

The Great Networks Scramble: Why Taco Tuesdays Will Never Get Lawyers Back to the Office, Why We Should Care (a lot), and What We Can Do About It



Presenters

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Session Abstract

We are in the midst of a crisis in our networks. Return-to-office policies are top of mind as we continue to emerge from the pandemic. But as organizations struggle to bring people back, they are missing something essential: that employees' networks—personal, social, and professional—have transformed so fundamentally that any attempt to return to a “normal,” pre-COVID environment will be futile. Perhaps the last few years have scrambled employee attitudes, values, motivations, and expectations so thoroughly that lawyers' 2019 workplaces feel like relics of their former lives—a scene from the past rather than a place to build a future.

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Meanwhile, artificial neural networks developed through large language models are rapidly becoming stronger, faster, more dynamic, more useful, more secure and domain-specific, making more reliable and trainable assistants. These tools will soon be able to perform many of the tasks law students currently train to do and which form the foundation of jobs for new lawyers in many practices. At the same time, hybrid work appears to be weakening traditional lawyer skill-building, a model that is unlikely to rebound without intervention because of its reliance on in-person apprenticeship.

And in the background, the network of stakeholders responsible for the pipeline of lawyer formation—pre-law advisors, admissions testers, law schools, bar examiners, employers, and regulators—remains badly disconnected. A clunky constellation of important connectors, each playing its own tune, will need urgent re-alignment to respond to these swirling dynamics.

So, how do we get beyond magical thinking (e.g., this will be the moment when new lawyers finally get to practice at the top of their license or the third year of law school is transformed to create a potent connector to practice) and develop real solutions that leverage incentives, new social networks, and maturing tech networks, to build better, newer networks?

Drawing from research in organizational psychology and sociology, Bridget McCormack and Jen Leonard will explore the shape-shifting landscape of social, technological, and professional connections and the implications for the future of law practice. The presenters will also expand the aperture by highlighting examples from various industries to explore whether legal can learn lessons from others on how to create a new learning and practice vision for a changed world.