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# Navigating new waters – Acing the launch of your career as a lawyer.

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My first surprise, few days into my employment, was being asked to prepare the first draft of an opinion responding to Labour law queries received from a client. I had not studied Labour law at university and so it was panic time for me. I was about to flunk my **“first try-out”**. Let me not bore you with the details of the experience; I got through it.

As a young lawyer, many times, you face difficult tasks and you are unsure how to get by. Overtime, I have learnt that the secret to success is to do it afraid and not back down at challenges; as with a child learning to walk, each failure strengthens your limbs.

Let me cut to the chase!

Clients’ requests are indeterminable in scope and requirements. In a world that’s rapidly changing, it is literally impossible to have exhaustive knowledge of all aspects of the law. Nonetheless, there are skills that enable nimbleness when addressing clients’ requests and enhance growth. These skills accumulated over time have high yield and where coupled with proper organisation, guarantee success. Notwithstanding the rigorous hours, numerous drafts and redrafts and uncountable mistakes, one easily moves from **“milk to the consumption of strong meat”**.

A few tips that can be used as a compass for navigating your tasks faster than you ordinarily would and in accuracy include:

## Clearly identify the task:

The first thing **to not do** when a client sends a query is to immediately start drafting the response. Clear understanding of clients' requirements must be first had before work commences. There is that temptation to assume that issues in context are like those previously handled and miss fine points that are peculiar to each client. It is critical to dissect clients' requests logically to build the foundation for the service to be rendered. A very useful aid at this point is to use the "problem tree analysis". Borrowed from Project Management, this system is a pictorial representation of problems, in context of causes, consequences and solutions. With this mode of analysis, issues and solutions are not identified in isolation. Instead, one is able to draw a connection between the client's objective and the solution proposed.

Sometimes, it may not be a request for a solution, it could be, simply put, a **"tell me in 60 seconds"** scenario. In such instances, you need to ask why; **"Why would my client be asking this question?"** and then articulate the response in a holistic manner.

## Research:

Dan Brown, writer, once said, "Google is not a synonym for 'research'." Research means inquiring into something you do not know with ardent fervour until you have come to full knowledge of it. Many young lawyers embrace Google like its all-knowing. We respond to clients' queries based on unverified information gleaned from the internet. We are not careful to ensure that all aspects of the subject matter are considered.

Research is a core legal skill that must be earnestly developed. Apart from building one's knowledge base incrementally, it aids analysis of complex legal issues and induces innovation. This is the bedrock of a young lawyer's growth. Failure to develop adequate research skills will result in stunted growth.

## Asking questions:

As a young lawyer, you sell your knowledge and not necessarily, your experience; by implication, there are certain aspects of the practice and business of the law which may only be learnt by inquisition. It is a growth process; accept that you have incapacities and do not try to compensate for incapacities that are above your **"pay grade"**. **ASK** questions! It is only when you ask that you learn what is **"stupid"** and what is not. Asking questions helps you navigate faster and with more accuracy.

## Your client is not a student:

My first memorandum was filled with all the academic arguments and quotable quotes that I found from my research. I pulled off a 7-pager advising my client on just two questions. By the time it underwent quality review, my article was 2 pages long including preliminaries. The average client wants pragmatism, plain English; something that could be described as a **"holistic tweet"**.

**N.B.** Do not water down your content because you want to simplify your advice. Nonetheless, it is important to be as practical as possible in addressing the issues presented and communicating solutions to clients. Like a patient, you do not want your doctor reeling out the scientific name of a disease before giving you medicine. At all times, show your client that you understand the "disease" but please do not forget that your duty is to provide the CURE.

Having said all these, law is dynamic and you must be intuitive to know when there is need to adapt your strategy to suit the needs presented to you by your clients.

I can assure you that success is attainable and you should not be afraid to explore the beauty that is a successful career in law. Enjoy the learning process, pick and keep the lessons learnt and sometime very soon, you will self-compliment.

**My two cents!**

**Oyeyemi**