



CONGRATS ON



# What California Legal Professionals Do Differently

*Lessons from Suzanne Smith*

CEB's head of sales, **Suzanne Smith**, is retiring after nearly 20 years. Here's what she learned from the attorneys, law librarians and legal professionals at the top of their game.



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## TWO DECADES

For nearly two decades, Suzanne Smith had a view of California law that few people get. Not from one firm, one courtroom or one practice area, but from years of conversations with the people doing the work across the state: solo practitioners, law firm leaders, public agencies, courts, law librarians, knowledge managers, judges and legal teams of every size.

She met them in law libraries and firm offices. She listened as they explained what they used, what they trusted and where their work became harder than it needed to be. She watched the legal profession move from print-heavy libraries to digital research platforms and now into a new era of AI-assisted tools. She saw attorneys navigate changing laws, rising client expectations, tighter timelines and the constant pressure to move faster without sacrificing judgment.

The challenges varied, but over time, Suzanne noticed patterns. The legal professionals who stood out were the ones who listened carefully, verified before relying, stayed curious when the profession evolved and understood that trust is built long before anyone needs it.

As Suzanne prepares to retire, CEB is celebrating more than the length of her career. We are also recognizing the unique perspective she gained along the way. These are the lessons that stayed with her.



# 1 Learn from those closest to the problem

When Suzanne first joined CEB, she was new to the legal community. She was based in Southern California, away from CEB's Oakland office, and she did not yet have deep relationships with attorneys, courts, agencies or law librarians.

But Suzanne understood something about relationships before she understood the legal market. Her path to CEB had come through someone who knew her work and believed she would be good with customers.

“It wasn't a job posting. It wasn't, 'I've got to find a new job or something different to do.' It just happened naturally,” Suzanne said.



Once she was in the role, she built her territory the same way: by **focusing on people**.

At first, Suzanne tried to understand her territory through spreadsheets and account data. But her husband encouraged her to stop studying the information from behind a screen and do what came more naturally: go meet people, ask questions and learn from the conversations. Or, as her husband put it, “Quit looking at these [faxes], get off of the computer and do what you do best. Go see people.”

Suzanne remembers walking into law libraries and firms where customers would show her their shelves and explain how they actually used CEB. They pointed out the resources they relied on, explained when they turned to them and showed her how those materials fit into the rhythm of their work.

*“No one turned me down for an appointment, not a single librarian,” Suzanne said. “And what was fascinating is that it was actually my on-the-job training. Our customers taught me about the value proposition of CEB.”*

That line says a lot about how Suzanne approached her work, because she did not come in assuming she already understood what California legal professionals needed. She let customers show her. But it also says something important about the best legal professionals she has met. Instead of treating knowledge as something to hoard, they explained their processes, pain points and judgment calls. They helped professionals outside their practice understand what they needed to do the job well.

# 2 Verify before you rely

When Suzanne thinks back to the early years of online legal research, she remembers how physical the work still was.

She would walk into firms and see attorneys with books “in a semicircle” around them, binders open, doing research on the floor or at a desk. When OnLAW came along, it did not immediately replace print for everyone. For many attorneys, it became a bridge. If they were researching an unfamiliar topic, they might start online, then pull the book off the shelf to check themselves.

Suzanne saw the same transition from the product side. Early in her CEB career, she visited the San Diego City Attorney’s Office to talk about OnLAW and was shown an older “smart laser disc” system: a giant disc and machine that made web-based access feel like a major step forward. Then came CD-ROMs, digital subscriptions, practice platforms, real-time case law feeds and now AI-assisted research.

Each evolution made legal information easier to access in some way, but none changed the obligation at the center of the work.

## Attorneys still have to know whether the answer they rely on is right.

Suzanne is not nostalgic for a slower, paper-only version of legal practice. Much of her career has been spent helping attorneys adopt better tools. But she is clear about the line those tools cannot cross. Technology can help attorneys move faster, spot patterns and be more efficient, but it cannot replace the judgment that comes from knowing the law, understanding the client and recognizing what still needs to be checked.

That matters even more now that AI-assisted tools are becoming part of legal research and drafting.

“The new tools are great and handy and quick and easy,” Suzanne said. But, she added, the risk comes when an answer “wasn’t verified by an actual human” to confirm whether it reflects a real case or the law.

When asked about shortcuts that create risk in legal research, Suzanne’s answer was direct: “not double-checking” or “getting a second set of eyes” to review something.

*“Sometimes I’ll receive an email or a response, and it’s like... that person did not write that. And do they know what they’ve just written? Because it’s not really answering the question,” Suzanne said.*

Suzanne found that the best attorneys do not reject new tools, but they also do not let the tool think for them. They use technology to get oriented, then check the law, compare sources and test whether the answer actually fits the client’s facts. That can mean asking whether the source is reliable, whether the answer is current, whether it applies in California, whether the facts change the analysis and what risk the attorney would be taking by relying on it without checking further.

For Suzanne, the human review piece is only becoming more important as technology improves and AI becomes embedded in legal research. Attorneys still need to be “confidently knowledgeable” in the law and “focused on solving the problems for their clients.” What changes are the tools they use to meet those client needs.

# 3 Stay curious in the face of change

Suzanne has an acronym she has lived by, and she knows it's corny. She says so herself.

**FIT:** be **flexible**, stay **innately curious** and **trust the people on your team**, your leadership and the organization you are part of.

For Suzanne, curiosity means talking to people in your own team and outside it, asking how a change affects them and learning from what they are seeing. For attorneys, that might mean asking a law librarian how they evaluate the reliability of a source, talking with a paralegal where a process creates avoidable friction, checking with an associate about where an assignment became unclear or questioning a client about what kind of communication helps them make decisions.

Those conversations do not require a committee or a formal initiative; just the humility to believe someone else may see part of the problem that you cannot, or perhaps a solution that you had not considered.

**curiosity means talking to people in your own team and outside it**

The advice comes from watching CEB, its customers and the legal profession move through change. Suzanne has seen the shift from print to digital, the rise of remote work, the changing role of law librarians, new customer expectations, new product launches and now the questions surrounding AI.

Her view is not that change is easy, or that people should pretend to be fearless. In fact, one of her clearest pieces of advice is the opposite: "Do it afraid."

"It's okay to be afraid because it helps you find creative ways of approaching a problem or managing the change," Suzanne said.

Attorneys are trained to be cautious, and they should be. But caution should sharpen judgment, not shut down learning. A firm considering a new tool does not need blind enthusiasm or blanket skepticism. It needs someone willing to be curious.



# 4 Combine high IQ with high EQ

When Suzanne was asked what habits she saw in the most effective California attorneys, she did not begin with credentials, prestige or technical brilliance. She talked about how they treated people.

The best attorneys she saw were “approachable,” “good listeners” who are “actually engaged in that present moment,” whether they were with a client, presenting or having a conversation at a conference. Suzanne described it as a balance of high IQ and high EQ.

Suzanne has seen how easy it is for professionals to become rushed, distracted and already thinking about the next thing. When asked what habit attorneys should move away from, she named that tendency directly: “always being rushed to the next thing.”

Anyone who works in law understands why that happens. When there is always another deadline, another email, another client question, another meeting, another issue waiting to be handled, moving quickly can start to feel like the only way to keep up.

However, a client may not know which fact matters until the attorney slows the conversation down enough to find it. A colleague may be flagging a risk indirectly. A law librarian may recognize that the research request on the page is not the real question. High EQ helps attorneys hear those things before they become problems.



**Suzanne’s own way of connecting with people reflects that. She describes herself as an introvert, even though many people experience her as deeply relational. What she enjoys is not being the center of attention, but learning from the person in front of her.**



# 5 Lead by taking ownership

When CEB's sales manager role became available, Suzanne did not see herself as the obvious candidate.

The position had been open for months. At the time, she was still in solution sales, but she had already started taking on pieces of the work. She was supporting then-director Heather Cameron by pulling reports and helping as the team prepared to launch OnLAW Pro and Practitioner. Around the same time, CEB had started using Salesforce, and Suzanne was helping with that too. She was also working with newer members of the sales team, mentoring them as they joined the department.

Still, when her family encouraged her to apply for the sales manager role, Suzanne hesitated.

*"I don't know," she remembered thinking. "I prefer to be under the radar."*

Their response was: "But you're already doing the work."

She applied, interviewed and got the role. Later, when she became head of sales, the pattern repeated itself. The move surprised her, too. It meant working more directly with the executive leadership team and combining "a little less doing and a little more strategic thinking." But again, the responsibility had started before the title arrived.



*"Continue doing what you think is the right thing to do and take action on those things, follow your instincts and ask a lot of questions," Suzanne said.*

*"Try to serve with every conversation. How can you help? What can you learn? And then the new title, promotion or whatever opportunity just naturally follows."*

For Suzanne, leadership is a kind of stewardship. If you oversee a team at any level, she said, you're entrusted with the job of protecting, elevating and helping them.

*"No matter what your circle of influence is, you should continue to do those things," Suzanne said. "That's part of what leadership is, just doing it whether you have a title or not."*

# Suzanne's leadership at CEB kept the work close to the people it was meant to serve.

What Suzanne made possible

When new leaders joined, she wanted them to hear directly from customers, not as a courtesy meeting, but because those conversations showed what dashboards couldn't. To Suzanne, the customer was not a segment, an account or a sales conversation. They were the attorneys trying to get the answer right, the law librarians helping someone find a better starting point, the public agency handling work with major consequences attached and the legal team deciding which tools could be trusted.

Inside CEB, Suzanne brought the same instinct to her team. She listened before assuming, helped colleagues grow into new responsibilities and treated leadership as stewardship.

When Suzanne talks about retirement, she imagines slower mornings, lingering by the bedroom window to watch the hummingbirds, orioles and scrub jays outside. She talks about creating a room where her grandchildren can read, make things, get messy and choose what they want to explore.

It is a different season of life, but not a complete departure from the way she has spent much of her career: making room for people to learn, grow and find what they need.

On behalf of everyone at CEB, thank you, Suzanne, for nearly 20 years of care, curiosity, steadiness and service. The lessons in this piece are drawn from what you saw in California's legal community, but they also reflect what you brought to CEB every day.



CONGRATS ON  
20 YEARS

*Suzanne Smith*

