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

A Growing up during the upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s, long term career ambitions were not front of mind. Law certainly never crossed my mind. In fact, whether I would even matriculate was not a certainty in those times.

When I got to university it was my mom who insisted on law. My mom, as with so many of her generation, had suffered the worst aspects of discrimination under apartheid, and I suppose she saw law as means of self-empowerment.

During my Masters' studies in the USA, I spent some time clerking for Judith Chomsky, a well-known American civil rights lawyer. When I met Judith she was working for the US Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) on cases in their international human rights docket. I was absolutely enthralled by Judith and wanted to walk in her footsteps.

But Judith had a different view. She said the world, and especially South Africa, did not need more human rights lawyers, instead it needed corporate and banking lawyers (especially black women) who, through their work for large corporate and institutional clients, could help bring about wider socio-economic upliftment.

I took that advice to heart and have focused my career on project development and financing transactions in the infrastructure sector in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). I am grateful to have worked on transactions in numerous jurisdictions in SSA.

It gives me enormous personal satisfaction to see how our work results in the building of infrastructure that is critically important to grow our economies and improve the lives of ordinary people.

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

A The challenges are the same for women in any professional services

career. Long working hours mean constantly juggling or reconciling different demands on our time, especially as mothers, wives and home-makers.

Women professionals experience the 'guilt' of not being able to devote enough time to all the demands on our attention, and it takes time to accept that this is how things are. As long as I am giving my best, whether in a professional or leadership capacity or as a single mother of twins, that is what counts.

Organising child care when I travel for business is also a major challenge. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I often felt guilty for the time spent travelling versus staying at home. The pandemic has given me – and my children, who are now teenagers – some perspective. Having experienced the mom-working-from-home phenomenon, they now have a greater understanding of the demands on my time.

One last thing: it's often said that there is a glass ceiling for women. I have never perceived there to be such a ceiling – or, probably more truthfully – if there was one, I simply ignored it and focused on doing and being the best version of me in everything I do.

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

A I have never had a step-plan. I worked as hard as I could, and this paid off. Looking back at how my career has developed, though, I do see a pattern of taking opportunities and not allowing them to pass me by.

One of the opportunities I made the most of was gaining international exposure. I worked for a leading international law firm for 15 years, starting in its office in New York and becoming a partner in 2007. Another opportunity, and one that was somewhat daunting at the time, was in 2017 when I was invited to consider the role of head of Banking and Finance at Bowmans.

I was a 'newbie' in the leadership ranks and had only been head of Infrastructure and Project Finance for a few months. I took the opportunity and it has worked out well. I have since become involved in other leadership roles within the firm.

So, my step-plan for a young woman lawyer starting out today would be simple: work hard, grab opportunities with both hands, take the initiative and, above all, maintain your integrity and sense of fairness.

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

A There is significant change in the legal industry. We are seeing, increasingly, the commoditisation of transactional work, where multiple law firms and lawyers are capable of performing the same job. So, firms are coming under great pressure to differentiate themselves – both when it comes to attracting talent and in looking after clients' needs.

Commoditisation is one of the major drivers of the increasing churn rates law firms are experiencing. Transactional skills have become portable, adding to the potential for mobility, especially among lawyers. Although there are exceptions, it is becoming rarer to see young people building single-firm careers.

Another big change is the increasing uptake of legal technology in the legal profession, particularly round artificial intelligence and machine learning. This may have started with the automation of activities such as contract management but is now permeating all manner of legal processes and transactions. Bowmans, for instance, recently became the first African law firm to adopt and roll out the end-to-end use of technology in M&A transactions.

What these trends mean for lawyers is that it is no longer sufficient to have excellent 'technical' legal skills. As important is what we call 'digital dexterity', meaning the ability to exploit technology for better business outcomes – or be left behind. 