Q&A

Zamadlomo Matshaya

Senior Associate
ENS

Blueprint for the next generation

What would you tell a young woman looking at the long hours and intense pressure of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I can do this"?

I would tell her that every successful M&A professional has felt this same doubt, especially the women. The pressure is real, but so is the reward. M&A lets you be part of big moments that shape industries and economies in South Africa and across the continent. Yes, the hours are long, but they do not last forever. Deals close, and you gain experience that helps you grow as a practitioner. I would let them know that resilience is built over time. It is not about never breaking down, but about learning to recover, pace yourself, and find meaning in your work. Each hard deal teaches you something that makes the next one easier. Importantly, I would tell them about the importance of finding your people, namely, mentors, sponsors and peers who will support you when things get tough. The women who succeed in this field are not those who never doubted themselves; they are the ones who kept going despite the doubt. Every senior woman you see in this space once stood where you are now, wondering if she could do it. And she did.

What are the non-negotiable soft skills, beyond financial modelling and sharp excel skills, that a woman needs to cultivate to excel in capital markets?

Technical skills open the door, but soft skills will take you far. Over the years, I have found the following to be essential:

Clear communication is key – you must be able to translate complex legal and financial concepts into practical, straightforward advice.

Emotional intelligence matters too – you need to know how to read the room, manage difficult personalities, and stay composed when things get tense.

A strong business sense is equally important – understand the commercial drivers behind a deal, not just the legal mechanics.

Building and maintaining relationships is critical – as the saying goes, "deals are made by people". Trust, long-term client satisfaction and effective teamwork are what set exceptional advisers apart. Your network of clients, colleagues, and contacts will become one of your most valuable assets.

Finally, back yourself. Do not wait until you feel fully expert before speaking up. Your perspective matters, and learning to share it, even among more senior voices, is a skill worth developing from the start.

How do you advise young professionals to build a visible personal brand in an industry that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

Our industry values behind-the-scenes work, but being visible is about strategy. A personal brand is your reputation made on purpose. Start by deciding what you want to be known for: your area of expertise, your values, and your unique point of view. Once you know this, look for ways to share your work. Write articles, speak at events, and join discussions on platforms like LinkedIn. Inside your firm, volunteer for projects and pitches where decision makers will see your work. Build relationships across all levels; not just with senior people, but also with peers and juniors who will lead in the future. Find sponsors who will speak up for you when you are not in the room.

Finally, remember that your brand is also about how you treat others. Being known as someone who shares knowledge, supports colleagues, and stays calm under pressure is just as valuable as being known for technical skill. Building a personal brand takes time. It is about showing up consistently and being someone others trust.

The traditional 'rite of passage' was grinding through hours of manual financial modelling and data room sorting – tasks AI now handles in seconds. How must the training and expectations for young women entering corporate finance right now evolve in this new landscape?

This is one of the biggest changes facing our profession. Junior professionals used to learn by doing repetitive tasks like document review, data room organisation and research. AI now does much of this work quickly. This is not a problem; it is a chance to do better. Juniors can focus on higher-value, strategic work earlier in their careers. But there is a risk: without hands-on experience, juniors may struggle to spot errors or understand how things work. Therefore, the training needs to evolve. Juniors need to learn critical thinking, good judgment, and how to check AI-generated work. They must learn not just how to use AI tools, but how to supervise them. They also need to develop commercial awareness earlier: for example, understanding why a clause matters to the client, not just what it says. Soft skills like client interaction, negotiation and clear communication become more important when machines handle the technical tasks.

Most importantly, AI is a tool, not a replacement for human judgment. Clients pay for insight, strategic thinking, and the ability to handle uncertainty: skills that cannot be automated.