

GEARING UP FOR GREATNESS

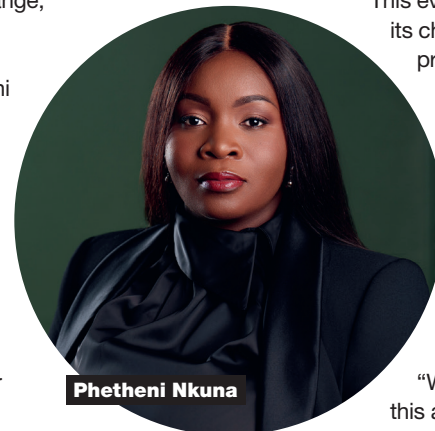
Solving the experience paradox and getting future ready.
By CLIFFE DEKKER HOFMEYR

Statistics South Africa's latest *Labour Force Survey* indicates that 4.7 million youth are without jobs. For graduates, a central issue is the growing misalignment between new entrants to the workforce and the limited availability of entry-level roles. This is particularly evident in professional fields such as law, where the number of graduates each year is roughly more than double the number of available candidate attorney (CA) positions.

Compounding this is what many describe as the experience paradox. Employers increasingly seek candidates who are work-ready, yet graduates struggle to access the opportunities that would allow them to build that experience. As a result, a significant proportion of young people remain excluded from meaningful economic participation despite holding formal qualifications.

The legal profession itself has also undergone profound change, reshaping what it means to succeed as a young lawyer today. As Phetheni Nkuna, chief operating officer at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr (CDH), explains, the past decade has seen a fundamental shift in how legal services are delivered.

"Technology has reshaped how we deliver legal services – from artificial-intelligence-assisted research, due diligence and contract analysis to the digitisation of litigation processes and virtual client engagement. COVID-19 accelerated this shift dramatically, compressing what might have been a decade of digital adoption into a matter of months," she notes.



Phetheni Nkuna

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This evolution has not been without its challenges, particularly in a profession historically rooted in tradition. However, it has also redefined the skills required of new entrants. "There is a need for greater technology and innovation literacy – lawyers who cannot engage meaningfully with legal technology will find themselves at a significant disadvantage," Nkuna says. "We need to move from seeing this as peripheral to deliberately making it foundational. It has become a critical skill."

Beyond technology, she notes there is increasing demand for lawyers who are not merely technically proficient, but also commercially astute, culturally intelligent and adaptable. "Lawyers are trained to analyse legal risk, but too few are equipped to understand

their clients' commercial realities, industry dynamics, growing sophisticated needs, or strategic objectives."

For graduates entering the profession, this means that academic excellence alone is no longer enough. "The candidates who succeed are those who combine strong legal acumen with digital literacy and a commitment to continuous learning, while being comfortable operating in multidisciplinary teams and navigating ambiguity – qualities that were perhaps less emphasised a generation ago, but are now indispensable," says Nkuna.

GRADUATE PROGRAMME PROVIDES ENTRY TO THE PROFESSION

Within this context, structured graduate programmes have taken on heightened importance, helping to address both the experience gap and the broader employability challenge.

"There is a well-documented gap between what law students learn in the lecture hall and what is required of them in practice," Nkuna explains. "Graduate programmes provide a structured environment in which young professionals can apply their academic knowledge to practical scenarios, develop client-facing skills and begin to build the professional networks that will sustain their careers."

At CDH, this bridge is intentionally designed. The firm's graduate programme is a carefully curated experience that combines hands-on legal work with formal training, mentorship and continuous feedback. Graduates are immersed in real legal matters, gaining exposure to drafting contracts, conducting research, attending court proceedings and engaging with clients – all under the guidance of experienced legal professionals.

Malebo Maholo, graduate recruitment lead at CDH, describes the programme as a holistic pathway into the profession. "CDH combines practical experience with academic support to prepare graduates for the real demands of the legal profession."



Malebo Maholo

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Naomi Mudywa
Retained CA

This includes a 24-month practical vocational training programme and equivalent pathways in the firm's Kenyan and Namibian offices."

The firm has also developed multiple entry points to support aspiring legal professionals at different stages of their journey. Vacation programmes provide early exposure to the legal environment, while bursaries support promising students in their academic pursuits. For high school learners, job-shadow initiatives offer a first glimpse into the profession.

Over time, the programmes have evolved with both the firm's growth and broader industry changes. This includes the integration of technology-driven learning, mentorship and more sophisticated approaches to assessing potential.

"Each graduate works with a principal who acts as a mentor during their training, monitoring progress and providing professional advice," says Maholo.

"After each rotation, formal feedback is provided – this approach creates a supportive environment where graduates feel equipped,

connected and confident as they navigate their careers."

Olivia Timothy, head of HR at CDH, emphasises that graduate employability is about more than securing a first job.

"A successful graduate programme addresses the experience deficit," she explains. "Through rotational exposure, supervised learning and clearly defined development pathways, graduates acquire both technical competencies and workplace acumen within a supportive environment."

These programmes also play an important role in promoting equitable access to opportunity. Transparent selection processes and standardised training frameworks create more inclusive entry points into the profession,

particularly for candidates from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Importantly, the benefits extend beyond individual participants. For organisations, investing in graduate development is a strategic imperative. At CDH, the impact of this investment is both measurable and far-reaching.

"Over the past three years, more than 80 per cent of our CAs have been retained as associates," says Timothy, who highlights that a significant proportion of CDH senior associates, directors and practice leaders began their careers through its graduate pipeline. CDH has a strong track record of developing leading legal talent across the UK, Europe, and beyond. In the South African market, its legacy is particularly evident with many of its alumni now serving as heads of legal across



Olivia Timothy

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Charles Green
Associate

major corporates. In these roles, they play a pivotal part in strengthening organisational governance, enabling strategic growth and contributing to the economy.”

In 2026 alone, the recent promotions of equity partners, salaried directors, counsel and senior associates, demonstrates the firm’s commitment to transformation in the legal sector. Beyond talent retention and progression, the programme has also contributed to meaningful transformation within the firm. CDH places a strong emphasis on developing female leadership. Women within the firm are not only visible across senior ranks at the firm, but also actively empowered as key decision-makers at board level, shaping strategy, guiding business priorities and influencing the direction of our firm. This is a marked shift from the legal landscape two decades ago.

At a broader level, CDH’s approach reflects an understanding that developing young talent is not simply about filling immediate vacancies. It is about building a pipeline of professionals equipped to navigate complexity, contribute

to the economy and shape the future of the profession.

“Leading firms like CDH occupy a privileged position in the legal ecosystem, and with that privilege comes a significant responsibility,” Nkuna says. “This is not merely a matter of corporate social responsibility; it is a strategic imperative and a higher call to impact society responsibly, not just make a profit.”

Ultimately, “greatness” in this context is defined not by scale, but by impact. It is reflected in the quality of the professionals CDH develops, the opportunities it creates, and the extent to which its graduates go on to make meaningful contributions – within the firm, across the legal sector and to society.

As Timothy advises, resilience is more than “toughing it out”. “It’s about treating feedback as a tool for growth, adjusting course where necessary and continuing to move forward even when progress feels slow. These are the characteristics we seek to instil in our graduates.”

Prospective applicants are invited to apply through CDH’s online portal at www.apply4law.africa.

africa, where they are required to submit a comprehensive CV, motivational letter, matric certificate and full academic records. ●



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