

LEGAL PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM 2025

OPENING ADDRESS

“The Future of the Legal Profession: A Shared Vision”

Tuesday, 29 July 2025

The Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon*

Supreme Court of Singapore

The Honourable the Attorney-General Mr Lucien Wong SC,

Justice Valerie Thean, Co-Chair of the Singapore Academy of Law’s
Professional Affairs and Membership Committee,

Professor David Wilkins, Vice Dean for Global Initiatives on the Legal
Profession at Harvard Law School,

Members of the Senate,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

* I am deeply grateful to my law clerks, Hannah Tan and Hariharan Ganesan, and my colleagues, Assistant Registrars Ong Kye Jing and Bryan Ching, for all their assistance in the research for and preparation of this address.

I. Introduction

1. A very good morning to all of you. I am delighted to address you today at the second Legal Profession Symposium (or “**Symposium**”). Let me first thank Justice Thean for her remarks, and the entire team at the Singapore Academy of Law (or “**SAL**”) for the tremendous effort that they have put into planning and organising this event. Let me also thank each of you for taking the time to join us today, especially our younger colleagues for whom we have conceptualised and designed this year’s Symposium.

2. As you just heard from Justice Thean, the focus of last year’s Symposium was on how we might better promote and enhance the values and standards of our profession.¹ This year, building on that foundation, our primary objective is to explore how we can sustain, strengthen and reimagine *the future of the profession*. We hope that together, we can develop a *shared vision* that will resonate with *all* of us, one that pays particular attention to the reasonable needs, expectations and aspirations of our younger colleagues.

3. To help us in this significant and worthwhile endeavour, we have brought together representatives from across the profession – from our

¹ Justice Valerie Thean, Opening Remarks at Inaugural Legal Profession Symposium (7 October 2024) at para 2.

newest entrants to mid-career lawyers and extending to our senior leaders. We intend 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. And to this end, we are delighted to have with us my good friend, Professor David Wilkins, who will deliver the keynote address this morning and facilitate our discussions. Professor Wilkins is one of the world's foremost thinkers on issues relating to the legal profession, and we are deeply grateful that he has joined us in this important initiative.²

4. Let me also express my heartfelt appreciation to the Minister for Law and Second Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Edwin Tong SC, who will participate in a fireside chat later this afternoon. As one of our leading litigation lawyers prior to entering public service, and now serving as our Minister for Law, he is uniquely placed to speak about what the future holds for our profession, and we look forward to his insights and perspectives.

5. The future of the profession is a broad subject that spans many different topics. This morning, I wish to focus specifically on how we can better promote ***sustainable careers in private practice***, expanding on

² Financial Times, "Insiders and Outsiders Who Have Reshaped Legal Work" (25 June 2025).

some observations that I have made in recent speeches.³ I consider this to be an issue of the highest importance because a *strong practising profession forms the bedrock of our legal system*. Lawyers in private practice advise lay persons 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 a strong practising profession is crucial if we are to ensure the public's continued *access to the rule of law* and to secure their continued *trust in our justice system*.

6. With that in mind, let me briefly outline my address this morning, which will be in two broad parts.

- (a) I will first discuss some *wider trends in our legal landscape* to set the context for our discussion.
- (b) And then, I will focus on three broad areas that we ought to look at more closely to address the challenges that are before us.

³ Sundaresh Menon CJ, "Reimagining the Rule of Law: A Renewed Conception", Speech delivered at Conversations with the Community (20 September 2024) ("**Reimagining the Rule of Law**") at paras 30–34; Sundaresh Menon CJ, "Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary: An Accessible and Values-Based Justice System", Speech delivered at the 37th LAWASIA Conference, Plenary Judicial Session – Beijing Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary (13 October 2024) at paras 14–25.

- 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. Next, 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. And lastly, we should consider how we can better leverage on *generative artificial intelligence* (or “**AI**”) to make legal work more sustainable.

II. Wider Trends in the Legal Landscape

A. Proliferation of Opportunities

7. Let me begin by outlining some wider trends affecting our legal landscape, the first of which is the *proliferation of opportunities* that are available to our younger lawyers today. We see this in several ways.

8. 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. And 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.

9. 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, that number has almost *doubled* – we now have approximately 4,900 in-house counsel in Singapore. They are perhaps the primary counsel to our business community, thus helping to ensure that Singapore remains a trusted, reliable and vibrant international business hub.⁴ These in-house roles are also often attractive to our young talent, 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 competitive packages.

⁴ Statistics maintained by the SAL.

10. Third, it has generally become easier for younger lawyers to pursue a *legal career outside Singapore*, given that many other jurisdictions have liberalised their legal services sectors. Just to illustrate the point, 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 or 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.⁵

11. And 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.

12. 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

⁵ Solicitors Regulation Authority, “SQE Exemptions” (last updated on 4 June 2025).

be left for the *practice of Singapore law*. And yet, as I mentioned a few moments ago, 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. And it is to these trends that I now turn.

B. The Evolving Practice of Law

i. Commercialisation of Legal Practice

13. 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, 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”.⁶ Let me highlight just a few ways in which we see this trend.

⁶ Sullivan & Cromwell LLP, “Bob Giuffra Featured in Daily Journal’s ‘Leading Commercial Litigators 2025’” (7 February 2025).

14. First, we have seen the rise of a special class of “superstar lawyers”, especially in the United States (or “US”). These 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 packages that have been compared to those of NBA superstars – in some instances to the tune of more than US\$25 million.⁷

15. 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.⁸ What was once intended to be a transparent technique for charging clients has in many US firms become the *primary means* to evaluate the performance of their associates.⁹ When these associates fail to meet their billable hour requirements, 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

⁷ Sujeet Indap, “Soaring Pay Rates Fuel the Rise of the Superstar Lawyer” (*Financial Times*, 25 June 2025); Maureen Farrell and Anupreeta Das, “Pay for Lawyers is So High People Are Comparing It to the N.B.A” (*New York Times*, 1 July 2024).

⁸ Travis Whitsitt, “‘Quiet Cutting’ in BigLaw: The Rise of Performance-Based Departures” (*Vault*, 26 March 2025).

⁹ M H Hoeflich, “The Craft of the Law: An Essay After Forty Years as a Law Teacher” (2022) 70 *Kansas Law Review* 483 at 497.

their talent pools without resorting to public layoffs or damaging their recruitment brands”.¹⁰ Just to provide some numbers, it has been found in the US that: (a) for every formal layoff in the US legal services sector, there are now three performance-based departures; (b) the use of formal performance improvement plans has more than doubled since 2021; and (c) nearly 70 per cent of lawyers who are placed on such plans will leave their firms within six months.¹¹

16. 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. And although the two specific developments that I have outlined 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 I readily accept that our law firms need to 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

¹⁰ Travis Whitsitt, “‘Quiet Cutting’ in BigLaw: The Rise of Performance-Based Departures” (*Vault*, 26 March 2025).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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.

17. And 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 I will return to later in my remarks.

ii. The Increasing Demands of Legal Practice

18. Let me turn to another trend affecting the practice of law, and that is its *increasingly demanding nature*. For one, the growing *complexity* of legal work has made practice much more challenging. I have made this point on a number of occasions by referring to what I have termed the complexification of disputes,¹² but this trend applies equally to transactional

¹² Sundaresh Menon CJ, "The Complexification of Disputes in the Digital Age", Goff Lecture 2021 (9 November 2021) at paras 3–5; Sundaresh Menon CJ, "The Transformation of Litigation and the Litigator of the Future", Keynote Address at the Litigation Conference 2024 (3 April 2024) at paras 12–15.

work. The recent economic tariffs introduced by the US administration are an obvious example of the additional complexities that corporate lawyers now have to contend with, alongside emerging areas such as trade sanctions, environmental, social and governance regulation, and data protection and privacy.¹³

19. Apart from its growing complexity, there is also the increasing *pace* of legal work. With clients paying top dollar for legal services, their expectations of their lawyers have also increased, not only in terms of their quality of work but also in terms of their responsiveness.¹⁴ 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 rapid pace of work, coupled with its growing complexity, has altered the complexion of legal work dramatically.

iii. Reduced Opportunities for Young Lawyers to Develop their Craft

20. The next trend that I would like to discuss reflects both the commercialisation of legal practice and its increasing demands, and that is

¹³ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “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.

¹⁴ Meraiah Foley et al, “‘Everything Now, All the Time’: The Connectivity Paradox and Gender Equality in the Legal Profession” (2024) 39 *New Technology, Work and Employment* 362 at 372.

the significantly reduced opportunities that are available to young lawyers to develop their craft.

21. 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 (or “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 excess of £1 million”, with the largest claim for £1 billion.¹⁵ 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 £1 billion commenced each year.¹⁶ These figures are consistent with an observation that was made in the Financial Times last year that the commercial courts in London “are grappling with some of the highest value and most complex cases in English legal history”. These cases have also helped the fifty largest litigation practices in the UK generate £6.1 billion in revenue in 2024, a 48 per cent increase from just five years earlier.¹⁷ And

¹⁵ Judiciary of England and Wales, “Report of the Commercial Court and Admiralty Court 2004–2005” at p 5.

¹⁶ Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, “The Commercial Court Report 2023–2024 (Including the Admiralty Court Report)” (February 2025) at p 5.

¹⁷ Alistair Gray, “Rise of ‘Mega Trials’ Fuels Fee Bonanza for London’s Top Lawyers” (*Financial Times*, 10 October 2024).

the median time to judgment in the LCC has risen from 450 days in 2020 to 786 days last year.¹⁸

22. These statistics demonstrate that disputes have grown in complexity and scale, a trend that we in Singapore have seen as well. 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 briefs. 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. And from the perspective of our young litigators, this lack of opportunities can also exacerbate the disillusionment that I 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.

23. Over the years, we have introduced various initiatives to address this growing challenge, including: (a) the signing of a pledge by 21 law practices

¹⁸ Solomonic, "How Litigation Data and eDiscovery Drive Successful Commercial Dispute Strategies" (4 April 2025).

to provide more oral advocacy opportunities for their young colleagues; (b) the launch of a Guide on the Development of Junior Civil Commercial Litigators in Oral Advocacy, to provide qualitative and quantitative markers against which junior advocates can benchmark their progress; and (c) the amendment of the Supreme Court Practice Directions to strongly encourage lead counsel “to apprise the client of the benefits of allocating certain advocacy tasks to junior assisting counsel” and to require, unless the court otherwise orders, that junior assisting counsel deliver the oral opening statement.¹⁹

24. But the sense is that there is more that can and should be done. Hence, we will soon introduce 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 (or “**General Division**”) and all hearings before the Appellate Division, the Court of Appeal and the Court of Three Judges, junior assisting counsel will now be “*ordinarily expected*” to make part of the oral submissions. And for proceedings in the Singapore International Commercial Court (or “**SICC**”) and other matters in the General Division, the SICC Procedural Guide and the Practice Directions will provide that lead counsel are “*strongly encouraged*” to give junior assisting counsel more opportunities

¹⁹ Paragraph 96(4) of the Supreme Court Practice Directions 2021.

for oral advocacy at a hearing”. We have consulted the Law Society on these changes and have taken note of their views.

25. It is our 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*

26. Having outlined some of the wider trends in our legal landscape, let me return 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 he used in another context,²⁰ they have coalesced to form a “perfect long storm” of challenges affecting the sustainability of private practice, by which I mean that they are complex,

²⁰ Senior Minister Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, “Responding to a Perfect Long Storm”, Speech delivered at the IMAS-Bloomberg Investment Conference (9 March 2022); Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Role of the Courts in Our Society – Safeguarding Society”, Opening Address at the Conversations with the Community (21 September 2023) at para 30.

long-term and structural in nature, and therefore unlikely to admit of quick or easy solutions.

27. On the one hand, we have the proliferation of opportunities that I described earlier. Given the explosion of choices, we must accept 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.

28. And then we have the trends affecting private practice itself, including its *growing commercialisation*, its *increasingly 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 (a) the financial rewards in private practice are being distributed inequitably; and (b) 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.

29. All of this appears to be reflected in the findings from recent surveys which I have spoken of previously.²¹ When we surveyed the applicants at

²¹ JLP Speech at para 11.

the Mass Admission Ceremony earlier this year, and at the Mass Call last year, around 60% of the respondents indicated that they were likely to move out of *legal practice* within the next five years,²² so as to pursue a career in in-house legal services, academia, or employment with other legal service providers. And within that same time period, slightly more than a third indicated that they were likely to leave the *legal profession* entirely.

30. Notably, when they were asked to indicate *why* they were inclined to leave their current place of practice, their responses matched the challenges that I have outlined earlier today. 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.²³ The next five most commonly cited reasons were: (a) a higher salary or compensation package elsewhere;²⁴ (b) the impact work had on their mental wellbeing;²⁵ (c) poor workplace culture;²⁶ (d) a lack of flexibility in their working arrangements;²⁷ and (e) a lack of guidance or mentorship.²⁸

²² In this context, legal practice includes employment in the Judicial Service, the Legal Service and the Public Defender's Office.

²³ 79.9% in 2025 survey and 81.2% in 2024 survey.

²⁴ 50.2% in 2025 survey and 59.4% in 2024 survey.

²⁵ 52% in 2025 survey and 44.7% in 2024 survey.

²⁶ 35.4% in 2025 survey and 40.6% in 2024 survey.

²⁷ 36.2% in 2025 survey and 38.6% in 2024 survey.

²⁸ 23.1% in 2025 survey and 31% in 2024 survey.

31. What is worth noting is that only around 20% of the respondents indicated that their inclination to leave was due to an interest in joining the in-house profession,²⁹ or in pursuing a non-legal career.³⁰ What this suggests is that our young lawyers are inclined to leave practice principally because of *push* factors rather than *pull* factors. In other words, 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.

32. 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 3000 young lawyers, which found 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.³¹ Among the latter group, 41 per cent cited concerns over workload, and 39 per cent cited the impact that work had on their mental wellness³² Similar concerns

²⁹ 21.8% in 2025 survey and 18.3% in 2024 survey.

³⁰ 23.6% in 2025 survey and 20.3% in 2024 survey.

³¹ International Bar Association Legal Policy & Research Unit, “IBA Young Lawyers’ Report” (2022) at p 18.

³² Ibid at p 20.

have been expressed in jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom,³³ the US,³⁴ and Australia.³⁵

33. 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 I had the privilege of serving on.³⁶ 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.³⁷

34. 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

³³ 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).

³⁴ Bloomberg Law, “Bloomberg Law Releases Attorney Workload Survey Insights and Webinar on Work-Life Balance Solutions” (15 April 2025).

³⁵ Maxim Shanahan, “Top-Tier Firms ‘Exploiting Young Lawyers Over Long Hours’” (*Australian Financial Review*, 8 May 2025).

³⁶ Report of the Committee to Develop the Singapore Legal Sector, “Final Report” (September 2007) at paras 3.38–3.63.

³⁷ *Ibid* at paras 3.39–3.42.

than five years of post-qualification experience (“**PQE**”) had left the profession in 2021.³⁸ And 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. 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*.³⁹ 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%.⁴⁰

35. Let me be clear 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,⁴¹ 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 that I mentioned earlier.

³⁸ Adrian Tan, “Opening of the Legal Year 2022: Speech of the President of the Law Society” (10 January 2022) at paras 39-40.

³⁹ Statistics maintained by the SAL.

⁴⁰ Statistics maintained by the SAL.

⁴¹ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Centrality of Trust in the Legal Profession”, Speech at the Mass Admission Ceremony (21 April 2025) at paras 21–23.

36. I suggest that 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 numbers continue 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 I have touched on.
- (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 recent survey found that three in ten of the respondent lawyers in Singapore screened positive for depression, and four in ten for anxiety.⁴² And similar findings have been made in other jurisdictions.⁴³
- (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

⁴² Mindful Business Singapore, “Lawyers’ Sustainability Report 2023” (22 June 2023) at pp 2–6.

⁴³ 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” (28 September 2021) at p 19; see also Thomson Reuters, “Today’s Lawyers and Mental Health: Mental Health Awareness Month” (16 May 2024).

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.⁴⁴

- (d) And lastly, unsustainable practices may result in what is known as “*ethical fading*”,⁴⁵ where high pressure work environments contribute to employees making judgments that are not in keeping with high professional standards.

37. For these reasons, the sustainability of private practice is a critical issue that merits our close attention and careful thought. In the remainder of my remarks, I will discuss three broad areas that we should explore in thinking of how to cope with this challenge.

III. Mindsets and Culture

38. 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.

⁴⁴ McKinsey Global Institute, “Performance Through People: Transforming Human Capital into Competitive Advantage” (2 February 2023).

⁴⁵ Ann Tenbrunsel and David Messick, “Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behaviour” (2004) 17 *Social Justice Research* 223.

A. Mindsets

39. Let me begin with the appropriate mindsets. At the recent Opening Conference of the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme, I 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.⁴⁶ There are three aspects to this: (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.⁴⁷

40. This morning, I want to focus on an *anterior* point, and that is the *sense of mission* that young lawyers ought to have when coming into the law. We should recognise and embrace the fact that lawyers are engaged in the shared mission of administering justice – a high calling that transcends our individual ambitions, hopes and desires.⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁶ JLP Speech at para 2.

⁴⁷ JLP Speech at para 3.

⁴⁸ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Singapore Academy of Law: An Essential Dedication to Honour and Service”, Singapore Academy of Law Annual Lecture 2018 (11 October 2018) at para 10.

41. 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 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.⁴⁹ As for law firms, they have an important role in this shared endeavour. In particular, returning to the concern that I mentioned earlier, 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.

⁴⁹ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “Law and Medicine: Professions of Honour, Service and Excellence”, 23rd Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration (21 July 2017) at para 25.

B. Culture

42. 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.⁵⁰

43. 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

⁵⁰ Kim Tae-Yeol, Wang Jie and Chen Junsong, "Mutual Trust Between Leader and Subordinate and Employee Outcomes" (2018) 149 *Journal of Business Ethics* 945.

Society and the 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.

IV. Concrete Solutions

44. 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.

45. Notably, several commendable initiatives already exist in this space:⁵¹

- (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 has launched its own set of Lawyer Sustainability Guidelines. These guidelines are not

⁵¹ Ethics and Professional Standards Committee, “Final Report” (8 January 2025) at para 176.

only adopted by Temasek internally, they have also been adopted by ten of Temasek's key law firm partners for matters involving Temasek.

- (c) And third, the Law Society has released a guidance note that aims to promote sustainable workplace practices in the context of litigation.⁵²

46. Let me take this opportunity to announce two other initiatives that the SAL will introduce, arising from this Symposium.

47. The first is a draft set of Sustainability Principles that has been developed in response to the feedback gathered during the focus group discussions that led to the Symposium. This remains a starting framework and we hope to seek your input in the course of our discussions today to refine these principles, before they are disseminated to law firms for their possible adoption. Broadly, the Sustainability Principles comprise three key planks which will be elaborated on later today:

- (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.

⁵² Guidance Note 8.9.1.

- (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) And 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.

48. The second initiative that we will introduce is known as the Living Case Study. This is a dynamic and open-access platform that will capture the ideas, insights and commitments generated from this 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 this Symposium.

V. Generative AI

49. Let me turn to the third area that I wish to touch on today, and that is generative AI.

50. Since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, the capabilities of generative AI have developed at an astonishing rate. I need only refer to

the launch of “ChatGPT agent” less than two weeks ago, which is described as a unified agentic system that *combines* the earlier breakthroughs in AI – its ability to interact with websites, its skill in synthesising information and its intelligence and conversational fluency.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

51. Significantly, generative AI has the tremendous potential to reshape the delivery of legal work. We see this in the landmark benchmark study that was published earlier this year by Vals AI, a US-based company that evaluates AI tools.⁵⁵ 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

⁵³ OpenAI, “Introducing ChatGPT Agent: Bridging Research and Action” (17 July 2025).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See <https://www.vals.ai/vlair>.

lawyers in two additional areas – data extraction as well as document review and analysis.

52. These results inform us that generative AI will transform the legal services sector. John Quinn, the Executive Chairman and Founding Partner of Quinn Emanuel, 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.⁵⁶ Some have also suggested that generative AI will fundamentally disrupt the traditional billable hour model, resulting in alternative fee structures becoming more common.⁵⁷ 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 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

⁵⁶ See Law Disrupted, “Winning at Trial with AI” (1 May 2025).

⁵⁷ Nancy B Rapoport and Joseph R Tiano Jr, “Fighting the Hypothetical: Why Law Firms Should Rethink the Billable Hour in the Generative AI Era” (2025) 20 *Washington Journal of Law, Technology & Arts* 41.

a guide and instructional video on how lawyers can obtain better results from large language models.⁵⁸

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

54. The first relates to their *training*. We have to think about this because 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.⁵⁹ 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 otherwise be impossible for them to meaningfully evaluate the output produced by these tools.

55. 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 precisely why the SAL has recently launched the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme. We

⁵⁸ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Legal Profession – A Community of Learned Friends”, Mass Call Address 2024 (19 August 2024) at para 12.

⁵⁹ Sundaresh Menon CJ, Welcome Address at the SAL 35th Anniversary Dinner (22 November 2023) at para 9.

should also explore other innovative solutions. For instance, generative AI tools might themselves be used to help train our young lawyers. Earlier this year, Three Crowns and Codex, the Stanford Centre for Legal Informatics, announced the launch of 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”.⁶⁰ This is a great example of the kind of innovative solutions that we will need in this new operating environment.

56. Apart from this, generative AI will also 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*, by which I mean the ability to form meaningful relationships with clients and to gain their trust and confidence. The growing emphasis on these core qualities will increase the need for proper 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*

⁶⁰ Three Crowns, “Three Crowns and Codex, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics Announce Launch of AI Powered Cross Examination Training Platform” (12 February 2025).

of purpose and a passion for the law, which are the key drivers of a successful and sustainable career.

VI. Conclusion

57. It will be apparent from what I have said this morning that the sustainability of private practice is an urgent challenge that requires our collective efforts. While the task ahead might seem daunting, 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. 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. We should therefore be optimistic that this is a challenge we can overcome.

58. Indeed, it is timely that we are gathered here today as we approach our nation's 60th birthday next week. 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*.⁶¹ The rule of law has played a central

⁶¹ Reimagining the Rule of Law at paras 15–20.

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. And 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.

59. Thank you all very much for your attention and I look forward to our continuing discussion.