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Q *What motivated you to pursue a career as a lawyer?*

A Growing up, I had set my sights on becoming a professional tennis player but was not prepared as a teenager to make the sacrifices required to succeed in the world of sport.

The possibility of a career in law did not actually occur to me until I was at university. Realising that a BA would not give me sufficient career options, I also completed an LLB.

It turns out that I was perfectly suited to being a lawyer. I am a hard worker and enjoy the intellectual stimulation and challenge of finding solutions for clients. No day in the office is the same as the last one, especially in an African law firm where much of the work we do is across borders and multi-jurisdictional.

Q *What are some of the common challenges that women face in the legal marketplace?*

A For women generally, probably the greatest challenge I have observed in the legal marketplace is juggling work and home life.

Women tend to carry most of the load in relation to childcare and running the home and are expected to work the same long hours as their male counterparts.

Evening social functions can also be challenging at times as they eat into family life and can be uncomfortable, particularly if there are few other women attending the engagement. This happened often in my early career, but has been balancing out as more women have progressed in the legal profession. In the past 18 months of the pandemic, of course, social events have been drastically curtailed and, I suspect, not everybody has missed them!

Q *What are some important first steps to set yourself up for a successful career?*

A It is important to be aware and informed about how the legal industry works and, beyond that, developments in the macro-economic, political and business environment. Clients expect us to have a comprehensive understanding of how they run their businesses and we as corporate lawyers need to be equipped to anticipate trends and issues that might affect our clients. Reading widely is a prerequisite for success in this profession.

I also recommend that women lawyers look for role models and sponsors within the organisation they work for to provide guidance and feedback on their career development, as well as on how the firm itself works and the people with whom relationships need to be built.

As in every profession, who you know is as important as what you know, and experienced role models can be invaluable in opening doors, particularly for a young lawyer with a good work ethic and willingness to take the initiative.

Q *Did you have a mentor at some point in your career, and if so, who were they and what did you learn from them?*

A I had no formal mentors, but a number of informal mentors, all of them male. Despite my shyness and lack of confidence, they believed in me and gave me opportunities to work on some wonderful transactions.

For example, after having just returned from maternity leave, I was part of the team advising Ponahalo Investments, a BEE consortium, in its acquisition of 26% of De Beers Consolidated Mines,

which gave me confidence and just the kind of exposure a young woman lawyer needs.

It was also through my mentors that I had the opportunity to take on leadership roles in the firm. Our former chairman co-opted me onto our Executive Committee in 2011, even though I had no leadership experience in the firm at that stage.

That gave me real insight into how the firm worked and laid the foundation for my subsequent appointment as Co-Head of Corporate in 2014.

Q *What changes are you seeing in the legal industry?*

A Over the past few years, legal technology has moved from the periphery of the legal profession into the centre and this shift is certainly going to gain further momentum in the years ahead.

Technology is increasingly being used to ensure efficiency and improve project management, including document automation, artificial intelligence and transaction management software. Digital dexterity is becoming a key skill for lawyers.

Another major shift is in how law firms go about assisting clients to address their business challenges. The problems our clients face today tend to demand a multidisciplinary approach and this requires a lot more collaboration and teamwork across practices to come up with the best solutions for the client.

Finally, there is increasing emphasis on leadership skills. In the modern firm, it is important to ensure you develop and enhance your leadership skills so that you can lead, manage and motivate yourself, your team and your clients. 🙌