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# FROM EROSION TO OPPORTUNITY

Advancing Lawyer Development in the AI Era

# WHAT THIS PAPER PROPOSES

Three converging forces are hollowing out the informal apprenticeship layer through which law firms have always developed lawyers: AI automation of entry-level legal work, generational friction around development expectations, and the structural weakening of proximity. The result is a growing gap between what firms assume associates are learning and what associates are actually experiencing.

This paper argues that the disruption creates a genuine opportunity. Firms that respond with intention can build a more consistent and equitable development model than the old apprenticeship system ever delivered. It proposes two complementary responses.

## SECTION V

### INTENTIONAL WORK DESIGN

A framework for how firms can reconstruct the developmental experiences that AI is displacing, at the firm and practice group level. It addresses the structural question: what work do junior lawyers do now, and how should firms design that work to ensure development continues?

## SECTION VI

### THE D.R.I.V.E. FRAMEWORK™

Five partner-level behaviors (Deliberate Delegation, Real-Time Correction, Intentional Visibility, Voiced Expectations, and Earned Candor) that rebuild the developmental trust the apprenticeship model once created through proximity. It addresses the human question: how do individual leaders show up differently?

Readers who want to go directly to the proposed solutions can turn to [Section V](#) and [Section VI](#). Sections I through IV provide the diagnostic context for those who want to understand the forces driving the need for change.

## SECTION I:

# THE APPRENTICESHIP BARGAIN

The hollowing out of the apprenticeship model in law firms is not a new observation. Talent professionals and firm leaders have been tracking it for years, and the contributing forces — technology, generational change, the shift to hybrid work, increasing leverage — are well understood. What is less well understood is the specific consequence this paper addresses; the erosion of the trust that made the apprenticeship model work.

The apprenticeship model developed lawyers because it created a particular kind of relationship: one in which associates had daily evidence that their growth was being observed, and that the people around them were invested in where they were going. That developmental trust was a byproduct of proximity, shared work, and the informal corrections and conversations that close physical and professional contact made possible. As those conditions have weakened, the trust eroded with them.

The erosion in trust runs in both directions. Partners face a concern that is not new, but that AI makes more acute: whether the associate who submitted a piece of work is actually developing the judgment the work was supposed to build. When junior lawyers produce the work themselves, the repetition builds capability over time, however unevenly. As AI takes over more of the production, associates may move through years of practice without their judgment growing at the rate their seniority implies. And that gap is harder to detect than most, because it does not show up in the work product until the moment it matters.

## SECTION II:

### THREE FORCES, ONE FRACTURE

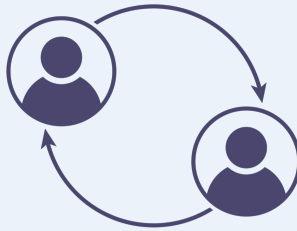
No single trend is eroding trust. At least three are converging at once, and their combined effect is greater than any one of them alone.

#### AI Automating the Training Ground



Shifting from "doing" to "supervising" prevents junior lawyers from developing the judgment built through informative repetition.

#### Generational Friction Within Mentorship



Structural mismatches regarding feedback and leadership create a "neediness vs. absence" misunderstanding.

#### Weakened Structural Proximity



Hybrid work and geographic dispersion have eliminated the incidental conversations and informal debriefs essential for development.

#### FORCE ONE: AI IS AUTOMATING THE TRAINING GROUND

The tasks AI is absorbing first are not incidental to lawyer development, they are central to it. Legal research, first-draft contract preparation, document review, due diligence memoranda: these are the assignments given to junior associates not only because they need to be done, but because doing them is how lawyers learn.

As AI tools absorb more of this work, junior lawyers will shift from doing to supervising: from drafting the memo to reviewing what the AI produced. These are not equivalent experiences. Supervising AI output builds quality control. Producing a first draft under conditions of genuine uncertainty builds judgment. Research from the Harvard Law School Center on the Legal Profession confirms that AI is compressing precisely the learning curve that formative junior work provided.<sup>1</sup>

There is a further problem. Associates asked to supervise AI output are being asked to evaluate a capability they may not have yet fully developed. An associate who produces a weak draft knows they produced it. One who approves a weak AI draft may attribute the problem to the tool rather than to their own failure to catch it. AI makes different errors than humans do, and recognizing them requires a depth of judgment that junior lawyers may no longer be accumulating through the work itself by default.

## FORCE TWO: GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES ARE CREATING FRICTION WHERE MENTORSHIP SHOULD EXIST

Today's law firms contain four distinct generational cohorts: Boomer and Generation X partners, Millennial senior associates and partners, and Generation Z associates. Each entered the profession with different assumptions about what good leadership looks like and what a healthy developmental relationship requires.

Research consistently shows that younger professionals regard learning and development opportunities and meaningful guidance as primary reasons to choose and remain with an employer. These opportunities are not peripheral benefits, but core expectations.<sup>2</sup> The Tilt Institute named the resulting dynamic precisely: when younger lawyers seek feedback and structure, their requests are routinely misread by Gen X leaders as neediness. Partners who believe they are extending trust by not micromanaging can be experienced by associates as absent. Both parties are acting in good faith. Neither is understanding the other.<sup>3</sup>

This is a structural mismatch between generations that hold genuinely different beliefs about what good professional development looks like. Left unaddressed, it can destroy the relational conditions on which mentorship depends.

## FORCE THREE: THE STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS FOR PROXIMITY HAVE WEAKENED

The apprenticeship model has traditionally required proximity: physical, temporal, and relational. Law firms are now larger, more geographically dispersed, and more highly leveraged. Flexible and hybrid working arrangements have reduced the incidental contact that once made informal development a natural byproduct of shared work: the hallway conversation, the impromptu debrief, the chance to observe a partner navigating a difficult call. Development that once happened in the margins must now be created on purpose.

*"The dying apprenticeship model is not the result of a single trend, but of several forces converging at once — each magnifying the others." - The Tilt Institute, 2025*

These three forces amplify each other. A partner already uncertain about how to engage with an associate who wants more structure is even less likely to create developmental touchpoints when that associate is working remotely and the junior work is being handled by an AI tool.

## SECTION III:

### THE EROSION OF TRUST

The convergence of these three forces produces a trust deficit on both sides of the relationship, and understanding both sides is important because each side feeds the other.

For associates, the erosion is familiar: a growing uncertainty that their development is being observed, and that the people around them are genuinely invested in them. It accumulates through certain types of experiences: the memo returned with light edits and no explanation, the trajectory conversation that never happens, the year-end review that surfaces concerns never raised in the moment.

The implicit question partners have always carried is whether the associate who completed a piece of work is developing the judgment the task was supposed to build. When associates produce the work themselves, repetition and correction build that capability over time. As AI absorbs more of the production, the developmental mechanism weakens. Associates may be getting work done without the underlying judgment growing at the rate their experience would suggest. A well-supervised AI output can look competent even when the associate had little hand in forming the thinking behind it. Partners sense this before they can articulate it, and it shapes how they delegate.

Partners uncertain about whether an associate's judgment is developing tend to respond in one of two ways: they over-supervise, which is costly and signals distrust, or they pull back from meaningful delegation, which widens the very gap they are worried about. Associates who receive less substantive work develop more slowly. Associates developing more slowly give partners less reason to trust their judgment. Without deliberate intervention, the pattern compounds.

## WHAT THE TRUST GAP LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

This erosion accumulates through small experiences that individually seem minor but collectively tell an associate something significant about their place in the firm.

The associate who completes a first draft, receives light edits with no explanation, and is left uncertain whether their approach was broadly right or fundamentally off. The mid-level associate who has worked with the same partner on several matters but has never had a direct conversation about how they are developing. The senior associate who assumes their trajectory is fine because no one has suggested otherwise, and who learns at year-end that concerns have been left unaddressed.

What these experiences share is that the information needed to close the gap already exists. The partner has a view about the memo. The leadership group has a view about the senior associate's trajectory. The feedback is available. It simply is not being shared.

AI compounds this. The corrective work that once built an associate's internal compass was not just training, it was calibration. It gave associates an accurate sense of where their judgment held up and where it did not. As that volume of corrective experience disappears, associates can reach their fourth or fifth year without a clear picture of their own gaps. They cannot seek the right guidance because they do not yet know what they are missing.

## THE GENERATIONAL DIMENSION OF TRUST

This erosion is not experienced uniformly, because trust is not defined uniformly across generations. For a Gen X partner, trust is often expressed through delegation without oversight: the implicit message being, I believe you can handle this. For Millennial and Gen Z associates, that same absence of oversight reads not as trust but as disengagement. As Millennial lawyers move into partnership themselves, they bring their own assumptions about development into the mentor role, assumptions that may align more closely with their junior colleagues, or may shift in ways that create new friction.

The partner who trusts by stepping back and the associate who feels trusted only when someone steps in are both operating from coherent frameworks. They have simply never explicitly addressed them, and so each continues to misread the other.

Addressing this erosion requires more than individual goodwill. It requires firms to build the structural, cultural, and behavioral conditions in which developmental trust becomes possible and expected.

## SECTION IV:

# THE OPPORTUNITY INSIDE THE DISRUPTION

The preceding sections should not be read as a counsel of pessimism. The apprenticeship model was never perfect. It was informal, inconsistent, and dependent on relationships that varied in quality. The associate lucky enough to work closely with a generous and reflective senior partner received something invaluable. The associate who worked with partners who regarded development as peripheral received considerably less. The model could tend to reproduce excellence where it already existed and could fail to create it where it did not yet.

AI and the other forces described in this paper are not destroying something that worked uniformly well. They are disrupting something that worked variably, and the disruption creates real pressure on firms to do consciously what the old system accomplished when it worked at its best. That is a harder task.

### WHAT AI ACTUALLY FREES UP

When AI absorbs the more mechanical dimensions of junior legal work (the initial research sweep, the first-pass document review, the standard-form contract generation) it does not eliminate the associate's role. It changes its nature. Associates no longer spending forty hours on document review have, in principle, more capacity for the work AI cannot do: attending client meetings, participating in negotiation strategy conversations, drafting the sections of an agreement that require judgment rather than template application, asking the questions that a senior lawyer's presence makes possible.

Whether firms are using that capacity well is a different matter. The efficiency gains from AI are being captured at the billing and delivery level, and the question now is how the developmental dividend gets invested alongside them.

### THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDEND

The generational friction described in Section II contains something useful. Millennial and Gen Z associates are not more demanding than previous generations because they are less resilient. They are more explicit about their developmental ambitions and more willing to have direct conversations about their growth. That is, on balance, an asset.

A Gen X partner who learns to meet that expectation, who develops the habits of direct, candid, forward-looking conversation, does not simply become a better mentor to younger associates. Those same habits build high-performing teams, retain lateral talent, and sustain client relationships through periods of transition. The generational pressure, directed well, accelerates capabilities the firm needs regardless of who is sitting across the table.

The shift required is conceptual before it is programmatic. It is not about adding more training or creating new curricula. It is about recognizing that the behaviors which once happened naturally (the real-time correction, the candid conversation about trajectory, the assignment given with developmental intent rather than staffing convenience) must now be designed for and expected of leaders, not left to chance or personal inclination.

The two sections that follow offer a practical response. Section V addresses how firms can reconstruct the developmental experiences AI is displacing, at the organizational and practice group level. Section VI addresses how individual partners rebuild the trust the apprenticeship model once created through proximity. Both are necessary. Neither alone is sufficient.

## SECTION V:

# INTENTIONAL WORK DESIGN

If AI is absorbing the tasks that once trained junior lawyers, the response must be to design something to replace that system. That is the concept at the heart of intentional work design: treating the gap AI creates not as a side effect to be managed but as a problem to be solved.

For most of the profession's history, firms did not need to design the training ground. It existed naturally in the volume and variety of junior work. A first-year associate who spent six months reviewing documents, drafting research memos, and sitting in on client calls was absorbing an enormous amount of contextual knowledge.

That is no longer reliably true. As AI compresses timelines and absorbs entry-level tasks, the training ground is shrinking. Writing in McKinsey's *In the Balance*, Ilona Logvinova, Associate General Counsel and Head of Innovation at McKinsey Legal, poses the question directly: what does the third-, fourth-, and fifth-year associate look like in 2030, and how do we ensure their judgment develops in the absence of the tasks that once built it?<sup>4</sup> It is a question firms across the profession are currently grappling with.

We propose that the firms that develop the strongest lawyers over the next decade will be the ones that recognize this not as an efficiency gain with an unfortunate side effect, but as a design problem requiring a considered response.

## WHAT INTENTIONAL WORK DESIGN REQUIRES

Before deploying AI at scale on a category of junior work, firms need to ask: what does this work develop in the person doing it, and what replaces that value when AI takes it over? The answer should shape how freed capacity is used rather than allowing it to be absorbed silently into higher matter loads and billing targets. In practice, this involves six disciplines.

1

The first is **auditing for developmental value**. Not all junior work is equally formative, and not all AI automation carries the same cost or benefit. Mapping work against its developmental function (what judgment does it build, what exposure does it provide) helps firms identify where the gaps will appear before they do.

2

The second is **designing for judgment**. As AI handles more of the mechanical work, the assignments that remain most valuable are those requiring analysis, synthesis, and client-facing judgment that AI cannot replicate. Creating clear pathways to these assignments, rather than leaving access solely to the preferences of individual partners, produces a more consistent result across the associate population.

3

The third is **protecting formative experiences**. Certain developmental moments are largely irreplaceable: the first client call, early exposure to negotiation, observing a senior lawyer managing a difficult situation in real time. These were once a natural byproduct of proximity. They must now be identified, protected, and allocated deliberately. A 2025 forum convened by Orbital, drawing on real estate legal leaders from UK Magic Circle firms and in-house legal departments, addressed this directly: participants examined how to replace experiences that no longer arise naturally from the work itself, with a shared view that firms must fundamentally rethink training models rather than expect juniors to adapt to higher expectations without corresponding support.<sup>5</sup> While the forum focused on the UK real estate context, the underlying challenge is consistent with what legal leaders in the United States are navigating as well.

4

The fourth is **sequencing with care**. Development requires progression: from supervised to independent work, from observation to participation, from execution to judgment. Treating this as a curriculum rather than a byproduct ensures that associates advance rather than simply stay busy. Hotshot, a legal training provider, describes this as a shift toward multi-modal development, combining on-demand learning, interactive skill-building, and experiential learning through simulated matters, so that associates understand how to do the work before they are asked to review and validate what AI produces.<sup>6</sup>

5

The fifth is **redirecting freed capacity**. When AI saves a junior lawyer twenty hours on document review, those hours represent genuine developmental potential. Whether they are invested in judgment-forming work and client exposure or absorbed into a higher matter load is a leadership choice that sits at the heart of intentional work design.

6

The sixth, **rebuilding the feedback loop**, addresses what the first five cannot fully replace: the calibration that repetitive, corrective work once built. The redlined draft, the research memo that missed the point, the due diligence that required three iterations: these gave associates a reliable internal compass. With that volume gone, firms need to rebuild the feedback loop deliberately. The partner who says check this for errors is doing something categorically different from the one who says tell me where this reasoning breaks down, and we will compare notes afterward. Building judgment mapping into assignment conversations, naming the judgment calls the associate will face before they begin and debriefing specifically on those moments afterward, is how firms begin to replace what the volume of corrective work once provided naturally.

## THE LEADERSHIP IMPLICATION

Intentional work design sits at the intersection of talent development and leadership. The decisions that shape what junior lawyers do (which matters they are staffed on, what tasks they handle, how much mechanical work is retained for its value versus handed to AI) are made by partners, practice group leaders, and talent management professionals. Those decisions now carry developmental consequences they did not necessarily carry when the training ground was ambient.

The question partners need to ask has changed. It is no longer simply: who is available for this? It is: who needs this experience, and what will they take from it? That shift, from staffing logic to developmental intent, is what Intentional Work Design requires, and it is what the D.R.I.V.E. Framework™ in the next section is designed to support.

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## SECTION VI:

### BUILDING TRUST DELIBERATELY

Structural changes to how work is designed and allocated create the conditions for development. They do not, on their own, create development. That still depends on individual partners — on what they do in the ten minutes after a client call, in the conversation before they assign a difficult memo, in the moment when an associate's work falls short and they have to decide what to say about it.

What follows is not a general case for mentorship or feedback. Those arguments are well established. It is a specific set of practices, drawn from our work with law firm leaders, that address the conditions this paper has described: a generation of associates who cannot rely on proximity to deliver the guidance they need, partners who are not consistently trained to provide it explicitly, and a cultural norm that treats development as something that happens around the work rather than through it.

#### THE D.R.I.V.E. FRAMEWORK™ FOR DELIBERATE TRUST

Drawing on our work coaching and advising law firm leaders, we have identified five practices that distinguish firms actively responding to this disruption from those absorbing it passively. Together they form the D.R.I.V.E. Framework™.

## THE D.R.I.V.E. FRAMEWORK™

### DELIBERATE DELEGATION

D

Assign work with developmental intent, not just for task completion. Name what the associate is meant to learn from the assignment. Use AI-freed capacity to redirect associates toward judgment-forming work.

### REAL-TIME CORRECTION

R

Replace or supplement end-of-matter reviews with brief, frequent, in-context feedback. A five-minute debrief immediately after a client call is worth more developmentally than a comprehensive review three months later. Make course correction a habit, not an event.

### INTENTIONAL VISIBILITY

I

In hybrid and distributed environments, proximity must be created deliberately. Include associates in client conversations, strategy discussions, and partner interactions that they would once have been present for simply by virtue of physical proximity.

### VOICED EXPECTATIONS

V

Make standards explicit. Partners cannot assume that what they regard as obvious is visible to an associate working remotely, managing AI tools, and receiving limited direct feedback. Name what excellent work product looks like. Name what the path forward requires. Silence is not clarity.

### EARNED CANDOR

E

Build the relational foundation that makes honest developmental conversation possible. Candor without trust is experienced as criticism. Trust without candor produces complacency. Honesty delivered within a relationship that associates believe is invested in their success is the core of developmental leadership.

## APPLYING D.R.I.V.E.™ IN PRACTICE

The barriers to developmental leadership in law firms are not conceptual. Partners understand, in principle, that feedback and mentorship matter. The barriers are structural and habitual: time pressure, no shared language for these conversations, and a cultural norm built over decades that development happens naturally when you hire good people and give them hard work. It does not, as the preceding sections have described. On both sides of the relationship the gap is widening: associates who feel unseen, and partners who are increasingly uncertain whether the associate in front of them is developing the judgment their seniority should reflect.

D.R.I.V.E.™ addresses both sides. Deliberate Delegation and Voiced Expectations rebuild the partner's confidence that the associate is genuinely developing, because the partner is now shaping what the associate does and why. Real-Time Correction and Earned Candor rebuild the associate's confidence that their development is being taken seriously, because the feedback is specific, timely, and comes from a relationship that feels invested rather than only evaluative. Intentional Visibility closes the loop: it ensures that partners see the work and the person, not just the output

In practice, this looks like: a partner who assigns a client memo takes ninety seconds to explain what the associate should be developing by writing it, and follows up briefly after the client call in which it was discussed. A practice group leader who creates a monthly touchpoint for career conversations, separate from matter updates, so that senior associates do not have to manufacture reasons for the conversations that matter most to them. A firm that builds into its partner evaluation criteria a demonstrable investment in associate development, so that the behavior is rewarded rather than merely hoped for.

None of these require significant time. Collectively, they create conditions in which trust accumulates on both sides: partners who delegate with greater confidence in the judgment being built, and associates who work with a clearer sense that someone is paying attention.

## SECTION VII:

# THE BUSINESS CASE FOR SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

The case for rebuilding lawyer development is not solely a humanitarian one, though the human case is real. It is also a business argument, and a fairly direct one.

### RETENTION AND THE COST OF ERODED TRUST

The NALP Foundation's CY-2024 Associate Attrition Report, released in April 2025, documents an overall associate attrition rate of 20%, up from 18% in 2023.<sup>7</sup> The more telling finding is not the headline rate but the acceleration of departures: 74% of associates who left in 2024 did so within their first four years, up from 72% the year before. Associates are leaving before the development model, even a well-functioning one, has had time to do its work.

Estimates of the financial cost of associate attrition vary and should be treated with caution. Industry research, including a 2025 report from legal technology provider BigHand, has suggested that the fully-loaded cost of losing a third-year associate, accounting for recruiting, onboarding, lost productivity, and client relationship disruption, can exceed \$1 million.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the precise figure, the directional point is consistent: the cost is substantially higher than the salary saved, and it compounds with every departure.

### ENGAGEMENT, PERFORMANCE, AND CLIENT OUTCOMES

Research conducted jointly by the University of Southern California Center for Effective Organizations and the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that organizations with strong performance feedback cultures, defined by frequent, high-quality, development-oriented feedback, demonstrate better employee outcomes and stronger business performance, including profitability.<sup>9</sup>

In law firms, engagement shows up as responsiveness, ownership, and the ability to sustain quality through demanding workloads. It erodes when expectations are unclear and lawyers are left to infer their standing through silence. Giving associates a clear sense of where they stand and where they are going is one of the conditions of performance.

The client dimension is often underappreciated. Client relationships are built through consistent delivery by teams that function well together. Teams function well when communication is clear, roles are understood, and junior lawyers are developing at the pace the work requires. Firms that invest in developing their people are investing, simultaneously, in the quality of their client service.

## COMPETITIVE DIFFERENTIATION

As AI becomes standard across the profession, the differentiator between firms will shift. We predict that the efficiency gains from AI will increasingly be table stakes. What will continue to separate firms is the quality of the judgment, the client relationships, and the leadership that AI cannot produce, and those are built, or not, in the years between a lawyer's arrival at a firm and their emergence as someone clients trust.

Firms that rebuild the development infrastructure now, before the apprenticeship gap becomes a capability gap, will recruit and retain better, develop faster, and build the kind of institutional depth that cannot be acquired laterally. In an era when lateral movement is the default response to talent shortages, that is a durable advantage.

We think that firms that lead the profession in ten years will not necessarily be the ones that deployed AI most aggressively. They will be the ones that understood what AI cannot do: develop the judgment, the client instincts, and the professional identity of the lawyers who carry their practices forward. That work is still human. It still requires partners who invest in the people around them and firms that treat that investment as an expectation rather than a personal choice. The window to build that culture is now, while the disruption is visible and the urgency is real.

*The firms that lead the next decade will not be defined by how efficiently they deploy AI. They will be defined by how well they develop the lawyers AI cannot replace.*

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Julia Mercier is the Principal of Mercier Talent Solutions LLC, a consulting firm dedicated to the development of lawyers and law firm leaders. Drawing on her background as a litigator and more than a decade leading professional development programs in global law firms, Julia helps lawyers build the leadership, communication, and management capabilities required for long-term success.

Julia's coaching practice is focused on senior associates, partners, practice group leaders, and senior business professionals. She works with leaders to refine executive presence, strengthen communication skills, navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and build the leadership habits that support high-performing teams. Her work addresses strategic delegation, performance management, and the broader systems that shape collaboration and accountability in law firms. She designs and delivers 360-degree feedback programs for partners and senior leaders, using qualitative interviews, structured analysis, and personalized coaching to help leaders understand how their behaviors are experienced across the firm. Julia is the creator of the A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Model™ and the A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™, as well as the D.R.I.V.E. Framework™ for rebuilding developmental trust in the AI era.

She holds a law degree from the University of Montreal (2004) and an executive coaching certification from New York University (2016). She is also a Certified DISC Practitioner, a Hogan-certified coach, an MBTI Certified Practitioner, and a Mental Health First Aid Instructor.