



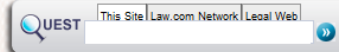
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## Valley Veteran Craig Johnson, 62, Dies

Zusha Elinson

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Craig Johnson  
Image: Maya Alleruzzo, 1993

Craig Johnson, the visionary Silicon Valley lawyer who founded Venture Law Group and more recently Virtual Law Partners, died Saturday after suffering a stroke. He was 62 and had just returned from a European honeymoon with his wife and law partner Roseann Rotandaro. The two had married on Aug. 15.

Johnson is perhaps the most quintessential Silicon Valley startup lawyer. He had an unbridled enthusiasm for new ideas. Just like his entrepreneurial clients, he pushed the boundaries of traditional business models in law practice. And he was always onto the next big thing.

"He was constantly innovating, constantly thinking of new ideas and new systems dealing with startup law," said Larry Sonsini, chairman of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati. "Every time I saw him he was working on something new — it was very much an 'on the back of the napkin' type of thing."

Johnson inspired a loyal following of lawyers and clients at Wilson Sonsini, where he started his career in 1975. But when he set out to found Venture Law Group in 1993, there was great skepticism that a law firm focused only on corporate startup work would succeed. The firm exploded with the tech boom, growing rapidly to more than 100 lawyers, and raking in millions with its investments in clients like Yahoo and Hotmail.

"Craig was a pioneer in Silicon Valley, and his vision helped drive the growth of the technology industry," said Jerry Yang, co-founder and former CEO of Yahoo, in an e-mail.

Venture Law Group **stumbled when the bubble burst** and was acquired by Heller Ehrman in 2003. After a few years outside the practice of law as a venture capitalist, Johnson again had a new idea: a virtual law firm on a grand scale. Last year, he launched Virtual Law Partners. His idea again met with skepticism, but in just a year, the firm has grown to 40 lawyers. And it has been hailed as the law firm of the future.

"He may have been a lawyer, but he was an entrepreneur at heart," said John Dean, a close friend and venture capitalist at Startup Capital Ventures.

Dean was one of the first people to find Johnson after he suffered a stroke last Tuesday morning at the office they share in Palo Alto. He was rushed to Stanford University Hospital, and was surrounded by his family until his death on Saturday.

As news spread Monday, Johnson's former colleagues reached out to each other over e-mail and in the hallways of law firms, like Cooley Godward Kronish and Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe where many Venture Law Group lawyers now work.

"He was kind to everyone and he knew everybody's name and knew their families and their history and he really went out of his way," said Don Keller, a former VLG lawyer now at Orrick. "Everyone that knew him felt they had a special friend in Craig."

### AN IDEA GUY

A native of Pasadena, Johnson's high-tech leanings were evident as far back as his college days at Yale University, where he pursued a major in Russian studies and a minor in computer science. After college, he spent two years teaching high school English and math with the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, then returned to the States in 1970 to begin programming computer operating systems for Burroughs Corp. He opted for law over business and planned to pursue an environmental practice.

Then, as a 1973 summer associate at a Los Angeles firm then known as Parker, Milliken, Kohlmeier, Clark & O'Hara, Johnson handled a few assignments for some small software companies. "I loved it," he told *The Recorder* in 1996. "I identified totally with the executives." Rather than seeking an environmental job, Johnson signed up with Wilson Sonsini immediately following his graduation from Stanford Law School.

His eclectic background always came through in conversations, whether at dinner with friends or at one of the many legendary parties at his Portola Valley home.

"Conversations might range from Craig reciting Goethe's 'Faust' in German to him telling you that his favorite movie was 'Flashdance,'" recalled Mark Medearis, a former VLG lawyer now at Cooley.

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Johnson loved to kick ideas around. He founded the New Venture Club in the last few years, which brought together CEOs and venture capitalists for informal conversations. That made him in high demand. "He was especially good with young entrepreneurs when they were getting started," said Norm Foglesong, a venture capitalist at Institutional Venture Partners who often turned to Johnson. "Look at Jim Carreker at Aspect [Communications] or Sandy Kurtzig at ask.com ... Craig was intimately involved with these companies; he was almost a founding member."

Medearis said that one client gave Johnson a plaque with the advice he gave the company: "Launching a business is like launching a rocket, if you're off a fraction of a degree on the launching pad you will end up miles from your goal."

## NEW PRACTICES

Johnson always wanted to push the legal business forward.

"He was very much a thinker that was willing to push the envelope of his ideas," Sonsini said. "A lot of them made sense, and some of them made no sense."

A big rainmaker and top earner, Johnson split suddenly with Wilson to pursue his own model for a law firm in the early days of the tech boom.

At Venture Law Group, he branded and marketed the firm without the traditional and lengthy string of last names, and emblazoned everything with VLG's acorn logo. The firm deferred fees for startups and took equity stakes — and everyone from staff to partner shared in the profits of the firm. And he wanted his lawyers to be business advisers as well.

"Big companies have a tendency to treat their lawyers like socket wrenches," Johnson told *The Recorder* in 1996 (.pdf). "That is the antithesis of what we want to do. ... The most difficult legal work, the most challenging, total judgment work, is involved in getting the company started, because you're painting on a blank canvas."

With Virtual Law Partners, Johnson was set on an alternative to the Big Law business model.


"It just seems like an idea whose time has come," Johnson told *The Recorder* last year. "Billing rates at large law firms have just gone up and up — it's not unusual to find partners in the Bay Area billing \$600, \$700 or \$800 an hour. ... They have to pay high salaries for associates, high profits per partner, and they feel they have to have prestigious offices — it's just a situation that can't continue."

Johnson was known for the twinkle in his eye. He enjoyed upending the apple cart of tradition.

"It's a bit fun for me to tweak the tail of the American legal industry," Johnson said when he founded his latest venture.

Johnson is survived by his new wife Rotandaro, his sons Matt and Scott, his brother Brian and his father Roger. The family is planning a memorial for Oct. 11.

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