

AS THE WORLD MOVES

ISSUE 2 AUGUST 2026

THERE'S
MORE TO
LAW THAN
THE LAW



P08

Striving for
more inclusion

P11

Choosing kindness
and changing lives

P14

Leading with
compassion and intent

AS THE WORLD MOVES

Contents:

02. Continuous growth, built on heritage, service and an extraordinary team

05. There's more to law than the law: building a new path to legal leadership

08. Striving for more inclusion, in the financial sector and legal profession

10. Rising Stars Q&A with public interest lawyer Nicola Irving

11. Choosing kindness and changing lives: cultivating the pro bono ethos

14. Women leading with compassion and intent to shape South African law

16. How Rosalind Lake evolved into one of the world's leading cyber lawyers

18. Rising Stars Q&A with real estate attorney and conveyancer Tholakele Mrubata

19. Rising Stars Q&A with admiralty, shipping, and transport lawyer Nicholene Mazibuko

In partnership with



Continuous growth, built on heritage, service and an extraordinary team

On 30 March, one of Africa's most pioneering law firms Deneys publicly launched its independent identity. Chief Information Officer Maurae Wooding and Chief Marketing Officer Cherrisse Rao discuss the months of work, and the single weekend, behind one of the most closely watched moves in African law.

Looking back, it is hard to believe how much happened between a Friday evening and a Monday morning. When the lawyers and staff of one of Africa's leading law firms, Deneys, went to work in late March under their own name and on their own systems, it was the culmination of months of planning, late nights, and thousands of hours of execution by Chief Information Officer Maurae Wooding, Chief Marketing Officer Cherrisse Rao, and their transition teams.

Maurae says that when she first heard last year that the firm would return to independence, concluding its membership of its global network, she was excited.

She also understood the transition would involve far more than changing logos, names or firm colours. "We're agile, and very nimble," says Maurae, one of the most experienced technology leaders in the South African legal sector.

"But when Brent Botha, our CEO, first asked how long it would take to move from the global systems to our own, I said that if we want our lawyers to be able to work all the time with no disruptions, ideally I need a year."

She had four months on the calendar. With December largely given over to the South African summer holiday, the real runway was three.

Talking with both Maurae and Cherrisse a few months after the launch, the scale of the undertaking comes into focus. "There is a fearless nature about this firm, a history of doing things first, and it showed in everything we did," says Cherrisse.

A legal professional herself, Cherrisse has led business development and marketing functions for mining companies and law firms, South African and international, over the past two decades, joining the firm as it prepared its return to independence.

With the firm tracing its roots back to Johannesburg in 1922, and the Deneys Reitz name still carrying deep respect in South Africa and across the continent, the task for Cherrisse was to honour more than a century of heritage while building an identity for what the firm is becoming.

"Being Deneys shows a clear progression, and a very clear commitment to continuously growing and being the best version of ourselves for clients," she says. "Our strapline is 'As the world moves,' and every part of the identity had to earn it. Nothing in this brand is decorative. Every choice, from the name to the colours to the tone of voice, is there because it says something true about this firm. That is what made the work so demanding, and it is why it holds together."

Maurae and Cherrisse worked closely together, alongside a steering committee, through the months, weeks, and days leading up to the public launch.

Confidentiality carried its own difficulty.



There is a fearless nature about this firm, a history of doing things first, and it showed in everything we did."



Business Support

Until the transition was announced, the work could not be visible to the market, so there could be no open approaches to providers. Maura drew on partners whose delivery she had seen firsthand, and tested her recommendations against their track records before any appointment was made.

The firm's systems sat in a shared international environment and had to move to South Africa, tens of millions of emails among them.

"An independent firm needs an environment built for it," says Maura. "We could not simply lift and shift everything as it stood. We rebuilt where we needed to and configured the environment for the firm we were becoming. And as a team we agreed there was no option but a single cutover. On the Friday we would be part of the network. We would have Saturday and Sunday to move everything. And on Monday morning we would be Deneys."



Maura credits Cherisse with the Friday launch events that quietly solved the weekend's biggest logistical problem: laptops were handed in by staff

on arrival, buying the IT team precious extra hours in a race against time.

More than 400 laptops across three offices. On the Saturday, the connection to the international environment was formally closed, and the final

migration of data ran to around 5am on Sunday. Then the rebuild of every laptop began: removing, loading, and updating applications, finishing as late as 3am on Monday morning in Durban. The new email environment went live at midnight.

Later that morning, staff came back into the office and got to work.

"People were patient, and kind," says Maura, noting that lawyers she'd never worked with before offered to help, and praised her team for the job they did. "That is where the atmosphere at Deneys is always so good. We had people putting their hands up, associates offering their time to help sort laptops out. My team were tired, but we got there because everyone was enthusiastic and committed to the end, and when you find people like that to work with, it is special."

That energy has continued since the launch, notes Cherisse, as the lawyers and support staff of Deneys carry the firm's African story forward, and "a brand that is our own, a heritage that is our own".



Maura Wooding

On the Friday we would be part of the network. We would have Saturday and Sunday to move everything. And on Monday morning we would be Deneys."

There's more to law than the law: building a new path to legal leadership

Michelle David drew her own blueprint for becoming a South African legal leader. The Chair of Deneys chose to make her own way, guided by an instinct for the business of law, resilience, and a determination to leave the profession better than she found it.

Long before she took the helm at Deneys, Michelle David understood something many overlook when it comes to the business of law: the people who will be placing work in ten years are rarely the people placing it today.

It was the early 2000s, and as a young financial services regulatory lawyer she took a clear-headed look at the client landscape of the time. The established corporate relationships were long settled, and an Indian South African woman entering the profession was unlikely to inherit them. Michelle could spend years working to break into those networks, or she could build her own.

She chose the latter.

"I had to look for my own potential clientele," recalls Michelle of that period. "The people that were coming up in my ranks, the people who were also finding their feet at pension funds or elsewhere, and have those conversations with them."

Consequently, Michelle's early support system was less in the South African and international firms where she practised as a young lawyer, before joining what is now Deneys in 2012, than among "like-minded people in potential clients".

Necessity may have prompted the approach, but Michelle's commercial instincts made it work. She recognised that markets and decision-makers change, and tomorrow's legal business does not necessarily come from yesterday's sources.

She learned early that there is more to law than the law. Technical excellence mattered, but so did understanding clients, relationships, and where revenue would come from. That insight would help take her from star law student and young attorney to equity partner and eventually Chair of Deneys.

An unconventional pathway

Michelle confesses she hadn't originally intended to become a lawyer. She began with chemical engineering, "probably the unhappiest time of my life", before admitting to her mother that she needed another path.

Law proved transformative. "Law school just came naturally," she says. "It wasn't something I'd always wanted to do, but I'm very grateful I got into law, it became my passion, and I'm good at my passion."

Michelle's switch came against a complicated backdrop: she grew up during Apartheid and finished school soon after South Africa's first democratic elections. She lost her father tragically while she was still at school, and her mother ran a fruit and vegetable business that put both her children through their education. "She was really good at business," says Michelle. "Even though it was a small business, she did it so well."

You can't simply expect someone else to change the world for you. You've got to get your hands dirty and make sure that you're contributing."



Michelle David



Years later, entering legal practice, Michelle would show similar nous.

“When I started my career as a Candidate Attorney at a large firm, on day one I realised there’s a big difference between studying law and the business of law,” she says. “But for me, I always find the business of law very, very interesting.”

Earlier, Michelle had experienced firsthand how much South Africa still had to change. Having attended an all-Indian school, she says university was the first time she really engaged with people from different racial backgrounds.

She excelled from the start. When she came first in a law exam, an anonymous complainant questioned how a student from an Indian school could have outperformed those from white schools. Michelle finished among the top students in her year regardless and was selected among the top three to represent her university in a national moot. Told privately that her background and accent were not those of the other candidates, she raised it, and her place was confirmed. She turned it down anyway. “When the issues were resolved, I nevertheless chose not to participate. That’s my personality.”

More to law than law

That attitude and agency continued into practice. Whether she looked or sounded different to the traditional idea of a successful corporate lawyer, Michelle was undeterred. No roadmap? She set the destination herself.

“Quite early on, I decided I was going to make a career at a law firm, I was going to become a partner,

“The business of law is what makes the difference between someone who’s going to be equity and someone who’s going to be the guy with great technical skills on a project.”

and I was going to be successful at it,” she says. “I think that was the difference: being focused on that career and being focused on clients.”

Beyond focus, Michelle developed deep expertise. Today, she specialises in pension funds, medical schemes, and financial advisory services, representing regulators and major corporates. But top legal skills are only part of what makes a successful partner and leader, she says. Her own success isn’t just because of her expertise, but the way she understands the business side of law, and her ability to navigate that legal and business environment with clients and colleagues.

“I think that’s the differentiator,” says Michelle. “Some people are technically skilled but lack the understanding of what the business requires, and that business of law is what makes the difference between someone who’s going to be equity and someone who’s going to be the person with great technical skills on a project.”

With growing African markets, legal expertise remains essential, but as Michelle’s journey suggests, future partners and legal leaders also need to deeply understand clients, relationships, and the economics underpinning their firms.

Moving, as the world moves

Her broader outlook was one reason Michelle joined the firm in 2012, drawn to a practice with Big Five roots that had chosen to evolve rather than stand still. She was interested in the agility, the movement. “There was almost a braveness about it, and I wanted to be a part of that,” she recalls. Now, Michelle is helping lead the century-old African firm forward as an independent firm.

“I like things to expand, chasing the next sort of new thing,” she says. “I’m not the kind of person who’ll say, ‘look, we’ve reached our goal.’ One thing that’s happened at Deney’s, outside of the great people and culture, is the different iterations.”

Evolution also means responding to the wider world.

“There’s got to be change as markets change, change as clients change, change as the world changes,” says Michelle, whose own journey and story illustrate ongoing evolutions in South Africa, its business landscape, and legal profession.

Gaining a broader outlook as part of global leadership groups provided Michelle with something new: senior women who looked like her, had gone before, and were “amazing mentors”. She calls it a turning point that opened up “a whole new dimension of what is out there and how to come out successful”. Now, as Chair of Deney’s, Michelle looks to occupy such space for others, maintaining an open-door policy and offering younger lawyers straight talk and practical guidance.

While Michelle chose to build her own path to legal leadership, she knows that nobody travels alone. Alongside her clients and colleagues who’ve helped and been alongside her on an uncharted journey, she says that none of it would have been possible without the unwavering support of her husband and kids.

Creating a fairer, better, future

As the world and region transform, alongside the country and legal profession, Michelle’s approach is characteristically concrete. “I’m not one for speeches and that kind of thing, but I’m definitely one for checking numbers,” she says. “Maybe that’s the engineering background. I’m all about processes.”

In practice, that means watching the numbers across teams and asking questions when they diverge. If two associates on the same team are building very different practices, the responsible partner can

expect a call, and if that gap tracks gender, Michelle wants to know what sits behind it. If the answer is performance, her next question is what is being done to manage it. It is, she says, “exceptionally important that we all have equal opportunities to be somebody in the building”, and the numbers are how she checks the firm is delivering on that.

Her advice to younger lawyers is similarly practical: understand the difference between having a job and deliberately building a career.

“Once you wrap your head around building a career, you’re able to focus a lot more,” she says. There are enough demands on any lawyer, she notes, and often more on women. Protecting your own focus is, in her view, a practical necessity. It is not an argument that the extra demands should be there, and her position is that both need attention: the individual career, and the structures around it.

There will always be difficulties. The important thing, Michelle says, is to understand what they look like for you, and to develop a plan to navigate them.

“We’d all like to see change happen faster,” she says. “But you can’t simply expect someone else to change the world for you. You’ve got to get your hands dirty and make sure that you’re contributing”

The Chair of Deney’s has spent her career doing precisely that: reading the landscape, looking beyond established boundaries, challenging outdated orthodoxies, and creating opportunities where the well-trodden path offered few.

She has no plans to stop.



Striving for more inclusion, in the financial sector and legal profession

As South Africa looks to bring cross-border crypto within its regulatory framework, leading financial services and fintech expert Desiree Reddy talks with Craig Sisterson about fast-evolving banking and finance practice, and her journey in law.

The rapid growth in the fintech and digital assets space in recent years is both a huge opportunity and the most tangible avenue that South Africa and the African continent have seen for achieving the kind of financial inclusion that's been a government priority for decades, says Desiree Reddy, a director and Head of the Financial Services and FinTech practices at leading African law firm Deneys.

"Different jurisdictions have made varying levels of progress, but with fintechs and digital assets, we've seen growth that we haven't been able to achieve, in my view, with your more traditional payment mechanisms and investment routes," says Desiree. "A lot of people were historically excluded from the traditional financial sector because of the cost of maintaining a bank account or access to traditional infrastructures. But now with digitalisation and everyone having a phone, most people having Wi-Fi, there's a real opportunity to address those access and cost barriers in ways that weren't possible before."

In-house experience teaches you that legal soundness and commercial viability have to go hand in hand. A structure that ticks every legal box but doesn't support the business objective isn't a complete solution.

Whether it's low-cost digital banks, mobile wallets, microfinancing, or cross-border remittances (which traditionally had exorbitant costs for the many African workers wanting to send money home), more and more we're seeing fintechs being able to get the same results much faster and much cheaper, says Desiree.

The longstanding challenge, she notes, is well-known. "In South Africa, historically our legislative process is very slow," says Desiree, noting some of the nation's macroeconomic framework is still governed by the Currency and Exchanges Act of 1933, while the National Payments Act was originally passed in 1998.

"The legislation was designed for a world in which all payment system participants are banks, and the landscape has evolved considerably since then. While reforms are being discussed, the current reality is that we have fintechs that have the capability to make the payment system more efficient, safer, faster, and more affordable, but they're constrained in what they can do as non-regulated entities. Without a regulatory framework that allows them to become regulated participants, we're in a difficult position where innovation and regulation aren't quite keeping pace with each other."

Recently, Desiree has been speaking on South African radio and sharing insights with clients and the public on the draft Crypto Asset Manual for cross-border activities issued by the National Treasury and the South African Reserve Bank on 3 August, with public comments due by the end of September.

It's clear that Desiree is passionate about the fast-changing sector, and what it can do for South Africa and the continent in terms of financial inclusion and boosting both the economy and society. She's found her place, after a journey she says "took many detours", including studying to be a vet before switching to law.

Desiree has now been working at the front line of financial services in South Africa for more than two decades; first, as an in-house counsel at local offices of multinational financial services and wealth management companies, and a 'Big Five' South African bank, then since 2012 as a Director in the Banking and Finance practice, specialising in regulatory compliance, at what is now Deneys.

"I was fortunate to have created a little bit of a niche for myself in the banks because I worked in legal and compliance, so I was able to bring a lot of that knowledge back into private practice," she recalls. Her in-house perspective helps her grasp the commercial imperatives that are just as vital for clients as the law.

"In-house experience teaches you that legal soundness and commercial viability have to go hand in hand. A structure that ticks every legal box but doesn't support the business objective isn't a complete solution. You learn to weigh legal advice against a broader set of priorities — and that balance is where the real value lies."

Nowadays, as a leader with Deneys and the South African legal profession, Desiree looks to pass her insights and experience onto the younger generation.

Having entered the profession at a time when client boardrooms were far less diverse, she recognises the significance of the shift that's taken place — and the responsibility that comes with visibility. "If my being in this role makes someone else's path even slightly easier, that's meaningful," says Desiree, who describes her leadership style as measured and deliberate. She appreciates that Deneys has given her the ability to be seen, and recognised for her expertise, saying it's the culture of the firm that's kept her there all these years.



If my being in this role makes someone else's path even slightly easier, that's meaningful."



"I was fortunate to have created a little bit of a niche for myself in the banks because I worked in legal and compliance, so I was able to bring a lot of that knowledge back into private practice."



Rising Stars Q&A

Based in Johannesburg, public interest lawyer Nicola Irving joined the firm as a Candidate Attorney in 2021. Promoted to Senior Associate earlier in 2026, she focuses on environmental, administrative, and child law, representing various organisations in pro bono and public interest litigation.

Q What made you want to join this firm when you were starting out, and what has kept you at Deneys for your entire career thus far?

What drew me here was the unique model of the Social Impact Department – a dedicated, full-time public interest litigation practice embedded within a major law firm. I'd also just completed my LLM in Environmental Law, and knew I wanted to build a career at the intersection of constitutional accountability, environmental justice, and human rights. The firm offered something rare: the platform, resources, and institutional credibility of a leading commercial firm, combined with a genuine commitment to using legal skills to serve indigent and vulnerable communities, non-profit entities and the public interest.

What's kept me here is threefold: the work, the people, and the room to grow.

I've been entrusted to lead complex, high-impact litigation that has a tangible effect on people's lives – from advocating for abandoned infants in the Baby Savers case, to obtaining environmental justice for communities suffering from illegal dumping and pollution, to representing over 400 victims of the Usindiso Building Fire at the Khampepe Commission of Inquiry.

My director Candice Pillay brought me into the firm and has given me the independence to grow as a litigator while remaining a steady hand, confidante, and mentor. Our team culture makes it possible to do emotionally demanding work sustainably over several years, and the firm has supported my advancement and given the space to innovate.



"Being part of shaping the future direction of a women-led public interest litigation team is something I'm very proud of."

Q Now you're a Senior Associate, how do you hope to support the next generation of lawyers that come to Deneys?

My approach comes from a simple conviction: the lawyers who come after us should be better equipped, more confident, and more resilient than we were at the same stage – and it's our responsibility to create the conditions for that.

In practice, this means several things: structured mentorship through meaningful work; building durable resources; fostering a knowledge-sharing culture; leading by example on values; and creating pathways for juniors to develop their own areas of expertise.

I believe juniors learn fastest when they're trusted with real responsibility on real matters, supported by clear expectations, feedback, and graduated autonomy. I want juniors to see that generosity with knowledge and expertise is a hallmark of good leadership, and hope to show it's possible to sustain a high-performance practice in an emotionally demanding area while investing in personal wellbeing, maintaining good humour, and treating everyone – clients, colleagues, and opponents – with dignity.

I also want young women to see they can lead complex litigation, shape public discourse, and build rewarding careers in spaces that were not always designed for them – whilst preserving the most important parts of themselves.

This is a condensed version of a recent Q&A with Nicola Irving. You will be able to read the full interview on Africa Legal under the Rising Stars tag in the coming weeks.



Choosing kindness and changing lives: cultivating the pro bono ethos

Head of Social Impact Law Candice Pillay talks with Craig Sisterson about how pro bono work isn't a tick-box addition to commercial legal practice, but a fundamental expression of the profession's responsibility to widen access to justice and strengthen South African society.

Whether it's representing cash-strapped NGOs in long-running constitutional law litigation, helping a world-renowned Olympian fight systemic prejudice on a global scale, or sitting with a villager at a rural clinic, Candice Pillay says the true measure of pro bono work isn't the size of the case, but the difference it makes.

"Even if we change one life, we change that one family, the impact you have is as big as a strategic impact litigation case, where you might change an entire community or change law for an entire sector," says Candice, Head of Social Impact Law at leading African firm Deneys. "You must touch the individual at that very first basic level. All our programmes are geared towards making that impact."

Over many decades and under different names, that's what the lawyers at Deneys have been doing; a sense of service and giving back permeates the law firm. Rather than treating pro bono as something lawyers do alongside their commercial practice, the firm has embedded it across the business.

In recent years Candice has led the firm's Social Impact Law practice, which across the Johannesburg and Cape Town offices includes fellow directors Jason Whyte and Laura Macfarlane, senior associate Nicola Irving, associates Sivuselele Manzini and Chuma Bubu, paralegals, and candidate attorneys who rotate through the team. But "the whole firm does social impact", explains Candice.

"Our staff must feel that we care about what they care about, and that we're working in the communities that they come from. That's what creates a great pro bono ethos throughout the firm."

Social Impact Law

Their work has two complementary arms. The first is access to justice, representing individuals whose rights have been infringed. Deneys and its lawyers help operate community legal clinics, partner with organisations including ProBono.org, and deliver legal education. The second arm is strategic impact litigation, pursuing cases that clarify rights, scrutinise government decisions, and contribute to the progressive development of South African law.

“Even if we change one life, we change that one family, the impact you have is as big as a strategic impact litigation case, where you might change an entire community or change law for an entire sector.”

An example of the latter is the landmark High Court hearing in May, challenging the Department of Social Development’s 2023 directive declaring life-saving Baby Saver mechanisms as illegal, and threats to cut funding to and close organisations who use them to provide safe relinquishment. Deneys invested more than 1,600 hours of internal legal work at no cost to the applicants in the case, Baby Savers South Africa NPO and Door of Hope Children’s Mission NPO.

“We believe that the true measure of our work lies not only in the outcomes we achieve for clients, but in the role we play in strengthening the social fabric of our country,” says Deneys CEO Brent Botha. “We are immensely proud of our lawyers and staff who invest their time, expertise, and compassion into this work. It is not ancillary to what we do – it is core to who we are.”

Candice and her Social Impact Law team don’t carry such responsibility alone. She connects lawyers throughout Deneys with opportunities that match their expertise and personal passions, from Directors such as David Kapelus (insurance and transport litigation) and Willem de Villiers (M&A and project finance) working on matters in the disability or arts sectors, to associates and Candidate Attorneys.

Lawyers across all practice groups contribute.

“If you’re doing what you do every day, then you’re just doing another matter where the fees are zero-rated,” says Candice, noting a great pro bono ethos resonates throughout Deneys. “Our staff must feel that we care about what they care about, and that we’re working in the communities that they come from.”

Leading a Social Impact Law team at a leading African firm is a lovely “full circle” sort of chapter in Candice’s legal career, she admits. She began her career in the human rights sector while at university. With Nelson Mandela’s release from prison leading into a new constitution and democratically elected government, it was an exciting, tumultuous time in South Africa. But also an uncertain one; and some traditional doors remained locked, including in law. Candice did her articles and began working in the insurance litigation field, stepping out of what she wanted to do in human rights and advocacy for ‘just paying the bills’ work.

When South African law societies began introducing pro bono directives around 2010, Candice was asked by her then-Chairman to create a business plan for a pro bono department at commercial firm Routledge Modise (which later joined with international firm Hogan Lovells); a very different role from being an activist or lawyer in a non-profit NGO. “For me, personally, it was kind of coming to pro bono at the right time in my career and my maturity and my growth, because prior to that I was just going to save the world with no plan,” laughs Candice.

Seventeen years later, Candice is right where she belongs, doing work she loves, bolstering Deneys’ long-held ethos of fighting injustice and supporting marginalised communities, and helping grow the next generation of lawyers.

“We get feedback from graduate recruitment all the time saying students have applied to Deneys because they saw we won this particular case, or did a clinic in a certain community,” says Candice. She believes the contribution of large firms to access to justice is sometimes overlooked. Deneys’ resources, specialist expertise, and ability to sustain complex litigation over many years enable them to pursue vital matters, like Baby Savers, that might otherwise never reach the courts.



“I think the legal sector have started to realise that the kind of strategic impact litigation cases that Deneys has taken on, that have been reported in the news, have only come about because we put our money where our mouth is,” says Candice. Big law firms have resources to take on cases from lower courts all the way to the Constitutional Court if necessary, over several years, and stick to it.

However, success can still ultimately be measured one client at a time.

“When a client looks at me and says ‘thank you so much, you stuck with me, walked the distance, and I wouldn’t have been able to afford this litigation’, then you know you’ve done something, really, really good,” says Candice, smiling. “Small actions mean great impact, and I’ve always said that to my team.”

One of the mottos displayed in her office is: Choose Kindness. For Candice, that’s what impact is. Choosing kindness in spite of whatever’s going on.

“We’re choosing clients and friends, we’re giving our time, giving legal knowledge, giving our empathy. Sometimes we just sit with the client and hear their story. In our team we often remind each other to choose kindness, because being a lawyer can be very demanding. Pro bono is extremely difficult. The cases we deal with can be horrific – babies thrown into toilets, people dying in hospitals, people being evicted, women being beaten up and abused, young girls being raped. It’s really traumatic. But I often say to myself, this is the idea of choosing kindness, to

help when there is no one else. But you also need to be kind to yourself too.”

While you may not be able to solve all the world’s problems, says Candice, you can always just help the person sitting in front of you. It’s not always about landmark judgments or high-profile injustices. Sometimes it begins with one lawyer choosing kindness, standing beside one client, and changing one life.

“When a client looks at me and says ‘thank you so much, you stuck with me, walked the distance, and I wouldn’t have been able to afford this litigation’, then you know you’ve done something, really, really good.”



Women leading with compassion and intent to shape South African law

The journey for women in South African law has changed markedly in a generation. Deneys directors Purnel Gangiah and Karen Ainslie discuss compassionate leadership, mentorship, and creating a profession where the next generation can see what is possible.

While technical excellence is key for successful lawyers, coupling that with experience and seniority does not in and of itself make a great leader, says Karen Ainslie, a director and Head of Employment and Labour at Deneys who will celebrate her silver anniversary (25 years) with the pioneering firm next year.

For Karen, the best leaders are those who can listen, empathise, and put themselves in someone else's shoes. Dispute resolution expert Purnel Gangiah, a fellow director at Deneys who first crossed paths with Karen as a Candidate Attorney in 2016, holds similar views. For Purnel, who now has several attorneys reporting to her, leading with compassion is so vital that it's a personal mantra.

"I think you're only able to have a great, healthy team where you're working together to reach a common goal, and when you understand the people in your team," says Purnel, who's also spent her entire career at the leading African firm.



Youngsters can walk into a firm like Deneys and see female partners, and senior associates putting their hands up for partnership."



Karen Ainslie

"Leading with compassion is so important, because when you're doing that it's not about your own feelings but understanding the people working with you. You need to understand their strengths and weaknesses, where you need to pick them up, where you need to fill the gaps, and the only way you're able to do that successfully is if you're leading with compassion, intent, and by example."

Talking with Purnel and Karen, there are a couple of nice overlaps for two talented lawyers who lead teams in different practice areas of Deneys, and began their legal careers at the firm nearly fifteen years apart. A decade ago, Karen was one of the women leaders at the South African firm who gave Purnel a glimpse of what was possible early in her career, now Purnel is doing the same for another generation of Candidate Attorneys and junior lawyers coming through Deneys.

Creating opportunities for new generations

Legal practice has come a long way since Karen began as a Candidate Attorney in 2002, "fresh from university in Pretoria", when there were few female partners at large South African firms, and none in the employment space she now leads.

While Purnel had Karen and several other female leaders - such as current Chair Michelle David, competition lawyer turned cyber law expert Rosalind Lake, and financial regulatory expert Desiree Reddy - among an array of examples of women excelling across many practice areas when she first joined the firm ten years ago, Karen hadn't had equivalent role models for what was possible.

"When I started out studying law, people told me 'don't you know the long, billable hours, it's not good for women' and that you shouldn't even start to think of having a family before you made partner, if you wanted to succeed," says Karen. "Representation is much better now. I think youngsters can walk

into a firm like Deneys and see female partners, and senior associates putting their hands up for partnership, while also being people with diverse family lives and other interests."

Purnel is part of that evolution, quickly rising to become an equity director, and Chair of the Women in Red Committee. While she was mentored by several leaders at Deneys, particularly in dispute resolution, Purnel also fondly recalls an airport drive with Karen when she was a Candidate Attorney, nervous about retention and unsure about her future practice area. Karen's example of genuinely listening and offering advice, despite the big gap in seniority, lingered. "No matter how senior I get, I want to always make sure that I'm approachable," says Purnel.

Women in Red

That sense of compassionate leadership, and of empowering lawyers to become the best versions of themselves, rather than trying to fit into a narrow box or particular track, is something that resonates when talking with Purnel and Karen, the current and past Chairs of the Women in Red committee at Deneys.

The firm has had women's initiatives for many years, but initially they were geared towards female lawyers and fee earners; nowadays the Women in Red committee is an active group with "regular get-togethers with a real purpose, and meaningful projects in place", says Karen. It's all-inclusive, seeking to create opportunities and conversations, and empower all women across the workplace, even inviting male colleagues to discussions on health and financial savviness.

Purnel, who took the baton from Karen as Chair over the past year, says that last Women's Month they ran a campaign relating to "messages to my younger self", giving the firm's ladies the chance to reflect on how far they'd come.

This year, like the firm itself, the focus of their Women's Month campaign is firmly on the future - goals, ambitions, what the women are working towards, the next chapter in their careers and lives. "It goes along with Deneys' 'As the world moves,'" says Purnel. "We're moving into a new chapter, what is that for yourself?"

Women in Red

"Leading with compassion is so important, because when you're doing that it's not about your own feelings but understanding the people working with you."

Purnel Gangiah



While Women in Red runs and takes part in events and campaigns, including beyond the firm with things like Help A Girl Child, it's mostly about women supporting each other, empowering each other, and creating a safe space.

For Purnel, some of the most valuable moments come when hierarchy vanishes, and people can openly discuss issues like mental health, motherhood, and workplace pressures as human beings. "Whether you're a director, Candidate Attorney, associate, or support staff, everyone's able to be themselves."

Accepting and embracing people as individuals is vital, say both senior leaders, who each credit the people and culture at Deneys for keeping them at the firm their entire careers. Deneys, they say, is a firm that provides space for different people and career paths, an ethos that goes beyond women to the firm's broader approach to diversity, and to clients themselves. "From a corporate perspective, I think we need to have diverse workplaces," says Karen. "I see so many clients now who feel comfortable working with all kinds of different members of my team. There really is a space for everyone, and we need to keep promoting it."

And while each has grown at the firm from Candidate Attorney to director, leaders, and role model, neither want to see those coming through at Deneys try to mimic their journeys. Instead, it's important, says Purnel, that younger lawyers find and stay true to themselves. "That's as original as you're going to be."



How Rosalind Lake evolved into one of the world's leading cyber lawyers

With more than 70% of South African employees now regularly using AI tools, the velocity of AI adoption is creating new risks alongside benefits. Leading cyber lawyer Rosalind Lake talks with Craig Sisterson about a new era in legal practice.

While Rosalind Lake has been practising law for two decades, was made a competition law partner in her 20s, and in May was the only African lawyer named in the 2026 Lawdragon 500 Leading Global Cyber Lawyers guide (for her third straight year), the leader of the cybersecurity, data privacy, and AI team at Deneys says her job has very little to do with what the law actually says.

“It’s very much about managing a crisis, finding the best kind of commercial outcome within the framework, negotiating with regulators, finding a way for clients to act in a compliant way, and still achieve their commercial outcomes.”

Some of that, perhaps, is also because Rosalind and her Deneys team operate on the cutting edge of legal practice, handling matters where laws and regulations often lag (far) behind fast-evolving technology. “No one is prepared for how quickly things are moving and how rapidly things are happening,” she says.

Rosalind’s role involves helping clients with practical challenges as much as regulatory issues, including “the very exciting world” of supporting and advising organisations who’ve suffered ransomware or other serious cyber-attacks.

It’s an ideal fit for someone who’s inherently curious, loves to learn new things, and has a passion for investigating what’s gone wrong then creating a solution.

“A lot of the time when you’re dealing with areas that are not well-developed, a lot of it is just really innovative,” says Rosalind. “You’ve got to make a call on something where there’s no precedent. One thing Deneys is amazing at is if you’ve got an idea and you back it, we’re given the freedom to really go and explore new areas of law. I’ve had some wonderful mentors who supported me through that.”

Rosalind celebrated her 20th anniversary with the firm earlier this year, having joined what was then Deneys Reitz as a Candidate Attorney in January 2006. She became a Director within six years, but says her early years were very hard.

“The thing I say to everyone who comes to work for me is you need to sort out your relationship with your parents, because everything in life, and particularly in the job of law, is about relationships.”

Rosalind recalls being twice rejected by the firm before securing a Candidate Attorney spot thanks to Marelise van der Westhuizen (who she’d done vacation work for), who would later go on to become the first female CEO of Norton Rose Fulbright South Africa. A regular refrain Rosalind heard in her early years, from clients and opposing counsel, was “but my girlie, you don’t understand the law”.

Dress codes in law were “oppressively restrictive”, female partners had to lean into masculine traits to succeed, showing no vulnerability, and clients struggled with a young female lawyer advising them on what they could or couldn’t do.

“Being a competition lawyer, generally I was telling people things they didn’t want to hear,” recalls Rosalind. “That meant I had them swearing at me, and again the ‘my girlie’ thing, and treating you in a way that you just wouldn’t even imagine.”

Fortunately, like the technologies she now works with and advises clients on, legal practice itself has undergone “a radical shift” during the course of Rosalind’s career. It’s been “such a wonderful evolution”, she says, that “women can finally be themselves in the workplace, and bring femininity”. Rosalind didn’t want to become someone who had to negate their femininity to be successful. She’s also grateful to have worked at “a very supportive firm” in Deneys, throughout.

“We are very accepting of people’s authenticity, of how you turn up and be your best self,” she says. “I don’t know what it’s like in other law firms, but we’re much more interested in people’s brains than how they look or how you dress.”

Nowadays, women make up the clear majority (around 57%, per the Law Society of South Africa) of new law graduates and incoming Candidate Attorneys. Newer areas of law, and particularly regulatory practices like cybersecurity, AI, and data privacy seem to attract female attorneys, says Rosalind.

She’s not sure why; perhaps given the need for empathy and multi-tasking in these fast-moving fields, many women are well suited to the areas of work.

Whether you’re operating in new areas like cybersecurity and AI where ‘the law’ is still being formed, or traditional practice areas, relationships and the human side of law are vital, says Rosalind, along with an ability to know and manage yourself.

“I think working on your relationship skills and bringing an understanding of yourself at a deep level is the best thing you can do for your colleagues and your clients,” she says. “The thing I say to everyone who comes to work for me is you need to sort out your relationship with your parents, because everything in life, and particularly in the job of law, is about relationships. So if you have issues from your formative relationships that trigger you or make you feel insecure, you need to be aware of those so they don’t cause you harm in the work environment.”

And whether it’s legal practice or the use of AI tools in an increasingly technology-soaked world, boundaries are the key to doing a good job, believes Rosalind.

It’s far too easy to become over-reliant on AI; if we don’t use it responsibly and in a way that stimulates our cognitive abilities, then it risks taking away our ability to think, says Rosalind. Similarly, law is a profession that can become all-consuming.

Succeeding in the law always requires some personal sacrifice, she says, but if you allow it, it will take everything from you. “What I always say to people is that you need to make sure you have enough of the things in your life that fill your cup,” says Rosalind, “so it gives you strength to do the things you need to do”.

“No one is prepared for how quickly things are moving and how rapidly things are happening.”



“It means a great deal to know my younger cousins and nieces can look at my journey and see what is possible through education, perseverance, and determination”



Promoted to Senior Associate earlier this year, Tholakele Mrubata joined the Cape Town office in late 2022 after completing her articles at a smaller local firm. An attorney and conveyancer, she focuses on all aspects of real estate transactions specialising in transfers, bond registrations, and servitude registrations.

Q What qualities do you think are essential for modern-day lawyers to succeed and advance in leading African law firms like Deneys?

One important quality is adaptability. Our profession is evolving rapidly, and so are our clients, their businesses, and the environments they operate in. Lawyers need to be curious, commercially minded, and committed to continuous learning. The ability to understand the legal aspects of a matter AND the broader commercial objectives and challenges facing clients, has become increasingly important.

Resilience and consistency are also essential. A legal career is a marathon not a sprint, and there will inevitably be demanding transactions and difficult moments. A valuable lesson I’ve learned is you cannot build a successful career on motivation alone. What sustains long-term growth is discipline, accountability, and the ability to keep showing up to do the work even when it’s challenging.

I also believe authenticity matters. There is no single mould for what a successful lawyer looks like, and it is important people feel empowered to build careers that reflect their own strengths, interests, and values. Ambition is important, but so too is understanding who you are and what drives you. Emotional intelligence is another important quality.. Whether you are advising clients or working within a team, success often depends on your ability to build relationships, communicate effectively and understand different perspectives. The lawyers I look up to are not only technically excellent but are also trusted advisers who know how to connect with people and navigate complex situations with professionalism and empathy.

Q What did being promoted to Senior Associate at Deneys mean for you?

It was a deeply meaningful milestone for me, both personally and professionally. It felt like recognition not only of the work I had done, but also of the growth, resilience, and confidence I have developed throughout my career.

What makes it particularly meaningful is that my journey in law has never been mine alone. My mother worked incredibly hard to create opportunities for me, and I carry with me the sacrifices made by her, my grandmother, and my aunts.

As a Black woman in the legal profession, I’m also conscious of the importance of visibility and representation. I hope my younger cousins and nieces see that the circumstances you come from do not have to define the heights you can reach, and that opportunities can be created not only for yourself, but for those who come after you.

Professionally, it has reinforced that progression in law is about far more than technical experience. At this stage of my career, there is much greater emphasis on taking ownership, understanding clients’ commercial context, developing trusted relationships, and contributing to the growth of the practice. My promotion has also made me more conscious of the responsibility to support and encourage those coming through the profession behind me.

This is a condensed version of a recent Q&A with Tholakele Mrubata. You will be able to read the full interview on Africa Legal under the Rising Stars tag in the coming weeks.

After studying and beginning her legal career in Durban, admiralty, shipping, and transport lawyer Nicholene Mazibuko joined Deneys in 2023, and is now based in Johannesburg. Promoted to Senior Associate earlier this year, she has experience in ship arrests, Boards of Inquiry, cargo theft and damage claims, and port equipment procurement.

Q What advice would you have for young female lawyers entering the legal profession in South Africa?

My advice would be to always back yourself, even before you feel completely ready. Legal practice can be demanding and, at times, intimidating, but confidence is built through experience and by embracing opportunities, not waiting until you feel perfect. Be curious, be reliable, and maintain a positive attitude. Do what you say you will do, take ownership of your development and never be afraid to lean on the experience and support of those around you.

I would also encourage young women to invest time in building strong professional relationships and finding mentors who genuinely want to see them succeed. Equally important is being receptive to that support. A mentor can share knowledge, experience, and guidance, but you must be willing to receive it. Growth requires enthusiasm, a positive attitude, and a genuine desire to learn and develop. Success in law is not simply about technical excellence; it is also about resilience, integrity, and the ability to build trust with colleagues and clients.

Most importantly, remember that your perspective has value. South Africa’s legal profession is strengthened by diversity of thought, background, and experience. Authenticity is one of your greatest strengths. Work hard, support other women along the way and trust that there is a place for you at the table.



“Women belong in courtrooms, boardrooms, leadership positions, wherever decisions are being made, while still embracing roles and relationships that make us who we are”

Q What impact has mentoring within Deneys had on your career so far?

It’s played a significant role in my growth as a lawyer and shaping my career. I’ve been fortunate to work alongside seniors who have shared their knowledge, provided guidance, and created opportunities for me to develop professionally. They poured into me selflessly and their willingness to include me in complex matters, expose me to clients, and encourage me to take on new challenges has accelerated my growth in ways formal training alone could never achieve.

Programmes such as Women in Red at Deneys are equally valuable because they create spaces where women can connect and share experiences, but most importantly learn from one another. They provide visibility to successful women leaders, and remind younger lawyers there is no single path to success. Seeing women thrive in senior leadership positions makes those ambitions feel both attainable and achievable. Having a front row seat to their success, while they embrace the many facets of their identities has been incredibly empowering.

This is a condensed version of a recent Q&A with Nicholene Mazibuko. You will be able to read the full interview on Africa Legal under the Rising Stars tag in the coming weeks.



About Deneys

Deneys is a full-service law firm with a 100-year track record of firsts and a clear view of what's next. Africa-first with a global perspective, we help our clients navigate disputes, transactions and regulation with agility, insight, and pace – turning challenge and change into advantage. It means that in today's fast-moving world, as the world moves, we're moving with it, so you can too.

<https://www.deneys.co.za/>

Cape Town

9th floor, 117 Strand
Street, Cape Town,
8001, South Africa

+27 21 405 1200

Johannesburg

15 Alice Lane, Sandton,
Johannesburg, 2196,
South Africa

+27 11 685 8500

Durban

3 Pencarrow Crescent, La
Lucia Ridge, KwaZulu-Natal,
Durban, 4051, South Africa

+27 31 582 5600

The information in this document is provided for general information only. It is not legal or other professional advice. While we have taken reasonable steps to ensure it is accurate, Deneys accepts no liability or responsibility, to the extent allowed by law, if any information is, for any reason, incorrect or corrupted; or for any loss or damage that may arise from reliance on such information.

In partnership with

