

From Training Programs to Talent Strategy: A Case Study in Building Troutman Pepper Locke YOUNiversity

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[Sona Spencer](#), chief legal talent officer at Troutman Pepper Locke, authored the article “From Training Programs to Talent Strategy: A Case Study in Building Troutman Pepper Locke YOUNiversity,” in the September 2026 issue of *NALP Bulletin*.

For generations, law firms relied on apprenticeship as their primary development strategy. The traditional way to learn was by observing experienced lawyers, receiving real-time feedback, and gradually developing the skills and judgment needed to assume greater responsibility. However, hybrid work, increased lateral mobility, geographic dispersion, AI, and shifting expectations around career development have exposed a critical challenge: firms can no longer assume development will happen organically.

At Troutman Pepper Locke, these changes (and a pandemic-era merger) revealed that we were facing more than a professional development challenge — we were facing a business challenge. When lawyers lack clarity about expectations and opportunities for growth — engagement, retention, succession planning, and ultimately client service can suffer. Additionally, as AI changes how lawyers work, firms must become increasingly intentional about creating opportunities to develop judgment, communication, and leadership skills that cannot be automated.

To address these challenges, we created YOUNiversity, a firmwide ecosystem designed to connect training, expectations, coaching, feedback, mentoring, and career planning into a cohesive, personalized development experience for lawyers. What began as a development initiative has evolved into a broader talent strategy that supports engagement, retention, and culture across the firm by helping lawyers understand what is expected, access the resources they need, and take ownership of their development.

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