

The African Law Firm of 2063

By

**Temitope Badejo, Esq.¹
(LL.B., B.L.)**

**Being a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the African Bar Association held in
Nairobi, Kenya, 22 – 27 July 2018**

¹ Temitope Badejo, Esq. is currently an Associate at Ikeyi & Arifayan, a top-tier Nigerian law firm with offices in Lagos, Abuja and Enugu, Nigeria. He provides business advisory/ transaction support and dispute resolution/ litigation services to diverse clientele, both local and international. He is currently developing expertise in the following practice areas: Corporate and Investments, Energy and Utilities, Dispute Resolution and Litigation and Project Finance.

Abstract:

Consequent upon the development of the African Union's Agenda 2063, it has become imperative and in fact, necessary for lawyers, law firms, national legal associations and legal professional regulatory bodies in Africa to embrace the positive dynamics and progressive refinement of legal practice exemplified by law firms and legal institutions in diverse developed jurisdictions outside Africa. There is no doubt that the prevalent approaches to and systems of law practice in Africa are antediluvian and must give way to global trends of advanced legal practice. Law firms in developed countries now employ state-of-the-art technology in the provision of excellent legal services to diverse clientele. For instance, conduct of legal due diligence on large corporations has become easier and more effective through the creation and use of virtual data rooms in lieu of the waning practice of perusing large stacks of corporate documents which are prone to loss and or destruction.

If the African Union's Agenda 2063, particularly aspiration one, which envisions a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development is to be achieved, then lawyers and law firms in Africa must likewise focus on deep understanding of the businesses of their clients. The dynamics of commerce and industry would always require vibrant approach by law firms to the legal issues relating to clients' commercial problems. This is perhaps the most important factor instrumental to possible delivery of premium services to clients.

This paper relied on primary and secondary sources of information. The primary source included the African Union's Agenda 2063. The secondary source included books, articles, reports and internet materials. The data collected from these sources were then subject to content analysis.

The paper addressed the current challenges faced by and shortcomings of law firms in Africa vis-à-vis their foreign counterparts in developed jurisdictions and charts a new course for the actualization of the African Union vision of the prototype law firm that Africa needs by 2063.

Keywords: African Union's Agenda 2063, African law firm, African lawyer, legal profession, legal market, legal services

1.0 Introduction

“Africa is the world's second largest and second most-populous continent. With 1.2 billion people as of 2016, it accounts for about 16% of the world's human population. Africa's average population is the youngest amongst all the continents; the median age in 2012 was 19.7, when the worldwide median age was 30.4.”² An in-depth statistical study would reveal that Africa has a lot to offer. Diverse resources and human capital abound in Africa, which can be deployed to actualise the vision of the continent. The economic strength of Sub-Saharan Africa continues to rise. Even “Big Law”³ have been able to identify the potentials of the legal market in Africa and this has fueled their drive to establish a strong presence on the continent. Law firms are venturing into Africa due to the high levels of foreign investment as well as a surge in infrastructure, commodity projects and manufacturing plant deals. Going forward, international firms are favouring an actual presence on the continent to act in the best interests of their clients.⁴

However, the continent is yet to live up to its potentials, especially in terms of political and socio-economic development. The situation in which Africa finds herself today is entirely paradoxical. Africa’s enormous resources and potentials have not translated into real fortune for the continent. This imbroglio has its roots in a number of factors that are however not within the precincts of the subject matter of this paper. Nonetheless, the need for serious intervention by stakeholders in the continent cannot be over-emphasized. On this basis, the African Union’s Agenda 2063 was developed. The Agenda charts a new course for the development of Africa across all levels. The Agenda was borne out of the need for Africa to take its place at the centre stage of global affairs. The Agenda challenges Africans of all classes to hold the fort and play their part in the development of the continent. No one is left out of this great task. The Agenda “echoes the Pan-African call that Africans must unite in order to realise its Renaissance and shape the future they want.”⁵

2.0 The Role of African Lawyers and Legal Associations

The global legal market size is estimated to be over \$500 billion. According to BusinessWire, “the USA was the largest country in the legal services market in 2016, accounting for about \$290 billion or 45% of the global market. The UK was the second largest market, accounting for about \$45

² Wikipedia. 2018. *Africa*. May 9. Accessed May 19, 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa>.

³ “The expression ‘Big Law’ refers to the segment that provides sophisticated legal corporate services, being the very elite of legal practitioners” - see Manuel Gómez, Rogelio Pérez-Perdomo. 2018. *Big Law in Latin America and Spain: Globalization and Adjustments in the Provision of High-End Legal Services*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature. These law firms are mostly found in Europe, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, though with a strong presence in many other parts of the world including Africa.

⁴ Capital Moments. 2014. *Why are international law firms tapping into the African Market?* November 3. Accessed June 6, 2018. <http://www.capital-moments.com/why-are-international-law-firms-tapping-into-the-african-market/>.

⁵African Union Commission. 2015. "Agenda 2063" *African Union Commission*. Accessed May 29, 2018. www.agenda2063.au.int.

billion or 7% of the global market. Germany was the third largest market, accounting for about \$25 billion or 4% of the global market. France account for 3.5% and \$20 billion, while Japan accounted for 0.5% of the global legal services market.”⁶ In other words, only the United States accounted for over 40 percent of the global value of legal services market in 2016, sharing the rest with other advanced economies such as Germany, UK, Japan and others. In the year 2011, Africa accounted for only 4 percent of global legal spend, while it is expected to account for 12 percent by 2025.⁷

Embedded within the Africa Union’s agenda 2063 is the responsibility placed on lawyers and law firms in Africa to revitalize and reposition the legal professional landscape on the continent. As stakeholders, lawyers, law firms and national legal associations in Africa must now assume the role of harbingers of change and development in the legal hemisphere. There must be a paradigm shift in our approach to law practice. Legal professionals in Africa must secure their position as global players in the legal industry. The idea behind the “African law firm of 2063” is that law practice will no longer be the same in Africa. Legal practice in Africa would also become synonymous with cutting-edge technological and innovative approach to solving clients’ diverse problems. Legal professionals would enjoy the atmosphere of an enabling environment to showcase their professional prowess.

“As in any client service business, the winners of the future will be those who best respond to the changing needs of clients. Clients have long been frustrated with the cost of legal full-service delivery and many have responded by taking more work in-house, supplemented by bringing individual lawyers in through ‘lawyer on demand’ providers. Their watchword is efficiency. At the same time, they want an integrated global service, simpler and more digestible output; providers with deeper understanding of their business, and processes to which their in-house teams can actively contribute.”⁸

For us to achieve this vision, we must position ourselves for the future of the legal profession. New areas of legal practice are now emerging. According to the 2018 Report on the State of the Legal Market⁹, “demand growth was slightly positive in corporate practices, tax and IP litigation, but was negative in all other fields. This was particularly significant in the case of general litigation,

⁶ BusinessWire. 2017. "Global Legal Services Market Report 2017 – Research and markets." *BusinessWire*. May 4. Accessed June 12, 2018. www.businesswire.com/news/home/2017504005920/en/Global-Legal-Services-Report-2017.

⁷ The Lawyer. 2016. *Africa – the great opportunity*. July 11. Accessed June 12, 2018. <https://www.thelawyer.com/issues/11-july-2016/africa-the-great-opportunity/>.

⁸ PwC. 2017. *The Law Firm of the Future*. Accessed May 29, 2018. <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/business-services/law-firms/survey/law-firm-of-the-future.html>.

⁹ The Centre of the Study of the Legal Profession at the Georgetown University Law Centre and Thomson Reuters Legal Executive Institute and Peer Monitor. 2018. *2018 Report on the State of the Legal Market*. Legal, Thomson Reuters.

which represents some 30 percent of all practice activity. Most firms have seen demand for their litigation services decline over the past several years, but during 2017 the pace of that decline accelerated.”¹⁰ The statistics strongly suggest that demand for certain areas of legal practice are fast waning.

3.0 Challenges of Law Firms in Africa

The dominant challenges in the African legal industry are: globalisation of legal practice, small practice, low level of technology, lack of support staff, passive adjustment to global trends, poor employment conditions. These problems shall be espoused one after the other.

Intrusion of Foreign Law Firms

What is being currently experienced in Africa is a continuous incursion of foreign law firms into the African legal market. This phenomenon sometimes called the “globalization of legal services” presents opportunities but also opens our legal practice to new challenges. This has led to increased competitiveness and deepening of the legal practices through introduction of more modern business approaches through cooperation with local firms. The challenges come in the form of “potentially” reducing the business opportunities available to the domestic legal practices. The bulk of our advisory services are provided by international law firms.¹¹ The competition is quite stiff because of the high-tech services already being offered by these foreign firms. As long as African law firms continue to grapple with providing their clients with top-notch legal services, there will be a constant poaching of them by foreign law firms.

Small Practice

Perhaps, Africa has the largest concentration of small law firms and practices in the world. There is a shortage of lawyers on the continent and this has largely encouraged small practice in several countries. Andrew Darwin, a partner at DLA Piper once quoted a colleague that “Ethiopia has a population of over 100 million. Their biggest law firm has about 20 people.”¹² A study carried out by the University of Pennsylvania Law School revealed that Zambia, a country of over 13 million people, had only about 731 lawyers in private practice.¹³ Even South Africa, a country with about 55 million people as at 2016, had only about 24, 269 lawyers in private practice in that year.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Karangizi, Stephen. 2018. *Future Proofing the Legal Profession in East Africa*. Accessed June 12, 2018.

<http://www.aflsf.org/news/future-proofing-legal-profession-east-africa>.

¹² Siegelbaum, Max. 2017. *Bloomberg Law: Big Law Business*. July 28. Accessed June 6, 2018. <https://biglawbusiness.com/why-big-law-is-betting-big-on-africa/>.

¹³ *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ Law Society of South Africa; Legal Education & Development (LEAD). 2016. "Practising Attorneys (2006 - 2016)." *Law Society of South Africa*. Accessed June 6, 2018.

http://www.lssa.org.za/upload/LEAD%20STATISTICS%20FOR%20LEGAL%20PROFESSION%202015_2016_2.pdf.

In Africa, the prevalent approach to legal practice is sole proprietorship or sole practitionership¹⁵. Sole proprietorship is a form of legal practice where a legal practitioner owns and manages his law practice and employs other lawyers to work for him. He may also employ other support staff but this is usually uncommon. Sole practitionership on the other hand, is a type of law practice whereby a legal practitioner practices alone, with no other lawyer working with or for him. He may engage support staff but this happens in rare cases. Both types of law practice however share similar disadvantages.

Some of the greatest drawbacks of a sole practitionership or sole proprietorship are poor growth and insignificant client attraction. Most law firms in this category are not attractive to big clients because of their inability to demonstrate professional competency to handle complex legal transactions. Large corporations and multinationals find it difficult to hire these law firms not because they are not competent but because of their smallness. It is therefore not surprising that Fortune 500 companies patronise Big Law. This factor also accounts for the incursion of Big Law into the African legal market.

By its very nature, sole proprietorship or practitioners limits the practice of the practitioner. It does not allow him to explore bigger opportunities that are available to larger firms. This not to say that having a small law firm is an entirely bad idea. As a matter of fact, there are small firms that handle complex legal work and are very profitable. However, the question is how much work can a small firm can handle?

Low Level of Technology

A vast number of law firms do not have state-of-the-art technology in place. Though not all firms can afford the latest forms of technology, a number of firms with the financial wherewithal are not abreast of the technological devices that can advance their business. As it stands today, many firms are not online. Permit me to say that it is an ‘unpardonable sin’ for a 21st century law firm not to have a website. Without online presence, it is difficult to be noticeable. More so, one of the most basic prerequisites to be recognized in international legal directories is to have a functional and seamless website.

It remains a source of concern that at this age, African law firms are still grappling with use of technology. Manual processes are fast becoming obsolete. According to PwC Law Firms Survey Report 2017¹⁶, “firms will need to embed best in class technology into all of their legal processes

¹⁵ Since they share similar features, both Sole Proprietorship and Sole Practitionership are usually collectively referred to as “Sole Practice”.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*

and will need to continuously innovate as better software tools are developed. Work will still be led by people but they will be augmented by technology, including Artificial Intelligence. Data will also play a huge part in the successful law firms' future. Firms will be able to have command over their unstructured data and this will enable them to develop a meaningful understanding of their client's businesses and their legal risks. Decisions and actions will not only be driven by experience, but by data too." We are now in the era of Big Data¹⁷ and law firms are now in the class of business organisations that generate and process voluminous data. It is therefore important that these data are effectively utilised and managed for efficient service delivery to clients.

It is indisputable that law firms generate and manage a lot of data most especially client information but it is not enough to generate data. Management of data is instrumental to the growth of the legal business. We are now at a stage where data will determine a lot of things. Facebook were recently embroiled in a controversy over the use of users' private data to influence the US general elections in 2016. Even though the allegations have not been fully proved, the entire imbroglio has brought to fore the importance of data in every aspect of our lives. Big Data is definitely shaping the future of everything, ranging from commerce and industry to government business. In the midst of these, it is inexcusable for African law firms to simply sit back and watch the globalization that is unfolding and play no role in it. We must take advantage of all that technology has to offer.

Lack of Support Staff

This is perhaps the greatest challenge to human capital in the African legal industry. Many indigenous African Law firms engage lawyers without providing them with the required support staff such as secretaries, paralegals and others. The result of this is that lawyers engage in menial, office work that should be left for administrative staff. Many lawyers eventually get drained because of the kind of work they do. To make lawyers combine menial labour with professional work is very debasing and constitutes underutilization of human capital. For instance, while it is part of a lawyer's professional job description to draft court processes, it should not be his duty to file same in court. Same goes for legal research. Lawyers should be made to do what they are professionally trained to do and nothing more.

¹⁷ "Big data is a term that describes the large volume of data – both structured and unstructured – that inundates a business on a day-to-day basis. But it's not the amount of data that's important. It's what organisations do with the data that matters. Big data can be analyzed for insights that lead to better decisions and strategic business moves." -see SAS. n.d. *Big Data: What it is and why it matters*. Accessed June 2, 2018. https://www.sas.com/en_us/insights/big-data/what-is-big-data.html.

Passive Adjustment to Global Trends

One rampant problem of law practice in Africa is lack of proactive adjustment to global trends. It is common for law firms to lag behind their foreign counterparts when it comes to changing modes of practice. As is stands today, many international have developed competencies in emerging practice areas such as space law. African law firms are generally unresponsive to global trends. The danger that needs to be averted is professional knowledge gaps. When clients' demands far outweigh what lawyers can offer, it becomes worrisome.

Law practice is an age long profession that has evolved over the years. The approach to legal practice in this age cannot be compared to the nascent days of the profession. At every point in time, there must be a progressive refinement of legal practice by professionals. It is therefore unrealistic for indigenous African law firms to ignore global trends and expect to compete with Big Law at the same time.

Poor Employment Conditions

This is no doubt a microcosmic reflection of the economic conditions of most African countries. Adequate remuneration for delivery of professional service is rare. Young lawyers are mostly at the receiving end. The worst of it all is that senior lawyers encourage young lawyers to accept poor pay with the hope that as the years go by, they would be in a position to bargain for higher fees considering that they would have gained much legal experience. This factor has however discouraged more young lawyers from pursuing a legal career.

According to a recent study, the average pay of associates (including first-year associates) in the United States is within the range of \$74,000 to \$250,000 depending on the law firm.¹⁸ Another study revealed that the national average salary of first year associates in the Unites States is about \$150,000 with additional average bonuses of about \$12,000.¹⁹ These figures represent huge sums of money when converted to currencies of many African countries. The statistics evince that law firms need to do much better in terms of employee compensation and welfare.

¹⁸ The average salary for an Associate Attorney is \$74,161 per year in the United States. Salary estimates are based on 8,004 salaries submitted anonymously to Indeed by Associate Attorney employees, users, and collected from past and present job advertisements on Indeed in the past 36 months. The typical tenure for an Associate Attorney is 1-3 years, see Indeed. 2018. *Associate Attorney Salaries in the United States*. June 1. Accessed June 3, 2018. <https://www.indeed.com/salaries/Associate-Attorney-Salaries>.

¹⁹ See Glassdoor. 2018. *Attorney, 1st-Year Salaries*. January 31. Accessed June 3, 2018.

https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/attorney-1st-year-salary-SRCH_KO0,17.htm. The salary estimates are based on 15,741 salaries submitted anonymously to Glassdoor

4.0 The African Law Firm of 2063

The African Union Agenda 2063 is a robust vision that lays out the plan for the future of Africa. Of keen interest are aspirations one, six and seven of the Agenda. Aspiration one envisions a “prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development”, aspiration six envisages “an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children” while aspiration seven visualises “Africa as a strong, united and influential global player and partner”. In all, the focus of the entire Agenda is a great future for Africa and her people.

The grand vision of globalising the economic impact of Africa as a continent has already defined the continent’s expectations from lawyers and law firms. The provision of high-end legal services is no longer negotiable considering the weight of responsibility now placed on law firms. Some This paper shall now explore the features of the prototype law firm that Africa needs by 2063. Some of these features include legal partnerships/ corporations, technological approach to legal business, great staffing, improvement in employment conditions

Legal Partnerships/ Corporations

The solution to small practice in Africa is legal partnerships and or corporations. Partnership allows for specialisation and deep industry knowledge for every lawyer in the legal partnership. Unlike what obtains in sole practice where the sole practitioner or proprietor struggles to grasp knowledge of as many areas of law as possible so as to deliver results to clients, partnership reduces the pressure. Partners are generally known to have their own specialty even when they have general knowledge of other practice areas. This also aids their bargaining power.

There is no doubt that the most successful law firms in the world today are partnerships.²⁰ This is because partnerships grow faster than any other model. In partnership, there is succession. This allows the partnership to keep growing. As more partners retire, more partners emerge from the ranks. This is how the world’s most successful law firms were built. Many of them were established in the 21st Century and have outlived their founders.²¹ It is already established that partnerships are the most enduring legal businesses. It is high time African law firms adopted this model. We must begin to encourage small firms to explore partnership mergers and encourage new law firms to start-up as partnerships. Apart from the fact that it boosts the economies of scale,

²⁰ Vault. 2018. *Vault Law 100*. Accessed June 11, 2018. <http://www.vault.com/company-rankings/law/vault-law-100?pg=2>.

²¹ One of the most prestigious and highest-grossing firms in the world, Kirkland & Ellis was founded in 1909. Another top law firm, Baker Mckenzie was established in 1949.

it also allows the firm to build a formidable team of lawyers who are versed in diverse areas of law.

Legal corporations are quite uncommon in Africa but are nevertheless a good model for law practice. In the United States, a limited liability company (LLC) may be formed for legal practice.²² The beauty of this is that legal professionals are shielded from personal liability. It is important for national laws to allow African law firms to form limited liability companies for their practice.

Globalisation of Legal Practice

International clients demand an integrated international service. One of the greatest challenges for African law firms is to determine what the best global strategy is for their firm in order to meet this demand. Determining which geographic markets are worthy of new investment and which established markets should continue to be supported/invested in is a strategic priority for all. Along with this, comes the decision as to whether to adopt a global ‘one firm’ partnership approach, a network strategy or ‘best friends’ relationships. Many firms are turning to blended solutions, dependent upon the regulatory complexities of the geography or their appetite for risk that comes with full merger.²³

A global law firm must have a global practice. This is not just a matter of geographical location. While offering legal services, law firms must bear in mind that their work is going international. Legal services must therefore be offered in the best way they can be. Big Law are well known for their world-class services because of their global approach to the legal business. This explains their interests in investing in Africa. African law firms must respond by developing global practices and following emerging trends in the legal market.

Technological Approach to Legal Business

The future of law practice will definitely be propelled by technology. The earlier we follow the trends of technological advancement, the better. We are now in a world where almost every process is regulated by machines. Machines now communicate with us like never before. They even know how we think. It is amazing what technology can do to the internal processes and day to day management of law firms. One of the greatest need of technological devices is data. Happily, data is not the problem. Law firms generate it on a daily basis and would be able to derive results from the data they produce if technological processes are maximised.

²² In the United States, a one-man LLC may be formed for this purpose. This model is rare in Africa. In South Africa, law firms take the form of sole proprietorships, partnerships²² or private companies. There is a special form of private company for lawyers and other professionals which does not provide full limited liability for directors.

²³ PwC. 2017, *Op. Cit.*

The dynamics of commerce and industry is already redefining the role of technology in commercial transactions. There is now a growing reliance on electronically signing and saving important documents. Lawyers are heavily involved in contracting, as they often help negotiate, draft, and manage contracts within their own firms as well as for their clients. As a result, signing, saving, and managing contracts via an online purpose-built solution is becoming increasingly common.²⁴ Another very exciting and growing area of technology is the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Computer programmes with AI capability are able to complete many of the tedious facets of legal practice, such as reviewing documents to parse out certain terms and conditions, mining documents during litigation discovery, or scouring data during a due diligence investigation. In addition, AI can be used to evaluate data and even make predictions based on the analyzed data. Firms that utilize technology with AI abilities are bound to save countless precious hours and will witness marked improvements in their overall productivity.²⁵

Technology definitely has a big role to play in law firm management. Between January and February 2018, I was part of the team of lawyers who conducted legal due diligence on a leading company in Nigeria. Throughout the exercise, we hardly perused hard copies of any document unless necessary. The entire documents we reviewed were uploaded in a virtual data room and only team members were given access. Our work was much easier since we didn't have to go through the rigour of examining hard copy files. I must say that the entire exercise was a pleasure for me.

Multi-professional Staffing

A major distinguishing feature of Big Law is great staffing. Apart from having hundreds and even thousands of lawyers in their employment, there is also a commensurate number of diverse administrative staff available to support lawyers with drafting of simple documents for legal input, legal research and scheduling of cases and meetings. This ideal situation allows lawyers to handle the most complex legal work and allows assistants to handle menial work with minimal supervision. This makes work easier for legal professionals. They get to spend more time on real legal work and it thereby enhances their productivity. Whilst working with lawyers, support staff would also gain some relevant legal experience that would help move the business forward. African law firms must clearly define the job description of legal professionals and limit same to their professional qualifications and or experience. Anything outside this would be defeat the purpose of hiring lawyers in the first place. Lawyers must be allowed only what they are meant to and nothing more. In the long, the legal business will flourish.

²⁴ Contractworks. 2018. *4 Legal Technology Trends to Watch in 2018*. March 27. Accessed June 12, 2018. <https://www.contractworks.com/blog/4-legal-technology-trends-to-watch-in-2018>.

²⁵ *Ibid*

Another aspect of staffing is the employment of professionals from diverse fields. According to PwC Law Firms Survey Report 2017²⁶, the new way of delivering legal services will depend on a range of professionals, not only lawyers. New specialisms will emerge – legal project managers, legal process designers, law technologists and law data scientists. Law firms will develop rewarding career paths for these people in order to attract and retain them. Sales teams will also professionalise, helping navigate the procurement process.²⁷ This means that non-lawyers will become as much important to the legal business than lawyers.

Human resources management is also key to the development of the legal business. It is however sad that many African law firms have not seen the importance of this. The role of a human resources department is simply to ensure proper management of work flow and welfare of lawyers. Just like other professionals, lawyers must be well managed to bring the best out of them. Most successful law firms in the world today have great human resources departments. These departments help them to properly manage their staff and respond to their needs where necessary. These departments also help these law firms to assess the performance of staff.

Improvement in Employment Conditions

Although good remuneration is tied to the profitability of the legal business, it is however important to emphasize the place of decent remuneration. Poor pay is one of the major reasons for underperformance while good pay always motivates employees. While it is understandable that not many African law firms can afford to pay lawyers the same way US attorneys are remunerated, there should nevertheless be some improvement in the remuneration of lawyers especially young legal practitioners. The onus is on professional regulatory bodies and Bar associations to prioritize the welfare of lawyers.

Conclusion

Indigenous legal practice in Africa is yet to experience a paradigm shift despite the influx of economic activities which have the potential of shaping the future of the continent. This paper addressed the demands placed by the African Union's Agenda 2063 on African law firms and how haven they can deliver outstanding results. The desired result is that Africa would become a haven of indigenous law firms exuding global best practices in their approach to legal practice.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ *Ibid*

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