

Lecture

THE FUTURE OF THE LEGAL PROFESSION: A SHARED VISION

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I. Introduction

1 The Legal Profession Symposium (“Symposium”) was conceived as a vital platform that would bring together all stakeholders within our profession, so that we could engage in honest conversations about the critical issues that confront us and chart our collective responses to these challenges.

2 To this end, the inaugural Symposium in 2024 laid the essential groundwork by examining how we might better promote and enhance the core values and standards that have long defined our profession.² Building on that foundation, the second iteration of the Symposium in 2025 adopted a more forward-looking perspective, by exploring how we could sustain, strengthen and reimagine *the future of the profession*.

3 The central objective of the second Symposium was to develop a *shared vision* that would resonate across generational lines, one that paid particular attention to the reasonable needs, expectations and aspirations of our younger colleagues. This was and remains a critically important and urgent task, because our profession stands at an inflection point. We are facing an unprecedented confluence of *rapid, dramatic* and *complex* challenges, which exacerbate and act upon one another.³ These include:

1 This article is based on speeches delivered by the author at the Legal Profession Symposium 2025. The author is deeply grateful to his law clerks, Hannah Tan and Hariharan Ganesan, and his colleagues, Assistant Registrars Ong Kye Jing and Bryan Ching, for all their assistance in the research for and preparation of this article.

2 Valerie Thean, Judge, Supreme Court of Singapore, opening remarks at the inaugural Legal Profession Symposium (7 October 2024) at para 2.

3 Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Senior Minister and Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, “Responding to a Perfect Long Storm”, speech at the IMAS-Bloomberg Investment Conference (9 March 2022); Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Role of the Courts in Our Society- Safeguarding Society” (21 September 2023) at para 30.

- (a) an increasingly uncertain and unstable geopolitical environment;
- (b) the exponential growth of the capabilities, and consequently also of the use, of artificial intelligence (“AI”);
- (c) the urgent and existential threat of climate change;
- (d) the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, facilitated and exacerbated by social media channels;
- (e) rising levels of inequality and the consequences that has on the global access to justice crisis;
- (f) the collective impact of some of these factors on declining trust in public institutions;
- (g) the threat of recurrent public health crises;
- (h) the global market for young talent seeking meaningful and purposeful work that can provide reasonable remuneration and work-life balance; and
- (i) the growing commercialisation of traditional professions like the legal profession.

4 What is notable is that these developments *all* impact us as lawyers, some more directly than others. Yet, many of these challenges did not even *exist* or were not even *recognised* just several decades ago. Collectively, they represent a fundamental change in *kind*, not just in *degree*, and they therefore spell changes in the nature of legal work, the type of education and training that lawyers will need to function effectively, and the way in which they will be hired, organised and developed. To add to this, the pace of these changes is proving to be remarkable, with existing challenges evolving rapidly and new challenges emerging constantly.

5 Because these challenges impact the profession in many ways, and because they fundamentally reshape what it means to be a lawyer, there is a pressing need to think and rethink many aspects of the practice of law such as:

- (a) how we attract, retain, develop and empower talent;
- (b) how we train our younger lawyers and create environments that facilitate continuous learning and development;
- (c) how we mentor them and ensure their well-being;

- (d) how we evaluate the performance of lawyers in a way that reflects their true value to our organisations and their potential;
- (e) how we ensure their fair remuneration;
- (f) how we integrate technology into legal work and ensure that we are providing value-added legal services to our clients; and
- (g) how we maintain our ethical and professional standards and promote our core values amidst the growing commercialisation of legal practice.

6 These challenges demand more than incremental adjustments; they call for a *fundamental reset* when thinking about how we will tackle these issues. The horizon of our imagination cannot be limited to marginal changes at the edges. It was with this imperative in mind that we brought together representatives from across the profession at the second Symposium – from our newest entrants to mid-career lawyers and extending to our senior leaders. Over the course of three days, we sought not only to distil the main challenges that we face as a profession, but also to co-create *meaningful, effective and lasting solutions* to meet these challenges.

7 Among these challenges, the sustainability of private practice emerges as a foremost priority that must be addressed, and it forms the focus of this article.⁴ This is an issue of the highest importance because a *strong practising profession forms the bedrock of our legal system*. Lawyers in private practice advise laypersons and businesses on their legal rights, support the courts in the fair and efficient administration of justice, and form a very important part of the pool of talent from which members of the Judiciary and the senior law officers of the State may be drawn. In all of these aspects, it can be readily appreciated that securing a strong practising profession will be crucial if we are to ensure the public's continued *access to the rule of law* and to secure their continued *trust and confidence in our justice system*.

4 For recent observations made by the author on this subject, see Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, "Reimagining the Rule of Law: A Renewed Conception", speech at Conversations with the Community (20 September 2024) at paras 30–34; Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, "Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary: An Accessible and Values-Based Justice System", speech at the 37th LAWASIA Conference, Plenary Judicial Session – Beijing Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary (13 October 2024) at paras 14–25.

- 8 With that in mind, this article proceeds in three broad parts.
- (a) It will first discuss some *wider trends in our legal landscape* to set the context for the subsequent discussion.
 - (b) It will then focus on three broad areas that we ought to look at more closely to address the challenges that are before us.
 - (i) First, we must address the *mindsets* of lawyers and think of how we can develop a real commitment to instilling the right *culture* within our law firms. These are necessary steps that we must take to realise the full potential of the further interventions that may be needed.
 - (ii) Second, we must develop *concrete solutions* to help law firms implement sustainable workplace practices that respond directly to the pain points faced and felt by our younger colleagues.
 - (iii) Third, we should consider how we can better leverage on *generative AI* to make legal work more sustainable.
 - (c) Finally, this article will explain the vital need for a *collective commitment to action* as we seek to generate *new and innovative solutions* that can reasonably accommodate the interests of as many stakeholders as possible.

II. Wider trends in the legal landscape

A. Proliferation of opportunities

9 The sustainability of private practice is a challenge that must be considered against the backdrop of wider trends that are reshaping our legal landscape. The first of these is the *proliferation of opportunities* that are available to our younger lawyers today. We see this in several notable ways.

10 First, there has been a significant influx of *international law firms* following the liberalisation of our legal services sector at the turn of the century. These international firms have played an essential role in helping to establish Singapore as a leading centre for legal services. They are drawn to our market in part because of our pool of bright young talent which they find highly attractive. With their financial strength and global reach, they are able to offer remuneration packages to our junior lawyers that can be significantly higher than those offered by domestic law firms, at least in the initial years.

11 Second, there has been a considerable increase in the number of *in-house opportunities* in our legal market. In 2015, there were around 2,800 in-house counsel in Singapore. Just a decade later in 2025, that number has almost *doubled* – there are now approximately 4,900 in-house counsel in Singapore.⁵ As the primary counsel to our business community, they help ensure that Singapore remains a trusted, reliable and vibrant international business hub. Many of our young talent are drawn to these opportunities partly because of the different professional experiences they offer and partly because the volume and pace of work is perceived as being somewhat less intense when compared to private practice. Many also afford more flexible working arrangements and some, especially the large corporations, can offer highly competitive packages.

12 Third, it has generally become easier for our young lawyers to pursue a *legal career outside Singapore*, given that many other jurisdictions have also liberalised their legal services sectors. By way of illustration, a Singapore-qualified advocate and solicitor can apply to become a solicitor in England and Wales without even having to leave Singapore, in that he/she can complete the written assessments at the first stage here, and then apply for an exemption from the second stage which focuses on practical legal skills, as long as certain requirements are met.⁶

13 Finally, there are today a plethora of *non-legal career paths* that are reasonably available to our young lawyers. These include opportunities in banking, consulting and big tech, just to name a few. These non-legal employers generally recognise the great value of a legal education and training, because it develops transferable competencies such as critical thinking and communication skills.

14 We should clearly celebrate the numerous options available to our young lawyers today. They reflect, above all, the high quality of our people and of their education and training. However, the same proliferation of opportunities presents a potential challenge because inevitably, as these opportunities absorb a larger proportion of our pipeline of talent, fewer will be left for the *practice of Singapore law*. Yet, as mentioned above, a strong and robust practising profession is a vital necessity to safeguard the rule of law and to ensure that it functions well, and this point takes on additional significance in Singapore given the relatively small size of our profession to begin with. We must therefore pay special attention to trends that specifically affect the practising profession and ensure that it remains attractive to young talent. It is to these trends that this article now turns.

5 These statistics are maintained by the Singapore Academy of Law (“SAL”).

6 Solicitors Regulation Authority, “SQE Exemptions” (updated 4 June 2025).

B. *The evolving practice of law*

(1) *Commercialisation of legal practice*

15 The first notable trend is the *commercialisation of legal practice*. In an increasingly competitive environment, law firms – particularly those that are large and financially successful – seem to be operating more like high-performing business enterprises rather than community-based purveyors of justice. Robert Giuffra, the Co-Chair of Sullivan & Cromwell LLP, summed this up in his observation that “[t]here’s a trend in the profession to turn law firms into investment banks with a me culture, not a we culture”.⁷ There are a few ways in which we see this trend.

16 First, we have seen the rise of a special class of “superstar lawyers”, especially in the US. They are highly successful lawyers who are subject to aggressive bidding wars from large law firms, “bought out” from their employment contracts, and offered staggering high annual compensation packages that have been compared to those of NBA superstars – in some instances, to the tune of more than US\$25m.⁸

17 Second, we have seen a rise in the trend that has been described as “quiet cutting”, where young lawyers are *effectively* asked to leave their law firms without being formally told to do so. Again, this trend appears to be particularly prominent in the US and it has been attributed at least in part to the fixation on the billable hour requirement.⁹ What was once intended to be a transparent technique for charging clients has, in many US firms, become the *primary means* by which firms evaluate the performance of their associates.¹⁰ When these associates fail to meet their billable targets, or are perceived to be underperforming in other ways, some are placed on “performance improvement plans”, which have been described as “instruments of controlled attrition, allowing firms to reshape their talent

7 “Bob Giuffra Featured in Daily Journal’s ‘Leading Commercial Litigators 2025’”, *Sullivan & Cromwell LLP* (7 February 2025).

8 Sujeet Indap, “Soaring Pay Rates Fuel the Rise of the Superstar Lawyer”, *Financial Times* (25 June 2025); Maureen Farrell & Anupreeta Das, “Pay for Lawyers Is So High People Are Comparing It to the N.B.A.”, *The New York Times* (1 July 2024).

9 Travis Whitsitt, “‘Quiet Cutting’ in BigLaw: The Rise of Performance-Based Departures”, *Vault* (26 March 2025).

10 MH Hoeflich, “The Craft of the Law: An Essay After Forty Years As a Law Teacher” (2022) 70(3) *Kansas Law Review* 483 at 497.

pools without resorting to public layoffs or damaging their recruitment brands”.¹¹ Indeed, the statistics are striking.¹²

- (a) For every formal layoff in the US legal services sector in 2024, there were three performance-based departures.
- (b) The use of formal performance improvement plans has more than doubled since 2021.
- (c) Nearly 70% of lawyers who were placed on such plans left their firms within six months.

18 These are just two aspects of modern legal practice that underscore its increasing focus on short-term profits and the bottom line, a trend that is likely to intensify. Although the two specific developments are not as prevalent in Singapore as they are in the US, the broader trend of the commercialisation of legal practice has undoubtedly affected our law firms, especially since many of them must compete in the global legal market. While our law firms must remain profitable in this increasingly global competitive field, this need not and should not come at the expense of our younger colleagues. The real concern is that in environments that place an *excessive* focus on profitability and billable hours, it is likely to be more difficult for young lawyers to find seniors who are willing and able to inculcate and pass on *values*, who will *mentor* them and support their *training and development*, and who will help them safely navigate the thorny *ethical issues* that are more likely to arise in a culture that prioritises profit maximisation.

19 Furthermore, such environments are more likely to lead to *dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the practice of law*, because of a combination of several factors: (a) first, the perception that the financial rewards in law firms are being distributed inequitably; (b) second, the constant anxiety about the security of one’s job; and (c) third, perhaps most importantly, the struggle to derive purpose and meaning from work, when it is viewed principally through the length of one’s timesheet. All of these factors have an obvious bearing on the sustainability of private practice, a point that will be elaborated below.

(2) *The increasing demands of legal practice*

20 Another trend affecting the practice of law is its *increasingly intense and demanding nature*. For one, the growing *complexity* of legal

11 Travis Whitsitt, “Quiet Cutting’ in BigLaw: The Rise of Performance-Based Departures”, *Vault* (26 March 2025).

12 Travis Whitsitt, “Quiet Cutting’ in BigLaw: The Rise of Performance-Based Departures”, *Vault* (26 March 2025).

work has made practice much more challenging. While this author has previously addressed the complexification of disputes,¹³ this trend applies equally to transactional work. The economic tariffs introduced by the US administration in 2025 are an obvious example of the additional complexities that corporate lawyers must now navigate, alongside emerging areas such as trade sanctions, environmental, social and governance regulation, and data protection and privacy laws.¹⁴

21 Apart from its growing complexity, there is also the increasing *pace* of legal work, accompanied by the seeming need for “constant connectivity”.¹⁵ With clients paying higher legal fees, their expectations of their lawyers have also increased, not only in terms of their quality of work but also in terms of their responsiveness.¹⁶ Given the increasingly competitive legal market, it is understandable why lawyers feel compelled to meet those expectations, even if these may sometimes feel unreasonable. The confluence of these factors – the rapid pace of work coupled with its growing complexity – has fundamentally transformed the complexion of legal work.

(3) *Reduced opportunities for young lawyers to develop their craft*

22 The next trend that this article discusses reflects both the commercialisation of legal practice and its increasing demands, and that is the *significantly reduced opportunities that are available to young lawyers to develop their craft*.

23 This is particularly so for young litigation lawyers. Over the past decades, cases have grown in complexity and scale. The point is well illustrated by some statistics from the London Commercial Court (“LCC”). According to its annual report published in 2005, the vast majority of claims dealt in the court at the time were for sums “well in

13 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Complexification of Disputes in the Digital Age”, speech at Goff Lecture 2021 (9 November 2021) at paras 3–5; Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Transformation of Litigation and the Litigator of the Future”, keynote address at the Litigation Conference 2024 (3 April 2024) at paras 12–15.

14 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “A Lawyer’s Craft in a Changing World”, speech at opening conference of the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme (21 May 2025) (“JLP Speech”) at para 6.

15 Judy Wajcman & Emily Rose, “Constant Connectivity: Rethinking Interruptions at Work” (2011) 32(7) *Organization Studies* 941.

16 Meraiah Foley et al, “‘Everything Now, All the Time’: The Connectivity Paradox and Gender Equality in the Legal Profession” (2024) 39(3) *New Technology, Work and Employment* 362 at 372.

excess of £1 million”, with the largest claim for £1bn.¹⁷ Two decades later, the LCC reported that the value of claims it deals with are now “generally well above £5 million” – a nearly fivefold increase – with several cases exceeding £1bn commencing each year.¹⁸ These figures are consistent with an observation that was made in the *Financial Times* in 2024 that the commercial courts in London “are grappling with some of the highest value and most complex cases in English legal history”.¹⁹ These cases also helped the 50 largest litigation practices in the UK generate £6.1bn in revenue in 2024, a 48% increase from just five years earlier.²⁰ Notably, the median time to judgment in the LCC has risen from 450 days in 2020 to 786 days in 2024.²¹

24 These statistics demonstrate that disputes have grown in complexity and scale, a trend that is equally evident in Singapore. As a result, the cost of legal proceedings has risen and clients who pay significant legal fees will generally prefer senior lawyers to have conduct of their matters. This naturally tends to result in young advocates having far fewer opportunities to develop and perfect their craft. At a systemic level, this lack of opportunities may affect the development of the quality of advocacy over time as well as the renewal of the Bar. Indeed, there is no substitute for being on one’s feet and making important judgment calls while engaging directly with the Bench, fellow counsel and witnesses. Moreover, from the perspective of our young litigators, this lack of opportunities can also exacerbate the disillusionment that was touched on earlier, because of the sense that their primary role, even at a fairly senior level, remains largely confined to research and administrative work, which is not what they might have envisioned when they decided to pursue a career in advocacy.

25 Over the years, we have introduced various initiatives to address this growing challenge, including: (a) the signing of a pledge by 21 law practices to provide more oral advocacy opportunities for their young colleagues; (b) the launch of the Guide On the Development of Junior Civil Commercial Litigators in Oral Advocacy, to provide qualitative

17 Judiciary of England and Wales, *Report of the Commercial Court and Admiralty Court* (2004–2005) at p 5.

18 Business and Property Courts, Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, *The Commercial Court Report 2023–2024 (Including the Admiralty Court Report)* (February 2025) at p 5.

19 Alistair Gray, “Rise of ‘Mega Trials’ Fuels Fee Bonanza for London’s Top Lawyers”, *Financial Times* (10 October 2024).

20 Alistair Gray, “Rise of ‘Mega Trials’ Fuels Fee Bonanza for London’s Top Lawyers”, *Financial Times* (10 October 2024).

21 “How Litigation Data and eDiscovery Drive Successful Commercial Dispute Strategies”, *Solomonic* (4 April 2025).

and quantitative markers against which junior advocates can benchmark their progress; and (c) the amendment of the Supreme Court Practice Directions 2021 (“Practice Directions”) to strongly encourage lead counsel “to apprise the client of the potential benefits of allocating certain advocacy tasks to junior assisting counsel”²² and to require, unless the court otherwise orders, that junior assisting counsel deliver the oral opening statement.²³

26 But the sense is that there is more that can and should be done. Hence, we have introduced further amendments to our Practice Directions to provide junior litigators with a greater role in oral advocacy. Among other things, for appeals in the General Division of the High Court and all hearings before the Appellate Division of the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Court of Three Judges, junior assisting counsel are now “*ordinarily expected*” [emphasis added] to make part of the oral submissions.²⁴ As for proceedings in the Singapore International Commercial Court and other matters in the General Division of the High Court, the SICC Procedural Guide and the Practice Directions provide that lead counsel are “*strongly encouraged* to give junior assisting counsel more opportunities for oral advocacy at a hearing” [emphasis added].²⁵

27 We hope that these changes will make a concrete and meaningful difference to our young litigators. But for these initiatives to achieve their intended outcomes, we will need our senior colleagues to embrace them in the right spirit, and to convince their clients that it is ultimately in *their* interests for certain advocacy tasks to be delegated to junior counsel, because it reduces legal costs and allows lead counsel to focus on the main advocacy tasks at hand.

C. *Sustainability of private practice*

28 Having outlined some of the wider trends in our legal landscape, this article returns to the central concern of sustainability. We should recognise that these trends do not operate in isolation. Instead, to borrow a phrase from President Tharman Shanmugaratnam that was used in another context,²⁶ the trends have coalesced to form a “perfect long

22 Supreme Court Practice Directions 2021 para 96(1A).

23 Supreme Court Practice Directions 2021 paras 96(1)–96(1A).

24 Supreme Court Practice Directions 2021 paras 112A(1), 117B(1) and 168A(1).

25 Supreme Court Practice Directions 2021 para 96(1A); SICC Procedural Guide paras 7.4.2 and 14.1.2.

26 Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Senior Minister and Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, “Responding to a Perfect Long Storm”, speech at the IMAS-Bloomberg Investment Conference (9 March 2022); Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Role of the Courts in Our
(cont'd on the next page)

storm” of challenges affecting the sustainability of private practice, in that they are complex, long-term and structural in nature, and therefore unlikely to admit of quick or easy solutions.

29 On the one hand, we have the proliferation of opportunities that was described earlier. Given the explosion of choices, we must acknowledge that our young colleagues today are highly mobile and will generally not hesitate to leave their place of practice if it fails to meet their reasonable needs, expectations and aspirations.

30 On the other hand, we have the trends affecting private practice itself, including its *growing commercialisation*, its *increasingly intense and demanding nature*, and the *reduced opportunities for our young colleagues to develop and hone their craft*. These factors can contribute to our juniors losing their sense of mission in the law, which is then exacerbated by a perception that the financial rewards in private practice are being distributed inequitably, and that they receive inadequate mentorship and training. When enough of these forces come together, it is perhaps inevitable that some of our younger colleagues will seek alternative careers, whether within or outside the legal field.

31 All of this appears to be reflected in the findings from recent surveys.²⁷ When we surveyed the applicants at the inaugural Mass Admission Ceremony in 2025, and at the Mass Call in 2024, around 60% of the respondents indicated that they were likely to move out of *legal practice* within the next five years,²⁸ so as to pursue a career in in-house legal services, academia, or employment with other legal service providers. Within that same time period, slightly more than a third indicated that they were likely to leave the *legal profession* entirely.

32 Notably, when the respondents were asked to indicate *why* they were inclined to leave their current place of practice, their responses matched the challenges outlined above. The predominant reason was that of excessive workload or poor work-life balance, which was cited by around 80% of the respondents who were considering leaving their present jobs.²⁹ The next five most commonly cited reasons were:

Society – Safeguarding Society”, speech at Conversations with the Community (21 September 2023) at para 30.

27 JLP Speech at para 11.

28 In this context, legal practice includes employment in the Judicial Service, the Legal Service and the Public Defender’s Office.

29 That is, 79.9% of the respondents surveyed at the inaugural Mass Admission Ceremony in 2025 (“2025 Survey”) and 81.2% of the respondents surveyed at the Mass Call in 2024 (“2024 Survey”) who were considering leaving their present jobs.

(a) a higher salary or compensation package elsewhere;³⁰ (b) the impact work had on their mental wellbeing;³¹ (c) poor workplace culture;³² (d) a lack of flexibility in their working arrangements;³³ and (e) a lack of guidance or mentorship.³⁴

33 Significantly, only around 20% of the respondents indicated that their inclination to leave was due to an interest in joining the in-house profession,³⁵ or in pursuing a non-legal career.³⁶ This suggests that our young lawyers are inclined to leave practice principally because of *push* factors rather than *pull* factors. Their desire to leave appears to stem *primarily* from a growing dissatisfaction with legal practice rather than a genuine interest in pursuing other career opportunities outside private practice.

34 To be clear, the sustainability of private practice is not an issue that is unique to Singapore. In 2022, the International Bar Association reported the results of a global survey of over 3,000 young lawyers, which revealed that within five years, slightly more than half were likely to leave their current legal job, and a fifth were likely to leave the profession entirely.³⁷ Among the latter group, 41% cited concerns over workload, and 39% cited the impact that work had on their mental wellness.³⁸ Similar concerns have been expressed in jurisdictions such as the UK,³⁹ the US,⁴⁰ and Australia.⁴¹

30 This reason was cited by 50.2% and 59.4% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

31 This reason was cited by 52% and 44.7% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

32 This reason was cited by 35.4% and 40.6% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

33 This reason was cited by 36.2% and 38.6% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

34 This reason was cited by 23.1% and 31% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

35 This being 21.8% and 18.3% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

36 This being 23.6% and 20.3% of the respondents in the 2025 and 2024 Surveys, respectively, who were considering leaving their present jobs.

37 Legal Policy & Research Unit, International Bar Association, *IBA Young Lawyers' Report* (2022) at p 18.

38 Legal Policy & Research Unit, International Bar Association, *IBA Young Lawyers' Report* (2022) at p 20.

39 Jane Croft, "Starting Salaries Are £180,000 – But Do Young Lawyers Believe the Hours, Stress and Burnout Are Worth It?," *The Guardian* (27 July 2024).

40 "Bloomberg Law Releases Attorney Workload Survey Insights and Webinar on Work-Life Balance Solutions," *Bloomberg Law* (15 April 2025).

41 Maxim Shanahan, "Top-Tier Firms 'Exploiting Young Lawyers Over Long Hours'," *The Australian Financial Review* (8 May 2025).

35 Nor is the sustainability of private practice an issue that is new to us. Indeed, it was specifically highlighted almost two decades ago by the Committee to Develop the Singapore Legal Sector, which this author had the privilege of serving on.⁴² The Committee noted that several surveys then had found that the *most significant challenge* faced by young lawyers was the demands of legal practice, particularly the heavy workload, the pace of work and the long hours.⁴³

36 If the sustainability of private practice was already flagged as a challenge then, it is safe to say that it has *intensified* considerably in recent years. This is also reflected in the *growing number of young lawyers leaving private practice at an earlier stage of their careers*. In 2022, the late Mr Adrian Tan, the former President of the Law Society, announced at the Opening of the Legal Year that a record high of 310 junior lawyers with less than five years of post-qualification experience (“PQE”) had left the profession in 2021.⁴⁴ When we examined the data more recently, we found two notable trends. First, our younger lawyers are leaving private practice for in-house roles earlier in their careers. As of 2025, the proportion of in-house counsel at the 2PQE, 3PQE and 4PQE marks has become sizeable, standing at *around a quarter to a third of each cohort*.⁴⁵ Second, while our total population of lawyers increased from 2015 to 2025, the proportion of lawyers in private practice declined over that same period from around 57% to 50%.⁴⁶

37 It should be emphasised that these trends are not *inherently* problematic. Lawyers who move from private practice to in-house roles continue to play a vital role in the administration of justice,⁴⁷ and in many ways we should see such movement as a circulation of talent *within* the legal sector. But these trends become concerning if they suggest that private practice has become less sustainable and less attractive to our younger colleagues, especially when they are seen together with the survey results mentioned earlier.

42 *Report of the Committee to Develop the Singapore Legal Sector: Final Report* (September 2007) at paras 3.38–3.63.

43 *Report of the Committee to Develop the Singapore Legal Sector: Final Report* (September 2007) at paras 3.39–3.42.

44 Adrian Tan, President of Law Society of Singapore, speech at the Opening of the Legal Year 2022” (10 January 2022) at paras 39–40.

45 These statistics are maintained by the SAL.

46 These statistics are maintained by the SAL.

47 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Centrality of Trust in the Legal Profession”, speech at the Mass Admission Ceremony (21 April 2025) at paras 21–23.

38 This is a development that we should all take note with concern, for at least four reasons:

(a) First, the most obvious consequence relates to the *attraction, retention and development of talent in the Bar*. If the number of practising lawyers continues to drop, this has implications for access to justice, the renewal of the Bar and potentially the quality and diversity of the Bench, all of which have been touched on above.

(b) Second, lawyers in firms with unsustainable workplace practices are more likely to face *mental wellness issues*. This too appears to be a growing challenge in our profession. A survey in 2021 found that three in ten of the respondent lawyers in Singapore screened positive for depression, and four in ten for anxiety.⁴⁸ Similar findings have been made in other jurisdictions.⁴⁹

(c) Third, there are also studies which have found that sustainable workplaces have a direct correlation with *employee productivity and firm performance*. McKinsey analysed 1,800 large companies across sectors and found that the companies that performed better and showed more resilience over the long haul were those that prioritised “organisational capital”, which they described as the management practices, systems and culture within each company.⁵⁰

(d) Lastly, unsustainable practices may result in what is known as “*ethical fading*”,⁵¹ where high pressure work environments contribute to employees making judgments that are not in keeping with high professional standards.

39 For these compelling reasons, the sustainability of private practice is a critical issue that merits our close attention and careful thought. The remainder of this article discusses three broad areas that we should explore in thinking of how to address this challenge.

48 Mindful Business Singapore, *Lawyers’ Sustainability Report 2023* (22 June 2023) at pp 2–6.

49 In the UK, 69% of lawyers indicated that they experienced mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, in 2020: see LawCare, *Life in the Law 2020/21* at p 19. See also, “Today’s Lawyers and Mental Health: Mental Health Awareness Month”, *Thomson Reuters* (16 May 2024).

50 McKinsey Global Institute, *Performance Through People: Transforming Human Capital Into Competitive Advantage* (February 2023).

51 Ann E Tenbrunsel & David M Messick, “Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behaviour” (2004) 17 *Social Justice Research* 223.

III. Mindsets and culture

40 The first area that we should consider is how we might better shape the mindsets of lawyers and think of ways to develop a real commitment to instilling the right culture within our law firms. The reality is that the implementation of policies to promote sustainable practices will be less effective if we do not work on these fundamental steps.

A. Mindsets

41 At the Opening Conference of the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme in 2025, this author suggested that young lawyers should think of the practice of law as a craft and embrace *craftsmanship* as an overarching guiding principle for their careers.⁵² This encompasses three essential elements: (a) first, they should make a *long-term commitment* to the endeavour of perfecting their craft; (b) second, they should take *pride* in their craft and strive for *excellence* without compromise; and (c) third, they should derive *purpose and meaning* from the very process of practising and perfecting their craft.⁵³

42 An *anterior* point to this commitment to craftsmanship is the *sense of mission* that young lawyers ought to have when coming into the law. The practice of law is, at its core, a mission-based endeavour. We should recognise and embrace the fact that all lawyers are engaged in the shared mission of administering justice – a high calling that transcends our individual ambitions, hopes and desires.⁵⁴ This is a fundamental attitude or disposition that will help lawyers remain committed to the law over the long haul, especially when the going gets tough.

43 But we should recognise that this sense of mission and commitment to the law as a craft is not something that law firms can cultivate by themselves. We should therefore aim for a broader-based effort by reaching out to aspiring lawyers, even before they enter university, to ensure that they enter the law with the right mindset and the right expectations. We can do this by *effectively communicating the values of our profession*, through wider outreach to pre-university students, or through opportunities for these students to be exposed to *pro bono* activities, perhaps through more legal internships. These efforts should then be reinforced by our universities, which should not only

52 JLP Speech at para 2.

53 JLP Speech at para 3.

54 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Singapore Academy of Law: An Essential Dedication to Honour and Service”, speech at the Singapore Academy of Law Annual Lecture 2018 (11 October 2018) at para 10.

strengthen their engagement with the legal industry, but also reflect on how their courses can be enhanced to instil in students a sense of mission in the law.⁵⁵ As for law firms, they have an important role in this shared endeavour. In particular, they should be more intentional and deliberate in ensuring that young lawyers are exposed to meaningful and purposeful work that resonates with their core calling and sense of mission.

B. Culture

44 Beyond individual mindsets, we must also find ways to develop a real commitment to instilling a positive and inclusive workplace culture within each law firm. This should be underpinned by two core pillars:

(a) The first is that of *openness and respect*. We must establish channels that will facilitate honest two-way conversations on how we can improve the working conditions of young lawyers.

(b) The second pillar is that of *mutual trust* between young lawyers and their supervisors. On this point, it is worth noting that there has been empirical research that has drawn a direct connection between mutual trust and work outcomes.⁵⁶

45 While it is relatively easy to identify these core pillars, it is more challenging to implement policies that can actually and noticeably improve workplace culture. This is especially so when the seniors are the ones who bear the primary responsibility for setting the appropriate culture within their law firms, and yet they would have had their formative experiences practising in an environment that is vastly different from what our juniors expect today. To bridge this gap, we should embrace the need for leadership training in the legal profession. This is an area that the Law Society and the Singapore Academy of Law (“SAL”) are already looking into and working on, and they have revised the content of courses such as the Legal Practice Management Course and the SAL-INSEAD Legal Leadership and Strategy Programme. But we should consider scaling up such efforts across the profession to ensure that our seniors are equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills to instil a positive and inclusive workplace culture.

55 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “23rd Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration: Law and Medicine: Professions of Honour, Service and Excellence”, speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 51st Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Medicine at para 25.

56 Tae-Yeol Kim, Jie Wang & Junsong Chen, “Mutual Trust Between Leader and Subordinate and Employee Outcomes” (2018) 149 *Journal of Business Ethics* 945.

IV. Concrete solutions

46 The second broad area that we should direct our attention to is how we can help law firms implement sustainable workplace practices that respond directly to the pain points that are faced by young lawyers. We need these interventions *not* because our younger colleagues today are less resilient or less willing to work hard. Rather, to reiterate what has been discussed, these interventions are necessary because the pressures that affect the profession today have resulted in the dramatic transformation of legal practice.

47 Notably, several commendable initiatives already exist in this space:⁵⁷

(a) First, a group of Singapore lawyers has formed the Mindful Business Singapore, which advocates the adoption of the Mindful Business Charter or similar initiatives by the legal profession in Singapore.

(b) Second, Temasek Holdings (“Temasek”) has launched its own set of Lawyer Sustainability Guidelines. These guidelines are not only adopted by Temasek internally, but they have also been adopted by ten of Temasek’s key law firm partners for matters involving Temasek.

(c) Third, the Law Society has released a guidance note that aims to promote sustainable workplace practices in the context of litigation.⁵⁸

48 Two other initiatives were introduced by the SAL at the second Symposium.

49 The first is a draft set of Sustainability Principles that was developed in response to the feedback gathered during the focus group discussions that led to the Symposium. The SAL gathered further input on the Sustainability Principles at the Symposium, and they will be refined before they are disseminated to law firms for their possible adoption. Broadly, the Sustainability Principles comprise three key planks:

(a) First, smart meetings and communications. This calls for meetings that are planned properly and run efficiently, leveraging on the appropriate use of smart technology.

57 Ethics and Professional Standards Committee, *Final Report of the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee* (8 January 2025) at para 176.

58 The Law Society of Singapore, “Guidance Note 8.9.1: Sustainable Practice Initiative” (20 August 2024).

(b) Second, supporting rest and growth. This calls on firms to provide resources to promote mental wellness, and to set aside protected time for training and mentoring.

(c) Third, mindful delegation. This entails providing our junior colleagues with clear instructions that include sufficient context, and setting deadlines that are realistic, transparent and appropriately negotiable.

50 The second initiative that was introduced is the Living Case Study. This is a dynamic and open-access platform that will capture the ideas, insights and commitments generated from the Symposium. Led by our younger colleagues, the platform will share updates and invite continuous feedback and contributions on shaping the future of the profession. In this way, we hope that the platform will help sustain the momentum for further changes and set the agenda for future iterations of the Symposium.

51 These initiatives were announced at the second Symposium alongside the launch of the Mindful Business Movement, which represents a collective commitment to improve the sustainability of the profession.⁵⁹ The Mindful Business Movement aims to drive awareness and adoption of the Sustainability Principles, support their practical implementation in legal workplaces, and promote the mental wellness and well-being of members of the profession.

52 Apart from the Sustainability Principles and the Living Case Study, the SAL will develop other resources to support the Mindful Business Movement. These include three upcoming initiatives:

(a) First, the SAL will develop a strategy playbook to help upcoming and newly appointed leaders consider, reflect and evaluate their strengths and their roles in the leadership and management of law practices.

(b) Second, the SAL will develop a series of Five-Step Guides to flesh out the Sustainability Principles, beginning with the need for mindful delegation and mindful communications.

59 The founding partners of the Mindful Business Movement are the SAL, the Mindful Business Charter (UK), the Mindful Business Singapore, Temasek Holdings and WorkWell Leaders. Twenty-two partners, comprising law firms, legal departments and government institutions, have pledged their support for the movement.

(c) Third, the SAL will work with its strategic partners to support the adoption of AI by law practices, such as by organising hands-on technology clinics.

V. Generative artificial intelligence

53 That leads to the third area that this article will discuss – generative AI.

54 Since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, the capabilities of generative AI have developed at an astonishing rate. In July 2025, OpenAI launched “ChatGPT agent”, which is described as a unified agentic system that *combines* the earlier breakthroughs in AI – its ability to interact with websites and to synthesise information, and its conversational fluency.⁶⁰ ChatGPT agent is said to be able to complete online tasks on behalf of the user through a process that involves *reasoning* and *action*. It can navigate websites intelligently, filter results, prompt the user to log in securely when necessary, run code, conduct analysis, and even generate editable slideshows and spreadsheets that summarise its findings.⁶¹ Less than a month later, in August 2025, OpenAI released GPT-5, which was described as its “best AI system” that represented “a significant leap in intelligence over all [its] previous models, featuring state-of-the-art performance across coding, math, writing, health, visual perception and more”.⁶²

55 Significantly, generative AI has the tremendous potential to reshape the delivery of legal work. We see this in the landmark study that was published in early 2025 by Vals AI, a US-based company that evaluates AI tools.⁶³ Through a series of real-world tasks, the study compared the performance of four legal AI tools against actual lawyers. *All four tools* outperformed the lawyers in the summarisation of documents and the analysis of transcripts, and Harvey Assistant, the platform developed by the eponymous legal technology start-up, even outperformed the lawyers in two additional areas – data extraction as well as document review and analysis.

56 These results inform us that generative AI *will* transform the legal services sector. Rather than viewing AI adoption as a binary

60 “Introducing ChatGPT Agent: Bridging Research and Action”, OpenAI (17 July 2025).

61 “Introducing ChatGPT Agent: Bridging Research and Action”, OpenAI (17 July 2025).

62 “Introducing GPT-5”, OpenAI (7 August 2025).

63 See “Vals Legal AI Report” at <<https://www.vals.ai/vlair>> (accessed 25 August 2025).

choice between humans and machines, we ought instead to harness the enormous potential of AI when human expertise is augmented by AI capabilities. Conceptually, we can think of this in three distinct parts: (a) first, the need to disaggregate AI's capabilities to identify its optimal applications in legal practice; (b) second, the willingness to engage in practical experimentation to better understand these applications; and (c) third, the importance of developing the relevant frameworks to ensure effective human-AI collaboration.

57 John B Quinn, the Executive Chairman and Founding Partner of Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan LLP, has suggested that it may soon be regarded as malpractice – at least in the US – if litigators do not use AI when preparing for trials.⁶⁴ Some have also suggested that generative AI will fundamentally disrupt the traditional billable hour model, resulting in alternative fee structures becoming more common.⁶⁵ But leaving aside these predictions, what is certain is that generative AI can help our younger colleagues execute certain routine tasks more *efficiently* and at higher *quality*, and it can therefore make legal work more sustainable. Hence, we should encourage equipping the profession with the knowledge and skills to enable the widespread, informed and effective use of generative AI. It is to this end that the SAL has, in collaboration with Microsoft, developed a foundational course on generative AI and prompt engineering, and it has also released a guide and instructional video on how lawyers can obtain better results from large language models.⁶⁶

58 Beyond this, generative AI has two serious implications for the careers of our younger colleagues.

59 The first relates to their *training*. Traditionally, it was through the *repeated* performance of basic legal tasks, such as document review and drafting, that juniors developed their technical competencies and their basic lawyering skills.⁶⁷ But these learning opportunities will become more scarce given that these are precisely the same areas that generative AI tools excel in. Nonetheless, it is essential that our young lawyers continue to develop these competencies and skills, because it would

64 “Law Disrupted: Winning at Trial With AI”, *Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan* (1 May 2025).

65 Nancy B Rapoport & Joseph R Tianò Jr, “Fighting the Hypothetical: Why Law Firms Should Rethink the Billable Hour in the Generative AI Era” (2025) 20(2) *Washington Journal of Law, Technology & Arts* 41.

66 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “The Legal Profession – A Community of Learned Friends”, speech at the Mass Call 2024 (19 August 2024) at para 12.

67 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, welcome address at the SAL 35th Anniversary Dinner (22 November 2023) at para 9.

otherwise be impossible for them to meaningfully evaluate the output produced by these tools.

60 We must therefore reimagine the way in which we train our young lawyers. In particular, we must adopt a more structured and intentional approach to how we train them, which is why the SAL launched the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme in 2025. We should also explore other innovative solutions. For instance, generative AI tools might themselves be used to help train our young lawyers. Three Crowns and CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, has launched an AI-powered cross-examination training platform, which “will allow users to practice in realistic scenarios tailored to different fact patterns, receive detailed and actionable feedback, and customise their training”.⁶⁸ This is a fine example of the kind of innovative solutions that we will need in this new operating environment.

61 Apart from this, generative AI will reshape the expectations of what is needed for successful lawyering. In short, there will be a premium on *human skills*, such as critical thinking, the art of persuasion, and the ability to integrate technology into legal work, and also on the *human touch*, which refers to the ability to form meaningful relationships with clients and to gain their trust and confidence.

62 The growing emphasis on these core qualities will require a commitment to more thoughtful, personalised and sustained mentorship, since these qualities are invariably better caught rather than they are taught. This is something that our seniors should embrace, because it is through such higher-order work that we can help instil in our younger colleagues a *sense of purpose and a passion for the law*, which are the key drivers of a successful and sustainable career. Yet, a survey of our young lawyers in 2023 found that only one in ten had experienced a structured mentorship programme.⁶⁹ We can and must do better.

VI. A collective commitment to action

63 This article has discussed three broad areas that we should look at more closely to address the sustainability of private practice. It is important to recognise that as with many of the other challenges the profession faces (such as in legal education and legal training),

68 Three Crowns, “Three Crowns and CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics Announce Launch of AI Powered Cross Examination Training Platform” (12 February 2025).

69 Ethics and Professional Standards Committee, *Final Report of the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee* (8 January 2025) at para 51.

the sustainability of private practice represents a “wicked” problem.⁷⁰ Coined by design theorists in the 1970s, this expression describes multi-dimensional problems that arise from multiple causes, and which involve many moving parts. By their very nature, “wicked” problems cannot be resolved by conventional straight-line thinking or single-actor one-shot solutions.

64 Another useful framework to understand these problems is the distinction between *technical* challenges and *adaptive* challenges.⁷¹ Technical challenges are those where the problem is well understood and the range of solutions is known, whereas adaptive challenges are those where both the scale and scope of the problem are poorly understood or ill-defined, and the solutions are, in essence, unknown, and have to be worked out as we go along. The most pressing challenges faced by the profession fall mainly into the latter category.

65 How should we address “wicked” problems or adaptive challenges? The key is to recognise the need to engage *multiple stakeholders* to understand the problem, and then to commit to working together to generate *meaningful, effective and lasting solutions* that can *reasonably accommodate the interests* of as many of these stakeholders as possible.

66 This will admittedly not be easy work. But instead of being cowed by what is ahead of us, we should resolve to step forward and have honest conversations, in order to find new and innovative solutions to address these issues. Returning to the sustainability of private practice, the reality is that the measures and initiatives introduced at the second Symposium, along with the further initiatives that will be introduced soon, are only the initial steps. At a more fundamental level, we must recognise the need for a reset and have the foresight and courage to be willing to rethink how our law firms are run and organised, and how our younger colleagues are managed and developed. Furthermore, we must also commit to creating structures that will underscore the fact that the legal profession *is* a community, where the seniors care about the future of our juniors, and are committed to making sure that they will have as rewarding and enriching a career as they have had.

70 Horst W J Rittel & Melvin M Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” (1973) 4 *Policy Sciences* 155.

71 Ronald A Heifetz & Donald L Laurie, “The Work of Leadership” (1997) 75(1) *Harvard Business Review* 124.

VII. Conclusion

67 The sustainability of private practice is an urgent challenge that requires our collective efforts. While the task ahead might seem daunting, we should be optimistic that this is a challenge that we can and will overcome as a profession. We are committed to bringing together all our stakeholders – the Ministry of Law, the Attorney-General’s Chambers, the Bar, the universities, the Judiciary and others – to better understand the challenge and the full implications of all that is upon us, and to find and develop cohesive new ways to address them. Indeed, our profession’s greatest strength has always been our remarkable ability to come together to unite in common purpose for the sake of our society and our greater good. This is ultimately a unique aspect of the Singapore way which has made and kept us exceptional. It is this unwavering spirit of collaboration and resilience which has allowed us to address the challenges we have already faced – from navigating the unprecedented disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic to clearing the substantial backlog of cases that confronted our courts decades ago.

68 The year 2025 marks the 60th year of Singapore’s independence. While there is much to celebrate on this milestone, we should not lose sight of the *foundational role of the rule of law in the building of our nation*.⁷² The rule of law has played a central role in our economic development, and ensured the peaceful coexistence of our multi-racial and multi-religious society. Yet, for the rule of law to be brought to life and to serve as the bedrock of our society, it requires a strong, dedicated and vibrant practising profession at its core. That is why our shared endeavour to create a more sustainable and values-based practising profession is, in the final analysis, one that is especially meaningful, rewarding and worthwhile.

72 Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, Supreme Court of Singapore, “Reimagining the Rule of Law: A Renewed Conception”, speech at Conversations with the Community (20 September 2024) at paras 15–20.