

How to navigate SA's evolving legal landscape

Most, if not all, industries are constantly evolving and changing. The need for transformation in South African law firms has become a necessity, especially when working with parastatals or the government. Having a good BEE rating and creating meaningful transformation in the workplace has become key to securing and keeping new business.



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However, changes aren't limited to BEE ratings. There are also new specialisations like social media law and the availability of basic legal information online. Client servicing has also seen significant change - the concept of 'regular business hours' has become something of a grey area. According to Naomi Williams, Director of Livingston Leandy, "The law itself is not static; it is constantly evolving. You can't assume that you can learn the law today and just keep going; if you do, you're in the wrong profession. To remain relevant in the industry, you need to evolve, grow and keep on top of your game."

The new face of effective client-servicing

Clients have come to expect more from their business partners and service providers - from cost-effectiveness to quick turnaround times. Clients want the best value for money, and as their supplier, you need to deliver. Your clients can find basic legal documents like sales contracts or wills online, and as a law professional, you need to provide them with a good reason to use your services - what value do you add instead of just giving them a simple drafted document? Clients want to see the value you are adding to their business; they want to see that you understand their business and can provide valuable input and solutions to their business challenges.

Law firms are physically changing

With the drive to become more solutions-driven and client-centric, your ways of doing business will need to be reviewed regularly. If you're in a very specialised field, you should keep your finger on the pulse of your industry to be an early adopter of any changes or new developments. "You have to have the right mindset, one where you're constantly learning and willing to adapt," says Williams. "This may mean that you need to keep an eye on the legal landscape so that you are aware of emerging legal fields - a prime example of this is social media law - and upskill yourself (and your team) where needed to ensure the provision of services your clients may need, before they know they need them."

Different generations working together

The ever-changing client-servicing landscape creates the perfect opportunity for different generations to work together and learn from each other in order to yield the best results. Williams states, “At Livingston Leandy, we have started including millennials in our recruitment process to help us assess future candidates fit for our firm. Whilst the younger generation may prefer dealing with clients online, via phone or instant messaging, older colleagues may prefer dealing with clients face-to-face. With client needs changing, the generations can work together to find the balance the client may need - between liaising online or face-to-face in order to deliver work quickly and cost-effectively.”



Naorri Williams, Director of Livingston Leandy

Moving towards leaner teams

The entire work landscape in South Africa is changing, which is why we're seeing more and more people willing or wanting to work remotely or work flexible hours to be able to spend time with their families. This means teams can be leaner and more agile, and firms can potentially save on rental fees for buildings. In the future, law firms may make use of agile teams, calling upon skills and expertise from a pool of resources on a per-project basis instead of employing full-time resources. This type of working does, however, raise the potential issues of disconnectedness and lack of human interaction between teams. Humans need to grow and foster relationships within work teams to function as a unit, therefore firms need to strike a balance between remote work and team cohesion.

The influence of technology on the law

Technology must be embraced in order to stay ahead. It has certainly made it easier to keep in touch with clients without sitting around a meeting room table. Technology is about more than the convenience it brings; technology can help us deliver better services. For example, we can make online learning available to our colleagues or clients to upskill them in new and emerging fields.

We also need to consider the place of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning in a law firm. For example, AI-powered software can efficiently analyse documents, and machines can review and flag relevant documents and sections. If a certain section or document is marked as relevant, machine learning algorithms can find other similar and relevant documents. This software can also be applied to contract reviews and due diligence. AI and machine learning may help speed up processes that take longer with human intervention, thus freeing up human time and expertise to focus on more strategic and analytical tasks, strengthening existing client relationships and introducing new clients to the business.

According to the Deloitte Insight Report, 100,000 legal roles will be automated by 2036. Law firms need to review their talent strategy and commit to being AI-ready as part of a growth mindset, according to Forbes.

Key drivers to stay successful in the future

According to Williams, the key drivers of change, and how to stay successful in the changing legal landscape are:

- **Adaptability:** Be willing to adapt and learn new skills - whether it is a new field of law or management skills, be hungry to learn.
- **Embrace technology:** Future technologies like AI and machine learning can help us do our jobs better. Technology can help you manage your client's needs more effectively. It can also be used internally to minimise time spent in meetings.
- **Keep on top of government policies and changes:** They may impact the way you do business. This way, you can adopt early and stay ahead of the curve.
- **Know the risks involved with your business:** While specialisation is key, you may over-specialise and limit yourself to only one field. If this field changes or becomes obsolete, you may need to find a new field of expertise. Diversification in your law firm is key in order to ensure the longevity of the business.

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