

INDIANA CPA SOCIETY: FIRM FORWARD SUMMIT

The Firm Reimagined: *Leadership at a Strategic Crossroads*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2026



The State of the *Profession.*

Where the profession actually is right now — and why the five pillars this Society built the program around are the right five.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

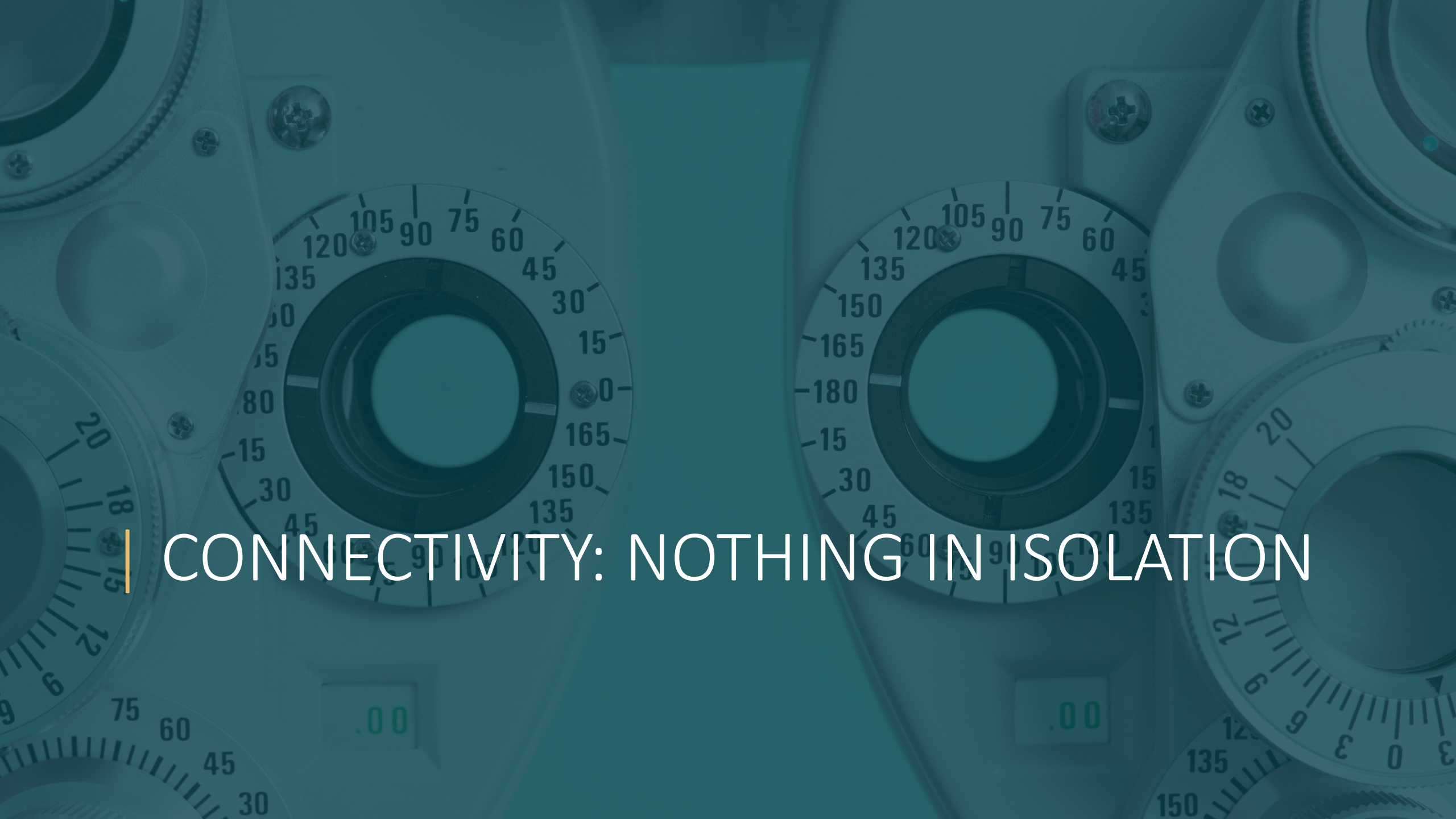
What watching this profession for four decades teaches you

Every generation of accountants has been told that the profession is about to transform beyond recognition. I remember when spreadsheet software was going to replace us. I remember when the internet was going to change everything. I remember at least four other moments announced as “the end of the profession as we know it.” And there is truth to be found in each warning.

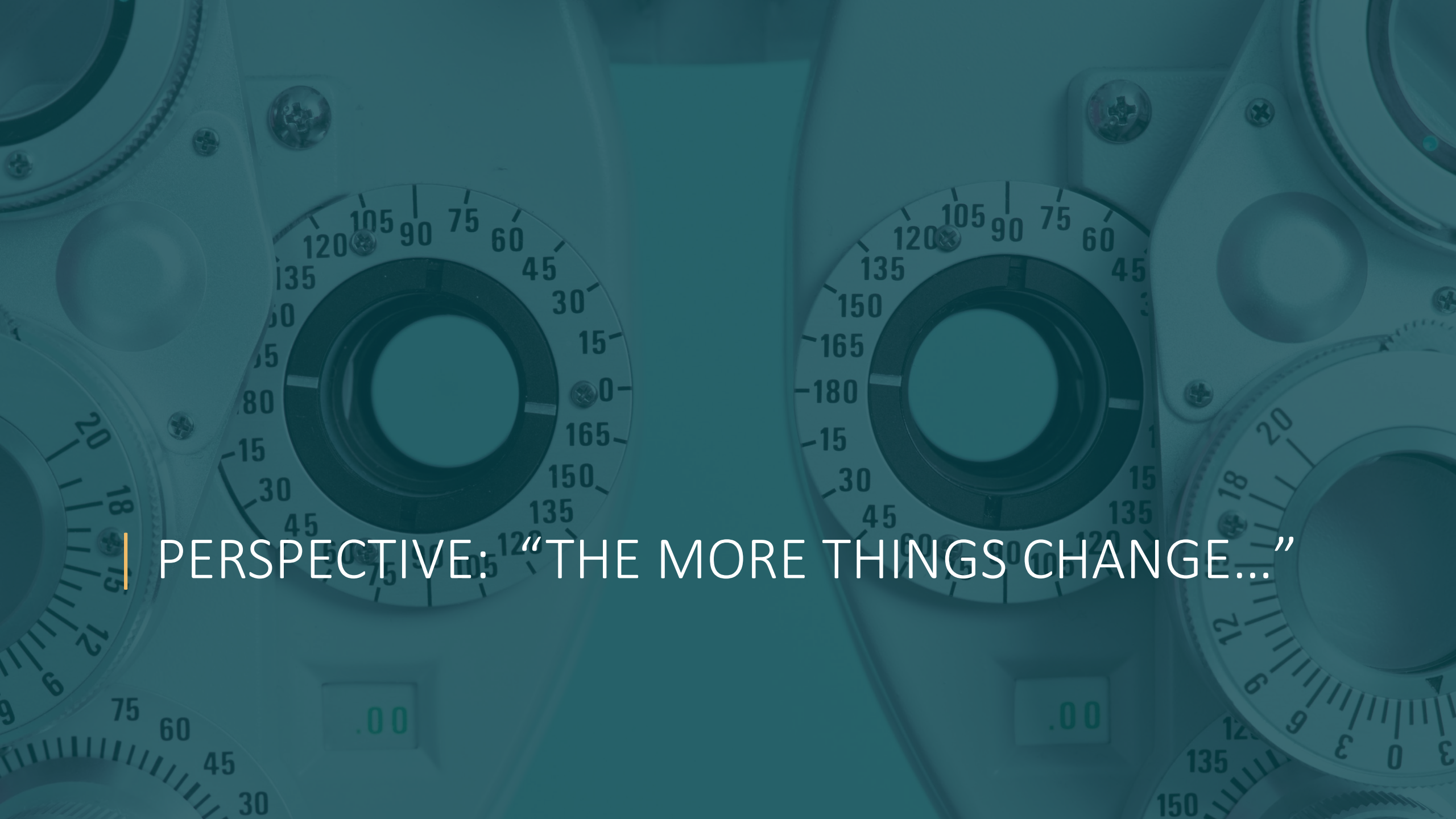
So, before we look at the forces: I am not here to tell you the sky is falling.

I am here to tell you that those who understand the pattern — and build their practices around it — are going to have extraordinary careers. The firms and the people who figure this out are not going to survive the next wave. They are going to define what the profession becomes next.

That is my honest, optimistic, 41-year assessment.



| CONNECTIVITY: NOTHING IN ISOLATION



| PERSPECTIVE: “THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...”



| ALIGNMENT: BE YOU...CHALLENGE YOU

”

LEGACY THINKING'S IMPACT ON PERSPECTIVE

Overcoming legacy thinking doesn't mandate erasing every strategy, idea, or leadership concept you've used in the past. Instead, identify those ideas and strategies that continue to serve you well while pinpointing others that may have worn out their value.

-Daniel Burrus

“

Five forces, compounding at once

Each of these would be significant on its own. They are happening simultaneously and reinforcing each other.

01

AI HAS MOVED FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO INFRASTRUCTURE

Tax, audit and client accounting are being restructured, not merely accelerated. Routine work is absorbed, entry-level roles require judgment earlier, and technology is exposing operational weakness in firms that delayed investment.

02

COMPLIANCE IS NO LONGER A PRIMARY DIFFERENTIATOR

Clients expect interpretation, not reporting. Advisory capability now drives valuation premiums, not just revenue growth. The question is no longer whether to shift — it is how deliberately and how fast.

03

PRIVATE EQUITY HAS RESHAPED THE CAPITAL STRUCTURE

Just over half the Top 30 now has outside capital, and \$49 billion of enterprise value has transacted since 2016. Independence is a strategic choice that must be funded — it is no longer the default setting.

04

M&A HAS BECOME A NORMALIZED OPERATING STRATEGY

The Top 100 completed 225 deals last year against a historical norm of 110–120. M&A is a talent, capability and succession tool now — used by firms that are not selling and not distressed.

05

TALENT PRESSURE HAS MOVED FROM THE ENTRY POINT TO THE MIDDLE

Enrollment is up for a third straight year, but managers received the smallest raise in the firm and face a 15% premium to leave. The shortage has relocated to the 5-to-8-year band you cannot replace.

Any one of these is manageable. The compounding is what changes the arithmetic — and it is why standing still now costs more than it used to.

Quick question

Which of the five forces is already showing up inside your firm, and which one are you still treating as somebody else's problem?

What the numbers tell us this year

605 firms reported. Growth slowed, profitability rose, and the pricing model moved — three facts that belong in the same sentence.

7.0%

Organic growth, down from 7.7%

10.4%

Net income growth, up from 8.1%

51.4

Average partner age, down from 53.0 in 2020

UNDERNEATH THE HEADLINE

- Hours × rates fell to 63.1% of revenue from 67.1%; fixed-fee and value pricing rose to 33.7% from 29.3%
- 756 new equity partners were admitted against 373 retirements — the pipeline is producing owners again
- Half of all firms now have a written succession plan; two-thirds of firms above \$30M do
- 20% of firms completed an acquisition — 64% of firms above \$75M, and roughly 5% of firms below \$10M
- Among the IPA 100, PE-backed firms grew 27.0% in total but 7.0% organically — the same organic rate as everyone else
- Professional staff turnover fell to 11.1%, down from 18.8% in 2022 — departures now are chosen, not forced

Read it plainly: the profession is making more money on slower growth — and the firms buying growth are not growing their base any faster than you are.

The benchmarks worth arguing about

Not stretch goals — the operating reality of firms that decided several years ago to stop running on yesterday's logic.

METRIC	WHERE THE PROFESSION IS	WHAT IT MEANS FOR A FIRM YOUR SIZE
Revenue per equity partner	\$2.58M	Up 94% since 2008. Leverage and pricing did this — not hours
Staff per equity partner	11.8 : 1	Firms above \$150M run near 16:1; firms below \$5M run 7.7:1. Leverage is the single largest structural profit driver
Advisory share of revenue	32.2%	Up from 22.1% in 2008 — but only 13% at firms under \$100M. That gap by size is the opportunity in this room
Professional staff turnover	11.1%	Lowest in years, down from 18.8% in 2022. Departures now are chosen, not forced by the market

The spread inside every one of these lines is wider than the movement year over year. Where you sit in the distribution matters more than which way the average moved.

The capital story — and where it touches you

If you have been reading the wave as still building, the 2026 data says something more specific is happening.

207

Deals in the 12 months to July 2026, down from a 230 peak in March

\$49B

Cumulative enterprise value transacted since 2016, across 473 firms

5

Independent firms left between the 6th and 26th largest in the country

WHAT IS GENUINELY NEW IN 2026

- Platform-on-platform consolidation: the deals are now between large firms, not roll-ups of small ones
- Sponsor-to-sponsor flips mean rollover equity quality now matters more than the headline multiple
- “Smaller firms” as targets of PE
- Independence is at the forefront of partner meetings

The wave did not crest — it consolidated upward.

The 2026 scoreboard

The transactions that reset the top of the market in a single year — and what each one signals.

TRANSACTION	WHAT IT SIGNALS
Grant Thornton – CBIZ	A top-5 firm formed overnight. CBIZ, the only publicly traded firm, delists
Crowe – KKR	Closed August 2026, including \$1B of debt financing. A top-10 firm moves into the sponsored column
Eide Bailly – Reverence	Roughly 2.1× revenue on \$840M of billings — the clearest public read available on large-platform pricing
Smith + Howard – TPG	Broad Sky's exit after quadrupling revenue and nine acquisitions in three and a half years
Prosperity Partners – Lightyear	104% growth; Unity retains a minority stake and an \$18M employee ownership program continues
HBK – H.I.G. Capital	The 49th-largest firm, at \$184M of revenue — proof the model now reaches well into your size band
<i>Whatever your partner group concludes about PE, your clients' and your recruits' sense of what is normal is shifting underneath you.</i>	

Sources: Accounting Today and CPA Trendlines transaction reporting, June–September 2026; company announcements.

How the market is expected to behave from here

If 2025 was the breakout year, 2026 is the discipline year. The character of the capital is changing — and that changes who wins.

DIMENSION	2025 REALITY	2026 AND BEYOND
Momentum	Breakout consolidation year; M&A normalized	Sustained but steadier; deal count plateauing while deal size climbs
Buyer mindset	Speed and scale prioritized	Precision, integration readiness, ROI discipline
PE role	Aggressive capital deployment	Operational focus, disciplined underwriting, second-bite economics
Valuations	Expanded multiples driven by scale and scarcity	Bifurcated — premium for quality, compression for the undifferentiated
Seller motivation	Succession-driven exits	Strategy-driven transactions expected to outperform
Assets acquired	Revenue and geographic footprint	Capabilities, advisory platforms, leadership depth
Integration risk	Largely a post-close concern	Integration planning now precedes valuation

If your firm received a credible offer in the next six months, does your partnership know — collectively — what the answer would be? If not, there is a pre-decision to make before the conversation happens.

Independence — the honest two-sided case

Most firms that stayed independent did not choose independence actively. They simply did not accept an offer. That is not a strategy.

THE CASE FOR IT

What you keep by staying independent.

- A purpose-driven culture you define — not a sponsor's
- Client relationships valued over years, not at an EBITDA multiple
- Governance decisions that serve clients, staff and community
- Decision-making without a committee outside the firm
- Internal succession that builds a multi-generational identity
- Partners building equity in something they own outright

THE CASE THAT IT IS HARD

What you take on by staying independent.

- A capital-intensive era with no external capital engine
- Talent competition against platforms offering equity — and paying a \$35K premium
- Technology investment cycles that require continuous commitment
- Partner buyout obligations that can force an involuntary transaction
- Governance by consensus that can prevent necessary decision velocity
- Scale disadvantages in M&A, brand and referral ecosystems

WHAT DECIDES IT

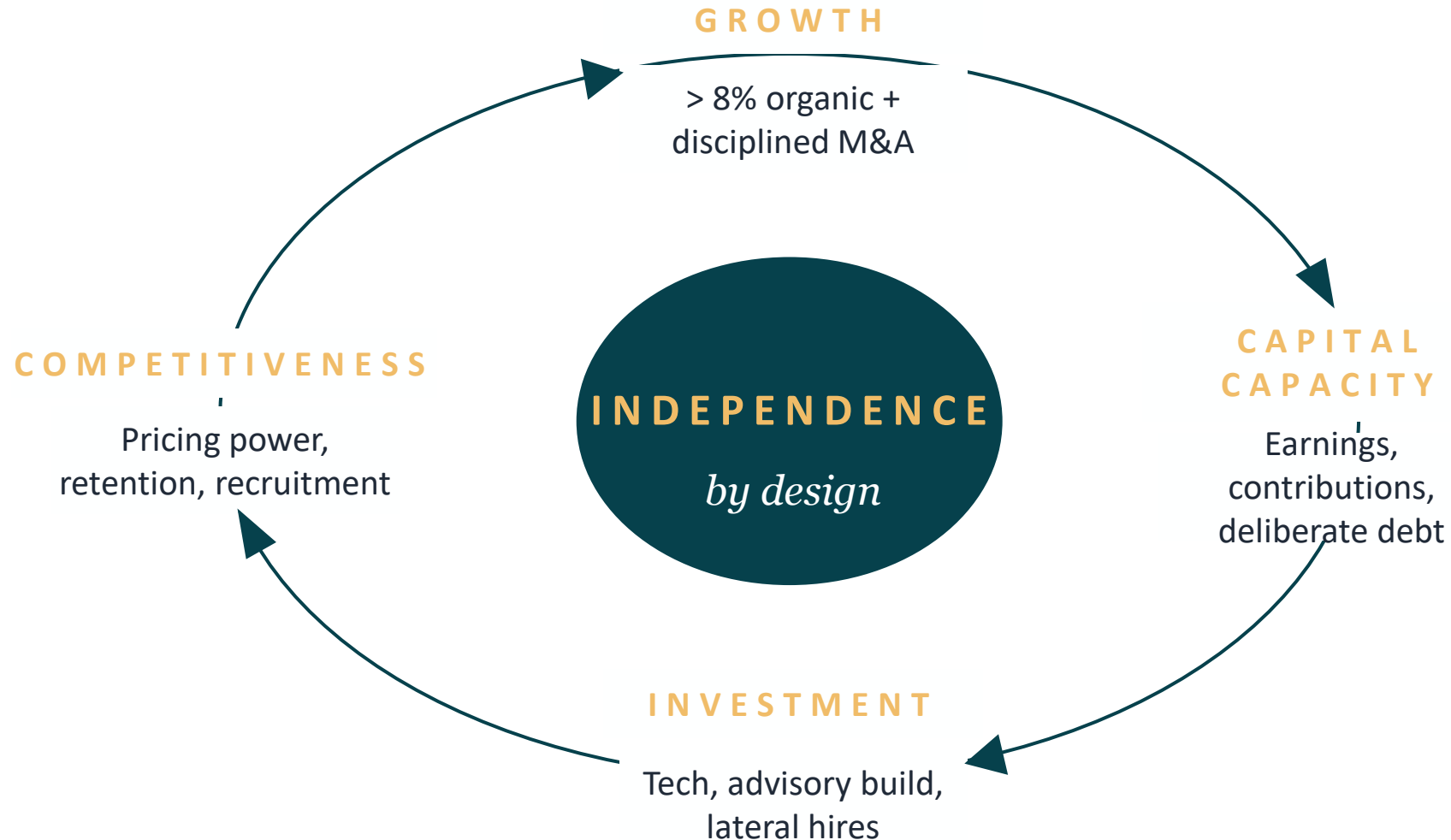
The moves that decide it — pick them, date them.

- Define the strategy: one sentence, tested with every partner
- Audit the governance: one change, decided and dated
- Make one structural decision: opened for real, not deferred
- Have the capital conversation annually, on purpose, offer or no offer
- Know what you are saying no to — and why. That clarity is itself a strategy

The candid question for this room: is your firm's independence a conviction, or a comfort? There is a significant difference between the two.

EACH PART FEEDS THE NEXT

Independence is not a posture. It is an operating system. Each piece below funds the next — and each one is something a partner must actively defend.



The view from inside the partnership

Across hundreds of leader conversations the same three lists surface — independent of firm size, region or service mix.

TOP PRIORITIES

What leaders say must be built.

- Leadership development and succession
- An integrated people strategy
- Technology efficiency at scale
- Strategic, intentional growth
- Industry specialization
- Governance and clear ownership roles
- A strong, deliberate culture

PERSISTENT BARRIERS

What gets in the way.

- Leadership alignment is lacking
- Capacity constraints across the firm
- Talent shortages and burnout
- Resistance to change
- Weak accountability culture
- Dilution of strategic focus
- Process gaps and inconsistency

WHAT MUST CHANGE

Where leaders want to act.

- Redefine shareholder roles and delegation
- Establish a clear vision and strategy
- Align the leadership group
- Address capacity constraints
- Improve operational efficiency
- Foster an advisory mindset
- Strengthen partner communication

Leaders see the work clearly. The constraint is not awareness — it is alignment, accountability and the willingness to act.

Five Pillars for the *Crossroads.*

The Indiana CPA Society built this program around five pillars. We take them one at a time for the rest of the morning — and at ten o'clock you choose the one your firm needs most.

Five pillars, one operating system

These are not five separate initiatives, and they are not a menu. They are one system.

TECHNOLOGY

Creates the capacity.

- Determines how much capacity exists to redeploy
- The floor, not the moat — everyone will have the tools
- Questions regarding depth of investments and change management

TALENT

Deploys the capacity.

- Decides whether freed capacity becomes advisory or margin
- The constraint has moved to the five-to-eight-year band
- Do “they want to be like us?”

STRATEGY

Directs the capacity.

- Chooses what the firm will not do
- Structural decisions outlive every quarterly one
- Where most partner groups are quietly misaligned

GOVERNANCE

Decides at speed.

- Determines how fast a decision can be made
- Consensus is a cost; decision rights are a design choice
- The bridge between a strategy and an executed strategy

CULTURE

Sustains all of it.

- Determines whether any of the above survives contact
- Exists whether you shape it or inherit it
- Beats strategy every time the two disagree

Technology creates capacity. Talent deploys it. Strategy directs it. Governance decides. Culture sustains. Pull one out and the other four wobble.

Technology is a capacity decision, not an IT budget

You will hear the AI depth later today. My argument is narrower, and it is about leadership.

FROM SUPPORT FUNCTION TO STRATEGIC PLATFORM

- 01 AI adoption moved from 9% to 41% in a single year; 35% of firms now use AI tools daily. Technology spend runs about 5.6% of revenue at top-performing firms — and the return shows up as capacity, not just efficiency.

THE QUESTION HAS CHANGED

- 02 It is no longer 'should we invest in technology?' It is 'is our technology investment aligned with our strategic direction — and is it funded, governed and sequenced?'

TECHNOLOGY DEBT IS LEADERSHIP DEBT

- 03 The cost of delay is not linear. It compounds as competitors move faster, talent expectations rise, and clients experience better service somewhere else. Every deferred year is more expensive than the one before it.

Independent firms can absolutely compete with capitalized platforms on technology — but only through disciplined investment and strategic clarity. Without that, independence becomes vulnerability.

The gap is no longer adoption. It is proof.

Budgets are up across the profession. Measurable impact is not — and the firms that close that gap first will set the competitive terms for the next three years.

70%+

Of firms raised AI budgets this year — the only technology category with budget growth

44%

Report no measurable impact from AI yet

18%

Say their organization actually tracks AI ROI; 40% do not know whether it is tracked

7%

Describe themselves as extremely prepared for AI

THE STRATEGIC WINDOW, AND WHAT IS INSIDE IT

- 24–36 months to define an AI operating model before competitive position sets
- Adoption itself is now common: 60% of tax firms use AI research weekly, up from 33% a year ago
- 74% of professionals use AI tools several times a week; 44% multiple times a day
- Aprio has committed \$300 million over five years — the largest disclosed single-firm commitment in the profession outside of the Big 4
- Big 4 GenAI commitments run to \$1B+; PE-backed platforms are deploying capital into the same race
- 91% of professionals report frustration with the gap between what AI promised and what it delivered

Almost everyone is spending. Almost nobody is measuring. That is not a technology problem — it is an unclaimed advantage.

AI creates capacity. Then somebody decides where it goes.

AI's greatest contribution is not cost reduction. It is capacity creation. What happens to that capacity is a leadership decision, and it gets made by default if you do not make it on purpose.

WHAT AI ABSORBS

Document intake, data extraction, exception management, review-ready outputs. The routine layer goes first — and it goes faster in tax and client accounting than most partner groups have modeled.

WHAT THAT FREES

Experienced professionals stop doing work that never needed their judgment. 86% of accountants say AI reduces their mental load; 93% already use it in advisory roles.

WHERE IT CAN GO — OPTION A

Reinvested into advisory capability, client-facing time, relationship depth and premium-fee services. This is the choice that changes the firm.

WHERE IT CAN GO — OPTION B

Taken as margin relief and headcount reduction. Defensible, sometimes correct, and quietly permanent. The firms that drift into this one usually never decided it.

This is not about replacing people. It is about deciding — explicitly, in a pricing and capacity conversation — where the freed hours go.

The ROI question is different in each category

Four types of AI investment, four different tests. Applying one test to all four is how firms end up unable to say whether any of it worked.

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES	THE QUESTION TO HOLD IT TO
Core platform AI	CCH Axxess · CoCounsel · Caseware · Karbon	How much faster does this make work we are already doing — and can we see it in realization?
Vertical specialists	Blue J · Fieldguide · DataSnipper · MindBridge	Does this materially improve speed, consistency or quality in one high-stakes function we can name?
AI-native challengers	Basis · Digits · Trullion · Black Ore	Does this reduce process friction enough to create scalable capacity — and can we absorb the change management?
General AI layer	ChatGPT · Copilot · Claude · Gemini	How much firm-wide productivity and future automation capability does this enable — and what does it cost us in governance?

*The general layer is where small firms are producing the clearest wins for the least money — and where governance is weakest.
Both of those are true at once.*

What leading firms do differently

The gap is not the size of the budget. It is whether technology is treated as a platform or as a purchase.

LEADING FIRMS

- Technology as a strategic platform, owned at the top
- A capacity multiplier applied across service lines
- A talent enabler — AI plus offshore leverage, deliberately combined
- A funded multi-year roadmap with named owners
- Governance and policy written before the tools arrive
- Training budgeted ahead of licenses

LAGGING FIRMS

- Technology as a cost center, reviewed at budget time
- Isolated tool purchases that never integrate
- Reactive adoption driven by what a peer firm bought
- An annual line item with no roadmap behind it
- Policy written after the first incident
- Licenses bought, training deferred — so adoption stalls

Both groups spend money on technology. Only one of them is buying capacity with it.

Independence and technology

Independent firms can compete with capitalized platforms on technology. It is not a resource question first — it is a discipline question.

LEARN FROM THE COMPETITION

Capital discipline, sustained technology investment, scalable infrastructure, real career structures. Every one of those disciplines is available to you without taking anyone's capital.

CAPITAL IS FUEL FOR STRATEGY

Partner capital, bank debt, minority equity, a strategic combination. The source matters less than whether the decision was made deliberately and funded on a schedule.

ALIGN TO STRATEGY, NOT TO NOISE

The failure mode is not underspending. It is spending steadily on tools that no stated strategy asked for — and then having nothing left for the one that mattered.

START WHERE CAPACITY IS

Use cases that create immediate capacity in your highest-value work. Governance around AI before broad rollout. Training before tools, every time.

Independence requires funded resilience. Without capital deployed toward technology, independence quietly becomes vulnerability.

Technology: what the next twelve months look like

Most firms buy first and govern later. This sequence is the reverse, and it is the one that produces evidence you can take to a partner meeting.

DAYS 1–30 · GOVERN

Write the AI use policy before the next tool arrives: what data may be entered, what must be reviewed by a human, who approves a new tool. One page. The cheapest item on this list and the one most firms skip.

DAYS 31–90 · PROVE ONE THING

One use case, in your highest-value service line, measured properly — hours before, hours after, quality, realization. One proven number ends more internal arguments than any vendor demonstration.

DAYS 91–180 · SCALE IT

Roll the proven case out to the whole team, with training booked before licenses. Then start the second one. Two proven cases is a program; six open pilots is a hobby.

DAYS 181–365 · REPRICE

Decide what the freed capacity is for, and change the pricing to match. If the gain never reaches a fee conversation or an advisory build, the investment has funded nothing but a shorter day.

Notice what is not in the first ninety days: buying anything. Governance and one proven number cost almost nothing, and they determine whether everything after them works.

Technology — what to do about it

Three actions, each one owned by a person with a date.

ELEVATE IT TO THE BOARDROOM

Make technology a standing strategic conversation at the partner or board level — not an IT line item reviewed at budget time.

NAME YOUR TOP THREE AI USE CASES

Target the applications that create immediate capacity in your highest-value service lines. Three, named, with an owner. Not a survey of everything available.

COMMIT TO A FUNDED PLAN

A technology investment plan that is funded, governed and aligned to a three-year strategy — including a budget line for the experiments that will fail.

The firms that win will not be the ones with the most technology. They will be the ones that deploy it with the most strategic clarity.

The shape of the workforce has changed

The traditional leverage model is not under strain. It has changed shape — and the operating model has to change with it.

THE PYRAMID

A large base of entry-level staff feeding upward. Predictable leverage, predictable margin, predictable succession. It worked for forty years and it is not coming back.

THE HOURGLASS

Tech-enabled specialists and experienced advisors at the top. AI and offshoring absorbing the base. A narrow, expensive, irreplaceable middle.

WHERE THE CONSTRAINT ACTUALLY SITS NOW

- CPA unemployment at 1–2%. The market has no slack to give you
- Enrollment is up for a third year — the entry point is healing
- Managers took the smallest raise in the firm this year
- A 15% premium is available to any manager willing to move
- The five-to-eight-year band is the one you cannot buy back
- Leverage is no longer headcount per partner — it is client value created per professional dollar

The leverage model is evolving

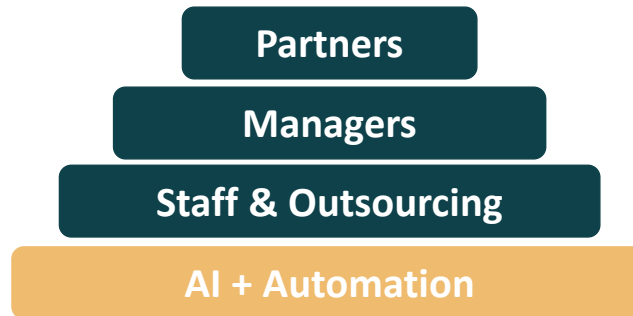
From traditional leverage to an AI-enabled firm

TRADITIONAL · PYRAMID



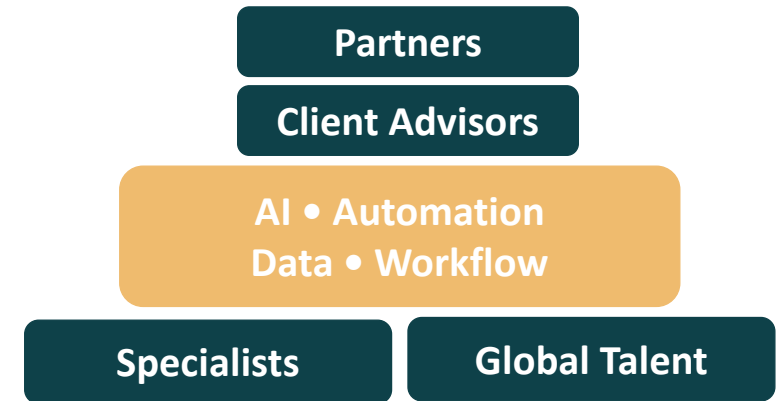
- Human leverage
- Large staff base
- Routine work
- Linear growth

TODAY · TRANSITION



- AI handles routine work
- Managers oversee technology
- Higher productivity
- More advisory

FUTURE · ENABLED MODEL



- AI enables professionals
- Specialized talent
- Scalable delivery
- Client-focused advice

The firms that outperform won't necessarily have more people—they'll have professionals better enabled by AI, automation, and specialized talent.

Talent is the capacity constraint

Not an HR challenge. The single largest limit on what your firm can deliver, grow into, or promise a client.

1–2%

CPA unemployment — the market has no slack to give you

75%

Of CPAs at or near retirement age

15%

Premium available to a manager willing to move

\$35K

Premium capitalized platforms are paying against you

11.1%

Staff turnover — the lowest in years, and still costly

WHAT THIS ACTUALLY MEANS FOR YOUR FIRM

- The 150-hour rule still shapes the front of the pipeline, and students price it against other careers
- Salary compression against competing fields is real, visible, and discussed openly on campus
- Enrollment is up a third straight year — the entry point is genuinely healing
- Succession pressure is now at every level, not only at partner
- You compete on total experience: career clarity, flexibility, purpose, development
- Money alone does not win this. But being materially below market loses it before you start

Every growth plan, every advisory ambition and every technology payoff in this deck is rate-limited by this one pillar.

The partner capacity trap

Partners who do too much, hold too much and refuse to let others grow create the very capacity constraint they complain about.

THE TRAP

Average partner charge hours are declining below 1,000 — and many partners still fill that time with work someone else should be doing. The work never transfers, so the successor never develops, so the work cannot transfer.

WHY IT PERSISTS

It is rewarded. Compensation still counts the book, not the bench. Delegation looks like risk to the client relationship, and nobody has ever been penalized for holding on too long.

WHAT BREAKS IT

Name two or three partners caught in it. Build a specific delegation plan with a named receiver and a date. Then measure the partner on whether the transfer happened — not on hours.

THE HONEST TEST

Faster promotion does not equal readiness. If your next generation has never run a relationship end to end, you do not have a succession plan — you have a retirement schedule.

Talent is capacity. Capacity is growth. And the partner capacity trap is the one constraint you can start dismantling this month without spending a dollar.

Recruit, train, retain, inspire

The firms winning this are reimagining the whole career experience — from the first interview to the partner vote — with intent and accountability.

RECRUIT

Who you go after.

- Hire for judgment and curiosity, not only GPA
- Sell the actual first ninety days, not the brochure
- Recruit experienced laterals, not only campus
- Know what your offer looks like beside a platform's

TRAIN

How they get good.

- Development designed, not absorbed by proximity
- Remote seniors developing on-site juniors needs a design
- Train on the tools before you buy the tools
- Give judgment work earlier — AI took the ramp away

RETAIN

Why they stay.

- Career clarity: can a third-year describe the path?
- Sustainable workload measured in outcomes, not hours
- Mental health as a performance issue, not a benefit
- Know your five-to-eight-year people by name

INSPIRE

Why it matters to them.

- Ownership, not participation
- Purpose that is specific to this firm, not the profession
- Leaders who visibly model what they ask for
- A wealth curve a 32-year-old can actually believe

Burnout is not a personal failing — it is a systemic productivity and retention issue. The shift is from measuring hours worked to measuring value delivered.

Talent — what to do about it

Three actions, each one owned by a person with a date.

ASSESS THE EXPERIENCE

Honestly, from the perspective of a 28-year-old choosing between your firm and everything else available to them. The first ninety days, not the recruiting material.

NAME THE CAPACITY TRAP

Identify two or three partners caught in it. Build delegation plans with a named receiver and an accountability date — then measure the partner on whether the transfer happened.

PROTECT THE MIDDLE

List your five-to-eight-year people by name. For each one, know what would make them stay and what would make them go. If you cannot answer, that is the finding.

Talent is capacity. Capacity is growth. Growth is the future — and the band you are losing is the band that was going to run the firm.

Strategy is the practice of choosing what not to do

Not a vision statement on a wall. A set of deliberate tradeoffs that a partner group has agreed to live with.

MICHAEL PORTER'S POINT, APPLIED TO A CPA FIRM

Operational effectiveness is not strategy. Doing the same things better is not strategy. Doing different things — and declining to do some things you are currently paid for — is strategy.

MOST FIRMS CONFUSE THE TWO

- 01 Ask a partner group for the strategy and you usually get a list of improvements. Improvements are good. They are not choices, because nothing is being given up.

A STRATEGY REQUIRES A NO

- 02 To clients that do not fit. To services you are competent at but cannot differentiate in. To markets where you will always be somebody's second call.

AND IT REQUIRES A SUPERPOWER

- 03 One sentence describing the thing you do better than anyone in your market. Test it by asking three partners separately and comparing the answers.

If every partner in your firm gave a different one-sentence answer to 'what are we best at?' — that is not a communication problem. That is the strategy problem.

Strategy cascades: vision, priorities, cost, funding

A vision only becomes a strategy when it is priced — and then funded.

KNOW YOUR VISION

- 01 Where is the firm five years out? Size, client mix, service mix, ownership. Specific enough that a partner could describe it the same way you would.

KNOW THE PRIORITIES THAT SUPPORT IT

- 02 The short list of initiatives that actually move the firm toward that vision — not the long list of improvements everyone likes.

KNOW THE COST OF FULL IMPLEMENTATION

- 03 What does it cost to implement those priorities completely — people, technology, time and partner capacity? A half-funded priority produces a half result.

KNOW HOW YOU WILL FUND IT

- 04 How do we fund the cost? Until the partner group answers that, the vision stays a wall decoration and the priorities stay a wish list.

Vision without priorities is a slogan. Priorities without a funding answer are a budget argument waiting to happen.

Structural decisions matter most

The most consequential strategic decisions are structural. They set the shape of the firm for a decade — and they are the ones partner groups are most practiced at deferring.

THE PROFESSION IS BIFURCATING

On one side, firms that made deliberate structural choices. On the other, firms that inherited their structure from history and have never revisited it. The second group is not failing — it is drifting, which looks identical until it isn't.

INDEPENDENCE IS ITSELF A STRUCTURE

It must be funded and defended, not assumed. A firm that has never priced what independence costs has not actually chosen it.

CAPACITY BEFORE GROWTH

Build the infrastructure and the people to deliver before pursuing the revenue. Growth taken on ahead of capacity is how firms damage the reputation they spent thirty years building.

STRUCTURE OUTLIVES STRATEGY

You can change a strategy in a quarter. Ownership structure, partner agreements, decision rights and capital arrangements take years and cost relationships. Which is exactly why they get deferred.

The decisions a partner group defers longest are the structural ones — because they are the only ones that cannot be quietly undone later.

Growth by design, not by arrival

Sustainable growth comes from disciplined design: a defined ideal client, expansion from actual strength, and pricing for value.

IDEAL CLIENT DISCIPLINE

Define the profile and pursue only clients with strategic fit. Then measure the existing base against it and make a decision about the bottom decile on a defined cycle.

ADVISORY FROM STRENGTH

Expand from existing expertise and existing relationships, not from a trend deck. Advisory is 32.2% of revenue profession-wide but only 13% at firms under \$100M — the gap is the opportunity, and it is built, not bought.

PRICE FOR VALUE

Top-performing firms price for value, not hours. It is the highest-return work available to most firms in this room, and it requires nothing but the decision and the nerve to hold it.

Structural decisions matter most. They shape the firm for the next decade, not the next quarter — and they are the ones partner groups are most skilled at deferring.

What a tradeoff is actually worth

Strategy sounds abstract until you price it. Four decisions most firms defer — and what the profession's own numbers say each one returns.

PRICING DISCIPLINE

Closing a \$342,000 annual pricing gap adds roughly \$2.6M of enterprise value at a 7.5× multiple. No hiring, no acquisition, no new service line. The constraint here is nerve, not capability.

RELEASING THE BOTTOM DECILE

Your worst-fitting clients consume capacity at your worst realization, and they occupy the people you cannot replace. Releasing them on a defined cycle is the fastest capacity gain available to a firm that cannot hire its way out.

CONCENTRATING IN A NICHE

Advisory is 32.2% of revenue profession-wide but only 13% at firms under \$100M. That gap closes through depth in a defined industry, not breadth across all of them.

EXITING A SERVICE LINE

The hardest one, and the clearest signal you have a strategy. A line you are competent at but cannot differentiate in will always be priced by somebody else. Leaving it frees the capacity that funds the line you can own.

Every one of these is available without capital, without a merger, and without permission from anyone outside your partner group. That is what makes them strategy rather than aspiration.

Building advisory from where you actually are

Advisory gets built in an order — and most firms attempt step four first.

01

START WITH THE CLIENTS YOU ALREADY HAVE

The advisory work you can win this year is sitting inside your compliance base. You already know their numbers, their family and their succession problem. That is a position no competitor can buy, and no platform can scale into.

02

NAME ONE INDUSTRY AND GO DEEP

Depth in one industry beats general business advisory across five. It gives you a reference client, a repeatable diagnostic and a reason to be called first — none of which generalists ever develop.

03

PACKAGE IT BEFORE YOU SELL IT

A defined scope, a defined deliverable, a defined fee. Advisory sold as 'we can help with that' gets delivered as unbilled hours by your busiest partner and then gets quietly dropped.

04

PUT A NAME AND A NUMBER ON IT

One person owns the advisory pipeline, with a revenue target and a monthly review. Advisory that belongs to everyone belongs to no one and shows up in nobody's goals when the year gets busy.

05

PRICE IT LIKE ADVISORY, NOT LIKE COMPLIANCE

The moment you price advisory on hours you have converted it back into compliance with extra steps. Value pricing is not a technique here — it is the thing that makes it a different business.

Firms under \$100M sit at 13% advisory against a profession at 32.2%. That is not a capability gap. It is a sequencing gap, and it is closable inside three years.

M&A as a strategic tool, not a reaction

Twenty percent of firms completed an acquisition last year — 64% of firms above \$75M, and roughly 5% below \$10M. The question is whether yours would be deliberate.

TARGET CAPABILITY, NOT REVENUE

Industry expertise, advisory talent, a geographic position that advances a strategy you have already written down. Buying revenue you cannot differentiate just makes you bigger at the same margin.

TEST EVERY TARGET AGAINST THE PROFILE

Ideal client profile, then service strategy, then cultural fit — in that order. A target that fails the third test will fail the first two eventually, and more expensively.

THE DISCIPLINES ARE GENUINELY NEW

Modified deal construction, post-transaction measurement, compensation pool alignment. Most firms acquire before they have built any of the three, and then spend two years integrating.

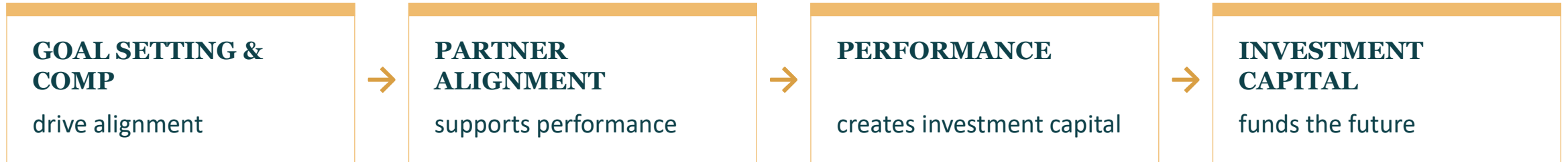
AND IT IS NOT A PHONE CALL

Define acquisition criteria in advance. Earmark the capital. Build target relationships before you need them. A broker's call is not a strategy — it is a test of whether you had one.

M&A should serve your growth design. Used well it is a talent, capability and succession tool — used reactively it is an expensive way to postpone a decision.

Strategy requires alignment, or it stays aspiration

The best strategy fails without alignment: between partners, between strategy and operations, and between stated priorities and actual behavior.



WHERE MISALIGNMENT SHOWS UP

- Partners pursuing personal goals disconnected from firm priorities
- Service lines competing with each other rather than collaborating
- A strategic plan written, circulated once, and never referenced again

WHAT ALIGNMENT ACTUALLY REQUIRES

- Cascading goals: firm strategy → service line → individual partner plan
- Every partner able to state the firm's competitive position consistently
- Compensation that rewards the behaviors the strategy actually needs

Strategy without alignment is aspiration. Strategy with alignment is execution. "Strategy is not what you say — strategy is what you do."

Strategy — what to do about it

Three actions, each one owned by a person with a date.

DEFINE YOUR SUPERPOWER

One sentence. Then ask every partner separately to state it and compare the answers. The variance in that exercise is your real starting point.

AUDIT YOUR CLIENT BASE

Measure every client against the ideal client profile. Identify the bottom 10% that drain capacity without advancing the strategy — and make the hard decision on a defined cycle.

CASCADE PARTNER GOALS

Every partner's individual goals flow directly from the firm's strategic plan, with measurable accountability and a date. If it does not cascade, it is not a plan.

Structural decisions, capacity, and alignment. Back your choices with all three or they are preferences, not strategy.

Governance is your operating system

Not bureaucracy. The structures, processes and norms that determine how fast your firm can decide, execute and adapt.

WHY THIS IS EVOLVING RIGHT NOW

The pace and complexity of change in the profession has outgrown the consensus-based model. Firms are shifting from partner consensus to firm-led decision-making, and managing partners are evolving into CEO roles.

WHAT NEEDS INPUT

- Admitting and terminating partners
- Mergers, acquisitions and structural change
- The strategic plan and the capital plan
- Compensation philosophy — not individual outcomes

WHAT NEEDS SPEED

- Pricing decisions and client acceptance or release
- Technology investment inside an approved budget
- Hiring, and holding people to written standards
- Day-to-day operating choices of every kind

The shift from consensus to decision rights is not about taking away partner voice. It is about distinguishing what genuinely requires input from what merely requires speed.

The governance elements — making it work

Six elements. Most firms have two of them written down, and four of them assumed — and the assumed ones are where the friction comes from.

- 01** **DECISION RIGHTS**
Who decides what, written down and communicated to every partner. Not a philosophy — a one-page matrix that a new partner could read and understand on their first day.
- 02** **GOAL SETTING AND CASCADE**
Firm strategy to service line to individual partner plan, each with a measure and a date. If the cascade breaks at any level, everything below it becomes optional.
- 03** **WRITTEN PERFORMANCE STANDARDS**
Expectations that apply to every partner regardless of tenure or book size. The standard is only real at the moment it is applied to the person everyone protects.
- 04** **A MANAGEMENT CADENCE**
A meeting rhythm that does not move for busy season. Lead indicators reviewed monthly, not lag indicators reviewed at year end.
- 05** **BOARD OR COMMITTEE STRUCTURE**
Small enough to decide, representative enough to be trusted. Most partner groups have the second half and not the first.
- 06** **THE MANAGING PARTNER ROLE**
Authority matched to accountability, and a scorecard they are actually measured against. Responsibility without authority is the most common governance defect in this profession.

Write down the ones you have. The gap between that list and this one is your governance agenda for the next twelve months.

The decision-rights matrix — a working draft

The single most useful page a partner group can produce. Fill it in, argue about it once, and stop arguing about it weekly.

THE DECISION	WHO DECIDES	WHAT THAT ACTUALLY CHANGES
Pricing, existing client	Engagement partner	Ends the six-week loop. You set a realization floor instead of holding a vote — and the floor is the governance
Client accept / release	Managing partner	Measured against a written ideal-client profile, so it is a standard being applied rather than a preference being expressed
Tech inside the budget	Managing partner	Turns the budget into the decision. The partner vote happens once, at budget time, not once per tool
Hiring below partner	Managing partner	Removes the most common delay in a talent market where speed is the entire advantage
Admission, M&A, capital	Partner vote	The genuinely structural decisions. Protecting these is exactly what makes delegating everything else defensible to the group

Everything above the last line moves to one person. That is the entire reform — and it is usually a two-hour conversation that firms defer for two years.

Accountability as a posture, not a punishment

Accountability is not punitive micromanagement. It is the posture of a firm that takes its own strategy seriously enough to hold itself to it.

IT STARTS AT THE TOP

Partners are held to written standards regardless of tenure or book size. A firm that will not hold its own partners accountable cannot credibly ask it of anyone else — and everyone in the building knows it.

IT IS SPECIFIC AND DATED

Goals with owners, measures and dates. 'We should focus more on advisory' is not a goal. 'Nina owns a \$400K advisory pipeline by June 30' is.

IT ERODES QUIETLY

One exception for a legacy relationship. One deadline that slips without comment. One partner everybody has stopped expecting anything from. Accountability does not collapse — it leaks.

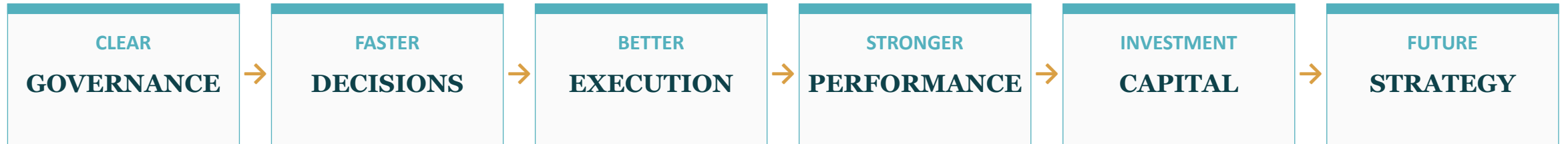
LAUNCH IT IMPERFECTLY

Do not wait for the perfect system. Start with goals, measure progress, improve as you go. The firms still designing their accountability framework are the ones that never launch it.

Effective governance does not create control. It creates speed, clarity, trust, and the organizational capacity to execute an ambitious strategy.

What effective governance enables

Governance is not the goal. It is the mechanism — and the chain it sets off is where the value actually shows up.



EACH LINK PAYS FOR THE NEXT ONE

- Speed is the first dividend — a decision that took six weeks takes one meeting
- Clarity is the second — people stop guessing what leadership actually wants
- Trust is the third — partners stop re-litigating, because the process was fair

AND THE CHAIN RUNS BACKWARDS TOO

- No decision rights means slow decisions, which means execution slips
- Execution slippage shows up as performance, which is where capital comes from
- No capital means no technology, no laterals, no advisory build — and no independence

Governance does not create control. It creates speed — and speed compounds into capital, which is what funds every other pillar in this deck.

Governance: what the first twelve months look like

Governance change fails when it arrives as a constitutional amendment. It works when it arrives as four decisions on a calendar.

QUARTER ONE • WRITE IT DOWN

The decision-rights matrix, drafted by someone other than the managing partner, put to a single vote. Do not attempt to fix compensation in the same quarter — it will swallow everything else.

QUARTER TWO • APPLY IT

Let the managing partner make one real decision under the new rights, and hold the line when it is questioned. The first application is the whole test: nothing is real until a decision survives being reopened.

QUARTER THREE • THE CADENCE

A standing management meeting that does not move for busy season, reviewing two or three lead indicators.
Governance without rhythm reverts to whoever is loudest that month.

QUARTER FOUR • THE SCORECARD

A written scorecard, reviewed by the board or the partner group. Authority without accountability is the defect that turns a governance reform into a power complaint.

Four decisions, one per quarter. Firms that attempt all four in a single retreat get none of them — and then conclude that governance reform does not work here.

Governance — what to do about it

Three actions, each one owned by a person with a date.

RUN A GOVERNANCE SELF-ASSESSMENT

Does your current structure match the pace and complexity your strategy demands? If not, name the specific changes — not the aspiration.

CLARIFY DECISION RIGHTS

Which decisions need partner input, which are delegated to management, which belong to the board. Write it down and communicate it to every partner.

HOLD ONE HARD CONVERSATION

The underperforming partner. The unfunded buyout. The distribution that should be reinvested. Pick the one you have been deferring and put a date on it.

Governance is the bridge between strategy and execution. Without it, even the best strategy stays aspirational.

Culture exists whether you shape it or not

The only question is whether your leaders are intentionally designing it or passively inheriting it.

Culture is not a set of values on a website. It is how people behave when leadership is not in the room — and without clear direction from the top, a firm of 100 people may effectively have 100 different cultures.

WHAT KOTTER AND HESKETT FOUND

207

Companies studied across 22 industries over 11 years

4×

Revenue growth at performance-enhancing cultures

8×

Employment growth versus the comparison group

12×

Stock price growth over the study period

Performance-enhancing cultures share three traits: they value employees, clients and owners alike; they encourage leadership from everyone; and they adapt when client needs change.

Source: Kotter, J. P. (2011). Does corporate culture drive financial performance? Forbes.

Culture is the how of strategy

Strategy tells you where to go. Culture determines whether you get there. It is not the complement to strategy — it is the execution mechanism.

STRATEGY

Where we are going.

The choices: what we will do, what we will decline, and what we are best at. Written, tested with every partner, and referenced more than once a year.

STRUCTURE

How we are organized to get there.

Decision rights, roles, capital, compensation. The machinery that either carries the strategy or quietly contradicts it.

CULTURE

Whether we go.

How people behave when leadership is not in the room. It will override both above, every time the three disagree.

WHICH IS WHY LEGACY THINKING IS A CULTURE PROBLEM, NOT A STRATEGY PROBLEM

- Alignment requires all three working together. Execution failures, the 'left out' dynamic and resistance to change are cultural phenomena — they do not get solved by rewriting the strategy.
- Back to Burrus: the work is identifying which ideas still serve you and pinpointing the ones that have worn out their value. That is a cultural act of judgment, and it must be led.

"When strategy and culture are misaligned, culture wins every time."

Resistance is about identity, not direction

When people resist cultural change they are rarely resisting the new direction. They are protecting the identity and the success story that got them here.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY BEING DEFENDED

The fear that 'what made us successful' is being discarded. The loss of individual autonomy. The unfamiliarity of an operating model nobody in the room has run before.

THE 'LEFT OUT' DYNAMIC

Moving from consensus creates partners who feel excluded — and excluded partners challenge routine decisions they would previously have waved through. The friction shows up somewhere other than its cause.

CULTURE IS THE HOW OF STRATEGY

Strategy tells you where to go. Culture determines whether you get there. It is not the complement to strategy — it is the execution mechanism. When the two are misaligned, culture wins every time.

THE LEADER'S ACTUAL JOB

Validate what got us here while making the case for what will get us there next. Both halves. Skip the first and you will spend two years fighting your own partners.

Transformation is about people first: empathy, psychological safety during change, involving teams early, and upskilling with a stated purpose.

Culture — what to do about it

Three actions, each one owned by a person with a date.

NAME THE THREE BEHAVIORS

Three behaviors you will reward and three you will stop tolerating. Specific enough that a manager could referee them on a Tuesday.

ASSESS THE CAREER EXPERIENCE

Honestly, from the perspective of a 28-year-old choosing between your firm and something else. Not the recruiting brochure — the actual first ninety days.

MAKE WELLBEING A STANDING ITEM

Sustainable workload on the partner meeting agenda, not the annual retreat. Burnout is a systemic productivity and retention issue, not a personal failing.

Culture without accountability is aspiration. Accountability is what turns a value on a wall into a behavior on a Tuesday.

Five pillars, one choice

You are not going to fix five pillars. Nobody does. You are going to pick one — and that is what the next session is for.

YOUR CALL TO ACTION

Choose the one pillar where your firm needs the most immediate attention — the one that, if it were strong, would unlock the most movement everywhere else.

Build a 90-day plan with measurable outcomes and share it with your leadership team within two weeks.

YOU CHOOSE

One pillar. Your firm. Based on your assessment results and what you have heard this morning.

YOU DIAGNOSE

Current state, honestly — observable behavior, not the version in the strategic plan.

YOU DESIGN

Future state three years out, then the five levers that decide whether it holds.

YOU LEAVE WITH IT

A one-page transformation sketch, two quick wins, and one conversation with a date on it.

The profession is at a crossroads. The path you choose — and when you choose it — will define your firm's next chapter.

The Guided *Design Lab.*

Reimagining one pillar of your firm. You will leave with a one-page sketch, two quick wins, and one conversation with a date on it.

Why we are doing this

One purpose, stated once: you leave with a decision you can act on soon — not a summary of what you heard this morning.

Alignment without action does not change outcomes. This session exists to turn one piece of this morning's alignment into an action with a name and a date attached to it.

THE PROBLEM

Partner groups already agree on what is wrong. Awareness has not been the constraint for years.

THE OUTPUT

One page: pillar, current state, future state, two quick wins, one dated conversation.

HOW IT RUNS

You think alone first, then you talk. The order protects ideas that would otherwise get overwritten.

HOW IT ENDS

Every table says the same four sentences out loud. You will see them on the next slide.

The promise of today was that you leave with one actionable focus area. This is the session where that gets made.

What you walk out with

One page. Five boxes. This is the artifact — and it is the only thing you need to complete in the next 75 minutes.

PILLAR _____ In one sentence: if this pillar worked, our firm would _____		
CURRENT STATE — OBSERVABLE REALITY What is true today. Behavior, friction, constraints — not diagnosis, not blame.	FUTURE STATE — THREE YEARS OUT If this pillar truly worked: what leaders do, what staff experience, what decisions get easier.	
QUICK WINS — NEXT 90 DAYS Visible, leadership-owned, and they cost somebody something.	CULTURE SHIFTS Behaviors to start rewarding. Behaviors to stop tolerating.	CAPABILITY NEEDS Skills, roles, tools, investment — and who funds them.

FIRST CONVERSATION	Who I talk to: _____	About: _____	By: _____
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You will get this as a printed worksheet. Short phrases, not sentences. Legible beats elegant.

What a finished one looks like

A worked example, so nobody spends the first ten minutes wondering how specific to be. This is the standard.

PILLAR GOVERNANCE If this worked, we would make a real decision in one meeting instead of three.		
CURRENT STATE — OBSERVABLE REALITY What is true today. Behavior, friction, constraints — not diagnosis, not blame. • Every decision needs all seven partners to agree; nothing under \$50K should need that • Two partners routinely re-open decisions weeks after they were made • MP has responsibility for results but no authority over pricing or hiring • Last year's strategic plan has not been referenced in a partner meeting since March FUTURE STATE — THREE YEARS OUT If this pillar truly worked: what leaders do, what staff experience, what decisions get easier. • Decision rights written down: board, MP, partner vote — everyone can name which is which • MP decides inside an approved budget without a vote • Partner meetings review performance against the plan, quarterly, on a standing agenda • A reopened decision is treated as a governance breach, not a preference		
QUICK WINS — NEXT 90 DAYS Visible, leadership-owned, and they cost somebody something. • Draft a one-page decision-rights matrix and put it to a vote at the November partner meeting • Move the strategic plan to a standing quarterly agenda item — first one in January	CULTURE SHIFTS Behaviors to start rewarding. Behaviors to stop tolerating. • Reward: disagreeing in the meeting, then committing • Stop tolerating: re-litigating a closed decision in the hallway	CAPABILITY NEEDS Skills, roles, tools, investment — and who funds them. • MP needs authority, and a scorecard they are actually measured on • Someone to facilitate the decision-rights draft — likely outside the partner group
FIRST CONVERSATION Who I talk to: my MP and the two most vocal partners About: taking the decision-rights matrix to November By: October 10		

Note what makes this credible: it is uncomfortable, it names people, and the first conversation has a date. Aim for that.

What your table will be asked to say

Knowing the destination changes how you work. Every table gives the same four sentences — so build toward them from the first minute.

ONE • THE CHOICE

“We chose _____ because _____.” The 'because' is the part people remember — and the part that tells you whether your table actually agreed or just went along with the first suggestion.

TWO • THE HONEST TRUTH

“The current-state truth we kept coming back to is _____.”
The one that repeated across firms at your table. Specific enough that a stranger could picture the Tuesday.

THREE • THE DESTINATION

“In three years, _____.” Present tense, one feature, bold enough to be worth the effort. Not a list — one thing that would be visibly different.

FOUR • THE FIRST MOVE

“The first thing leadership does differently is _____, starting _____.” A named action with a date. If your table cannot finish this sentence, the design is not done yet.

Two minutes, one spokesperson. Everything between now and then is in service of these four sentences.

What we want you to do next

I will call every transition out loud. If you are still writing when I call time, stop writing — what comes next is more valuable than what you are finishing.

FRAME • all of us

The canvas, the standard, and how your table will work. Then I stop talking.

CHOOSE YOUR PILLAR • on your own or with others from your firm

Choose your pillar. Write the current-state truth. Write the future state. Silence is deliberate — it stops the room converging on whoever speaks first.

DISCUSS AND DESIGN • at your table

Discuss as a table. Then find the pattern and design the future state together using the five levers.

FIND QUICK WINS, THEN PRESSURE-TEST • at your table

Quick wins that meet the standard, then the pressure test. This is where most tables discover their plan is too comfortable.

REPORT OUT • two minutes per table

Four sentences. Headline style. Nobody reads their canvas aloud.

TAKE IT HOME • on your own

One idea, one assumption, one conversation — with a date. Then we close.

How we will talk to each other

The size of this group is the advantage. It only pays off if the conversation is specific, honest and short.

YOUR TABLE

Who you are sitting with.

- If your firm sent more than one person, you are together — you leave with a shared plan you can actually execute
- If you are here on your own, you are with others in the same position, and you get range instead of depth
- Name a timekeeper and a scribe before we start. The scribe holds the pen on the canvas

WHAT WORKS

Four habits worth borrowing.

- Specific about your own firm, general about anyone else's
- Say the uncomfortable version. The polite version helps nobody at this table
- Ask “what happened the last time?” rather than “what do you think about?”
- Build on what the last person said before you add your own

WHAT KILLS IT

Four failure modes.

- Solving somebody else's firm instead of describing your own
- Debating the profession instead of designing for Monday
- Waiting for the most senior person at the table to go first
- Long preambles. Short phrases, then move

Nothing said at your table leaves this room attached to a firm name. I will use the patterns; I will not use the sources.

Choose the pillar that matters most

Not the one that is most broken. The one that, if it were strong, would unlock the most movement everywhere else.

TECHNOLOGY

TALENT

STRATEGY

GOVERNANCE

CULTURE

FOUR QUESTIONS TO DECIDE IT

01 Where is the bottleneck?

Which pillar, if it stayed exactly as it is for three more years, would do the most damage to the firm's value?

03 Which one is upstream?

Fixing some pillars fixes others. Governance often unlocks strategy; culture often unlocks talent. Pick the one with leverage, not the loudest one.

02 Where is the talk–action gap widest?

Which one does your partner group discuss most often and act on least? That gap is usually where the real constraint lives.

04 Which one can you actually influence?

You are one person in a partner group. Choose something you could credibly move within twelve months, not something you would need a merger to change.

If you completed the Society's firm assessment, your results are the fastest way in. Where you scored yourself lowest is a candidate — where you and your partner disagreed most is usually the better one.

Current state: describe observable reality

Behavior you could film. Not diagnosis, not blame, and not the version that appears in the strategic plan.

TOO VAGUE TO DESIGN AGAINST

"Our governance is slow."

"We have a culture problem."

"We need to invest more in technology."

SPECIFIC ENOUGH TO DESIGN AGAINST

"A pricing change needs all seven partners and takes six weeks."

"Two partners re-open decisions after they are made."

"We bought three tools last year and nobody owns any of them."

FOUR PROMPTS — WRITE SHORT PHRASES, NOT SENTENCES

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS

Describe the behavior, the constraint and the incentive that shapes the work today.

WHAT REINFORCES IT

Which process, metric or comp arrangement keeps this in place? Diagnose the system, not the person.

WHERE THE WORKAROUNDS ARE

Shadow processes, duplicated effort, unclear decision rights. The workaround is where the cost hides.

WHAT IT COSTS

Capacity, speed, morale, quality. You do not need a precise number — you need an honest order of magnitude.

The test: could someone who does not work at your firm read this and picture the Tuesday? If not, it is still a diagnosis, not a description.

Future state: if this pillar truly worked

Three years out. Bold enough to be worth the effort, believable enough that you would defend it to your partners on Monday.

WHAT LEADERS DO DIFFERENTLY

Not what they believe — what they do. They fund the technology plan. They enforce the standard with the partner everyone protects. They delegate a decision and then do not take it back.

WHICH DECISIONS GET EASIER

Name two decisions that take six weeks today and would take one meeting. Decision speed is the most reliable signal that a pillar is actually working.

WHAT STAFF EXPERIENCE

The manager who was going to leave stays, and can say why. Someone in their third year can describe the path to partner without guessing. Busy season has a defined end.

WHAT CLIENTS NOTICE

Something they would mention unprompted. If a pillar is genuinely strong for three years and no client can tell, be honest about whether it was the right pillar.

Write it in the present tense, as though it is already true. "Partners are held to written standards" — not "we should hold partners to standards."

Step two: how your table works

Thirty minutes. Three moves, in this order — and the order is the point. It stops the room converging on whoever speaks first or loudest.

ROUND-ROBIN

EVERYONE SPEAKS BEFORE ANYONE DEBATES

Each person: my pillar, my current-state truth, my future-state feature. No questions, no reactions, no 'oh we have that too' until everyone has gone. The timekeeper is ruthless about this — it is the single rule that makes the table safe for whoever is least senior.

FIND THE PATTERNS

WHAT SHOWED UP MORE THAN ONCE?

Capture the repeats as short phrases where everyone can see them. Then push one level down and ask what the common cause underneath them is. Slow decisions, unclear accountability and no capacity are usually three symptoms of the same thing.

DESIGN THE FUTURE

PICK ONE PILLAR AND BUILD THE FUTURE STATE TOGETHER

Choose the pillar where your table has the most energy or the most leverage, even if it is not everyone's individual pick. Design it against the five levers on the next slide, and keep asking the one question that matters: what would leaders do differently on Monday morning?

If your table is a firm team you are designing your firm's plan. If it is mixed you are stress-testing each other's — and either way you each leave with your own page, and your table owes four sentences at 10:55.

Quick wins: signal matters, substance sustains

Two to four actions inside 90 days. There is a standard for what counts, and most first drafts do not meet it.

A QUICK WIN COUNTS IF IT IS...

- Visible — people who are not in this room will notice it happened
- Leadership-owned — a partner's name is on it, not a committee's
- Friction-removing — it gives time back, or makes a decision faster
- Costly to someone — it requires giving something up, which is what makes it a signal

AND IT DOES NOT COUNT IF IT IS...

- A survey, a working group, or a decision to look into it further
- Something already scheduled that you are now calling a quick win
- A purchase — buying a tool is a transaction, not a change
- Something nobody outside the partner group would ever notice

THE PRESSURE TEST

WHO PUSHES BACK, AND WHY?

Name the person or the group. If nobody pushes back, you have designed something that does not change anything.

WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP GIVE UP?

Authority, income, a client, a habit, a comfortable silence. Transformation that costs leaders nothing is an announcement.

WHAT BREAKS IN MONTH FOUR?

When the novelty is gone and busy season is coming. Design for that month now, because that is when plans quietly stop.

DOES THIS FEEL EASY?

If the whole plan feels comfortable, it is almost certainly not transformative. Discomfort is not proof you are right — but comfort is decent evidence you are not.

Quick wins buy you permission. They are not the change — they are what makes people believe the change is real enough to invest in.

Four sentences. Headline style.

Nobody reads their canvas aloud. One spokesperson, four sentences, two minutes. I will hold the clock and I will be unpopular about it.

- 01 "We chose _____ because _____."
- 02 "The current-state truth we kept coming back to is _____."
- 03 "In three years, _____."
- 04 "The first thing leadership does differently is _____, starting _____."

WORKED EXAMPLE — WHAT TWO MINUTES SOUNDS LIKE

"We chose governance, because every other pillar at our table was blocked by how slowly we decide. The current-state truth is that a pricing change needs all seven partners and takes six weeks. In three years, our managing partner decides inside an approved budget without a vote, and a closed decision stays closed. The first thing leadership does differently is put a one-page decision-rights matrix to a vote at the November partner meeting — drafted by October 10."

Questions from the room are clarifying only. No critiques, no 'have you considered' — there is not time, and it is not the point.

Transformation Canvas

Your worksheet. One page, short phrases, and a date in the bottom right.

PILLAR _____

In one sentence: if this pillar worked, our firm would _____

CURRENT STATE — OBSERVABLE REALITY

What is true today. Behavior, friction, constraints — not diagnosis, not blame.

FUTURE STATE — THREE YEARS OUT

If this pillar truly worked: what leaders do, what staff experience, what decisions get easier.

QUICK WINS — NEXT 90 DAYS

Visible, leadership-owned, and they cost somebody something.

CULTURE SHIFTS

Behaviors to start rewarding. Behaviors to stop tolerating.

CAPABILITY NEEDS

Skills, roles, tools, investment — and who funds them.

FIRST CONVERSATION

Who I talk to: _____ About: _____ By: _____

Photograph it before you leave.

Go to your breakout — 60 minutes

Work the canvas in this order. I will call every transition out loud; when I call time, stop writing and move on.

BEFORE YOU START

Name a timekeeper and a scribe. Specific about your own firm, general about anyone else's.

ON YOUR OWN • 10 min

Choose your pillar. Write the current-state truth, then the future state. No talking yet.

AT YOUR TABLE • 25 min

Share what you wrote, find the pattern across your firms, then design the future state together using the five levers.

AT YOUR TABLE • 15 min

Quick wins that meet the standard — visible, leadership-owned, costly to somebody. Then pressure-test them.

FINISH THE CANVAS • 10 min

All six boxes filled, and the first conversation names a person and a date.

REPORT OUT • 2 min, one spokesperson

1. “We chose ____ because ____.”
2. “The current-state truth we kept coming back to is ____.”
3. “In three years, ____.”
4. “The first thing leadership does differently is ____, starting ____.”

THE CANVAS • one page, six boxes

Short phrases, not sentences. Photograph it before you leave.

PILLAR: _____ — **if this worked, our firm would** _____

CURRENT STATE

What is true today — behavior, friction, constraints.

FUTURE STATE — 3 YEARS

If this pillar truly worked: what leaders do, what staff experience.

QUICK WINS — 90 DAYS

Visible, leadership-owned, and they cost somebody something.

CULTURE SHIFTS

Start rewarding. Stop tolerating.

CAPABILITY NEEDS

Skills, roles, tools, investment — and who funds them.

FIRST CONVERSATION: who • about what • by when

From insight to intention

Transformation is not something that happens to a firm. It is designed, funded and executed — or it is not.

WHAT YOU DID THIS MORNING

You looked at the profession honestly, chose one pillar out of five, described your firm as it actually is, designed what it could be, and named the first move.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY IN YOUR HAND

A one-page sketch, two quick wins that meet a real standard, a pressure test you have already survived, and one conversation with a date.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Refine the language on the drive home while it is fresh. Have the conversation inside three weeks. Bring the canvas to your next partner meeting — not as a proposal, as a question.

Every firm in this room walked in this morning carrying the same set of pressures. Every one of you now has something specific that you did not have at 8:30 — and the only variable that matters from here is whether the conversation you just dated actually happens.

Intentional leadership is a choice you make on a Tuesday, repeatedly — not a decision you make at a conference.

The work starts *TODAY!*

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Happy to keep going on any of this!