

UCT launches new course to bridge gap between law and business skills

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Lawyers and legal advisors working in Africa should be good managers and great leaders, with a comprehensive understanding of the business world's complexities and shifting paradigms of emerging market economies.

There is an urgent need for those in legal practice to add the skills of leadership to their understanding of the law.

Fortune magazine has noted that law firms have an unusually high turnover of associates - around 20 percent each year compared to three percent at Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For. Associates leave their jobs because "work quality standards are not being met".

In emerging markets that alter and shift even quicker than the constantly changing global economy, legal practitioners, if they want to lead, should be formally trained to manage others.

Irena Wasserfall of UCT's Faculty of Law says: "At law school, students are not prepared or equipped in any way to take up a management role and yet they are often placed in management positions when they join a large law firm or enter the corporate arena. This involves managing people, managing change, strategic planning and unit financial management; areas they have not been exposed to at law school."

The need for legal practitioners to learn effective business skills has prompted the Faculty of Law's Professional Development Project at UCT - managed by Wasserfall - to collaborate with the UCT Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) to design a course - the first of its kind in Africa - to help legal practitioners on the continent become successful leaders in emerging markets.

Wasserfall says: "Only Harvard and Georgetown universities have recognised the gap in this type of skills development for people in the legal field, but the Dollar/Rand exchange rate has put these overseas courses out of reach of the average associate in a law firm or junior legal advisor in a company. Large firms and corporates tend to fund the attendance of these courses at prestigious US universities for their senior partners and directors, but are not willing to incur the expense for more junior employees. Clearly, there is an urgent need to provide this training on our continent."

The new UCT course offers the additional benefit of providing insights that are key to emerging markets. The UCT GSB has for the past decade been developing insights into this market place and training managers and leaders to be effective in these contexts.

According to Bruce MacDonald, director of the Programme for Management Development at the GSB, the continent is in "desperate" need of managers who are capable of dealing with the particular opportunities and challenges that set Africa apart from the rest of the world.

"But education on the continent has to be tailored to the requirements of emerging market economies with different needs and demands - and stressors," MacDonald says.

Professional assistants, associates and partners in law firms, as well as corporate or legal advisors to government will need to learn critical new skills if they are to manage and lead effectively in African legal practice.

"Legal practice today is a client service industry and in order to compete, you have to adapt. The legal profession is not immune to the changes happening in all other sectors. Companies, especially in emerging market economies, deal with

uncertainty, unstable markets and changing conditions, and legal practitioners need to have the tools that will help them to not only handle, but thrive, in these conditions," Wasserfall says.

For more information about the Developing Leaders in African Legal Practice course, please contact the Executive Education department through the GSB call centre on 0860 UCT GSB or email execed@gsb.uct.ac.za. The course will run from 27 July to 8 August 2015.

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