites, call-center agents don't have to click and click from one screen to another to find what they want. The process goes much faster, and the caller is spared the annoyance of having to be placed on hold while the agent looks up the requested information," she said.

Medical Providers and Financial Institutions

The same is true for medical providers when they work using websites. "Native-driven platforms improve patient history intake, but they also accelerate the updating of electronic health records and provide instant access to an important database—say, the Center for Disease Control's data storage—without a user having to scroll down several times and across many different fields to obtain critical information about disease outbreaks, side-effects to drugs and vaccines, and other critical data about patient populations," she said.

Other beneficiaries of this new technology would include financial institutions that face huge liabilities and losses when there are breaches on the front end of an online system caused by unwarranted access to customer transactions.

She is convinced the new technology will significantly reduce the risk of breaches during transfers of funds between different accounts, or online payments of bills or credit cards. This, she said, is because a native-driven platform can extend advanced security features that make transactions less vulnerable to unwarranted intrusion.

"Unlike traditional websites where passwords and cookies can be cracked all too easily because all websites conform to a similar Web 2.0 design, native design is so individualized that it would require intricate reverse engineering for a hacker to figure out the security protections. In addition, native is more secure because in the native-driven platform, everything is, so to speak, in one place. There is no long chain of interactions every time someone uses the system. Since a chain is only as strong as the weakest link, cutting down on the number and sensitivity of the links in the native design makes the whole system stronger and much more immune to security breaches," she said.

Helping Consumers

All of which, she said, explains why native design will help the typical online shopper. She offered the example of an online shopper looking for a new album by a particular musical band. With a native-driven platform, the consumer can bring up "context menus" that offer information about the band, including other examples of its work and critical reviews.

"And this is all without having to move from web page to web page and without having to open up the browser again to access a particular newspaper's website to find the music reviews. As a consumer, I can see all this information side by side on the same screen without having to strain my mind trying to remember what was on another page or on another website while I get back to the product details to make a purchase decision. That's really good for the consumer and for the seller, too. It means a quicker sale, fewer returns, and a more informed consumer," she said.

For patients using a portal, a secure online website that gives patients access to their personal health information, having access to diagrams or figure illustrations can make it much easier to provide crucial information to their physicians.

Converting "Patient Talk" into Medical Terminology

She suggested that patients who are asked to fill out forms would have a much easier time using the new technology than when forced to "cram everything into a fixed-size data box."

"The 'smart' forms that this native technology offers can expand quite easily to allow patients to add or delete rows when listing complex medical histories, and it can allow for shifting the chronological order of those histories by building cut-and-paste features into the system," she said.

She is very excited about her company's proprietary Sequence Package Analysis, a higher-scale form of natural language understanding that can convert "patient talk" (laymen's language) into medical terminology that makes patients' symptoms more intelligible to physicians.

Convenience and Safety

She believes the new technology will also help consumers complete online banking transactions. A native-driven online banking site substitutes menus for page-to-page navigation, allowing consumers to access a list of all pending and paid transactions in one window that can be placed side-by-side a dialogue window through which payments or transfers between accounts are being transacted.

"This means the user sees all the pending and paid transactions before transferring funds, which reduces the risk of uncovered bill payments," said Dr. Neustein.

She is convinced this new technology not only makes life easier for users, but safer, too, because it takes "threat detection to a whole new level."

"By condensing and simplifying the web interaction system, it can give on-the-spot information to the soldier in the jeep or the co-pilot in the cockpit. That gives the new technology an important role in homeland security as well as promoting convenience, cost reduction, and data protection," she said.

An Outgrowth

While she is an enthusiastic promoter of her new endeavor, she is mindful that, in many ways, it is not so much a detour from the work she has done for children and parents as it is an outgrowth of it.

"I'm reaching out to new people, many of them creative, innovative, and able to think outside the box. These were intellectual 'soul mates' who shared my Weltanschauung about improving social conditions, public safety, and the lives of everyday users of technology in practical ways that would also earn a nice return on investment for the company," she said.

She was not overly concerned about being fooled as to the motives of those with whom she was meeting and networking.

"Having had to think on the fly all those years that I spent networking with parents across the country, fielding media requests, doing interviews, speaking at press conferences with politicians, joining representatives of women's organizations at places like the White House Women's Office, I am pretty good at sizing up a person and a situation. I built a stellar team of like-minded individuals and formed a company. We incorporated last winter in New Jersey and we're ready to hit the ground running," she said.