

# Future-Proof Patent Law By Starting Talent Pipelines Early

By **Christine Hollis** (September 9, 2025)

In early August, the American Bar Association made headlines by **removing** mandatory diversity-based seats from its Board of Governors, replacing them with criteria focused on demonstrated commitment to inclusion, rather than demographic identity.

As the legal profession reckons with shifts in how diversity is defined and fostered, the importance of proactive outreach to younger students — specifically in STEM — is more pressing than ever. For firms, building interest in patent-related roles as early as high school isn't just strategic — it may soon be essential to sustaining a truly inclusive legal pipeline.



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Law firms operating in the intellectual property space face a unique and persistent challenge: The talent pipeline is simply too narrow. Patent prosecution work requires not only legal training but also hard science credentials. That combination, particularly when paired with the goal of building a diverse workforce, remains in short supply.

Firms have long understood the importance of expanding the funnel to find strong candidates. But what we have learned more recently is this: Expanding the funnel is no longer enough. To build a sustainable pipeline, we need to start earlier. In fact, firms should consider beginning their pipeline strategies for potential candidates as early as high school.

## The Legal Path They Never Heard About

Many students pursuing degrees in engineering, biology, chemistry or physics are never exposed to the legal profession unless they plan to attend law school. Fewer still are aware of career opportunities within IP law that do not require a law degree.

Roles such as patent agent or technical specialist offer a meaningful entry point into the legal industry without the immediate time or financial commitment of law school. Yet these roles remain largely unknown on most college campuses.

The issue is not a lack of talent. It is a lack of awareness.

This point became clear to me through a personal lens. My husband, a mechanical engineer by training and now a vice president in product quality and consumer safety, spent years at Motorola without ever hearing about the patent agent pathway. When he finally learned about it, he realized it could have significantly expanded his options and increased his earning potential earlier in his career. If he had known earlier, it may have been a path he pursued.

That experience pushed us to ask a broader question: What if students were introduced to patent law before college? What if we reached them before they were locked into a single view of how to use their STEM degrees?

## Start Early, Go Wide

High schools today, particularly STEM-focused charter schools and academies, are

cultivating early interest in engineering and science. These students are exactly the kind of thinkers and problem-solvers the patent profession needs. But without exposure, they will never consider law as a viable path.

If we can engage students before they finalize their academic tracks, we can show them that their interest in science can take shape in the legal world, not just in the lab or a corporate research and development department. Patent law allows them to understand how innovation happens and help protect it. They can take part in the life cycle of invention and influence how ideas move from concept to market.

A technical specialist or patent agent role enables someone to explore new technologies, collaborate with inventors and shape legal strategies. And if they later discover a passion for legal practice, they can pursue law school with experience and confidence.

Many equity partners at my firm started this way. They began as technical specialists or patent agents, driven by a love of science, and later chose to deepen their careers through law school and legal practice.

### **Lessons From the Field**

Potential strategies, which my firm has implemented, include:

- One-on-one mentorships between attorneys and high school students;
- Classroom presentations delivered directly to students by practicing attorneys;
- Partnerships with STEM-focused and legal-themed charter schools;
- Internships for both high school and undergraduate students pursuing STEM degrees; and
- Outreach to career services professionals at undergraduate and law schools.

Career offices often lack information about legal careers that do not require a law degree. As a result, students are rarely informed about these options. This can be addressed by panel discussions, direct phone outreach and short resource guides that career centers can distribute to students and organizations. The goal is to equip them with language and visibility so they can advise students more broadly.

### **Understanding the Gen Z Mindset**

To design sustainable talent strategies, we also need to understand the mindset of the new generation entering the workforce. Gen Z is challenging traditional ideas about careers. They are not solely defined by their work. They value flexibility, community, personal interests and the ability to make an impact outside of their job title.

Side hustles are common. Identity is multifaceted. And many are looking for work that supports their personal values and goals, not just their professional advancement.

This shift should not be viewed as a liability. It is a prompt for employers to adapt. If we want to attract and retain top talent, we must build roles that allow for exploration, autonomy and purpose. We must be open to new ways of working and communicating. And we must accept that the next generation does not view professional commitment in the same way as the generations before them.

Patent law is uniquely positioned to meet this generation where it is. A new graduate with a

STEM background can join a firm as a technical specialist or patent agent and do meaningful work immediately.

They can contribute to the legal process, learn how intellectual property functions and determine whether law school aligns with their long-term goals. If they decide to pursue a law degree, they will be better prepared than most first-year law students, with a clear sense of purpose and a foundation in legal work.

### **Practical Steps for Firms**

For firms seeking to replicate or build on these efforts, here are several practical recommendations:

- Identify high schools in your region with STEM-focused programs, and offer to present or mentor.
- Create internships that are accessible to undergraduate students with science or engineering majors.
- Establish relationships with STEM departments and faculty, not just prelaw programs.
- Provide career centers with easy-to-understand materials outlining the roles of patent agents and tech specs.
- Track engagement and follow up with students over time to maintain relationships and assess long-term impact.

Importantly, these strategies are not just about diversity or public service. They are about building a more informed, committed and sustainable talent pipeline.

### **The Broader Impact**

The work of invention and innovation has always been forward-looking. Our recruiting efforts must follow the same trajectory.

By reaching students early, we are not just helping them discover alternative paths. We are helping them understand that their love of science can live on through legal protection and strategy. We are showing them that they can have an impact on how ideas are preserved, commercialized and remembered. Patent law offers a way for their talents to shape the world, and to leave a lasting legacy.

That is a story worth telling. And it begins much earlier than we thought.

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