



Q&A

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For Lebohang Mabidikane, Director in the Competition Law practice at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, success looks very different today from what it did at the start of her career. After years of navigating the demands of corporate law, she has come to value something far less tangible than titles or material milestones: ownership of her time, a peaceful home, and meaningful relationships.

In this conversation, she reflects on the realities of work-life balance, the potential of AI to create opportunities for women, and why the people closest to her remain her greatest source of perspective.

Do you believe AI will act as an equaliser that lowers the barriers to entry for women looking to launch their own boutique advisory firms, or will it further consolidate power among the global hyperscale institutions that own the technology?

I don't think there is one answer that applies across every country, discipline or group of women. In South Africa, we have to consider the context of our history and the inequality that still exists as a result.

AI could certainly lower barriers and enable women to run boutique firms more efficiently and successfully, but access to the technology is itself a barrier. AI tools aren't cheap, and not every woman has access to the capital required to invest in them. For historically disadvantaged women in South Africa, that distinction matters.

The impact will also depend on the type of practice. A competition or corporate lawyer dealing with large due diligence exercises may have a much stronger business case for investing in sophisticated AI tools than, say, a smaller practice in another area of law. For many boutique firms starting out, there may simply be other resources that matter more.

So, yes, AI has enormous potential to be an equaliser, but only if access keeps pace with innovation. Otherwise, we risk talking about opportunity without addressing who can actually afford to participate in it.

The phrase 'work-life balance' can feel mythical in transactional finance. How do you personally define and manage the integration of a demanding career with your personal life?

In the early years of a legal career, work-life balance can genuinely feel like a myth. Junior lawyers are the foot soldiers of any practice. The work is demanding and, at that stage of your career, you have very little control over your time.

I think work-life balance is something you acquire with seniority.

The more senior you become, the more ability you have to regulate your diary, decide where your time is best spent, and choose what work you do and when. That, for me, is what work-life balance means.

Today, I am very deliberate about wanting to be a well-rounded person. I don't want to be a successful lawyer at the expense of being a present wife, mother, sister or aunt. As far as possible, I push my work into the week. If that means working late on a weekday so that I can protect my weekend, I will do that. My career is important to me, but it cannot be the only part of who I am.

When the deal closes and the adrenaline drops, how do you intentionally disconnect, recharge and protect your mental well-being?

The truth is, there often isn't a neat moment to disconnect because one matter closing usually overlaps with another beginning. So rather than waiting for the perfect opportunity to rest, I try to disconnect weekly.

My weekends are sacred. Unless a matter genuinely requires my attention, I use that time to step away from work, recalibrate, and return to my personal life. I walk, spend time outdoors and enjoy quiet time on my own. I read lighter material, read the Bible, watch series and movies, and I will happily binge some reality TV as an escape.

I also love entertaining. My home is a place where family and friends come together, relax and enjoy a braai. But above everything, my family is my centre. My husband and daughter ground me. My husband, in particular, is my safe space. He is the person I can talk to about the stressful things, but also the person I can be with and forget about everything else.

How has your definition of 'success' changed from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today?

When I started out, success looked very material: becoming a partner at a big law firm, living in the house of my dreams, driving the car I wanted, and earning the respect of my community and peers.

Today, my definition is far simpler: a peaceful home. I think that shift has come with both age and experience. I achieved many of the things I once thought would define success, and perhaps I needed to achieve them to understand that they don't. There is a real cost to a purely material definition of success, and sometimes you only recognise that once you have the things you spent so much time working towards.

I've also become very conscious of surrounding myself with people who know me beyond my profession or what I've achieved. Many of my closest friends are still my high school friends. They remind me of who I've always been and who I want to remain.

Success for me, today, is owning my time and controlling my time, not so that I can fill it with more work, but so that I can actually live my life, doing the things I love and spending time with the people I love.

What is a daily ritual, habit or boundary you protect fiercely that keeps you grounded amidst the chaos of deal flows?

My daily check-in with my husband. It sounds simple, but I protect it consciously and never take it for granted.

He is my safe space. Whether I need to talk through something stressful or forget about work entirely, that time allows me to reconnect with the part of my life that exists outside of being a lawyer.

In a demanding profession, it is very easy for work to consume every part of your day and, eventually, become your identity. That daily connection reminds me that I am not only a lawyer. I am also a wife, a mother, and a person with a full life outside of work. That is something I protect fiercely.

When your career in this industry is eventually complete, what is the lasting legacy you want to leave behind in the South African financial sector?

This one is deeply personal to me. I want to leave behind a long list of black professionals who cannot talk about their successful journey in this profession without mentioning my name, and how I impacted, enabled, encouraged and inspired that journey. That, for me, is legacy.

If your life story up to this point had a headline in a business newspaper, what would it be?

"God, the propeller of professional legacy." 



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