



Ziningi Hlophe
Partner

WEBBER WENTZEL

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Women helping each other

by Masetuka Ntsoereng

Determined and outspoken, Ziningi Hlophe has taken responsibility for helping other young lawyers (and not always women) navigate the profession's complexities.

She had her “aha” moment about six years ago – five years into her career.

“I never set out to be exceptional. I just wanted to be a good lawyer, from a technical point of view, and do my job well,” she says. “But once you look around you at how the world works and understand the special role you can play, it changes your whole outlook. I realised I was selling myself short by not contributing everything I could. It transformed how I approach my work and gave me a greater sense of responsibility for the influence and impact I can have in the workplace.”

Ziningi is a partner in the corporate department, who has worked in sub-Saharan Africa and focuses on private equity transactions and general mergers and acquisitions. She grew up in KwaZulu-Natal, and studied there. She later moved to Johannesburg to start her career at Webber Wentzel because of the greater opportunities that the “big city” offered to practise commercial law.

She never considered any other career but law. “I like that I am part of something that makes a fundamental contribution to the economy,” she says. “It is great when you can see that a transaction that you’ve worked on has made a difference. I had the chance to visit a retail mall in Nigeria where we had been advisers on the investment and funding phase. I was proud that we were involved in something that had made a tangible difference to the economy, and people’s daily lives.”

She has enjoyed two secondments in the past

eight years, one to MultiChoice in 2015, and another to Anglo American in 2020, where she was part of the team that advised on the separation and listing of Anglo’s domestic coal mining business, Thungela Resources. Both experiences deepened her understanding of what corporate clients expect from their external advisers, and how to deliver a service that is fit for purpose. They also gave her greater insights into those sectors, which she has been able to contribute to other deals.

Ziningi participates in the transformation initiatives at Webber Wentzel. It is widely known that she is always willing to assist her junior colleagues, and mentors a number of juniors. In 2018, she was nominated for Attorney of the Year: Junior Professional in the African Legal Awards, listed as one of News24’s 2018 100 young Mandelas of the Future (under the leadership category), and was one of the top five finalists in the Professional Services category of the 2018 Standard Bank Rising Star Awards Programme.

Her advice to other female lawyers is: “don’t undersell yourselves”. Women often underestimate their contributions in the workplace.

“It is the biggest disservice we can do to ourselves, because our contribution is so vital, and we bring a different and invaluable view and approach. I don’t think an organisation can be successful without diverse views.”

She admits that she still experiences imposter syndrome at times, and in spaces where she presents as the minority, but has learnt that “even when I am scared, I still do what I have to do”. Doing it scared has allowed Ziningi to show up in spaces that challenge her and ensure that her voice and perspectives are heard.

She believes that the workplace environment still presents challenges for women. The first thing that needs to change is the perception that putting women in leadership roles automatically makes the lived experience of other women easier, because the truth is more nuanced. More work needs to be done to ensure that the realities change for women who are junior lawyers or in business-related roles; having senior female leadership is just the beginning and not the end. Secondly, even though there are more women in senior positions in legal firms, the profession is still losing a lot of female talent.

“I don’t know what the answers are,” she admits. “Perhaps there needs to be more introspection and a closer look at the reality of what women go through in the workplace.”

One of the benefits that Webber Wentzel offers its professional staff is remote working. When Ziningi has family responsibilities, she is able to attend to them during the day and reorganise her work hours around these, while still ensuring that she manages her workload. Another benefit that the firm offers all its employees is a maternity mentorship programme, which helps new mothers to reintegrate into the workplace after maternity leave.

Law is a demanding profession, both in hours and its emotional toll. Ziningi says that she strives to achieve a 50:50 balance between her work and private life, but there are obviously going to be times when work takes over. Over time, she has become better at managing both spheres of her life, but simultaneously maintaining personal relationships takes conscious effort. It helps to have a good support structure, and a loyal and understanding family, partner and friends. 📌