

## NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION SECTION ON LEGAL PRACTICE

# SLP Newsletter

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### From the

### CHAIRMAN

Distinguished colleagues,

hree months ago, when our last edition of the SLP newsletter was published, no one imagined that we would a few days after, be 'hunkered down' in a global lockdown occasioned by a pandemic.

COVID-19 has changed the face of the world at large, and specifically the face of legal practice. Over the last three months, administrative functions, business processes, and indeed legal procedures have taken a paradigm shift. 'WFH' (work from home) is now a popular hashtag arising from this new normal. Virtual meetings, court time scheduling, social distancing, and the raging debate on the constitutionality of remote hearings have taken center stage



on our professional turf. In this edition, there is a contribution on the subject, and I leave our dear readers to pitch your tents on either side of the debate until the Supreme court decides on the constitutionality of virtual proceedings. Meanwhile, practice



The objectives of the Section as stated in Article 1 of the Section Bye laws are: -

- To promote the exchange of information and views among individuals' members of the Section and other likeminded bodies as to the laws, practices and other procedures; affecting the Section locally and internationally;
- To assist members develop and improve their legal services to the public;
- To undertake such related activities as may be approved by the Section's council from time to time;
- To promote and provide Continuing Legal Education.

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### From the Chairman Continues...

directions of various superior courts are already pointing us in the direction of remote hearings.

Our Section programmes were no doubt directly impacted by the pandemic, so much that our much anticipated 2020 SLP Conference scheduled to hold in May at the Ibom Hotels and Golf Resort Uyo has had to be postponed by reason of the pandemic and consequential restrictions. It, however, opened up a vast platform of opportunities to your section to reach a wider audience through our incisive online events, thought-provoking webinars, and hands-on workshops the SLP has hosted in the last few months, attracting up to a thousand registered participants at each event.

New opportunities and collaborations have emerged from some of these engagements and more, both on national and international platforms, offering our colleagues and members opportunities for professional development. We will be unveiling these plans in the next few weeks for the benefit of our members, as your Section takes a quantum leap in furtherance of its objectives. We invite you to also look out for and join us at our sessions at the 60th NBA Annual General Conference, our first virtual Bar conference ever, holding from the 26th to 29th of August. 2020.

For now, I warmly invite you to enjoy another interesting edition of the Section on Legal Practice newsletter for the second quarter of the year 2020.

### **OLUSEUN ABIMBOLA FCArb**

Chairman, NBA – Section on Legal Practice



'If we never do anything which has not been done before, nothing will change; the entire world will move on whilst the law remains the same and that will be bad for both the world and the law'

### ~ LORD DENNING<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Human history is replete with dynamic changes driven by technology-powered innovations and the 21st century is no exception. This century, known as the information technology age, has witnessed innovations such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Cloud Computing, Machine Learning to mention but a few. The last twenty years have produced an unprecedented paradigm shift in the usage of technological tools and their impact on business transactions, economic relations, and the legal market,

cannot be ignored or taken for granted.

The infusion of technology into law practice and the justice system in Nigeria is taking root. For example, the proliferation of technology such as electronic mail, social media, video, and conferencing applications have enhanced client-lawyer relationships. Clients communicate with and obtain advice from lawyers in real-time, thereby dispensing with the hassle and expenses of in-person meetings.

The development of legal software solutions such as Computer-Assisted Legal Research Applications- Law Pavilion, Nigeria Weekly Law Reports (NWLR) online, CompuLaw, NextCounsel, Practical Law, LexisNexis and Westlaw, assist the Bar and the Bench to carry out more efficient and effective legal research. Several software applications generate templates for contracts, wills, and other legal documents, reducing the time spent in creating these documents from scratch thereby

increasing productivity. AI applications are fast becoming a one-stop-shop for legal software solutions and are referred to as the 'Robot Lawyer' as they can carry out more complex legal tasks.

In the justice sector, the National Judicial Council ("NJC"), through the instrumentality of the National Judicial Policy, recommended the use of Information Communications Technology (ICT) by all Courts in Nigeria<sup>2</sup>. Pursuant to the foregoing, in 2012, the Chairman of the NJC inaugurated the Judicial Information Technology Policy Formulation Committee tasked with the development of a comprehensive, pragmatic information technology policy for the Nigerian Judiciary. This brought about the Judicial Information Technology Policy ("the JIT Policy") with several recommendations on the deployment and management of ICT within the Nigerian Judiciary<sup>3</sup>.

In a reaction to the disruption occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, the NJC in May 2020 released "Guidelines for Court sittings and related matters in the COVID-19 period" (the Guidelines")<sup>4</sup>. Various heads of Courts have also issued Practice Directions for remote hearing of cases during the pandemic amongst other issues<sup>5</sup>. A prominent feature of these Guidelines and Practice Directions is the implementation of virtual Court sittings/remote hearings. This generated a lot of controversy on the legality or otherwise of same.

This article will briefly outline some of the technology law firms may adopt to enhance the provision of legal services to clients. It will also consider the use of technology in the delivery of justice. Finally, it will give a concise perspective on the constitutionality or otherwise of virtual Court proceedings.

## THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE PROVISION OF LEGAL SERVICES AND JUSTICE DELIVERY

### **Legal Services**

The benefits of technology in the delivery of legal services cannot be overemphasized. Innovative technology solutions enable lawyers to perform their duties optimally thereby enhancing efficiency and productivity. There have been numerous arguments on the downsides. One of such arguments is that technology will eventually take the job of lawyers as the business model of law firms is highly dependent on billable hours. These argument fails because legal technology only exists to eliminate the time spent on mundane, labour intensive and administrative tasks and will not substitute for a lawyer's creativity, instinct or judgment. Technology cannot deploy the emotional intelligence required in negotiations and personal rapport with clients neither will it replace the oral advocacy of Counsel in a Courtroom.

Some of the technology that lawyers may exploit are discussed below:

- 1. Microsoft 365 This is a one-stop-shop for a variety of tools required for the day to day running of a law firm such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, SharePoint to create microsites, Outlook for emails, One Drive for storage and Teams for instant messaging, voice and video conferencing<sup>6</sup>.
- 2. Computer-Assisted Legal Research Applications include indigenous applications such as Law Pavilion, CompuLaw and NextCounsel with features that enhance productivity.
  - a. Law Pavilion Business
    Solutions has an electronic law
    report which covers cases from
    the Supreme Court and Court of
    Appeal of Nigeria; a Solicitor's
    Tool Kit with Forms and

Precedents for legal drafting, a database of Statutes, and case law on specific areas of law, amongst others. Its Prime version has a Practice Management System, Court Management System and Legal Analytics Solutions. The Law Pavilion Case Management System assists in managing schedules, workflow, information, and judicial processes on behalf of legal practitioners<sup>7</sup>.

- b. CompuLaw offers an electronic database of legal materials both online and offline. Products offered include: a searchable repository of case law- Supreme Court case law from 1960 to date, indexed Laws of the Federation, daily legal news and events, law dictionary amongst others; Auto Retrieve.NG and Court Watch.NG (both of which are designed as Court Management Systems) and Judges Access which is a practice management solution<sup>8</sup>.
- c. NextCounsel provides practice management solutions such as client relation management, case management, time management and account management. It aids proper organization, planning and keying of accurate time entries for client's job which ensure accurate billing<sup>9</sup>.
- 3. Artificial Intelligence Applications simulate cognitive processes of the human mind and can carry out legal functions such as legal research and due diligence, ensure compliance, analyze, and review contracts and documents and predict legal outcomes. This can be

done in less time and without the mistakes usually overlooked by the human eye. ROSS, the world's first AI lawyer is being engaged by lawyers in the United States and comes highly recommended<sup>10</sup> In Nigeria, Law Pavilion in 2018, unveiled 'TIMI', Nigeria's first AI Legal Assistant. Though the Application is still being developed to provide complex solutions, it currently carries out the functions of a Consultant that Lawyers can converse with. Presently it has only been programmed to guide a user through the Civil Procedure Rules of Nigerian Courts<sup>11</sup>. An Application of this nature operating at full capacity will be an asset to every legal establishment.

### **Justice Delivery**

The judiciary is not left out in the scramble for the use of technology in boosting the delivery of justice. The National Judicial Policy makes provisions for the training and sensitization of Judicial Officers on optimal utilization of ICT tools and the internet for legal research purposes including electronic and digital recording and transcription of Court proceedings and processes<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, to promote speedy and judicious disposal of corruption, economic crime and high-profile cases, the National Judicial Policy recommends the provision of proper infrastructure and ICT equipment<sup>13</sup>.

The JIT Policy, amongst others, recommends the use of technology such as case management software, file tracking systems, virtual library, video conferencing, e-courts, and e-filing to improve productivity and boost public confidence in the judiciary<sup>14</sup>.

It is interesting to note that some Courts have embraced the use of technology in obtaining the testimony of witnesses. This has led to Legal Practitioners having to cross-examine witnesses via video conferencing. The Federal High Court has engaged the use of Zoom as a

tool for witnesses to give evidence. Kudos to the Judges of the High Court of Lagos State as they have also been forward-thinking and have granted applications for giving evidence via video conferencing.

Unfortunately, the National Industrial Court recently denied an application for a witness who lives in Australia to give evidence via video conferencing, on the grounds that same is unknown to our laws. My Lord, however, went on to state that same is permissible in criminal but not civil proceedings and that in view of the recent directives by the NJC, the Counsel involved in the matter is at liberty to file a fresh application.

We are not unaware of the numerous obstacles that may hinder the adoption of the JIT Policy; however, we are hopeful that all Courts will continue to embrace the use of technology in proceedings as this may help save time and costs.

### **Constitutionality of Virtual Court Hearings**

The implementation of virtual sittings/remote hearings has been controversial. As laudable as the use of technology with regards to virtual hearings is, there may be an underlying constitutional juggernaut, which could form a stumbling block to this approach. The major question with respect to this development is the constitutionality of virtual sittings and whether it satisfies the requirements of sections 36(3) and (4) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended 2010) - the grundnorm, which requires court proceedings to be heard in public.

Arguments abound that virtual/remote hearings are alien and unconstitutional and unless an amendment is made to modify pertinent sections of the Constitution, the unconstitutionality of virtual hearings could be used as grounds to set aside a judgment on appeal. Can we really say that virtual court hearing is unconstitutional?

The word <u>public</u> is not defined by the Constitution. According to Black's Law Dictionary, it means "open or available for all to use, share or enjoy" In **Kosebinu & Ors v. Alimi** He Court of Appeal per Muhammad JCA stated as follows "It is my firm and considered view that a place qualifies under S.36 (3) of the 1999 Constitution to be called "public", and which a regular Courtroom is if it is outrightly accessible and not so accessible on the basis of the "permission" or "consent" of the Judge".

The problem is that the word 'public' is confused with the word 'physical'. Public does not in any way mean physical but means unconditional general accessibility. This could be virtual or physical. Additionally, the Constitution does not suggest that for a hearing to have been carried out in public, it must be heard in a Courtroom. Courts are known to visit the 'locus in quo' and carry on proceedings thereat. Therefore, in so far as the entire proceedings are made accessible to the public, it should meet the requirements of hearing 'in public'.

It has been argued that the "waiting room" feature of the Zoom video conferencing application requiring the Convenor to let a Participant into a meeting negates the idea of unconditional general accessibility.

It should also be noted that the Constitution is a substantive law and not a procedural law; as such the Constitution does not outrightly spell out the procedural laws for Court sittings but empowers each head of Court to make rules and procedures in this regard<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, as long as the Guidelines and Practice Directions meet the requirements of public accessibility, then remote hearings cannot be said to be unconstitutional. It is pertinent to note that although the Practice Directions of the Lagos State Judiciary and the Federal High Court are not as detailed as the NJC Guidelines with regards to who may access a remote Court sitting, recourse may be had to the NJC

### Guidelines.

We are also not unaware of the fact that the National Assembly has taken a proactive step by commencing hearings for the amendment of the Constitution to cover up the alleged lacuna<sup>18</sup>.

### **CONCLUSION**

Technology is the fuel that drives the practice of law in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. No law firm will be able to survive without the use of technology as service delivery to its clientele would be almost impossible, thus affecting the productivity of the firm. The mantra "lawyers are learned" will no longer be accurate if lawyers are found wanting in the dynamics of technological changes. Lawyers as social engineers are at a vantage position to formulate policies and regulations that will guide the transformation occasioned by technology. Hence, the knowledge and exploitation of technological advancement will enhance a lawyer's service delivery to clients and generally improve the justice system. The adaptability and sustainability of technology may pose several challenges, but it is my view that the adoption of same is a step in the right direction.

Agba Eimunjeze is the Managing Partner of Aarndale Solicitors a Lagos based commercial law firm.

### **End Notes**

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Land Use Act (formerly called the Land Use Decree) Chapter 202 of the Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990, is:

"An Act to vest all Land compromised in the territory of each State (except land vested in the Federal Government or it's agencies) solely in the Governor of the State, who would hold such Land in trust for the people and would henceforth be responsible for allocation of land in all urban areas to individuals resident in the State and to organisations for residential, agricultural, commercial and other purposes".

When Land has been allocated to individuals within the State, they have

the responsibility of ensuring that title to the vested land is registered at the Lands Bureau / Lands Registry of the State.

## 2. FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE LANDS REGISTRY

The Lands Registry or Lands Bureau of each State is a very important department that is saddled with the responsibility of keeping an up-to-date record of all land transactions in the State. In Lagos State, it is the only agency of the State Government that is statutorily empowered to store registered title documents relating to land in Lagos State by virtue of the following Laws:

a) Lagos State Land Registration Law (Cap. L41, Vol. 6, Laws of Lagos State of Nigeria 2015)

- b) Registration of Titles Law (CAP L15 Laws of Lagos State 2015)
  The following are the usual functions of the Lagos Land Registry:
- Storage of proper records of all land transactions in Lagos State
- Registration of Deeds of transfer,
   Assents, Court Judgments,
   Deeds of Release as well as
   issuance of Memorandum of
   Loss of title documents,
   Certified True Copies of title
   documents, to maintain and
   conduct searches and support
   investigatory processes for the
   verification of land ownership.
- Registration of instruments affecting Land in Lagos.
- Administration of the Electronic Document Management System (E.D.M.S).

## 3. WHAT DOES RETROSPECTIVE REGISTRATION/DOUBLE CONSENTENTAIL?

It is a known fact that registering one's title to land or property in Lagos State can be tedious as a result of the associated bureaucracies as well as the high cost of registration at the Lands Bureau. It is a system that tends to discourage many Land and property owners from title registration with most being content with merely stamping their deeds of title. The effect of nonregistration of an instrument of title to land or property is that the owner of such land or property cannot plead the instrument of title as evidence of such title in court except he/she registers same<sup>3</sup>, provided that such an instrument is not exempt from registration<sup>4</sup>. This is not the only disadvantage of not registering one's title to property. It also makes the process of a subsequent legal transfer to a new owner or beneficiary tedious and almost impossible, especially when the owner of the property has passed away.

The Lagos Lands Registry has now introduced a simple method of bypassing the issue of non-registration of title by an erstwhile owner of l a n d / p r o p e r t y t o a Purchaser/beneficiary of the same interest in the land/property simply because he did not undergo the process of registration of the title to such land/property.

Most times, before a land/property sale transaction is consummated, it is usual for the Buyer to conduct a due diligence search at the Lands Registry. However, what is not unusual is for the Seller's title to the land/property to have remained unregistered at the Lands Bureau, as a result of the difficulties and costs associated with such registration.

If the Buyer decides to proceed by other means to verify ownership of the land/property and he is satisfied that the Seller is the true owner of the land, he may proceed to payment despite the fact that the Seller has not registered his interest in the land/property at the Lands Bureau.

The process of retrospective registration/double consent gives a subsequent Buyer the right to submit two sets of transfer instruments (one set will detail the transfer transaction between the previous owner (Party A) and the current Vendor, who did not register his equitable interest in the

land (Party B) which he now seeks to transfer to the current Purchaser (Party C). the second set of transfer instrument will detail the transfer between Party B and Party C.

This submission may be done with or without the active participation of the previous owners of the land/property (Parties A and B), provided that all the documents required for the purpose would have been obtained from them prior to the completion of the sale transaction.

The following are the requirements as well as the workflow for an application for double consent/retrospective registration at the Lagos Lands Bureau:

### 4. REQUIREMENTS

- a. Application letter with the address, telephone number and email address of the applicant or the applicant's representative.
- b. Two sets of duly completed and sworn Form 1c<sup>5</sup>.
- c. 2 sets of Deeds/instruments of transfer 2 Deeds between Parties A & B and 3 Deeds between Parties B & C.
- d. A duly sworn indemnity at the High Court by the Grantee/Assignee (Party C).
- e. 2 passport photographs for Party B (the unregistered Assignee) and 4 passport photographs for Party C.
- f. A certified true copy of Party A's root of title.
- g. Site photographs.
- h. Site location sketch.
- i. Certificate of Incorporation/registration (if a Company is a party to the

- transaction).
- j. Charting and endorsement fee (N7,500 & N3,000).

### 5. WORKFLOW

The workflow for this application is as follows:

- a. After submission of the application requirements and documents, a file will be opened and passed to the vetting unit whose duty it is to ensure that all the requirements and documents are in place.
- b. After the procedural vetting, the file will be passed to the Surveyor-general's office (private land) or the Land Services Department (for State land) for charting and confirmation against all revocations of Statutory Right of Occupancy (SRO) to ensure that the land sought to be registered has not been revoked by the Government.
- c. After this process, an assessment will be issued for the charges to be paid based on the location of the Land, in line with the fair market value rates whose aggregate pattern is broken down as follows:

For the transfer instrument between Parties A and B, the Consent charge is 1%, Stamp duty is 0.5%, Registration & conveyancing fee is 0.5% whilst for the transfer instrument between Parties B and C, Consent charge is 1.5%, Stamp Duty is 0.5%, Capital Gains Tax is 0.5% and Neighborhood

Improvement Charge /Ground Rent is flexibly calculated or assessed, based on the location and size of the land.

- 1. The file thereafter moves to delegated Commissioners for execution, en-route the Permanent Secretary (Lands) and after execution, the file, c o n t a i n i n g t h e deeds/instruments of transfer, will be forwarded to the Lands Bureau.
- 2. At this point, the file will be forwarded from the Lands Bureau to the Lands Registry Directorate for the stamping of the deeds/transfer instruments and verification of the payment of personal income tax (for individuals) or Company income tax (for Companies) by the parties to the transaction. The file will then be forwarded to the Registration Unit for the inspection of the original root of title which the applicant is expected to produce and thereafter followed by the registration of the deeds/transfer instruments.
- 3. After this process, the registered deeds/transfer instruments will be returned to the Land Services Unit for the preparation of the letter conveying the approval of the consent application after which both sets of the registered deeds and approval letters will be released to the applicant.

### 6. CONCLUSION

This process is bound to facilitate land transactions as well as encourage applicants who fall within this category of land/property owners to submit their unregistered deeds/instruments of transfer for registration because it is not only cheaper, it is also faster as a result of the eradication of the need to wait for a previous owner to complete the process of registration, which may not be assiduously pursued, since their interest has been transferred to another Buyer.

For further information on this article and area of law, please contact

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### **End Notes**

- Adetola Ayanru, LLB, LLM, Senior Associate, S. P. A. Ajibade & Co., Lagos, Nigeria.
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ue to the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) and the resulting stay at home orders issued by governments worldwide, many businesses have had to transition to remote work in order to avoid disruption to their usual business practices. Virtual meetings have now become an invaluable tool used to connect people such as prospects, clients, co-workers, which has created caused employers and employees to gradually learn the particulars of virtual meeting etiquette.

Because there are a few undeniable differences between an online meeting, conference call or webinar and face-to-face meetings, there are also slight differences between video conferencing etiquette and normal business etiquette. Listed below are some virtual meeting etiquettes to be observed to ensure that your meetings are professional and productive.

### 1. Dress appropriately.

One of the benefits of working remotely is the freedom to wear anything to work. However, before the meeting starts, it is both polite and professional to appear clean and tidy. In addition, this will help put you in the right headspace to be productive<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Test your camera and microphone before the meeting commences.

Test your laptop or telephone's camera and microphone ahead of the meeting to make sure they are working properly. In addition to this, make sure that your camera is placed at the right angle so that other participants can see you clearly.

However, the microphone is more important than the camera because if it is difficult to hear a speaker during an online call, it could disrupt the purpose of the meeting. Therefore, before the meeting begins, test your microphone and camera, or use the features provided by your virtual meeting platform<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. Be audible.

When you join a meeting, ensure that you introduce yourself and you do not interrupt someone mid-sentence. Do not forget to speak clearly and audibly during the meeting<sup>1</sup>.

### 4. Avoid eating during the meeting.

Do not distract people by eating during the meeting. This action is both unprofessional and distracting to other participants<sup>1</sup>.

## 5. Ensure you mute your microphone when you are not talking.

Some video conferencing platforms such as Zoom have created a feature known as the 'push to talk' functionality which functions to keep your mic turned off by default and only pick up noise when you press a button to turn it on. It was created to eliminate most background noise on conference calls. However, it is especially important to note that if you are using a headset since people might still be able to hear every little sound on your end such as breathing, coughs, conversations or if you are clicking away on a different tablet or telephone, microphones should be muted<sup>2</sup>.

### 6. Be present.

Avoid distractions such as checking your mailbox, telephone or carrying on a side conversation during a meeting. Always use attentive body language such as sitting up straight and avoid looking around. Phones should either be on silent or off<sup>2</sup>.

## 7. Clear your screen of unnecessary documents.

While sharing your screen during a meeting, unnecessary documents should be removed from your screen to avoid sharing confidential documents with a third party<sup>3</sup>.

In conclusion, being able to work remotely is beneficial to employers most especially during this period of the global pandemic. It would be valuable to everyone if we are all aware of the differences between virtual and face-to-face meetings especially since online business meetings are increasingly becoming the norm.

#### **Bonuade Aderemi**

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- 10 Law and Individual Rights Yakubu Maikyau, SAN FCIArb
- 11 Medicine & The Law Mr 'Laolu Osanyin
- 12 Professional Development Professor Augustine Agom
- 13 Professional Ethics Aham Eke Ejelam, SAN
- 14 Succession Trust & Estate Planning Mrs Sola Adegbonmire

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