

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a light-colored blazer over a dark top, is seated and looking towards a man whose back is to the camera. The man is wearing a dark suit. They are in an office setting with computer monitors and office furniture visible in the background. The lighting is soft and professional.

A LEARNING DIALOGUE FOR THE EVOLVING LEGAL WORKPLACE

By Kristen Uhl Hulse

As we enter the second half of our second year navigating the pandemic workplace, those in legal professional development roles may feel essential yet exhausted by the challenges of continuing disruption and uncertainty. When our firms went remote, we were quick to adapt and extend our preexisting programs online. We noticed trends, we informed, and we created. We have been reimagining and redesigning curriculum, innovating our approaches to build bonds remotely, onboarding and integrating lawyers who have never had a physical touch-point with our firms, and serving as torch-bearers for our firms’ investment in lawyer learning and development — all while modeling the resilience, self-direction, and tenacity critical for success in times of change.

PD leaders have been the proverbial glue holding our departments together and advancing our mission, even as traditional assumptions about the nature of practice and client service were upended by the pandemic. It is not surprising that many of us report being busier than ever, with expanded roles despite fewer resources at our disposal.

Yet with challenge comes opportunity, and we should not overlook positive developments for lawyer PD during this period. For example, fully remote or hybrid in-person/remote work may have accelerated our lawyers’ exposure to 21st Century skill sets such as cross-office

collaboration, communicating across difference, technology proficiency, and being innovative and proactive project managers. This experience prepares them to be nimble and responsive leaders during uncertain times and may inform updates to our core competency frameworks.

Additionally, lawyers in a competitive market often have more bargaining power to build

the structures they want and need for their development, and they can benefit personally from more workplace flexibility than has traditionally been accepted. Moreover, our firms’ investments in technology make remote work now more accessible and productive, rather than a *de facto* obstacle to development. Through this innovation we see benefits of virtual training, including more participants, different modalities, and lower costs, plus

more opportunities to bring people together through multi-office bonding events like virtual happy hours and trivia nights.

Whatever tumult we face as our organizations navigate COVID-19, our multidisciplinary roles afford us access and insight — positioning us to be go-to advisors and connectors while empowering us to pivot and execute our functions in effective ways. As we settle into this “new normal,” our mission only continues to evolve.

Emerging PD Imperatives for the Remote-Hybrid Workplace

With many firms reopening their physical offices while maintaining some remote work option (a “remote-hybrid” workplace), we are now tasked with ensuring that less-visible lawyers do not get left behind for learning and development opportunities. The moment at hand presents additional challenges: persistent attrition, a competitive lateral hiring market (with significant salary increases and signing bonuses), and multiple classes of junior lawyers who have not had access to the ways that most lawyers in our firms have learned and built connections. As such, we are already experiencing two imminent and inter-related needs: (1) the retention of our lawyer talent (including those who have never had a traditional in-person firm experience); and (2) ensuring that our lawyers are learning, progressing, and

PD Tool	Format	Elements	Purposes
Stay Interview	Dialogue	User experience-focused: * What they appreciate * What concerns them * What will keep them	Retention initiative; information-gathering to effect positive organizational change
Individual Development Plan	Independent self-reflection	Goal-setting document, relative to firm competencies or benchmarks, individual learning needs or preferences, resources available to support development, and workplace realities	Fostering self-awareness, self-direction, and career engagement
Learning Dialogue	Dialogue	User experience-focused: * How they learn and engage * Takeaways from navigating remote work * What they need to learn and build networks going forward Collaborative goal-setting, relative to firm competencies or benchmarks, individual learning needs or preferences, resources available to support development, and workplace realities	Discerning individual learning needs in a remote-hybrid environment; fostering self-awareness, self-direction, and career engagement; retention initiative; information-gathering to effect positive organizational change

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building connections regardless of where they sit (including equity of opportunity for those who may not be physically in the office when others routinely are present).

These focuses emerge as many firms are making a significant financial investment in replenishing their talent pool; as such, they will want to ensure their laterals' needs are being met and that they feel connected to the firm — whether remote or in-person. At the same time, given the challenges and costs of recruiting in this market, firms will want to focus on “keeping the keepers” and to continue binding them to their firms through work and connections. With main drivers for attrition including underperformance or underutilization, isolation or lack of connection, lack of transparency about career prospects, and lack of control over career trajectory, appropriate PD responses are those that will foster connection, enhance transparency, identify firm resources, ensure access and opportunities for development, and empower goal-setting and self-direction. Our roles and experience enable us to take such a systemic approach, but what is the best first step?

If we are curious or concerned about how our lawyers are developing during this pandemic period, we ought to ask them about it. A personal check-in can serve as a bonding agent and an information source, and our mission of promoting learning and development gives us a reason to open that door. To inform our

systemic initiatives, this check-in should be structured and purposeful. For this, I propose a new discussion tool that I call the Learning Dialogue.

The Learning Dialogue

Our emerging PD imperatives require that we understand how our lawyers are currently learning and connecting with one another. We also need a forum to share resources, provide tailored advice, and work collaboratively on individual development goals. The Learning Dialogue is designed to meet those objectives. It is a conversation in which the facilitator (a PD professional, consultant, or mentor close to the lawyer being engaged) and the lawyer connect about the lawyer's perspectives, experience, and plans for learning and connections going forward. This blends elements from two well-known PD tools — the stay interview and the individual development plan — and it can be pegged specifically to the realities of the remote-hybrid environment.

Stay interviews are a retention tool familiar to PD professionals, allowing us to understand individual lawyer preferences, perspectives, and developmental needs. These conversations build trust and show lawyers that their firms are interested in their views. An individual development plan, which engages the lawyer in independent self-reflection and goal-setting, makes them an active stakeholder in their own development. This can improve the lawyer's

future growth prospects and engagement with the firm.

A Learning Dialogue is a stay interview centered on the lawyer's recent learning journey, and an interactive development plan to create pathways for learning and connections relative to emerging needs and preferences. It is grounded on the premise that the ways our lawyers navigated remote work will influence their approach to the remote-hybrid workplace, and that reflection about their experience can help foster their self-awareness and informed goal-setting for this “new normal.” Offering tailored connection, the Learning Dialogue can have retention and developmental benefits, in addition to informing future firm PD initiatives.

Why the Focus on Learning and Reflection?

Ongoing learning is required for competent law practice, so we must ensure that our lawyers have meaningful opportunities to learn, regardless of physical location. This may require us to disrupt certain assumptions about prerequisites for learning (for example, that it should primarily be obtained in-person, or that such learning is somehow more resonant and effective). Thus, it will be useful to understand our individual learners' access, needs, and preferences. After all, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to learning and gathering current data about how each lawyer

A Learning Dialogue that centers around the lawyer's experience navigating remote work will likely shed light on their support network.

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navigated learning remotely can inform what they may need to learn in a remote-hybrid environment.

Additionally, we know that learning is gained through many modalities, such as on-the-job work assignments and “know-how,” organized training presentations, and independent self-study. It also occurs informally through mentoring, observation, debriefs, feedback discussions, and the osmosis of absorbing what one sees, hears, and feels in the workplace. In the remote-hybrid future, we may need to find ways to replicate environmental or access-based learning. Understanding our lawyers’ needs and preferences about different learning modalities can help us design and advocate for appropriate structures for continued development.



While each lawyer is on their own learning course, we have all learned more about the ways we learn and connect with each other over the past several months. This immediate reference point can foster meaningful self-reflection to guide each individual’s path forward. To prompt this, the facilitator can specifically address the lawyer’s experience navigating remote work and how that affected their learning and connections. For example, questions might include:

- What resources or which connections helped you to learn remotely? What presented challenges?
- Where and when did you find “flow” while working remotely? What or who supported that?
- How did your habits or preferences affect the ways you engaged with your work when remote?
- What was your remote workload like? Did you seek more work? How did you know when or whom to ask for more?
- How connected did you feel to the firm when working remotely? What led you to feel this way?
- How often did you receive feedback when working remotely? Did you need to actively seek it out? Were supervisors responsive?
- What have you not had a chance to work on or gain access to? What has

been hampered (if at all) by working remotely instead of in-person?

- As we move forward to a remote-hybrid environment, what are the ideal circumstances for you to be able to learn from and connect with your colleagues?

These reflection points prime the lawyer to engage in more self-aware goal-setting for the remote-hybrid workplace. Such planning will likely need to consider, among other things:

- How their ability to work on stated goals may be affected by physical access, if at all,
- If the lawyer is remote, how they can access networking and observation opportunities, and
- Whether their goals rely on certain assumptions (for example, having a set workspace, being surrounded by people with whom they work, or the ability to focus without distractions).

The Learning Dialogue provides a unique opportunity for PD professionals to influence a lawyer’s future learning and connections during this time of continued change. While the content and structure of the Learning Dialogue should be driven by your firm’s and your lawyer-learner’s needs, whomever is facilitating it should prepare to ask purposeful questions, listen, discuss resources, make suggestions, and follow-up.

Additional Considerations

Below are some additional considerations for a robust, engaging, and productive conversation.

1. Context Matters: Ground the Discussion in Current Realities

A Learning Dialogue is not a theoretical discussion — we are in a dynamic situation, and the conversation should be pegged to this moment (which happens to be one of continued uncertainty and ongoing change). In other words: remote-hybrid work is our new reality, so how can we help the lawyer to navigate it in an informed, growth-oriented way?

It is important to acknowledge the lawyer’s journey through the pandemic months and how that informs their ideas for future growth in the remote-hybrid environment. Resist expressing your assumptions about how work or learning should be done or may have been tackled pre-COVID. Your lawyer may share new ideas and insights that you may not have previously considered (see #5 below, providing specific considerations for engaging with your junior lawyers).

You might also connect the skillsets they developed through remote work to the realities of the new workplace. Highlighting how competencies and traits such as adaptability, responsiveness, resilience, empathy, judgment,

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self-motivation, and technological proficiency contribute to success in a remote-hybrid environment can put a positive spin on an uncertain time.

2. Reinforce Certain Truths About Lawyer PD

The Learning Dialogue might open the door for you to affirm some universal principles of lawyer PD. This includes emphasizing that ongoing learning is essential, and that interpersonal connections are often the gateway to exposure, guidance, feedback, and further connections. Many lawyering effectiveness factors center around relational rather than cognitive skills, so lawyers cannot overlook the value of strategic and meaningful connections and the necessity of building communication, emotional intelligence (EQ), and collaborative skills regardless of setting.

You will also have the opportunity to affirm the importance of building good habits around reflection and self-awareness, as we know these will serve the lawyer well in weathering future uncertain scenarios. For example, goal-setting while acknowledging one's own tendencies and preferences allows the lawyer to be more self-directed (which is widely recognized as a success trait and one that leads to greater lawyer satisfaction). Building self-awareness about one's values, goals, instincts, strengths, and challenges contributes to their professional identity, which is especially important for junior learners who



have recently transitioned from law school to practice.

3. Ask for Takeaways

Reflection is a powerful tool for building self-awareness; learning is cemented when we ask for takeaways. As the lawyer is sharing information about their pandemic learning

journey, be sure to ask about implications for future practice. For example, if a lawyer indicates that they struggled with procrastination or divided focus while working remotely, how will they navigate around this in a remote-hybrid environment? Other questions to prompt takeaways might include:

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We are at a natural inflection point to consider our path forward as PD providers.

- Knowing what you do now about your patterns and preferences, what would you have changed about the way you tackled their projects remotely?
- What do you wish you had known about yourself, your supervisors, and/or firm structures and resources when you shifted to remote work in 2020?
- What have you learned about yourself that informs your goal-setting and future plans for learning and connection-building?

4. Co-Create the Path Forward

The entire Learning Dialogue, including the goal-setting component, should be interactive. As such, you should be prepared for brainstorming and to share ways the firm's current resources, structures, and connections can help support the lawyer's learning plans. This collaborative approach to goal-setting can build mutual trust and accountability while demonstrating your firm-specific knowledge and insight. For example, as the lawyer builds a plan, you might provide some suggestions about useful connections or resources, guardrails concerning any specific constraints, and even whether there might be opportunities for new PD initiatives to support their efforts.

5. Focus on Junior Lawyers' Needs and Input

One's first years of practice set a new lawyer up for success. It makes sense to focus on how their access to opportunities may be affected

by remote-hybrid work, but do not assume that physical presence is the ideal or only way for them to learn and progress. Consider that your cohort of junior lawyers has had an altogether different learning experience: the Class of 2019 had less than one year of in-person access to work and connections before the pandemic struck; many members of the Class of 2020 had delayed start dates until winter 2021 and are only now coming back to an office; and the Class of 2021, which joins firms this fall, completed nearly half of their legal education online before graduating.

They have all learned, but likely in different ways than their superiors did as junior lawyers. That the majority of their practical legal learning and connection-building occurred virtually means they may have established some effective online learning habits, or perhaps even greater self-awareness around their learning needs. You might acknowledge that they learned remotely, though ask whether they may have missed something they would have otherwise been afforded in different times. Then, consider how PD professionals can help provide that in a remote-hybrid structure.

6. Note Any Well-Being Implications

This pandemic period has affected us in a myriad of ways. For many, navigating COVID risks alongside workplace demands presents a continuing source of stress, and the Learning Dialogue may reveal ways the lawyer is or is not coping. Consider addressing well-being

explicitly in the discussion. For example, you might ask the lawyer what recharges them, how they manage stress, and ways they might find balance between home and work (particularly if they are continuing to work remotely). You might also want to have ready some supportive resources and connections in case the lawyer raises mental health, substance abuse, or similar concerns. Many PD professionals are now getting certified in mental health first-aid; those on the front lines of lawyer connection might find this to be a beneficial training for times like these.

7. Remember Your Firm's Culture and Values

Learning Dialogues provide an opportunity to reinforce your firm's commitment to lawyer PD and the lawyer's future with the firm. You can also reflect your firm's culture and values through your discussions and your follow-up actions. For example, you can convey a spirit of inclusion by expressing why you want the lawyer to feel connected to the organization. You can invest in their success by co-actively brainstorming their future growth and using their input to guide systemic PD improvements. As a representative of firm leadership, showing sincere interest in each lawyer's experience and takeaways demonstrates that the firm values them personally and professionally.

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Reflection is a powerful tool for building self-awareness.



What's Next? Informing PD Initiatives

Regardless how you implement Learning Dialogues, you will want to collect and analyze the information you have gathered. This current input from your lawyers can help guide you to a responsive, integrated approach for assessing — and possibly refining — your firm's PD initiatives. This also reinforces a learner-as-stakeholder approach, as the lawyer's views and input will be used to frame the next iteration of PD at the firm. Some areas you may wish to revisit, or influence, include:

1. Core Competency Framework

Many firms use core competencies as foundations for learning. Informed by the Learning Dialogues, you may wish to consider whether your core competencies should be updated for skill-building and client service in the remote-hybrid workplace. For example, do your competencies and benchmarks reflect where your learners are now (following more than a year of remote work), and where they need to be in the remote-hybrid future? Are any competencies now less relevant, should new ones be added, or should existing ones be emphasized in different ways?

2. Training Modalities and Topics

Do your firm's current methods of training and development reflect your current learners' needs and preferences (both remote and in-person)? For example, do you offer a suite of options that allows each unique learner the opportunity to receive relevant support and access to tailored resources? Opportunities for observation have traditionally been central to learning; how could these be replicated remotely through simulations or explicit invitations to "live" events? What about the subject matter for your training? Typical practice management training topics such as delegation and supervision, collaboration,

time management, and managing teams take on a new dimension in the remote-hybrid workplace. Should your materials be updated to address these new implications directly?

3. Performance Evaluation Processes

As you are considering updates to your core competency framework and training content and modalities, you may also wish to revisit your performance evaluation criteria to ensure it still connects to overall PD goals. Are your lawyers still being evaluated in the right areas, or have the past 20 months led to an emphasis on other competencies? Should the evaluation process reflect content informed by the Learning Dialogues? For example, is there a way to integrate learning preferences and goals in a performance self-evaluation and as discussion points in the performance assessment? Following a performance evaluation, should the lawyer's mentor and/or a PD professional follow up to discuss a development pathway that specifically incorporates their Learning Dialogue takeaways? In addition, to preserve connection and learning opportunities, should your firm consider adopting a "real-time feedback" mechanism to guarantee that performance evaluations happen regularly, regardless of physical proximity?

4. Mentoring Programs and Additional Support

A Learning Dialogue that centers around the lawyer's experience navigating remote work

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will likely shed light on their support network as well. As the Learning Dialogue is in part a needs assessment, you may uncover reasons to revisit existing mentoring programs and/or consider providing additional support networks and resources. Early data suggests that women and diverse lawyers bear a disproportionate impact from working remotely (for example, reduced workloads, less visibility, and challenges of juggling childcare or other family responsibilities). This information may be the launching point to consider policies or programs to provide tailored support and resources. Committee membership could be reevaluated to ensure a balance between in-person and remote members in a forum that is inclusive of both. New affinity groups could be considered, such as one focusing specifically on remote-hybrid navigation. This may also be a good time to revisit (or consider creating) wellness initiatives; they could be tailored specifically to address some identified stressors of remote-hybrid work.

5. Work Allocation and Supervision

As PD professionals, one of our explicit imperatives (and a key driver for the Learning Dialogue initiative) is to ensure that our lawyers are learning, progressing, and building connections in the remote-hybrid workplace. The opportunity to work on a substantial volume of diverse and progressively more challenging assignments is a central pathway to competency. Yet those working in person may naturally favor those in close physical proximity. As such, you may wish to consider

setting up equitable systems or processes for assigning and monitoring workloads, having regular PD check-ins with those working remotely to ensure they are connected with a variety of clients and partners, setting up some supervision guideposts so that supervisors and assignees have regular touch-points, and keeping vigilant so that as more lawyers return to the workplace, those who remain remote do not get left behind. In addition, one learning challenge that junior lawyers must overcome is that they do not always have a complete picture of how legal work gets done — whether working remotely or in person. Our most junior ranks are often given a discrete portion of an assignment, and due to leveraged staffing models, may have limited access to their supervisors. You may wish to consider how these challenges may be addressed in a remote-hybrid scenario, so that all junior lawyers have some form of access to observe foundational lawyer functions and discern the broader context of their work.

6. Firmwide Communications

For many firms, the all-remote workplace ushered in more regular firm-wide messages to ensure lines of communication were not lost. Whether to share COVID-related policies and updates, or simply to foster a sense of connection, events like virtual town halls or weekly emails from a firm chair conveyed a sense of firm culture, instilled confidence in leadership, and helped participants feel cared for and connected to something larger than themselves. If the remote-hybrid landscape shifts to more

in-person work, some may think there is no longer a need for this manner of communication — which may erode the connection lifeline for those who are not physically present. Insights gleaned from the Learning Dialogues could inform whether virtual town halls or weekly firm-wide leadership emails would provide valuable connection in the remote-hybrid future and could perhaps even identify content for leadership to address through such initiatives.

7. Partnership Between PD and Recruitment

As input from the Learning Dialogues may lead you to reassess your firm's core competencies and success factors for future practice, you may wish to consider whether certain behaviors, abilities, or attitudes that emerged during remote work could be identified in prospective laterals during the interview process. This integrated approach can ensure that your firm is targeting the right candidates for future remote-hybrid work. It might be appropriate to partner with your recruiting colleagues to share the types of questions you are asking during the Learning Dialogues. Perhaps they

will want to incorporate similar questions into interviews. If so, then they can also gather data, which lays the foundation for PD to follow up about with the candidate about their learning needs and preferences as part of their integration to the firm.

Final Thoughts

A full-time return to office may not happen for a long time, and even then, may not be for everyone. Since some form of remote-hybrid work is likely here to stay, we are at a natural inflection point to consider our path forward as PD providers — including ways to foster lawyer learning and connection in an evolving workplace.

A Learning Dialogue provides the benefits of direct personal connection between learners and advisors, lawyer reflection and self-direction, and resource-sharing while input-gathering — the outcomes of which can lead to a workplace that better accommodates difference in access and learning, and a roadmap for future PD initiatives in continuing times of change. +



Kristen Uhl Hulse (khulse@swlaw.com) is the Senior Director of Attorney Development & Recruiting for Snell & Wilmer LLP. She brings to the role nearly 20 years of experience as a practitioner, legal educator, and law firm recruitment and development advisor. Kristen serves on the Board of Directors for the Professional Development Consortium (PDC), is an active member in NALP, and advises the Institute for the Advancement for the American Legal System (IAALS) on their Foundations for Practice initiative.