INSIGHT

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The defining deal

Looking back at your career, what do you consider your defining deal – the one that tested you the most or fundamentally changed how you viewed your own capabilities?

When I look back on my career, one transaction stands apart from all the others. It was not necessarily the largest deal by value, but it was unquestionably the one that tested me the most, and fundamentally changed how I viewed my own capabilities as a lawyer and trusted adviser.

The transaction centered on a strategic partnership. What began as a single matter quickly evolved into a series of interconnected transactions spanning four jurisdictions: South Africa, Namibia, the Falkland Islands and Guyana. Over the course of just one month, we successfully completed options in all four jurisdictions, each with its own legal framework, regulatory environment, commercial drivers and stakeholders. Looking back, I realise that what we achieved was extraordinary, not simply because of the pace, but because every transaction had to fit within a broader strategic partnership while remaining responsive to the unique legal and commercial realities of each jurisdiction.

At the outset, I appreciated that this would be a technically demanding mandate; oil and gas transactions are inherently complex. They involve significant commercial risk, intricate joint venture arrangements, regulatory approvals, farm-in structures, funding commitments and competing stakeholder interests. However, what I underestimated was the level of strategic thinking, teamwork and resilience that the matter would require within the context of a demanding deal pace. Unlike many transactions that progress in a relatively linear fashion, these deals were constantly evolving. Decisions taken in relation to one jurisdiction often had implications for another. Timelines were compressed, negotiations were fast-moving, and there was little room for error. Every document, every commercial concession and every regulatory consideration had to be assessed not only on its own merits, but also in the context of the wider partnership between the parties.

One of the defining aspects of the transaction was the pace. Completing commercial agreements in one cross-border energy transaction within one month would have been challenging. Drafting four interconnected transactions across different jurisdictions within the same period required exceptional coordination, discipline and adaptability. It demanded an ability to prioritise under pressure, manage multiple workstreams simultaneously, and remain focused despite constantly shifting priorities.

The matter also reinforced an important lesson that I have carried with me ever since: clients are not looking for lawyers who simply identify legal risks. They expect advisers who understand their commercial objectives, and who can navigate complexity without losing sight of the bigger picture. Throughout the transaction, I found myself moving well beyond traditional legal drafting. I was balancing regulatory requirements with commercial realities and helping clients make strategic decisions in circumstances where there was often no obvious answer. Every stage required judgement rather than simply technical legal knowledge.

The transaction also reminded me of the realities of operating in frontier exploration jurisdictions, where regulatory frameworks continue to evolve, and commercial decisions are often made against a backdrop of geological uncertainty and significant investment risk. Advising in that environment requires a different mindset. The law remains essential, but success depends equally on understanding the commercial drivers of exploration companies, the priorities of investors, the expectations of regulators and the practical realities of delivering projects in emerging jurisdictions.

Perhaps the greatest challenge was maintaining perspective. With multiple transactions progressing simultaneously, it was easy to become consumed by the immediate issues of the day. I quickly realised that my value to the client depended on my ability to step back, understand how every individual decision affected the broader transaction, and ensure that each workstream continued to advance the client's long-term strategic objectives. That ability to move between the detail and the bigger picture became one of the most valuable professional skills I developed.

The experience fundamentally changed how I viewed my role as a lawyer. I stopped seeing myself as someone whose primary responsibility was to produce technically accurate legal documents. Instead, I began to see myself as a strategic adviser whose role is to help clients solve complex commercial problems, bring together diverse stakeholders, and find practical solutions in situations where there is rarely a perfect answer. That shift in mindset has influenced every significant matter I have worked on since. It has shaped how I lead transactions, how I mentor younger lawyers, and how I build relationships with clients. It has also reinforced my belief that the best lawyers are not defined solely by their technical expertise, but by their ability to remain calm under pressure, understand the client's business, and create solutions that allow complex projects to move forward.

Many transactions have contributed to my development, but none has had the same impact as this one. Completing interconnected transactions at this scale and pace was more than a professional achievement. It was the experience that broadened my perspective, and it remains the defining deal of my career because it showed me not only what I knew, but what I was capable of becoming.

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