

# The Brief

Not your average legal Magazine. We talk Innovation. We breathe Strategy. We give a damn about Humanity.

AUGUST 2025 ISSUE 02



## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

'SHE IS NOT YOUR REHAB' CHANGING THE CONVERSATION AROUND FAMILY VIOLENCE, HON. JUSTICE ALTOBELLI'S REFLECTIONS ON HARMFUL PROCEEDINGS, TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE AND CAREER JOURNEYS TO NEURODIVERSITY IN PRACTICE AND PROACTIVE RECRUITMENT, AI IN LAW, MARKETING TRENDS, FIRM CULTURE AND THE PERSONAL STORIES BEHIND LEADERSHIP—THIS EDITION DIVES INTO THE IDEAS, PEOPLE AND CHANGES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF FAMILY LAW IN AUSTRALIA AND BEYOND.

Cover Photography by Jared Yeoward

“Healing is not weakness.  
It is courage in motion.”





# The Brief

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# From The Editor

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Welcome to the second edition of *The Brief*—a publication for those who think strategically, work with purpose, and care deeply about the people at the heart of our profession.

This edition is a special milestone, featuring our first Judicial contribution from the Honourable Justice Altobelli AM. His considered exploration of harmful proceedings orders provides timely guidance on how the Courts can act proactively to protect parties and children from the collateral harm of litigation. We are grateful to him—and to all our contributors—for generously sharing their knowledge, insight, and lived experience.

Our cover story, *She Is Not Your Rehab*, is a powerful reminder that healing is not weakness—it is courage in motion. Matt and Sarah Brown's work challenges us to rethink how we address family violence, shifting from shame to empathy, and offering practical tools for breaking intergenerational cycles. Their message resonates beyond the personal—it's a challenge to the legal profession to see the person, not just the problem.

From building meaningful careers in family law and embedding trauma-informed practice, to authentic marketing strategies and fresh approaches to recruitment, this issue weaves together ideas, strategies, and stories that reflect the profession at its best: innovative, collaborative, and deeply human.

As you read, I invite you to see these articles not just as commentary, but as calls to action—to practise law with empathy, to lead with intention, and to keep sight of the purpose that brought you here.

Here's to the innovators, reformers, and quiet changemakers shaping the future of law—case by case, conversation by conversation.

Warmly,  
Amanda Little  
CEO, Family Law Education Network

*Amanda Little*





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Respected judicial leader contributing to family law reform and trauma-informed practice.

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# CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Interview by Victoria Moss  
Photography by Jared Yeoward







Family violence is one of the most complex and deeply rooted issues facing society today. "She Is Not Your Rehab," co-founded by Matt and Sarah Brown, has been leading the charge in changing the way we talk about, respond to, and heal from family violence.

In a candid conversation with Sarah, we explore the philosophy behind their work, the ground-breaking Inner Boy app, and why understanding the trauma behind violent behaviour is the key to breaking the cycle.

**The Birth of 'She Is Not Your Rehab'** Sarah explains how the movement started:

"She Is Not Your Rehab began as a simple message that while your childhood trauma isn't your fault, your healing is absolutely your responsibility. This has now grown into a global movement that has impacted many since its launch in Matt's 2019 Ted talk: [The Barbershop where men go to heal](#).

"Founded by my husband Matt and I, rooted in Matt's lived experience of childhood trauma and family violence; the core message and invitation is that women are not rehabilitation centres for men's unhealed trauma. It's about encouraging men to take responsibility for their healing rather than seeking it from their partners or families. What we don't transform we transmit!"

"After realising how many men were struggling, we had the idea to start a weekly group therapy sessions at our barbershop. Everyone told us men wouldn't come, but on the first night, over 100 of them showed up. We knew we were onto something."

"I would say 100% of the men we've ever worked with extensively have come from their own story of violence, intergenerational trauma and/or abuse. We want to support those people to heal from their past to change their current behaviour, rather than shaming and blaming. That's going to produce better outcomes for the children involved."

"It started with the many conversations had in our barbershop, where men naturally open up, and it has evolved into a worldwide movement that challenges harmful cycles of violence and creates spaces and tools where healing is possible."

***"Women are not  
rehabilitation centres for  
men's unhealed trauma.  
What we don't transform, we  
transmit."***

Photography by Jared Yeoward



Photography by Jared Yeoward

**Creating Safe Spaces for Men to Heal** Sarah reflects on the importance of providing spaces where men feel safe enough to engage with their emotions:

*"Healing always requires safe spaces. Places where men can talk without shame but where accountability is modelled and actioned. The barbershop model we began with was incredibly effective because it's a place of trust, familiarity, and realness. We need more spaces like this everywhere."*

*"Storytelling is another crucial tool. When people hear someone else's story, especially one that resonates with their own, it gives permission to reflect and change."*

*"We've never had trouble getting men to engage in our programs, including through the prison system in New Zealand and Australia. We insist that it's voluntary—not court-mandated. Every time, the room is packed – people are engaged, respectful and impacted by what Matt has to say. We've had men lining up to hug Matt afterward. That's the power of connection and understanding."*





*"I knew Hannah Clarke and her ex-partner for 7 years before he killed her. I couldn't see what was right in front of me, because my own lived experience of domestic violence shaded my view.*

*If I had innerBoy back then, I would have done the work and shown up differently during that time, and maybe she'd still be here".*

**- Dave Kramer, 37**  
Behavioural Scientist.  
Violence Prevention Advocate  
and Educator, Small Steps 4 Hannah

**B**  
innerBoy.au

### The Inner Boy App – Supporting Men Through Their Healing Journey

A key part of their recent work has been the development of the Inner Boy app, which provides daily support and guidance for men navigating the impact of intergenerational trauma.

"We launched Inner Boy in New Zealand and Australia after seeing the demand for it. A private philanthropist funded the first year in Australia, but it's not yet government-supported. Our goal is to make it sustainably funded so it can keep evolving and supporting more people."

"Its primary purpose is to support men who are victims of intergenerational trauma and violence. It's aimed at getting them to explore their inner world, helping them understand the correlation between their own childhood and their current behaviour. Some have perpetrated violence, others might be at risk of doing so. We're very clear that when you work in a trauma informed way, it's about understanding people's backstory."

"The app is designed to give men language and tools to work through their trauma. It's a 30-day program that they do their own pace. A lot of men struggle with emotional literacy or articulating their feelings, so we kept the language simple and direct. The feedback has been amazing. Men say it feels like Matt is walking with them, and that's the kind of support they've never had before."

"Within the first hour of launching the app, we had 36,000 requests. When you put things out there in a way that resonates and you're mindful of your messaging and the way you communicate that, we really believe that more people want help, than not. A lot of men don't want to continue on these patterns of behaviour and cycles for their own children, but they just don't know a different way. They've never had healthy masculinity modelled to them."

"We know that if men can understand why they behave the way they do—if they can connect the dots between their childhood experiences and their adult reactions—they can start to change."



Photography by Jared Yeoward



*"Being a professional athlete in the NRL for over a decade I learnt first hand that my mental fitness is equally as important as my physical fitness."*

*"I am proud to be a man in my family who broke the cycle of violence and I know innerBoy can help you too."*

- **Faamanu Brown, 27**  
Professional athlete.



innerBoy.au

## Why Shame Doesn't Work

A central pillar of the movement is the understanding that shame is not an effective tool for changing behaviour:

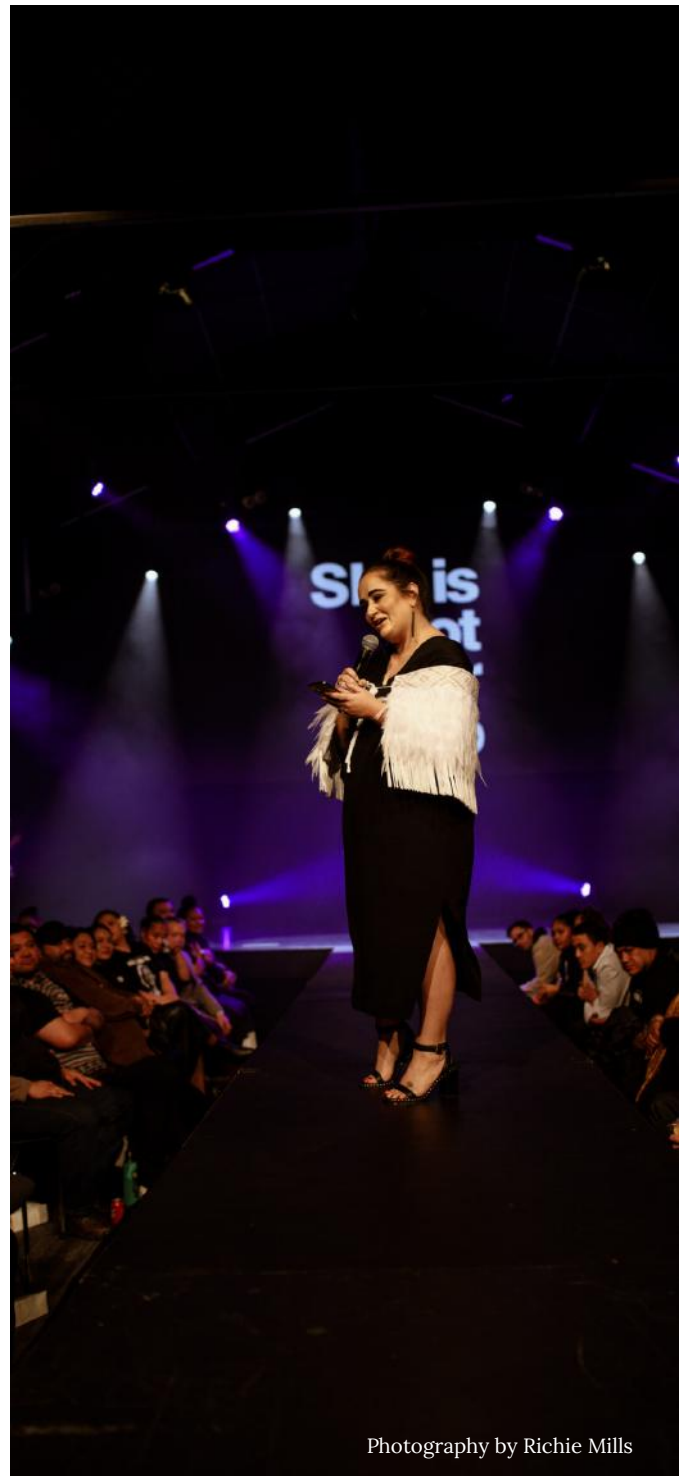
"We tell men to reach out for help—but then there's nothing for them to reach out to. If they aren't court-mandated, the support options are incredibly limited. And when they do reach out, they're often met with judgment rather than understanding."

"We continue to hear the call for men to stop beating women – and they absolutely should, But what have we done to set them up for success? For us, it's about time that we as a society, as a community, as a country, and as a global population do something differently. If we've got a big problem like domestic violence and we're not getting good results with what we're doing, let's think about how else we can approach the problem. Our work is very trauma informed. It's understanding that while your childhood trauma wasn't your fault, your healing now is your responsibility, but healing is best done in the conditions of empathy."

"If you treat someone like a perpetrator, that's all they'll ever be. You need to treat them like a human being first. Matt's story resonates with men because it's real. He grew up in poverty, his father was in and out of prison for family violence, and no one ever stepped in to help. So, of course, he understands why these cycles keep repeating."

"Our Whakataukī (proverb) is 'Speak to the sacred in him, until the sacred in him remembers'. The sacred in you is that you are a human being, deserving of the same love, belonging, empathy and care that everyone else wants and deserves. We have found if we approach men in this way, very seldom do they remain in the place that they were – energy matches energy."

"Shaming people doesn't work. Understanding them does."



Photography by Richie Mills

*Our Whakataukī is: "Speak to the sacred in him, until the sacred in him remembers"*





**Empathy as a Tool for Change** Sarah stresses that the goal is not to excuse violent behaviour but to create conditions where real change is possible:

*"Your childhood trauma isn't your fault—but your healing is your responsibility. And healing happens best in the context of empathy, not shame."*

"We've had people ask us - why do you want to work with those that perpetrate violence? They're probably narcissists and the 'worst of the worst'. My response is - but they're still somebody's dad, somebody's son, brother, a person in the community. How we work with them impacts those children and those families - so either we help them, or we don't but if we choose not to, those children and families suffer. No one is born in isolation, and no one is born evil. If we only had a handful of people in the world who behaved violently, we might put that down to them as individuals; but given the massive numbers that we do have of domestic violence, it reflects on us as a society, rather than just the individuals involved.

We believe this problem is endemic because we have too many people silently suffering."

"Our work, our book, our app, anything we do, is always about how to invite men into the conversation and how to encourage them down a path of healing, how to make them more aware of themselves internally. We keep expecting people are going to have empathy towards their partner, understanding and emotion. But if you've never seen it, you've never had it modelled to you, and you're not taught it at school, then we're asking a lot of people that haven't really been given a lot themselves."

"We've had men tell us they've never heard a man say 'I love you' or 'I'm proud of you.' That's why this work matters."

***"Your childhood trauma isn't your fault, but your healing is your responsibility"***



## Expanding the Conversation

Sarah and Matt are also working to broaden the conversation about family violence and healing. They recently published a children's book called 'This Is Not Yours to Carry,' aimed at helping children living in violent homes understand that they their circumstances are not their responsibility to fix or resolve.

"My husband Matt was often in and out of Women's refuges as a child with his mum and siblings. I asked him, "what's something you wish someone had said to you during that time?" He told me, without batting an eyelid, "I wish someone had told me that this just wasn't mine to carry." Because kids suffering take all of these experiences on board and carry them around into adulthood with thoughts like, 'what can I do to make dad better?, what can I do to make Mum happy? Or how can I make home better?'. It's not a child's job to do any of that. Matt was never de-briefed by anyone over his childhood and through these refuges because there simply weren't the resources for that. This is what we hope to achieve with the book."

"Unfortunately for some kids, their circumstances may not change. Even if they are in the Oranga Tamariki (New Zealand Ministry for Children) system, they might be back and forth with parents that don't do the work. We want to be able to plant seeds of encouragement into these kids lives because we can't go around taking kids out of every home that isn't safe. We've got to find ways to get a message of hope to them, to encourage them to break that cycle."

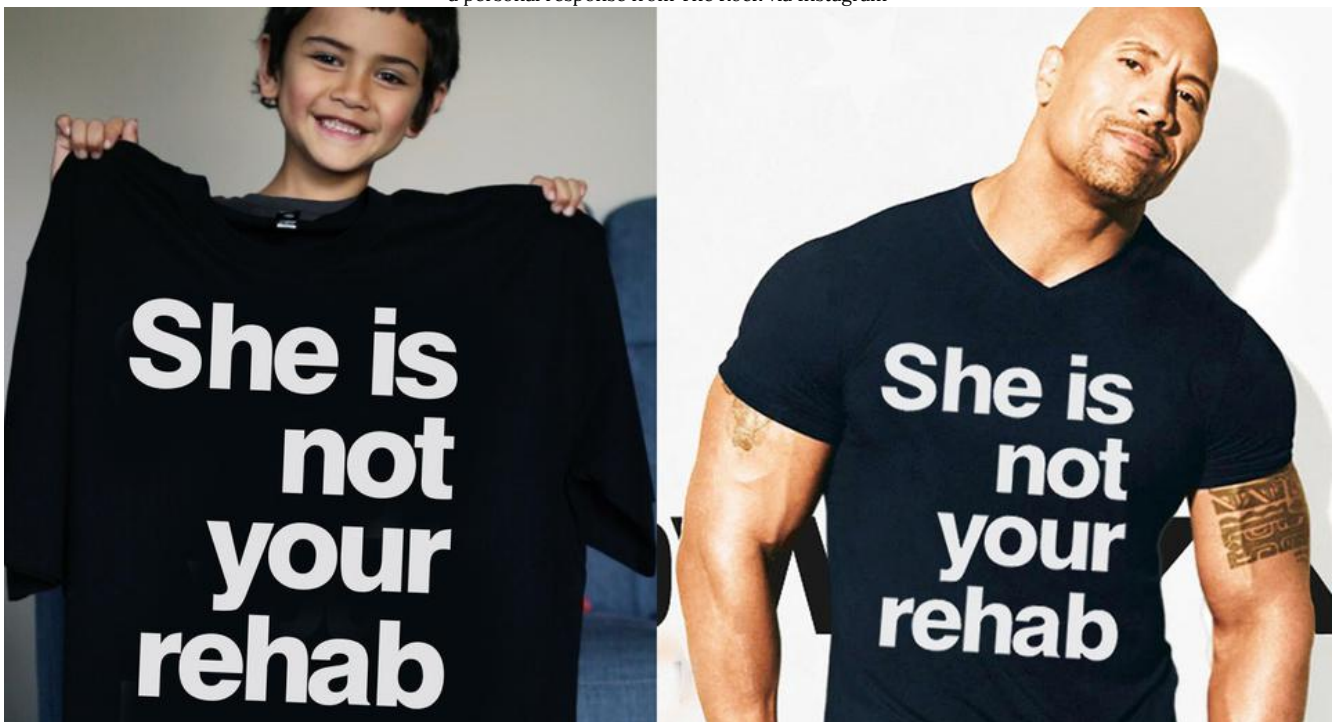
"In the book we've got a glossary of new terms to try and encourage emotional literacy. We can't underestimate the power of words; the right insight at the right time."

"We want to be able to gift these books to schools and refuges across New Zealand and Australia so that they have something to give the precious children who absolutely need that message given to them. We have set the goal of reaching 100,000 children. We've self-funded the first 10,000 books, but the demand is already huge. We're looking for partners to help fund the next print run so that we can get this message into the hands of the children who need it most."

"In 2025, we'll release a book for women entitled I Am Not Your Rehab. These books will further expand the conversation, hopefully bringing healing and awareness to even more people."

*Kids take on what's not theirs — trying to fix the adults, trying to make home better. But it's not their job to carry that weight. This book is there to tell them: This Is Not Yours To Carry.*

A heartfelt [video](#) letter to Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson went viral, gaining millions of views, ultimately receiving a personal response from The Rock via Instagram





**A Call to Action for Lawyers** Sarah closes with a powerful message for family lawyers:

*"Trauma is present in almost every family law case. The person sitting across from you isn't just angry or difficult—they've likely been through profound pain. If you can approach them with empathy rather than judgment, you can change the outcome of that case—and maybe their life."*

*"Being trauma-informed doesn't necessarily require specialised training. It's about recognising how past experiences shape present actions. It's understanding that there's always a story behind someone - we can be trauma informed lawyers, trauma informed therapists, trauma informed teachers, trauma informed sports coaches. If someone is not presenting brilliantly, there's probably a reason for it. Offer some understanding and empathy. Lawyers can play a powerful role in making people feel heard, validated, and supported, rather than just another case in the system."*

*"The legal profession has a unique platform to influence both policy and public attitudes. One way to drive change is to push for more holistic interventions —legal outcomes that prioritise not just punishment but also rehabilitation, support services, and long-term solutions."*

*"Read our book! We have many members of the Judiciary who have told us our book has given them a better understanding of family violence."*

The work of "She Is Not Your Rehab" challenges us to rethink how we approach family violence. By shifting from shame to empathy, and providing practical tools for healing, Sarah and Matt are helping men rewrite their stories. And in doing so, they're not just changing individual lives—they're reshaping the future for the next generation.

**If you, your firm, or anyone you know feel driven to contribute to the print and donation to refuges and schools of the children's book "This is Not Yours to Carry", please scan the QR code.**



Photography by Lyren Fraser



A Family Law Education Network event, co-hosted by JustFund.

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# A GUIDE TO HARMFUL PROCEEDINGS ORDERS

*Written by Hon. Dr. Tom Altobelli AM,  
Jessica Humphreys and Bryton Johnson*

Photography provided by Chambers of the Honourable Justice Altobelli AM

*Disclaimer: The views expressed by the authors are their personal views expressed in the context of professional education only. In particular, the views expressed by Altobelli J are not expressed in a Judicial capacity.*

## **Introduction**

The recent amendments to the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) (“the Act”) have created a robust framework designed to curtail proceedings that are not only unmeritorious and/or vexatious but are harmful. The provisions found in Part XIB of the Act reflect a legislative shift towards providing safeguards to litigants and children from being subjected to the collateral damage that arises due to litigation. This article briefly contrasts the legislative frameworks in relation to vexatious proceedings, summary dismissal and harmful proceedings, before diving further into the latter. To achieve this, we examine what constitutes harm under s 102QAB of the Act, how the harmful proceedings provisions have been applied since their introduction and speculate about future directions in this space.

## **Overview of Part XIB**

Part XIB of the Act outlines the Court’s powers in dealing with proceedings that are “unmeritorious, harmful, or vexatious” (s 102QAA). In the Explanatory Memorandum to the Family Law Amendment Bill 2023 (Cth) at paragraph 309 (“the Explanatory Memorandum”), the rationale behind Division 1A & 1B of the Act was to “collocate all the Court’s powers for dealing with application or proceedings... to improve usability”.

**Unmeritorious proceedings** are those without reasonable prospect of success, frivolous, vexatious or otherwise constitute an abuse of process. These may be dealt with by **summary decree** (s 102QAB). There is no separate order, however, called an unmeritorious proceedings order. A summary decree can be made in the following circumstances: there is no reasonable prospect of successfully defending, or prosecuting, proceedings; there is no reasonable prospect of success; the proceedings are frivolous, vexatious, or an abuse of process. A summary decree could be sought in respect of part only of a proceeding.

**Harmful proceedings** orders are a new and relatively distinct form of order that prohibits the institution of proceedings that may result in harm to another party and/or a subject child (if applicable). Harmful proceedings orders will be discussed in more detail below.

Both summary decrees and harmful proceedings orders may be made on application by a party, or on the Court's own initiative, and costs may flow from both forms of order.

Vexatious proceedings orders already exist so will not be the focus of this article. Practitioners should familiarise themselves with the following material:

*See particularly Perram J in Official Trustee in Bankruptcy v Gargan (No 2) [2009] FCA 398, Fitch, E., & Eastel, P. (2017). Vexatious litigation in family law and coercive control: Ways to improve legal remedies and better protect the victims. Family Law Review, 7(2), 103-115 and Benjamin, R (2014). A national approach to manage vexatious litigation: New powers under the Family Law Act. Family Law Review, 4(3), 170-182.*

#### **Harmful proceedings orders**

Harmful proceedings orders uniquely require the Court to determine whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that a party, or a subject child, would suffer harm if the proposed proceedings were to begin. It is limited, however, to proceedings under the Act, but 'proceedings' is given an extended definition to include a proceeding, whether between the parties or not, including cross-proceedings or an incidental proceeding in the course of or in connection with a proceeding. This extended definition thus potentially includes applications by third parties which are incidental to the proceedings between, for example, the parents.

Judicial officers are permitted to take account of direct medical evidence, and/or the history of proceedings in this and other Australian Courts as evidence of such 'harm'. Before making a harmful proceedings or vexatious order the Court is required to hear the respondent. This is not a requirement for the other summary decrees though best practice arguably requires this.

The concept of 'harm' is central to a harmful proceedings order. Harm is defined in non-exclusive terms under s 102QAC(2) of the Act as including psychological harm or oppression, major mental distress, detriment to parenting capacity and financial harm. There is nothing in the wording of the section to prevent only one element of harm being a sufficient foundation for an order.





Parliament's intention behind the harmful proceedings powers is found in the Explanatory Memorandum at [322]:

*“to allow the courts to proactively intervene, or intervene upon application by a party to the proceedings, before further applications are served on the other party, and therefore limit the detrimental effect, major mental distress or psychological harm that may result from further applications”.*

This endows s 102QAC(2) of the Act with a uniquely anticipatory capacity. But does it limit the application to merely prospective proceedings, or does it extend to existing proceedings as well? Judge Brown in *Lamport & Garside* [2024] FedCFamC2F 1007 (“*Lamport & Garside*”) said:

*“it would make a nonsense of the provision, if the court, having formed a view that relevant proceedings are likely to cause harm to a party or child, could only intervene under the section, after the conclusion of such harmful proceedings, and only in respect of prospective proceedings”*

Whilst we agree with the sentiment of his Honour's comments, both the section, and the Explanatory Memorandum are clear: it only applies to prospective proceedings.

A proper understanding of harm in the context of s 102QAC(2) of the Act is found in the non-exclusive, statutory components of harm.

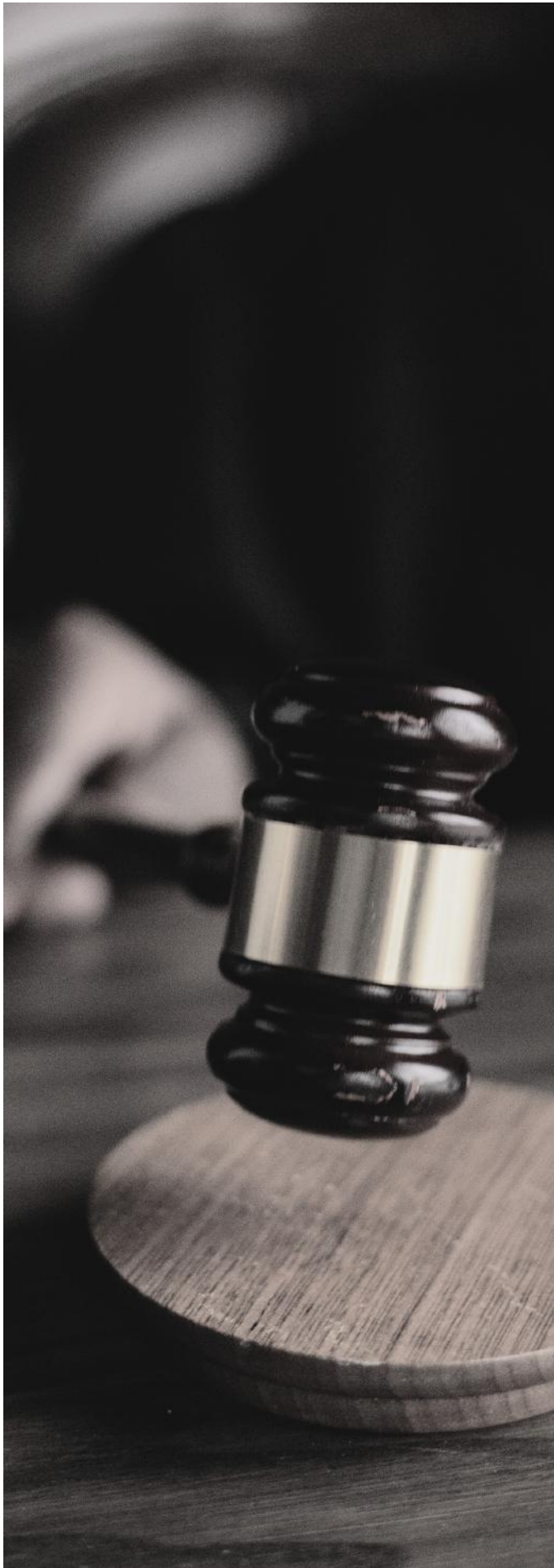
*“The power is anticipatory — designed to stop harm before it happens. The Court can act before further proceedings even begin.”*

**Section 102QAC(2)(a) psychological harm or oppression.** These factors are expressed in the alternate; one or the other may suffice. According to the Macquarie Dictionary definition 1 ‘harm’ means to “*damage or hurt*” whilst ‘oppression’ means “*the exercise of authority of power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner*”. In conjunction, the form of ‘harm’ intended to be addressed by both alternate propositions is limited to purely mental or emotional detriment induced by the imposition, or continuation of, purportedly harmful proceedings oppression. As the definition is inclusive, however, this might mean, for example, that physical and financial oppression is caught by this section.

**Section 102QAC(2)(b) major mental distress.** According to the Macquarie Dictionary definition 1, ‘distress’ means “*great pain, anxiety, or sorrow; acute suffering; affliction; trouble*”. Mental distress, as a form of harm, is likely to arise from most proceedings under the Act. Justice Behrens noted in *Chen & Parisio* [2025] FedCFamC1F 27 (“*Chen & Parisio*”) that “*much litigation will cause mental distress*” and that “*something more is required*”. This may be surmised by reference to the statutory inclusion of the presupposition major mental distress in the Act. The form of harm sought to be addressed by this factor is extraordinary distress beyond the norm for the proceeding contemplated. Arguably the harm may be inferred.

**Section 102QAC(2)(c) a detrimental effect on the other party's capacity to care for a child.** Parental capacity is a well-accepted consideration in the determination of parenting orders that does not require explanation here. The inclusion of this factor demonstrates that harm may be indirect in the sense that the proceeding induces a net negative effect on a family unit via the degradation of core competencies of one or more parties. Further, it is important to note that this factor is not limited to adjudication of putative or current parenting proceedings. It may be such that auxiliary, contingent or bifurcated financial proceedings may have a harmful effect on a person's parental capacity and thus enliven this sub-provision.

**Section 102QAC(2)(d) financial harm.** According to the Macquarie Dictionary definition 1 ‘financial’ relates “*to monetary receipts and expenditures*”. Financial harm must therefore describe the detriment a person suffers through excess or unnecessary pecuniary loss as a result of pending or current proceedings that is beyond the norm similar claims under the Act.



### **How have the harmful proceedings division been applied?**

In search of possible trends, we briefly survey a selection of recent harmful proceedings decisions.

Berman J in *Purnell & Keene* [2024] FedCFamC1F 571 handed down on 29 August 2024 (“*Purnell & Keene*”) declined to make a harmful proceedings order. In this matter, final orders were made for the children to live with the mother, spend no time with the father who was subjected to various restraints. Despite a previous ADVO and the evidence supporting that the father had previously harassed and intimidated the mother, the evidence submitted did not establish that “*further proceedings would result in inevitable harm or aggression.*” (*Purnell & Keene* at [115]).

On 20 September 2024, judgment was handed down in by Harper J in *Morse & Duarte* (No 8) [2024] FedCFamC1F 639 (“*Morse & Duarte* (No 8)”). His Honour made a harmful proceedings order after having found that a wife had unsuccessfully prosecuted nine applications before the Court. He referred to “*such proceedings hav[ing] been frequently and habitually instituted by the wife*” (*Morse & Duarte* (No 8) at [103]). The husband submitted that if the wife were to institute further proceedings “*he would suffer financial harm and stress that impacts upon his quality of life*” and further that any “*financial harm the husband would suffer could not be properly addressed through a costs order given the wife’s persistent non-compliance...*” (*Morse & Duarte* (No 8) at [104]). His Honour “*had regard to the cumulative effect, or potential cumulative effect, of any harm to the husband resulting from further proceedings*” and further commented that the effect was seemingly “*significant*” (*Morse & Duarte* (No 8) at [105]).

Judge Glass in *Sastri & Kurta* [2024] FedCFamC2F 1742 delivered on 4 December 2024, refused to make a harmful proceedings order where his Honour formed the view that the harm was mere speculation. Judge Glass noted the requirements of the rule of law and contended that “*it is a serious matter to deprive a person of access to the courts*” (*Sastri & Kurta* at [68]). Counsel asserted that “*it is likely that the mental distress that it would cause to my client would trickle through to the child, and there would be an impact on her*”, but his Honour concluded that “*counsel’s anticipation of what is “likely” is not a matter to which [the Court] can afford any weight*” (*Sastri & Kurta* at [75]) and in the absence of any evidentiary foundation, the application was rejected.



In an unpublished judgment handed down on 11 February 2025, Judge Mansfield made a harmful proceedings order after receiving evidence from the mother's treating psychologist that the "mother has suffered psychological harm and major mental distress attributable to the father instituting these proceedings" (at [50]). The Court accepted this evidence in addition to evidence about financial harm and independent evidence about the detrimental effect that the proceedings had on the mother's capacity to care for the child. Notably, whilst third party evidence may not be independent it may still assist the Court in exercising its discretion to make a harmful proceedings order. See Lamport & Garside for a further example of an order made to proactively prevent psychological harm.

Behren's J made a harmful proceedings order in *Chen & Parisio* on 30 January 2025. Her Honour confirmed that the Court is "not required to be satisfied on the balance of probabilities that harm will occur if further proceedings are instituted, but rather to be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to believe there will be such harm" (*Chen & Parisio* at [84]). This is a case where no medical evidence was presented but the history of proceedings was relevant (*Chen & Parisio* at [86]). This case shows that medical evidence can prove harm, and where not available, historical analysis may suffice.

#### **Future directions**

The harmful proceedings provisions were introduced "to limit systems abuse, which is a form of family violence that is prevalent in the family law system" (Explanatory Memorandum, paragraph 319). The future directions of the provisions should go towards this aim. As Division 1B of the Act matures, judicial officers may step away from the view that a harmful proceeding order is exceptional and requires definitive proof, towards a broader recognition of harm generated through repetitive filings as a distinct form of family violence, even where the only evidence of harm generated by this violence may be inferred. The deliberate inclusion of a non-exhaustive list of factors which may form reasonable grounds as a basis for a harmful proceedings order creates flexibility and allows remote or unforeseen changes to be considered where appropriate. This may extend; given the current epoch of technological advancement, to harm induced or exacerbated by technology including artificial intelligence.

#### **Conclusion**

Although none of our predictions may materialise, what is certain is that the harmful proceedings divisions under the Act provide a new and useful avenue for practitioners. This article outlines the additional principles, the dos and don'ts of an application pursuant to s 102QAC of the Act. Looking on the horizon, there is scope for an expanded recognition of varying natures of harm. The key take-away for practitioners is that harm is open ended but bound to a specific purpose. Some, but not all, principles are shared between different forms of summary decree. In order to satisfy the unique criteria for harmful proceedings order medical or fiscal evidence is an important first step.

*As the law evolves, so too must  
our recognition that harm  
comes in many forms — and  
courts have the tools to act  
before it takes hold.*



**Honourable Justice  
Altobelli AM**



**Jessica  
Humphreys**



**Bryton  
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# TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE FOR FAMILY LAW PRACTITIONERS

*Lessons from Two Decades of Clinical Experience*

Photography provided by Dr Antonio Simonelli



Written by Dr Antonio Simonelli

## **Introduction: A Personal Journey Through Trauma Work**

Over the past two decades, as a psychiatrist, I have had the privilege—and challenge—of working with traumatised individuals across diverse settings: the public health system, correctional facilities, military and veteran populations, and now the Family Court space. Throughout this journey, classical psychoanalytic concepts have provided both theoretical grounding and practical wisdom for navigating the complex terrain of trauma work.

As I've transitioned into the Family Court environment, I've found myself drawing heavily on established clinical principles while adapting them to legal rather than therapeutic contexts. While the Family Court setting presents unique challenges—legal rather than therapeutic outcomes, time constraints, adversarial processes—the fundamental principles of trauma-informed work remain remarkably consistent across contexts.

This article represents my attempt to translate clinical insights into practical guidance for family law practitioners who encounter traumatised clients daily.

## **Understanding Trauma: Four Key Categories**

Rather than relying on rigid clinical definitions, trauma is best understood through recognisable patterns. Trauma can be categorised into four main types:

### **1. Acute Single-Incident Trauma**

These are overwhelming events that exceed an individual's capacity to cope, such as serious accidents, violent crimes, sudden death of a loved one, or single incidents of severe abuse. In Family Law contexts, this might include witnessing domestic violence, experiencing a traumatic divorce revelation, or surviving a family tragedy.

### **2. Chronic Strain Trauma**

Kris (1956) introduced the concept of "strain trauma" to describe ongoing, persistent traumatic experiences. A particularly relevant example he provided was "*the ongoing strain trauma of being black in this country*", highlighting how systemic oppression creates continuous psychological strain. In Family Law contexts, this includes ongoing domestic violence, chronic neglect or emotional abuse, persistent discrimination, or long-term financial insecurity that affects family stability.

### **3. Developmental Trauma**

This occurs during critical developmental periods and has a profound impact on personality formation and relationship patterns. Examples include early parental loss, childhood sexual abuse by family members, severe physical abuse during formative years, and disrupted attachment relationships. This type of trauma particularly impacts clients' ability to maintain stable co-parenting relationships and make sound decisions about their children's welfare.

#### 4. Intergenerational Trauma

This refers to trauma effects transmitted across generations, such as Holocaust survivors and their descendants, effects of historical trauma in Indigenous communities, patterns of family violence passed through generations, and immigration trauma affecting multiple family members. This type of trauma often emerges in Court proceedings where generational patterns of dysfunction become evident.

##### The Impact of Trauma on Psychological Functioning

Trauma fundamentally disrupts normal psychological development. As Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) described, healthy development requires the consolidation of self-and-object constancy—the ability to maintain stable internal representations of oneself and others even during times of stress or separation. Trauma interferes with this crucial developmental achievement and also impairs the mind's capacity to recognise and regulate emotional states.

##### Understanding Self-Object Constancy in Family Law Practice:

Healthy Self-Object Constancy: When a lawyer needs to reschedule a meeting, a client with intact self-object constancy thinks:

- "I'm disappointed, but I know my lawyer is working hard for me"
- "This must be important—they're usually reliable"
- "Our working relationship is strong enough to handle this delay"

Impaired Self-Object Constancy: The same situation might trigger:

- "My lawyer doesn't care about my case"
- "I'm always abandoned when I need people most"
- "They're incompetent" (all-bad thinking)
- Difficulty remembering previous positive interactions.

This concept helps explain why traumatised clients may experience normal legal processes as personal rejections, struggle to maintain nuanced views of family members, and require extraordinary consistency from their legal representatives.

#### Four Essential Principles for Trauma-Informed Family Law Practice

##### 1. Create Safety Through Consistent Presence and Welcoming Environment

Traumatised individuals need to experience genuine safety before meaningful work can begin. Ferenczi (1929) described this as allowing clients to experience psychological safety for potentially the first time in their lives.

##### Practical Applications:

- Begin meetings by acknowledging the stress of legal proceedings.
- Create office environments that feel safe rather than intimidating.
- Maintain consistent communication patterns and reliable scheduling.
- Validate clients' protective instincts while educating about legal realities.
- Allow clients to bring support persons when appropriate.
- Use language that validates clients' experiences without making promises about outcomes.

##### 2. Provide Psychological "Holding" Through Flexible Timelines and Adaptive Approaches

Winnicott (1960) emphasised the importance of "holding"—providing psychological containment that allows individuals to process difficult material safely. Premature pushing or rigid adherence to standard timelines can re-traumatise vulnerable clients.

##### For Family Law Practice:

- Build additional time into case timelines for trauma-affected clients.
- Allow for multiple meetings before expecting major decisions.
- Modify standard procedures when clinically indicated (meeting locations, communication methods).
- Recognise that setbacks are a natural part of the healing process.
- Coordinate with mental health professionals when appropriate.
- Break complex legal decisions into smaller, manageable steps.
- Provide extra preparation time before court appearances.

*Trauma can echo through generations — shaping how clients see themselves, others, and even their lawyer's every action.*



### 3. Validate Trauma Impact While Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Validation involves acknowledging the reality and impact of traumatic experiences without necessarily adjudicating between competing narratives. This requires sophisticated clinical skills adapted to legal contexts.

#### **Practical Strategies:**

- Acknowledge the difficulty of clients' experiences without requiring detailed trauma disclosure.
- Focus on how past experiences affect current functioning rather than establishing historical facts.
- Avoid minimising trauma with statements like "that's in the past" or "you need to move on".
- Distinguish between believing clients' subjective experiences and determining legal facts.
- Support clients in developing their narrative coherence.
- Separate validation from fact-finding in legal proceedings.
- Create conditions where clients feel safe sharing relevant information when legally necessary.

### 4. Develop Professional Self-Awareness and Manage Responses to Traumatic Material

Working with traumatised clients inevitably affects practitioners. Developing skills for managing these responses is crucial for effective practice and professional sustainability.

#### **Key Strategies:**

- Recognise that intense emotional reactions to client trauma are normal and human.
- Use emotional responses as information about case dynamics and what others (judges, opposing counsel) might experience.
- Seek regular consultation with mental health professionals for both case consultation and personal support.
- Maintain clear boundaries between empathy and over-identification with clients' experiences.
- Develop consistent self-care practices and professional support networks.
- Understand when personal trauma history enhances versus impairs professional judgment.
- Build referral relationships with trauma-informed mental health professionals.

*Supporting traumatised clients starts with supporting yourself — boundaries, self-awareness, and consistent care are non-negotiable.*

### **Conclusion**

The integration of classical psychoanalytic understanding with contemporary family law practice offers a sophisticated framework for working with traumatised clients. The goal is not to become therapists, but to recognise trauma's impact on legal processes and adapt practice accordingly.

Effective trauma-informed practice requires both genuine human presence and legal competence. As clinical literature consistently demonstrates, neither warmth without expertise nor technical skill without authentic care can adequately serve traumatised families navigating the legal system.

The fundamental requirement remains bringing an authentic professional presence to the work while maintaining appropriate boundaries. This approach not only serves clients more effectively but also provides practitioners with a sustainable framework for managing the emotional demands of family law practice.



#### **Dr. Antonio Simonelli, Consultant Psychiatrist, MBBS (UNSW) FRANZCP Mast. Forensic MH (UNSW)**

Dr Antonio Simonelli is a Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist with over 20 years' of experience within multiple healthcare sectors and across diverse communities – working as a Senior Staff Specialist in public mental health, maintaining a private practice, and provide expert evidence to the NSW Courts. He has 6 major qualifications including FRANZCP, Masters in Forensic Mental Health, and specialized certifications bring a broad perspective to his role as an Expert witness in criminal court proceedings (Local, District and Supreme Court matters) and Mental Health Review Tribunal matters. Dr Simonelli has special interest in Sex Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation.

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# THE CLIENT VIEW

**What they remember, long after the matter ends.**

*“You looked me in the eye and said, ‘You’re not a bad parent.’ I needed to hear that more than anything.”*

*“You didn’t rush me when I was trying to explain. That’s the first time I felt someone really listened.”*

*“You told me I wasn’t difficult. Just exhausted. That changed everything.”*

It’s easy to underestimate the impact of small moments.

But when the dust settles, it’s often those moments that clients carry forward—the pause, the patience, the quiet reassurance that they are not broken.

# BUILDING A MEANINGFUL CAREER IN FAMILY LAW

*A Guide for Junior Lawyers*

## Written By Amanda Little

I remember the day I stepped into my first job as a paralegal. Little did I know almost 20 years later I would look back at those early moments and wonder how I survived.

I grew up during the era where Juniors were left to their own devices, you were required to hustle, utilise your own skill sets and learn as you went from making mistakes. There was little mentoring or support from Senior Partners/Firm owners who were themselves drowning in work and admin.

One of the most adept sayings to describe being a Junior lawyer is ...

*“being a lawyer is like riding a bike, but the bike is on fire, the ground is on fire and you’re on fire”*

However, that landscape has now changed, Junior lawyers don’t have the luxury of being able to make mistakes and learn from them, due to the power of online presence for firms (especially google reviews!) lawyers must, from the get-go, be fully functional and supervised heavily.

However, this brings opportunity for Junior Lawyers to learn the right way from the start. To have healthy, functional and best practice skill sets from the get-go.

Starting your journey in Family Law is both exciting and overwhelming. You’re dealing with real people, real emotions, and often real crises. It’s not a field for the faint-hearted—but for those drawn to making a difference, family law offers one of the most meaningful legal careers you can build.







Here are my six key suggestions on how to build a fulfilling and long-term career in family law:

1. Find a Mentor – Not just a Manager
2. Get Comfy with Complexity
3. Join a Collegiate Community of different Skill Sets (Like FamMastery)
4. Build Strong professional habits early that are BEST practice
5. Show Initiative and stay teachable
6. Stay Connected to your Why

#### 1. Find a Mentor – Not Just a Manager

Every lawyer has a supervisor, but not every lawyer has a mentor. A manager tells you what needs to be done. A mentor shows you why it matters and how to do it better and helps you build quality skills focussed on best practice in a ethical and considered way.

A great mentor will:

- Share their real experiences—the wins and the mistakes
- Help you decode difficult client interactions or court feedback
- Give perspective when you feel overwhelmed or stuck
- Advocate for your growth
- Challenge you regularly in a healthy way

#### How to get started:

Identify someone you admire for their professionalism, integrity, or work style. LinkedIn stalk people if you have to!

Invite them for a coffee or a quick check-in and ask if they'd be open to mentoring you informally. Most experienced lawyers are more than happy to support emerging practitioners—they just don't always know who's seeking that guidance.

*“You don't have to do this alone. The right mentor can help you build your confidence while staying grounded in your values.”*

Send a simple message via LinkedIn or an email introducing yourself and asking for 10 minutes of their time to have a chat about practising. See if you have the right repour and if you do ask them to formally mentor you.

## 2. Get Comfy with Complexity

In Family Law, there's rarely a clear 'win'—and that's what makes it so human. You're dealing with people at their most vulnerable, navigating financial, emotional, and legal tensions all at once. Family Law will never be black and white. It is constantly grey. If you're a person who likes certainty and wants to practice Family Law, then you need to change the way you see the world.

The world of Family Law is rarely fair, and the outcomes are rarely one sided. In most cases a good outcome is where both parties won and they both lost. Learning to sit with ambiguity and still make sound decisions is a critical skill.

As a junior there is this insatiable need to be able to give answers from the outset, but the truth is , all Senior Lawyers will tell you that there is no definitive answer and case strategy, the ability to think outside of the box, and creativity play a huge part in the outcomes of family law matters for clients.

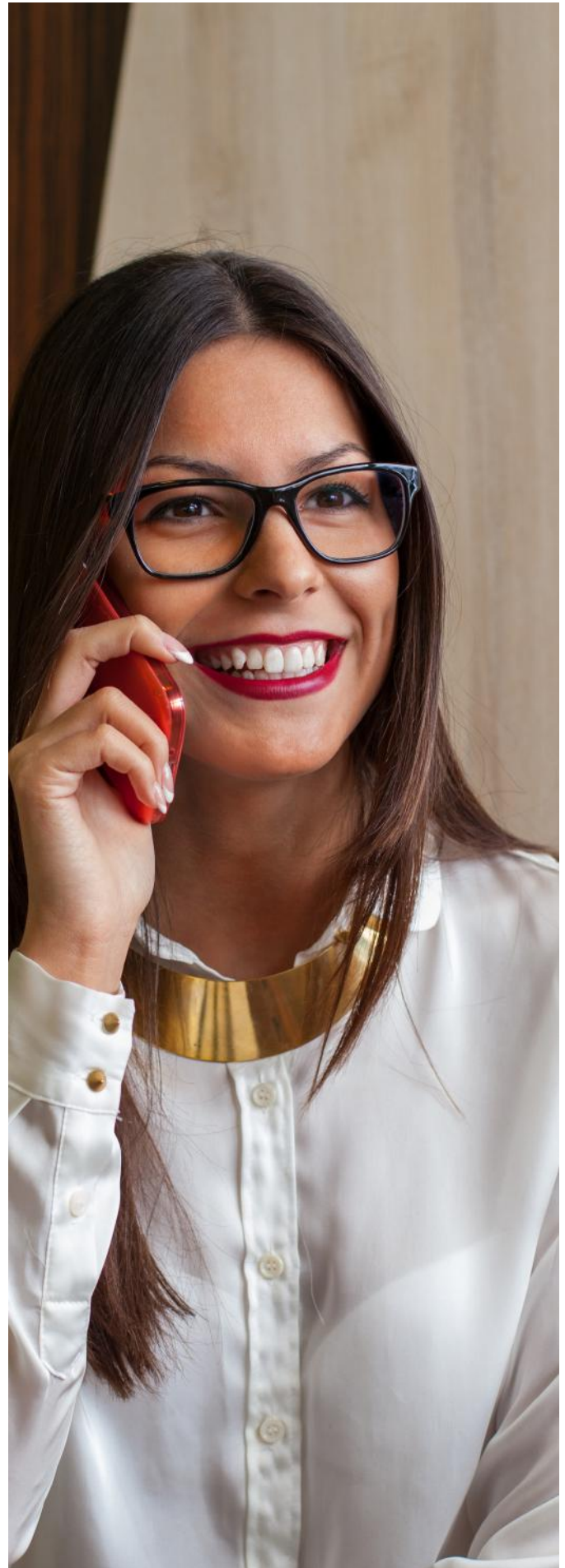
You'll need to:

- Assess not just legal principles but emotional undercurrents
- Consider long-term impacts for children and families
- Navigate opposing narratives without judgment
- Accept that sometimes, compromise is the best outcome
- Think outside the box and see the grey in all situations

### Practice tip:

Ask yourself not only what the law says but why it says it. Contextual reasoning is what elevates a competent lawyer into a strategic one.

*“Clients need more than legal advice. They need clarity in the midst of chaos. Your job is to be both a translator and a guide.”*





### 3. Join a Collegiate Community of Different Skill Sets and be inspired

No one thrives in isolation—especially not in Family Law. Even inside your firm you might not have the supports to thrive, especially if the Seniors around you are drowning in their own file work.

The best work and most learning comes from being exposed to different cases, peoples professional opinions, case law and just general collegiate discussion.

We no longer have water coolers in the office, but the premise still applies. You can learn more standing around a watercooler in 5 minutes then in hours of reading case law or a book.

*When great minds come together, something magic happens and being part of that, or even exposed to it, is priceless.*

Joining a professional community like FamMastery gives junior lawyers access to:

- Real-time support and collaboration from peers and mentors
- Exposure to different perspectives and specialisations
- Skills development beyond black-letter law (business, communication, wellbeing)
- A sense of belonging and shared purpose
- Exposure to collegiate disagreements (yes they are healthy and appropriate!), challenges and case strategy

You'll learn faster, grow smarter, and feel less alone in your challenges.

#### **Why it matters:**

Some lessons are best learned from shared stories—not textbooks. Being part of a supportive network keeps your momentum going, especially when the job gets tough.

*“In a collegiate community, your questions become conversations—and your struggles become shared solutions.”*





#### 4. Build Strong Professional Habits Early That Are Best Practice

Your habits in the first few years will set the tone for your whole career. Take the time to embed best practices now so you don't spend later years unlearning poor ones. As someone who hires, I want to know where lawyers worked previously to determine what habits they come with.

It is better to know less but have good habits and practices, then know more but have poor habits.

Some must-have habits:

- Time-record daily and accurately
  - Always confirm instructions in writing
  - Keep clear, structured file notes
  - Follow through on deadlines—yours and others'
  - Proofread with purpose—clarity is respect
  - Be respectful to clients, colleagues and the court.
- Professional Courtesy is free. Aggression will ensure your matters don't settle and will usually lead to a poorer outcome overall.

Good habits not only protect you legally but build trust with clients, colleagues, and the court.

#### Tools to help:

Use checklists, templates, and digital tools to stay consistent. If your firm doesn't provide them, create your own or borrow from community platform or [sign up to Family Law Education network](#) yourself (yes its tax deductible!)

*“Professional habits are like your legal reputation—they take time to build and seconds to damage. Start strong.”*

#### 5. Show Initiative—and Stay Teachable

Initiative is gold in any firm. It shows you're thinking ahead, willing to contribute, and ready to grow. But the flip side is humility—staying teachable, curious, and open to correction. My favourite staff are the ones who come to me asking questions, who think outside the box and challenge themselves.

Ways to show initiative:

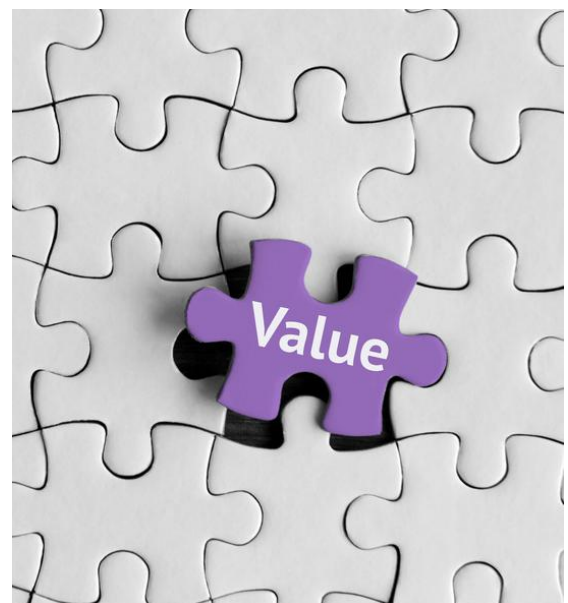
- Offer to draft something new.
- Suggest a legal update for your team meeting.
- Summarise a recent case for the internal precedent bank or education resource.
- Volunteer to attend mediation or court with a senior.

Ways to stay teachable:

- Ask why something is done a certain way.
- Own your mistakes and correct them quickly.
- Reflect on feedback instead of defending it.

*“Your mindset should be: how can I add value—and how can I improve next time?”*

I still learn every day, and I am just shy of 20 years in practice. The more I learn, the more I realise what I don't know – and there is a lot. Lawyers are human beings who are fallible, who need to be constantly learning and being challenged to improve. Staying teachable and not being arrogant means your career will continue to expand into the future.





## 6. Stay Connected to Your ‘Why’

It’s easy to get caught up in billable hours, court deadlines, and the emotional weight of the work. But your longevity and satisfaction will come from staying connected to your purpose.

Your ‘why’ might be:

- Supporting vulnerable families.
- Fighting for fairness and justice.
- Creating safe parenting arrangements.
- Making the legal system less intimidating.

### **Check in with your why regularly:**

Write it down. Put it somewhere visible. Revisit it when you’re doubting yourself or feeling burnt out.

*“The most meaningful careers are value-driven. When you work from your ‘why’, even the hard days make sense.”*

### **My Thoughts:**

You’re not just “starting out”—you’re laying the foundation for a career that can impact lives, shape communities, and redefine what it means to practise family law.

Surround yourself with the right people. Commit to excellence. Stay grounded in your values and practice in a collegiate respectful way.

**You’re not here to survive. You’re here to lead—with heart, with skill, and with purpose.**



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# WHEN TWO STAFF GIVE NOTICE AND THE WHOLE PRACTICE FALLS

*The Pitfalls of Traditional Recruitment for  
Modern Law Firms*

Written by Christian Gaszner

At a recent industry dinner, I found myself seated next to John, a family law principal with his own firm. Naturally, I asked how business was going, and if he was hiring, hoping to find out if Insource's talent database could support his firm.

His response caught me completely off guard.

***"I'm actually in the process of closing the practice,"***

Asking him what happened, he explained that his two senior associates had resigned within weeks of each other, both heading to other firms. After years of stress, two global financial crisis's, and recent health issues, those two departures were the final straw for John. He'd decided to shut up shop.

## **Retention, Attrition, and the Tipping Point**

Retention and attrition are natural forces in any profession. But in family law—where firms are often small and built on tight-knit teams, complementary skill sets, and deeply held relationships—the departure of key staff can feel like a gut punch. Losing multiple senior staff in quick succession can be a knockout blow.

Family law practitioners are particularly mobile, with a strong demand in the market and less barriers to launching your own practice than fields like Personal Injury, both junior and senior staff are liable to change roles at any moment.

When this happens, they don't just take billable hours—they take client relationships, expertise, goodwill, and stability. And in today's tight market, replacing them is no easy feat.

As I talked with John over dinner, he walked me through his decision to close his firm.

***"My wife actually works in a recruitment firm," he told me. "When the first Senior Associate resigned, I started talking with her about how we might replace them. But based on what she was telling me over the kitchen table each night, I knew it would be tough."***

John proceeded to tell me anecdotes of his wife advertising roles and getting no qualified applicants. Head-hunting was proving just as difficult even with their "black book" and trying to map the market for each role takes time, and even then, you're not sure if the candidates are the right fit.

***"When the second Senior Associate resigned," he said, "I realised I'd have to pull a rabbit out of the hat—twice. And probably pay a recruiter for it both times, with where the firm was at the idea of having to work longer to pay off that investment hiring new staff didn't make sense"***

### **The difficulty of hiring and retaining staff in the current market**

At Insource, we've watched this instability play out firsthand, tracking the comings and goings of staff from firms nationally. In the past 12 months, nearly 1 in 5 family lawyers with 0–5 years' experience changed roles.

While that might sound like a buoyant market, the reality is that 4 in 5 lawyers stayed put. Meaning that most firms are fishing from the same limited pool of talent, spurring multiple recruitment agencies to set up satellite offices in New Zealand in order to find more candidates.

This tension is echoed across the broader legal sector. Surveys by [Actionstep](#) and [ALPMA](#) show that recruitment and retention remain the top HR challenges for mid-sized law firms and member firms respectively, citing that 60% of firms expect hiring to remain difficult through 2025 and into 2026 and one of their largest strategic challenges.

### **The Hidden Cost of the Waiting Game**

When firms wait until a staff member resigns before they start thinking about their replacement the consequences can be severe. The average hiring process via job ad takes approximately 6–8 weeks to reach the offer stage. If your offer is accepted immediately with no counteroffer or drama, you'll then have to wait at least another 4 weeks while your new hire serves their notice before they are able to start.

At best, that's almost three months of lost productivity—assuming someone qualified applies to your initial job ad and you don't have to start from scratch and readvertise.

While all this is playing out, the workload of your departed solicitor doesn't disappear. It's absorbed by remaining staff, leading to stress, burnout, reduced service quality, and sometimes, even more resignations unless you're able to fill the gap left in your team.

Waiting until you have a need before starting your search puts pressure on the business with the imminent departure of your tenured employee putting a ticking clock on the recruitment process and bringing you ever closer to being understaffed.

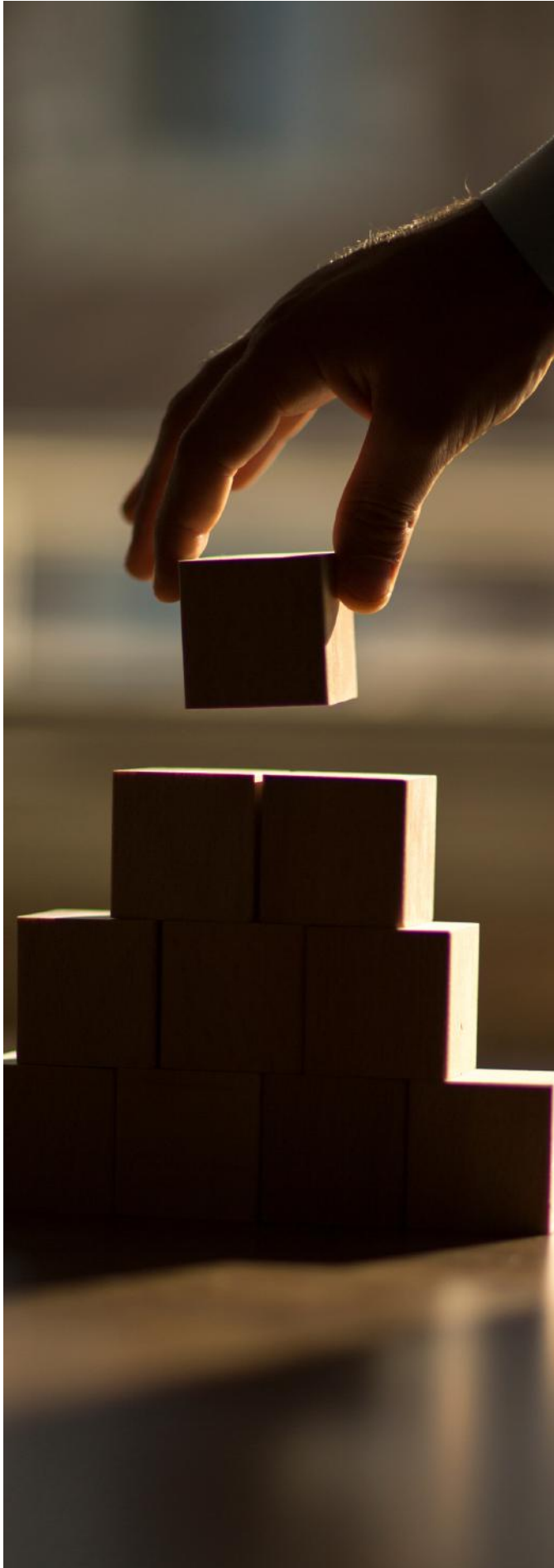
Going to market in the heat of the moment, means you only connect with or attract people who are looking at the same time as you.

You're not getting the best of the market, you're not getting the whole of the market, you're getting a snapshot, a handful of professionals who are looking at a job board at any one point in time, specifically those looking to leave their current job in the immediate future.

*Waiting to hire until someone resigns can cost you three months of productivity—and push your team to breaking point.*

Photography provided by Christian Gaszner





### **The High Cost of Outsourcing Recruitment**

Faced with the prospect of job ads not securing a candidate, many firms turn to recruiters to supplement their search, knowing that *“I’ll only pay if I actually take their candidate”*.

It’s not uncommon to see fees equivalent to the cost of a new family car. 20% or more of starting salary, meaning \$20K–\$30K per placement for early career hires, or significantly more for senior hires.

But unlike a new car the warranties for these new hires are less reliable, often with short windows for performance guarantees and other hidden intangible costs, like an increased dependence on using recruiters in the long run, a limited view of the market and potential candidates responses to your role or firm, and a lack of control over how your brand is being portrayed to prospective candidates.

### **There’s a Better Way**

Imagine if the next time you have someone resign from your firm you already have their replacement waiting in the wings. No dramatic loss of productivity or billables, no additional stress being pushed on to your team, no nights spent wondering how to fill a looming hole in your firm.

Through proactive recruitment, its entirely is possible —and the impact is powerful.

Just like for good business development, it pays to be thinking ahead when it comes to recruitment. Directly approaching candidates with recruitment propositions can feel awkward and uncomfortable for both parties, but when its a quiet undercurrent in your conversations, there is space for the idea of joining your firm to mature into a meaningful proposition, backed by your EVP rather than a bigger bag of money. Time and again Insource has seen success from firms who have their Partners and Directors close to their recruitment, taking an active hand in having coffee with prospective hires and building a warm pipeline of practitioners who might make the decision to join their practice in the future when the time is right.

Family law firms that play to their strengths, utilising agility and strong networks, are well-positioned to transition to this proactive approach. Firms that are thriving aren’t just reacting to the cards they’re dealt —they’re planning ahead and building relationships with future candidates now, before they have a hiring need and before the candidate is actively applying for other jobs.



### Tools That Make It Easier

Traditionally, recruiters kept a literal “black book” of potential candidates. It took time, effort, and constant updates, to keep these lists viable and to allow them to stay in business. As technology has advanced, so too have their tools but the time consuming search process remains, working to identify candidates based on a firms needs.

This is where tools like Insource’s database can help firms get an edge over their competition and recruiters in the market. Firms can now access a real-time, searchable database of every registered lawyer in Australia and New Zealand, filterable by practice area, geography, seniority, or firm history, enabling market maps to be created in seconds, longlists to be built in minutes and targeted shortlists of candidates to approach to be finalised in half an hour, (or over your lunch break), ready for firms to reach out directly to prospective hires.

We’ve seen it firsthand: firms that plan ahead make better hires, reduce costs, and stay resilient—even when the unexpected happens.

### Call It Succession Planning

Proactive recruitment might sound foreign, but call it succession planning, and it can start to feel more familiar.

Most firms claim they have succession plans, but when asked how they plan to fill key roles with external hires, that plan often includes a few gaps or the hope to snare an applicant via a traditional recruitment campaign.

Succession planning isn’t just for partners. It applies to every role in your firm. When you know who’s out there, build a shortlist in advance, and hire on your terms—not out of desperation—you help your firm move from reactive to resilient.

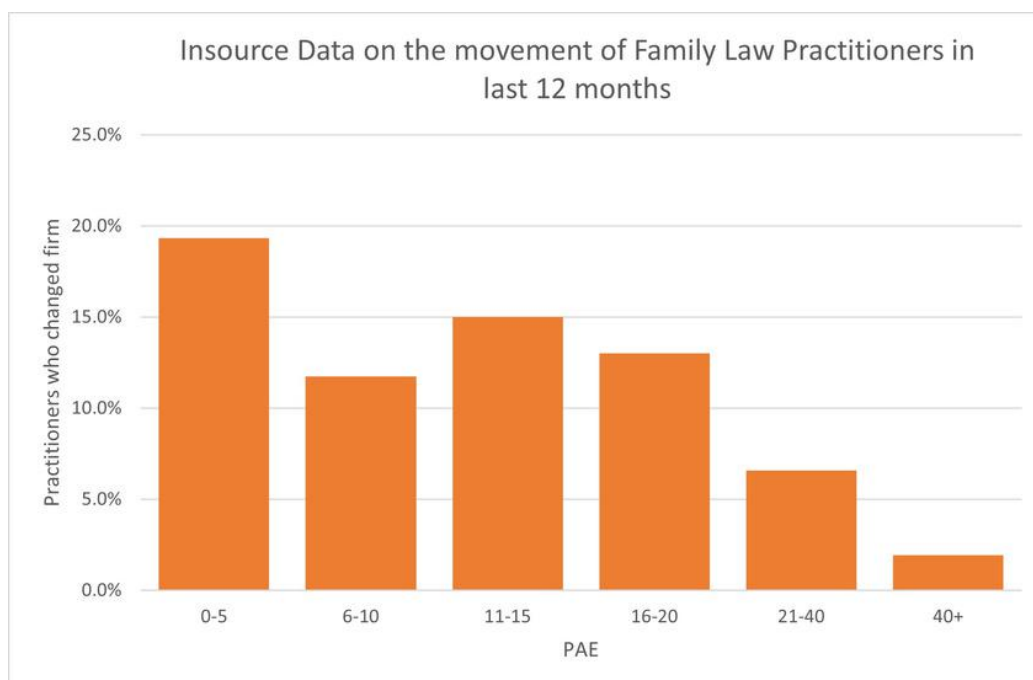
### Strong Firms Plan for the Future

Back to John, and his decision to close his firm. Fortunately, his story ends on a happy note—as he now runs a charming wedding venue from his idyllic rural property with all his tech needs safely outsourced to his niece and her social media skills.

When it came to his firm, perhaps John’s biggest mistake was failing to plan far enough ahead for his firm’s resourcing needs. He knew that traditional recruitment approaches were either going to be too slow or too expensive to sustain the firm but even having these conversations over the dinner table wasn’t enough for him to start to think ahead.

But this does not have to be the case. Let’s stop letting vacancies and recruitment costs dictate the future of firms and lets stop letting ordinary attrition become an existential threat.

*If you want to explore what the shift from reactive to proactive workforce planning would look like for your firm feel free to get in touch or visit [www.insourcerecruit.com](http://www.insourcerecruit.com) to learn more about how Insourcing your search for talent can help make your firm stronger.*



# THE HEART OF THE OFFICE

*A Paralegal's Perspective on Purpose, Partnership and Practice*

Written by Amanda McAlister  
EA and Paralegal



I've been a legal secretary, paralegal or executive assistant for most of my adult life (far longer than I care to admit). It's not just something I do — it's who I am.

As a working mum, I've balanced school runs with deadlines, preschool pickups with urgent client calls, and dinner prep with drafting support. I've worked across many different areas of law over the years — each with its own pace, pressure, and people — and throughout it all, I've found deep meaning in being part of something greater than myself.

Clients come to us during pivotal, often stressful moments in their lives. They don't just want outcomes — they want answers, reassurance, and someone who cares. As a legal support person, I'm often the first voice they hear and the steady presence they remember. I help manage expectations, guide them through unfamiliar processes, and support the solicitor to deliver the best possible service under pressure.

I've been incredibly fortunate to work for some truly wonderful solicitors — people who value their teams, build strong relationships, and genuinely care about both clients and colleagues. When you work in an environment like that, the role becomes so much more than a job. It becomes a partnership. You learn each other's rhythms. You anticipate needs. You build trust. And over time, you become more than support staff — you become part of the heart of the practice.

The legal world is changing. Clients expect things faster, cheaper, more personalised. Social media has created a culture of urgency — instant advice, immediate attention, and constant updates. That pressure doesn't just sit with the solicitor. It reaches the whole team. But as legal secretaries, paralegals and EAs, we adapt. We stay organised, calm, and responsive. We look after the detail, the people, and the progress.

I've also seen how under-recognised this role can be — how paralegals are sometimes viewed as having less knowledge or value than we truly bring to the table. But the reality is, many of us have spent decades honing our skills, building legal insight, and becoming trusted pillars within our firms. We see the toll that legal practice can take on those we support. And we're often the ones holding things together behind the scenes — quietly, reliably, professionally.

For me, being a paralegal and EA isn't a stepping stone. It's a career I've built with pride. It has given me flexibility, purpose, challenge, and connection. It has introduced me to lifelong mentors and friends. And most of all, it has given me the privilege of helping people through meaningful work that truly matters.

Now, I'm fortunate to bring all that experience into my role with the Family Law Education Network — where I work across member engagement, serve as Executive Assistant to Amanda Little, and act as Administration Manager. It's a space where I can combine my background with a commitment to building community, supporting practitioners, and strengthening the profession from the inside out.

So if you're reading this and you work with a legal secretary, paralegal, EA or support team — take a moment to let them know you value them. Behind the scenes, we're riding the wave with you. We feel the pressure, the urgency, the emotional load. And when we feel seen, appreciated, and included — that's when the real magic of teamwork happens.

*"We're often the ones holding things together behind the scenes — quietly, reliably, professionally."*



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# BEYOND THE BILLBOARD

*Building Authentic, Strategic Marketing in Law Firms*

By Victoria Moss, based on an interview with Greta Hearle  
Photography provided by Greta Hearle



In an increasingly saturated legal market, where everyone is “client-focused” and “committed to results,” one thing is clear—cookie-cutter messaging won’t cut it. According to legal marketing expert Greta Hearle, the firms that stand out today aren’t the loudest or most polished. They’re the ones that know exactly who they are, who they serve, and how to connect with real people.

After more than 15 years in the legal sector—including senior marketing roles at Smokeball and InfoTrack—Greta now is a consultant marketing manager for law firms and legal service providers of all shapes and sizes that can’t afford a full-time marketing resource or need a second set of hands. Her mission? To bring clarity, strategy, and authenticity to a space that’s often undervalued and under-resourced.

And her message is simple: marketing doesn’t have to be overwhelming. But it does have to be intentional.

*“Marketing doesn’t have to be overwhelming — but it does have to be intentional.”*

## **Know Who You Are—Then Show It**

“A lot of firms struggle to differentiate themselves,” Greta says. “They rely on generic messaging—‘we’re professional,’ ‘we’re experienced,’ ‘we care about our clients’—but none of that speaks directly to the client’s fears, hopes, or needs.”

Instead, she urges firms to begin by identifying their core values and niche, then communicating them clearly and consistently. Whether you’re a boutique family law practice or a growing succession and estates firm, it’s crucial to speak in a tone that reflects your brand—across every touchpoint.

That means more than just a slick logo and matching colours.

“Your tone of voice should be recognisable whether someone’s reading your website, an email, or a social media caption. Clients notice when it’s not aligned—and it erodes trust.”

Greta recommends developing brand language guidelines early on to help maintain that consistency. “It’s not about sounding corporate,” she adds. “It’s about sounding like you.”

## Where to Start

For sole practitioners or new firms, Greta's advice is to start simple and focus on what matters most.

*"The two most important things are your website and your Google Business profile. Those are what make you findable and credible. Social media can wait."*

From there, she suggests setting up an affordable email marketing tool like Mailchimp and creating segmented contact lists for clients and referrers. Even a quarterly email newsletter can go a long way toward staying top-of-mind.

And for visuals? Canva is your best friend.

*"It's a fantastic tool for small teams. You don't need a designer on retainer—just clean, consistent templates that reflect your brand."*

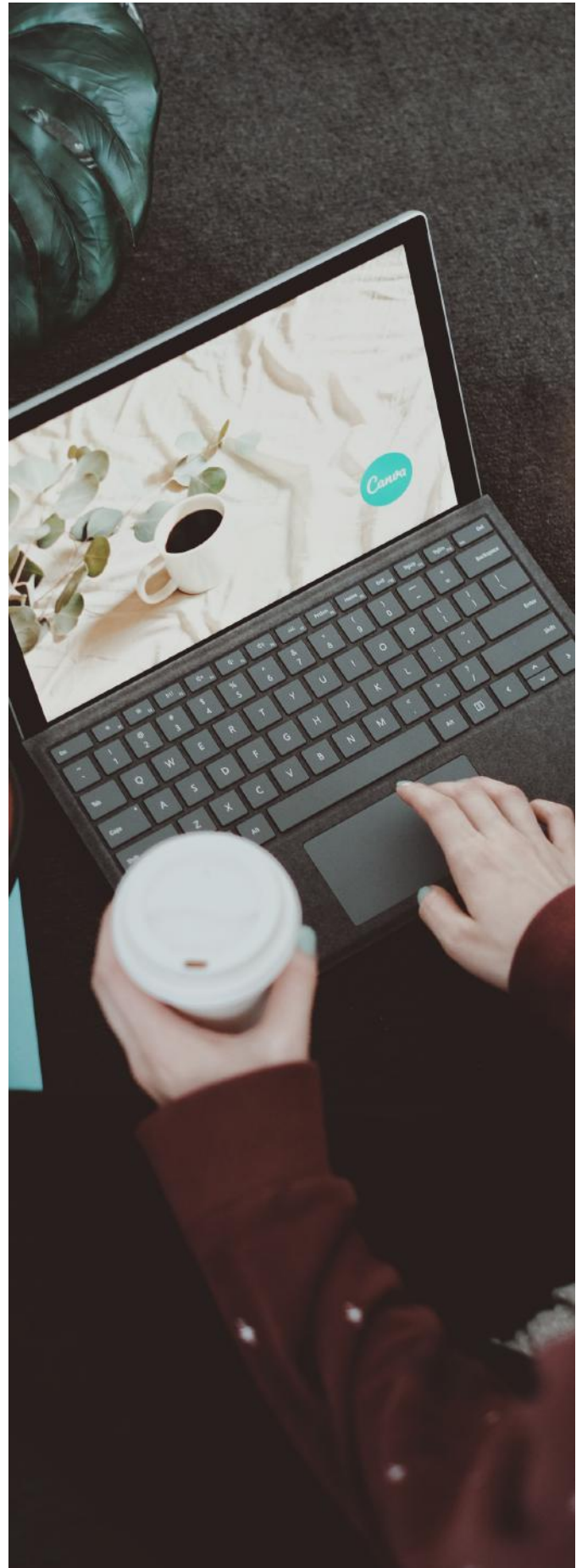
## Social Media: Strategy Over Trends

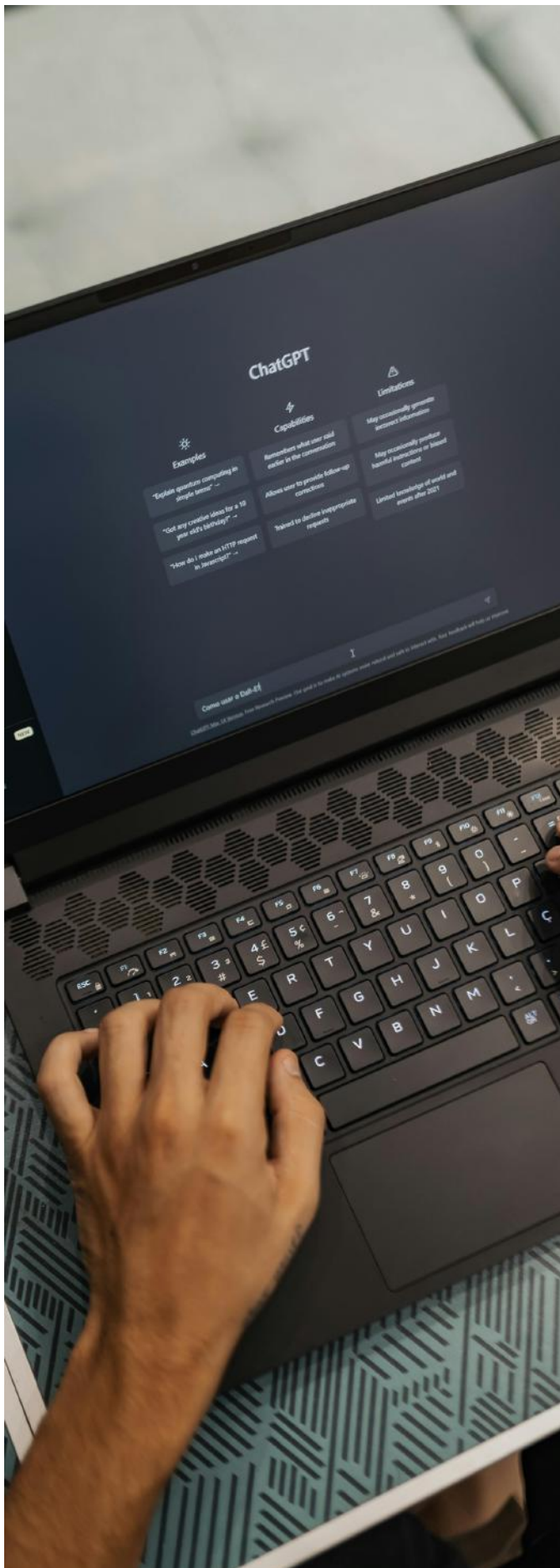
If social media is on your radar, Greta recommends stepping back and thinking strategically before jumping into posts and reels.

*"It's not about doing what's trendy. It's about creating a content plan that connects to your broader business strategy. What do you want to be known for? What kinds of people do you want to attract? Work backwards from there."*

She suggests mixing up your content to avoid being too sales-driven: "Only about 25% of your posts should be promotional. The rest should show your firm's personality, share team culture, or provide valuable information for clients. Photos of your team volunteering, client success stories, or Q&A videos can build trust in a way billboards never will."

*Only about 25% of your posts should be promotional — the rest should build trust, show personality, and provide value.*





### The Rise of Personal Branding

Another emerging trend Greta sees gaining momentum is the rise of personal branding in the legal sector.

*“People want to connect with people—not faceless brands. Showcasing individual lawyers as experts in their field, whether through blogs, webinars, or media appearances, helps build credibility and makes your firm more approachable.”*

Encouraging team members to write content, speak on panels, or post insights on LinkedIn not only supports their professional development but strengthens the firm’s reputation.

Video plays a big role here too—clients often respond more strongly to seeing and hearing from individual lawyers than reading a bio. Whether it’s a short explainer on your website or a LinkedIn clip offering practical advice, video accelerates trust and strengthens visibility.

*“Landing pages with video can increase conversion rates by up to 80%, making it one of the most effective tools for client engagement.”*

### The Role of AI and Automation

Like many industries, legal marketing is being shaped by AI and automation. But Greta offers a measured approach.

*“Yes, use tools like ChatGPT to outline a blog or generate email ideas. But always, always human edit. AI is a support tool—not a substitute for your voice.”*

She also encourages firms to explore automation in other ways—like appointment reminders, client check-ins, or referral follow-ups.

*“Automation done well can make your firm feel more responsive, not less.”*

*People want to connect with people—not faceless brands. Showcasing individual lawyers as experts makes your firm more approachable and builds real trust.*



### Measure What Matters

For the more analytical firm owners, ROI is always top of mind. Greta agrees it's crucial—but warns that not everything meaningful can be tied directly to leads or cost per conversion.

*“There’s sales ROI—like leads from an ad campaign—and then there’s brand ROI, which is harder to measure but just as important,” she explains. “Things like trust, recognition, and referral impact take time to build, but they pay off long-term.”*

That said, she strongly encourages regular review of measurable activity. “With paid advertising, events, or email campaigns, track performance monthly. Even spending just one hour a month reviewing what’s working can lead to sharper decisions—and save you from wasting money on what’s not.”

### Your Best Clients Are the Ones You Already Have

If there’s one area Greta urges firms to double down on, it’s the clients and referrers they already have.

*“Too often, firms focus their marketing on chasing new leads, when in reality, the most reliable source of future revenue is right in front of them.”*

In fact, studies show that up to 80% of a firm’s future revenue will come from just 20% of existing clients. Greta recommends looking for ways to deepen those relationships—through follow-up check-ins, newsletters, value-added content, and simply staying top-of-mind.

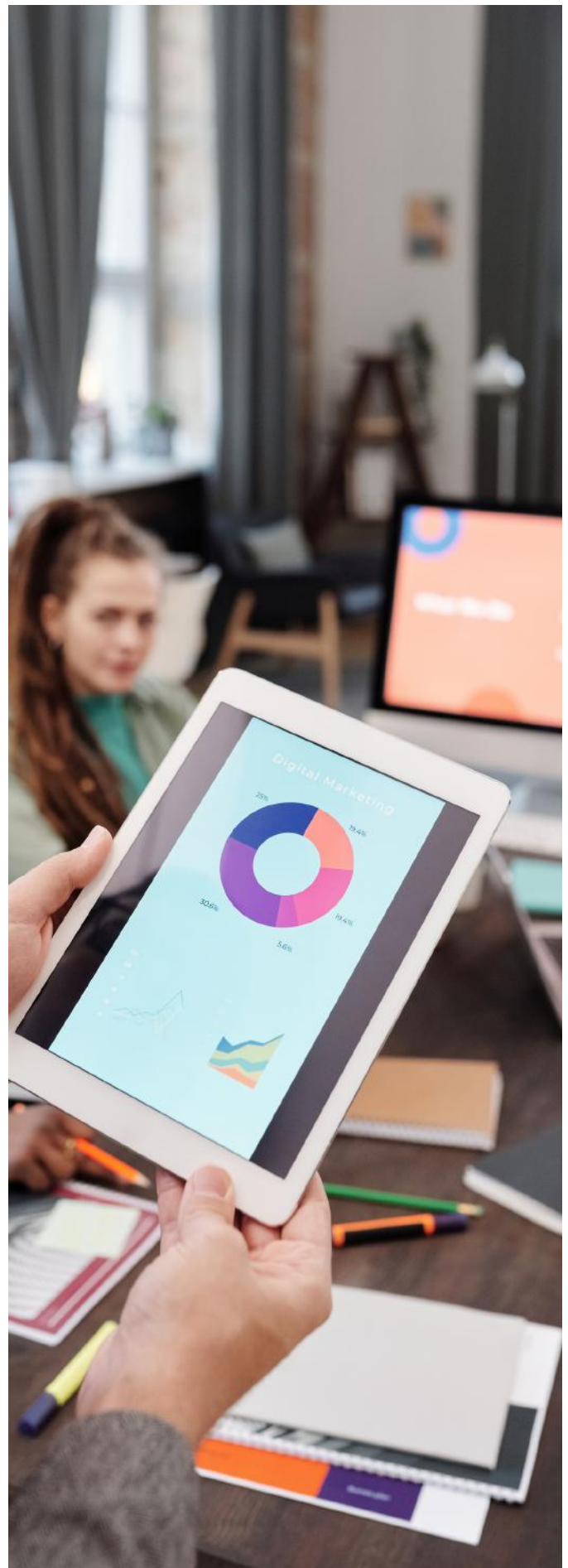
Referrers, too, are often an untapped goldmine.

*“Know who your key referrers are. Nurture them. Stay visible. Send them updates or small thank-yous. Don’t take them for granted.”*

A thoughtful post-settlement process or referral acknowledgment can have a lasting ripple effect.

Marketing doesn’t need to be complex, but it does need to be considered. Whether you’re starting out or scaling up, Greta’s advice rings true across the board: know your voice, stay consistent, and don’t be afraid to show your human side.

*“Law is about people,” she says. “Your marketing should reflect that.”*





# THE REFRAME

Because words aren't neutral. They shape the way people experience the law.

When pressure is high, language becomes a tool or a weapon. Reframing what we say doesn't water it down. It sharpens it, softens it, or makes it more human. When we speak with purpose, we don't just inform — we empower.

## Instead of

"They just want to fight"

"You'll have to accept it"

"The court won't care about that"

"You've left it too late"

"We've done all we can"

"It's standard procedure"

## Try

"They're feeling unheard and overwhelmed"

"Let's look at the options you still have"

"Here's what the court will focus on"

"Let's work with the time we have now"

"Let's take stock and see if there's a next step"

"This part can feel impersonal, but I'll guide you through"

# THE PREDICTIONS BY AI

We asked AI: what's ahead for family law?



*"Court transcripts will be auto-generated, edited, and emailed to clients in under five minutes."*



*"Clients will check the status of their matter the same way they check parcel tracking."*



*"Virtual courtrooms will include AI interpreters in every major language and Auslan."*



*"The term 'custody battle' will disappear from our vocabulary—replaced by more child-centred language."*



*"Law firms will offer 'quiet meeting rooms' with sensory-friendly design as standard."*

What do you think? Is AI close or completely off?  
Is this a glimpse of what's coming—or still too far off?



# THE TECH-LED TURN

*Amanda Kerdel's Journey Beyond Legal Pathways*







Former family lawyer Amanda Kerdel sat down with Victoria Moss to discuss her inspiring journey from practising law to joining the fast-growing legal tech company JustFund. In this candid conversation, Amanda opens up about her motivations, challenges, and how she's found purpose in redefining access to justice—while balancing motherhood, mindfulness, and meaningful work.

**Victoria Moss: Amanda, you've taken quite the leap from traditional legal practice into legal tech. What led you to make that shift?**

**Amanda Kerdel:** It was a journey of stages, really. I'd been practising law, most recently at Naala Djookan—a healing-focused community centre for women. What was beautiful about that role was its holistic approach. We didn't just give legal advice; if someone needed a financial planner or psychologist, we made those referrals. It aligned with how I've always believed support should be delivered—meeting people where they are, with care for the whole person.

But after having children, I started to reflect more deeply. I realised I didn't want to carry that emotional load home with me anymore. I loved the work, but the cost of carrying other people's trauma was high. Around that time, a friend introduced me to Settify, and I entered the legal tech world. It felt like stepping into a space full of ideas, creativity, and innovation. Suddenly, I saw that being a lawyer didn't mean I had to practise forever. There were other ways to use my skills and make an impact.

**Victoria: That's a powerful realisation. Was it difficult to leave the structure and certainty of law?**

**Amanda:** Terrifying at first! We're trained to think, "This is what a lawyer does." The idea of stepping away from that path—even into something related like legal tech—feels like you're abandoning your identity. But when I moved into Settify and met people who were entrepreneurs, problem-solvers, innovators—it was exhilarating. I discovered that I thrive in that startup environment where ideas are welcomed and nothing is set in stone. It felt like an expansion rather than a loss.

**Victoria: What's your role at JustFund now?**

**Amanda:** I joined in 2023 as Director of Partnerships, working alongside co-founder and Co-CEO—Jack. My role initially was to expand our reach, particularly among Family Law firms, and help grow awareness of what we offer. JustFund had launched the year prior and was scaling quickly. Now, we've got over 50 employees. We've grown our legal team, loans monitoring, and internal operations. I helped build the partnerships arm—bringing on like-minded people, developing & nurturing relationships, and helping shape the strategy.

**Victoria:** JustFund provides legal funding for family law clients—what drew you to that mission?

**Amanda:** It spoke to everything I care about. In family law, you see how many people—especially women in abusive or financially controlling relationships—simply can't leave because they don't have the resources. With JustFund, they don't need to pay upfront. They can fund legal representation, living costs, even rent or school fees, and only repay at settlement. That changes lives. I've seen firsthand how this kind of support can be the difference between staying stuck and moving forward. I'm proud to be part of that.

**Victoria:** You're also involved in wellness—tell us more about Chakra Wellness.

**Amanda:** My husband and I started Chakra Wellness as a side passion project. We offer yoga and breathwork sessions, and we sell home saunas and ice baths. It's all about giving people tools to manage stress and reconnect with themselves. For me, that journey started in law—realising how much trauma and tension we carry in our bodies. Breathwork changed my life. We now run sessions where people do yoga, breathwork, and finish off on a sauna and ice bath session. The emotional release is powerful. It's healing in every sense of the word.

**Victoria:** What advice would you give to lawyers considering a shift out of traditional practice?

**Amanda:** Don't be afraid to question the path. You don't have to have an “aha” moment to make a change. For me, it was about listening to how I felt—what energised me, what drained me. The skills I've gained in legal tech—team management, strategic planning, product development—I would never have developed staying in law. But those legal skills gave me the foundation. So be open. Stay curious. Your values are your compass, and you don't have to sacrifice them to be successful. If anything, success comes from living in alignment with them.

Amanda Kerdel's path reminds us that there are many ways to build a meaningful legal career—and that innovation often comes from those brave enough to step outside the box. In her journey from practitioner to product leader, she's not only shaped her own path but is quietly reshaping the future of law itself.

**Victoria:** What's been the biggest challenge in adjusting to this new way of working?

**Amanda:** Letting go of structure. In law, we measure everything in six-minute increments. It's so task-focused. Moving into tech, it was strange at first—some days are full of brainstorming or strategy, others are slower, and you wonder if you're doing “enough.” But that weight lifted quickly. I was suddenly more creative, less stressed, and had time for my kids. Now, I work from home, I'm there for school pickups, I don't miss the Easter Hat Parades or school assemblies. That flexibility has been life-changing.

**Victoria:** You've spoken about the challenges of being a working parent in law. How has this transition helped?

**Amanda:** Massively. When I was in private practice, I felt guilty even asking to leave for my kids' events. But why should we apologise for being present for our families? The school day isn't built for working parents, and without flexibility, we're forced to make impossible choices. I wanted a life where I could be a great mum and do meaningful work—and now I have that.

I'm still serving the same core mission—supporting people during incredibly hard times—but now I'm doing it in a way that's sustainable and energising. If I can offer any advice, it's this: trust that there are paths you haven't considered yet, and you're allowed to change direction. There's power in walking away from what no longer serves you—and joy in discovering what does.







# THE LAW AS PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

*AI and the End of Legal Scarcity*

Photography provided by Habeas AI

## Written by Will McCartney

In a suburban Melbourne VCAT hearing, a tenant faces eviction. She knows she has rights under the Residential Tenancies Act, but these rights might as well be written in Sanskrit for all the practical good they do her. She cannot afford a lawyer, and the community legal centres she contacted are stretched beyond capacity with -long waiting lists. The landlord's representative begins to rattle off tribunal precedents and regulatory provisions, while the member speaks in legal terminology that sounds like a foreign language. Yes, her rights are enshrined in hundreds of pages of legislation and regulations, but in this moment, they feel distant and inaccessible.

This all-too-common scenario exposes the reality of Australian justice: our legal framework has become so impenetrable that the very rights designed to protect people remain locked behind a wall of complexity only expensive professionals can breach.

This artificial complexity represents not a necessity but a choice - one that has historically served powerful interests while betraying law's fundamental promise of equal justice. Yet, we stand at the cusp of an incredible transformation: the emergence of artificial intelligence systems capable of making legal knowledge and understanding highly accessible. This transformation promises to turn law from a professional service into a real public utility.

### **The Historical Context of Legal Knowledge Transmission:**

To understand why this transformation is so profound, we need to revisit the past. Across most societies, there was always some degree of stratification when it came to the communal inheritance and understanding of law. For example, when writing first emerged, legal knowledge transformed from an oral tradition transmitted exclusively by tribal elders into codified text. The printing press somewhat democratised access to written knowledge, but legal texts remained impenetrable without years of specialised training. Even when the internet made legal documents universally available, there was no guarantee that they became more comprehensible to the average person.

Each technological revolution changed how legal knowledge was stored and transmitted, but none fundamentally altered its accessibility. Artificial intelligence promises something different: not just access to legal information, but access to legal understanding and capability.

*"Rights remain locked behind  
a wall of legal complexity."*

### **AI and Emerging Technology is Creating a Paradigm Shift in the Law:**

The emergence of sophisticated AI systems capable of understanding and explaining legal concepts in plain language presents a direct challenge to this status quo.

When law becomes the exclusive domain of experts, it stops serving its fundamental purpose: helping people understand and navigate their rights and obligations to each other. AI's ability to translate legal knowledge into everyday language isn't just about making law more accessible - it's about restoring law to its original purpose as a way for society to organise itself fairly and resolve disputes openly. This technological democratisation of legal knowledge could help bridge the gap between how people actually live and interact, and the formal structures we've created to govern those interactions. AI could be a piece of the puzzle in helping transform law from something that happens to people into something that works for people.

If this sounds a little dubious, consider a more practical example of how this transformation might reshape the nature of dispute resolution. When people engage in mediation, it can often become a frustratingly complex process for them to navigate. When peering behind the curtain, they realise their choices are stark: pursue potentially ruinously expensive litigation, attempt mediation while flying blind to their actual rights and leverage, or simply surrender their legal claims and disengage. Instead, imagine beginning a dispute by consulting an AI system that immediately illuminates the legal landscape, drawing from vast databases of similar cases to explain rights, suggest strategies, and draft initial positions.

When parties enter mediation or arbitration armed with a more comprehensive understanding of their positions, relevant precedents, and likely outcomes, the process shifts from an exercise in managing information asymmetry to one focused on genuine resolution. Mediators, freed from the tedious work of explaining basic legal concepts, can focus their expertise where it truly matters: navigating emotional complexities, repairing relationships between two parties and crafting creative solutions. The process becomes less about who has access to legal knowledge and more about how that knowledge can serve the cause of justice.

### **The Modern Lawyer's Core Skillset is Rapidly Changing:**

Alongside this paradigm shift in the law, the role and skillset of the lawyer in the modern world is also beginning to change.

Legal problem-solving takes on new dimensions. A key skillset of the best lawyers and barristers is their ability to navigate novel legal territories where competing rights and ethical considerations demand sophisticated human judgment. The importance of this skillset in the future will only be magnified, as lawyers will become orchestrators of solutions to systemic legal issues that AI can identify and analyse but cannot resolve on its own.

Furthermore, the concept of the 'billable hour' becomes somewhat antiquated in the face of AI systems that can review complex contracts in seconds or analyse thousands of precedents in minutes. It should be acknowledged that the profession's attachment to time-based billing isn't just about economic convenience - it represents a way of thinking about legal value and what it is lawyers do. Some innovative firms are already experimenting with subscription-based legal services, outcome-based pricing, and hybrid models that combine AI efficiency with human expertise. Some firms are doing the opposite: reaffirming the way of the past and closing the blinds on the future.



## Two Pathways for the Future of AI and technology in the Law:

This defensive posture threatens to create a perverse outcome: a two-tier legal system where wealthy clients benefit from sophisticated AI-augmented legal services, while ordinary people are blocked or discouraged from accessing basic AI legal tools in the name of "consumer protection." We've seen this pattern before in other sectors - think of how financial services firms initially resisted online trading platforms while developing sophisticated algorithmic trading systems for their wealthy clients. The risk here is that professional resistance to AI could actually worsen rather than improve access to justice.

There is a different, brighter future where the legal system evolves from a hierarchy built on information control, to a network focused on knowledge distribution and system design. This transformation will not eliminate injustice or solve all problems of legal access. But it offers the first realistic hope of making legal capability a practical reality for the majority of humanity rather than a luxury good. The technology to enable this transformation exists and is rapidly improving. The only question is whether we will allow it to fulfill its potential or whether we will sacrifice that potential on the altar of professional privilege.

The choice facing the legal profession is stark: adapt to become facilitators of widespread legal capability, or face increasing irrelevance as technology makes traditional gatekeeping roles obsolete.

Critics raise many legitimate concerns about this transformation. They warn about the risks of algorithmic bias becoming systematised in legal AI, the potential loss of human judgment in legal decision-making, and the challenges of maintaining precedent in a computationally mediated legal system. These concerns deserve serious consideration and should be combatted through intelligent, thoughtful design. But they must also be weighed against the moral catastrophe of the status quo, where the majority of humanity cannot meaningfully access justice. The relevant comparison is not between AI legal assistance and expert human lawyers - it is between AI assistance and no assistance at all, which has been a reality for many until very recently.

The choice before us is clear: we can cling to an outdated model of artificial scarcity that serves professional interests at the expense of public access to justice, or we can embrace the potential of AI to transform law into a public utility accessible to all.

This isn't merely a technological decision but a moral one. It fundamentally asks what kind of society we wish to create. Do we want law to remain a tool of privilege, or become an infrastructure of justice? The technology to enable this transformation exists. What remains in question is our collective courage to embrace it.

The screenshot displays the 'AI Search Engine' interface. On the left is a dark sidebar with navigation options: Home, Tools (AI Chat Assistant, AI Search Engine, Query Builder, User Dashboard), and Search History. The main content area features a search bar with the query 'can directors be held personally liable for breach of fiduciary duty?'. Above the search bar is a toggle for 'Include AI-Generated Summary'. Below the search bar are filters for Type, Jurisdiction, Source, and Results (1). The search results section shows '10 results found' and an 'AI-Generated Answer' card. This card includes a 'Summary' stating that directors can be held personally liable for breaches of their fiduciary duties, a 'Detailed Analysis' section with 'Core Fiduciary Duties' (Duty to act in good faith, Duty to avoid conflicts of interest, Duty not to exercise powers for an improper purpose, Duty not to make unauthorized profits) and 'Personal Liability' (Forms of Liability). A 'Copy with Citations' button is visible in the top right of the answer card. An 'Activate Windows' watermark is present in the bottom right corner.



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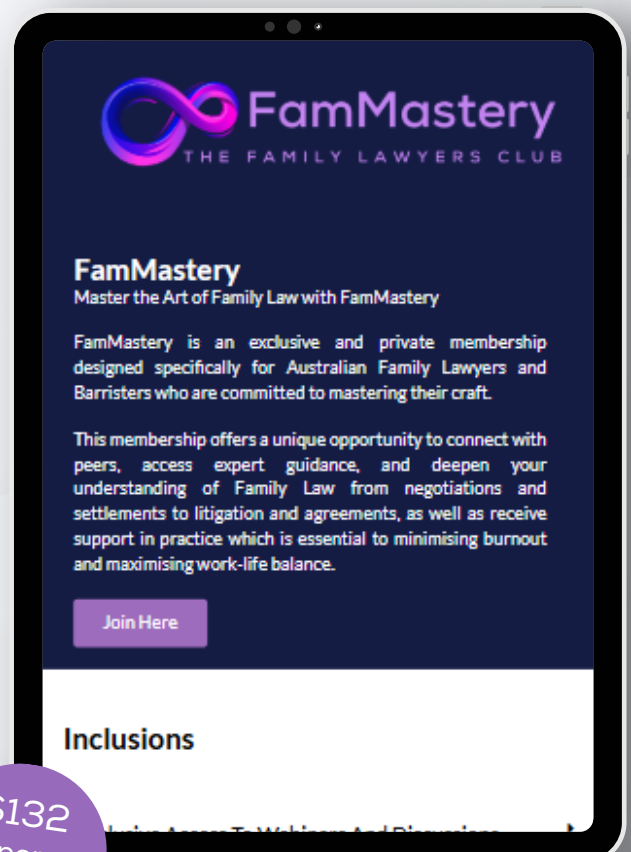
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# A NEW KIND OF FAMILY LAW FIRM

*How Umbrella Family Law  
Is Leading with Heart*

By Victoria Moss, based on an interview with Jane and Eve of Umbrella Family Law  
Photography provided by Umbrella Law

In an industry often synonymous with high stress and burnout, Umbrella Family Law is challenging the status quo. Founded in 2018 by Jane and Eve—two lawyers determined to practise differently—this Melbourne-based family law firm is proof that compassion and commercial success can coexist.

What makes Umbrella Family Law stand out isn't just their legal acumen—though they certainly have that in spades—but the unwavering focus on human connection, mental wellbeing, and redefining the lawyer-client relationship. "We're not special. We're not above anyone else. We're humans first, lawyers second," says Eve, a dual UK and Australian-qualified lawyer who teamed up with Jane after a chance job interview sparked something more.





Photography provided by Umbrella Law



Photography provided by Umbrella Law

### **Built from Values, Not Just Vision**

The story of Umbrella Family Law began not with a business plan, but with shared values. “We got to a point in our careers where we asked ourselves, ‘Is this it?’” Eve recalls. “We were working hard, doing good work—but within structures that didn’t reflect who we were as people.”

They both knew there was a better way to do family law—one rooted in empathy, transparency, and client support. So they built it.

At Umbrella Family Law, values are lived every day. The firm’s philosophy is grounded in practical, emotional, financial, and legal support. Clients don’t just get legal strategy—they get a welcome video from Jane and Eve, a custom intake process designed to get to the heart of their situation before the first meeting, and, if needed, direct access to Jane and Eve for personal check-ins. “We sometimes give them pointers on their CV or point them in the right direction of the best person to help if they want to set up a small business, for example.” Says Eve. “We like to provide guidance around the practical and emotional, as well as the financial and legal.”



### Practising Law Without Losing Yourself

For Jane and Eve, creating a values-led business meant challenging long-standing cultural norms within the legal profession.

*“Law can be a really isolating, emotionally exhausting profession, especially family law,” Eve explains. “We’ve both had times in our careers where we felt like square pegs in round holes—like the way we wanted to work didn’t fit the mould.”*

Now, they’re not just practising differently—they’re leading differently.

Their firm encourages flexibility, discourages hierarchy, and openly invites staff to bring their whole selves to work. Lawyers are encouraged to play to their strengths, and files are shared in a way that values timeliness and teamwork over ownership and ego.

### Culture That Walks the Talk

Umbrella Family Law’s team culture is one many firms aspire to, but few achieve. Mental health days are freely available—no doctor’s note required. Chocolate is in steady supply. A shared jigsaw puzzle sits in the kitchen for anyone needing a screen break. A firm WhatsApp thread buzzes with pet photos, TV tips, and daily banter. Staff are trusted, supported, and encouraged to prioritise life when it matters most.

This ability to balance structure with humanity has created a firm culture that is not only sustainable but genuinely joyful. “We really care about our people,” Jane explains. “We want to avoid that Sunday-night dread that too many people in this profession experience. If someone needs a mental health day, they take it. If someone’s going through something personally, we offer real support.”

Their approach challenges many traditional assumptions about law firm leadership. At Umbrella Family Law, strength is not about ego or hierarchy—it’s about connection, shared vision, and understanding when to step forward and when to let the other shine. “We’ve built something that feels true to who we are,” Jane reflects. “And we’ve done it together.”

*Strength in law isn’t about ego or hierarchy  
—it’s about connection, shared vision, and  
knowing when to step forward and when to  
let others shine.*

### Letting Go of the Wrong Clients

It’s not just about staff wellbeing. Jane and Eve also believe in preserving the wellbeing of their entire firm—sometimes by letting go of the wrong clients.

*“We’ve made a conscious decision not to act for people who are a poor fit for our values or approach,” Jane says. “We’d rather walk away than risk the impact that kind of matter can have on a lawyer’s mental health or the culture we’ve built.”*

### Scaling Without Losing Soul

While some values-driven businesses cap their growth to preserve their ethos, Umbrella Family Law has done the opposite—scaling steadily while maintaining their heart.

From working on laptops in lounge rooms to running a 16-person team across multiple locations, Jane and Eve have grown thoughtfully. Key to their success has been building infrastructure (like their custom client intake tool), partnering with values-aligned services like **JustFund**, and maintaining a deliberate, personal onboarding process.



## Partners in Practice: The Strength of Complementary Leadership

One of the most compelling aspects of Umbrella Family Law is the partnership between co-founders—a dynamic duo who prove that mutual respect, values alignment, and complementary skills can be the foundation of an extraordinary legal practice.

From the outset, their collaboration has been grounded not just in shared professional goals but in a remarkably aligned vision for how family law should be practised. “We don’t argue,” Eve says matter-of-factly. “People assume you must have disagreements when you’re in business together, but we really don’t. We’re just incredibly aligned in our values.”

That doesn’t mean they’re carbon copies of one another. On the contrary, it’s their differences that make the partnership thrive. “We have some differences of personality,” Jane adds. “But we play to our strengths. I look after HR, Eve’s got a stronger handle on the finances. We joke that if it were just me, the firm wouldn’t have any money—and if it were just Eve, HR would be very different!”

Their clear division of responsibilities doesn’t just support the business—it also sets the tone for a workplace culture grounded in empathy and collaboration.

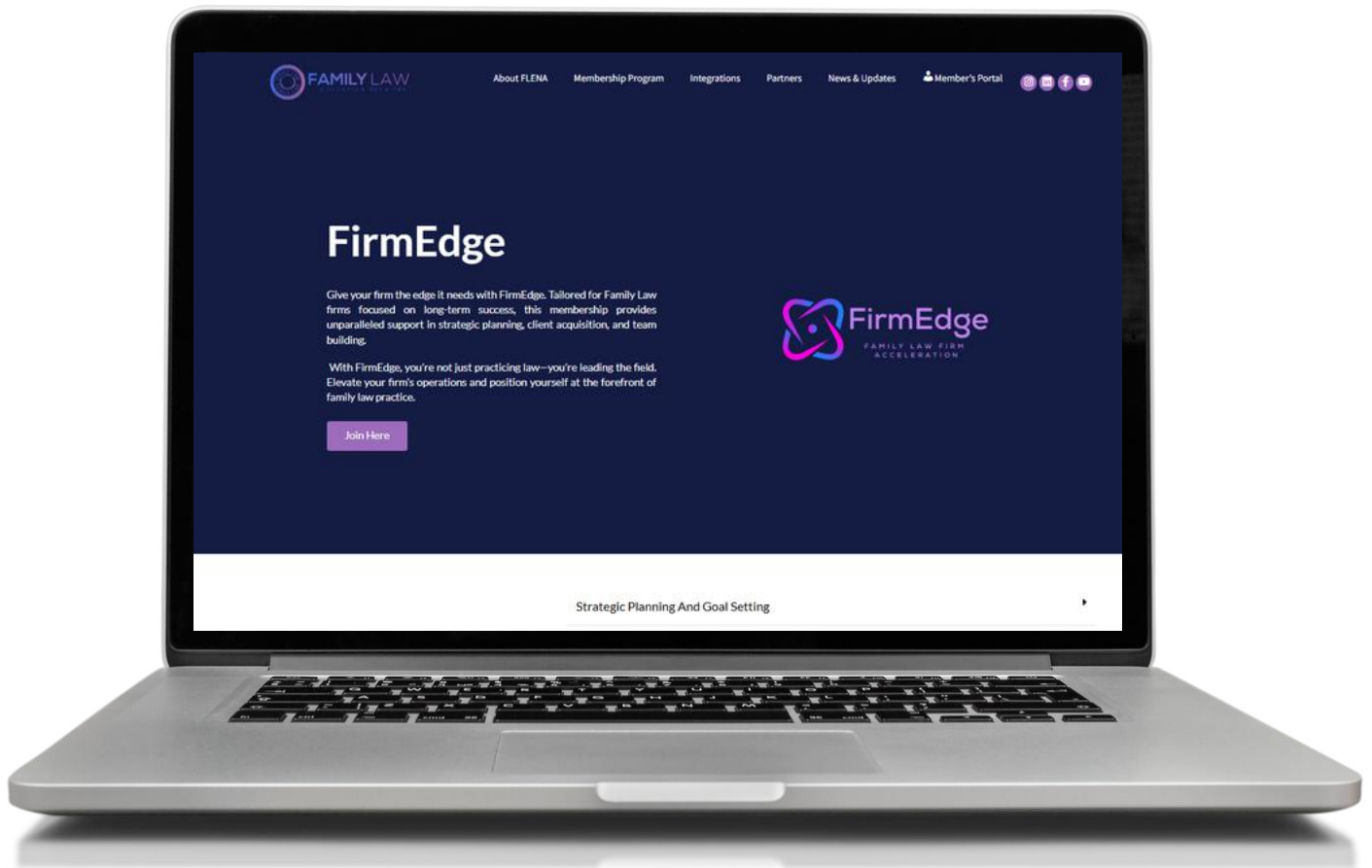
## Looking Ahead

Umbrella Family Law isn’t slowing down. Jane and Eve have plans for continued expansion—both in teams of size and impact. Their long-term vision includes broadening the way the public sees lawyers: not just as legal professionals, but as life problem-solvers.

“There will always be litigation,” Jane says. “But more and more, we want people to see lawyers as partners in their healing and rebuilding—not just advocates in court.”

If the success of **Umbrella Family Law** is anything to go by, the profession may be ready for that shift. With their client-first ethos, genuine team culture, and unapologetically human approach, Jane and Eve are showing what’s possible when lawyers practice in a way that aligns with their values.





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# NEURODIVERSITY IN LEGAL PRACTICE

*Creating Systems That Work for Every Mind*

Family Law is, at its core, about human connection and communication — both within the family involved in a dispute and in the relationship between a client and their lawyer. Yet, despite our best intentions, the systems we work within and the way we deliver legal services often assume all people think, communicate, and respond the same way. For neurodivergent clients, that assumption can create barriers that are disheartening and emotionally taxing.

Neurodiversity describes the idea that people think, learn, and behave in different ways. In Family Law, clients with neurodivergence may be facing separation, parenting conflicts, family violence or financial pressure without support that aligns with how they understand information or manage stress.

So what does it actually look like to build a neurodiversity-friendly legal practice? The good news: it doesn't require a complete system overhaul! Just thoughtful, practical changes to how we communicate, engage, and plan.

## 1. Give Clear Written Instructions

Many neurodivergent people process written information more easily than spoken words. Use bullet points and avoid jargon.

## 2. Structure the Process Early

Uncertainty often heightens anxiety, particularly for individuals with autism or anxiety-related neurodivergence. Clearly outline the expected stages of a case using plain language. Provide estimated timelines, explain what will happen at each step, and clarify their role and your role throughout the process.

## 3. Offer Communication Options

Phone calls can be difficult for people with auditory processing difficulties, anxiety or ADHD. Allow clients to choose how they want to communicate. All you need to do is ask. Give clients time to process and respond. If you're calling unexpectedly, a short one-liner before diving in can ease stress: "Hi, just calling to check in, nothing urgent." Same goes for an email, try: "You don't need to reply to this immediately, let's discuss next week."

## 4. Be Mindful of Sensory Environments

Offices, Courts, meeting rooms, even the café visit in the break – it can all be overwhelming for someone with sensory processing differences. Offer quieter meeting spaces if available. If attending Court, prepare clients in advance with photos, videos, or descriptions of what to expect.

## 5. Slow Down, Repeat, and Check Understanding

Avoid rapid-fire questioning or "information dumps" in meetings. Break discussions into chunks. After each key point, pause and ask, "Would it help if I repeated that in another way?" Encourage questions without time pressure.

## 6. Normalise Neurodiversity

Make it part of your intake to ask, "Do you have any preferences for how we communicate or work together that would make this process easier for you?" By embedding this into standard practice, clients don't have to "disclose" neurodivergence as a personal burden. It becomes just another way of providing good client service.

Family lawyers are uniquely positioned to model inclusive, accessible legal practice. Embrace neurodiversity as part of your client's lived experience, not as a problem to "accommodate", but a difference to understand.



By Holly Pitt, Senior Solicitor at Rafton Family Lawyers