

Juta & Co.'s Kamal Patel is inspired by the possibilities for our legal profession's future

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Architect-turned-businessman Kamal Patel began his leadership career as a management consultant at Accenture, a global consulting firm, followed by an entrepreneurial venture in manufacturing where he was a founder and director. After making the transition into publishing as an executive at international media firm Thomson Reuters, he became CEO at Juta & Company - South Africa's leading legal and regulatory publisher - in 2018.

"I know first-hand how difficult it can be to run a business in South Africa," Patel says. "Business owners are struck with incredibly high costs of compliance and operate in an environment that is often not as smooth-sailing as it might be in more developed markets."

Patel believes it is important to view those who own and operate law firms as businesspeople, who simply want what all businesspeople want: not only to run their businesses as efficiently and profitably as possible, but also to work with tools that ease their day and minimise frustration. Because of this, his focus since arriving at Juta has been on digital transformation and technological innovation.

"Around the world, there has been a new appreciation for how technology can augment legal practice, making it easier, more efficient and more enjoyable. Automated drafting, document management and billing can make running a law firm cheaper, but this is just the beginning."

Global studies indicate that small law firms only spend an average of 60% of their time on client-facing activities. The rest of their time is spent dealing with administration, billing and accounting. Large firms have, especially over the past 10 years, been investing heavily in automation, lowering their costs and, as a result, threatening smaller players.

But new technology is changing this. Lower cost 'software as a service' licensing and delivery models are making it increasingly possible for small law firms to access these technologies, improving their ability to compete and thrive against large law firms.



Kamal Patel



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“Some of Juta’s customers, especially those who have been in the legal profession for decades, are surprised when they hear us speaking about technological innovation and digital transformation. They still associate us with book shops and hard-copy law reports,” Patel says.

While Juta is still very much in the business of compiling and delivering high-quality law reports, journals and textbooks to the South African legal profession, the bulk of its energies are now directed at making access to legal information more effective than it has ever been before.



LEGAL

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Jackie Rhodes & Kamal Patel, Juta and Company 13 Apr 2021



“Technology can offer insights into legal materials that were never possible, even for the brightest of legal minds,” Patel observes. This expertise, he says, is based on feedback Juta has received from lawyers on its Jutastat Evolve platform, a tool the company describes as a ‘cognitive analytical research solution for fast, accurate discovery, data insights and analytics.’

The Evolve platform not only allows users remote access to Juta’s full online legal resource offerings (including law reports and journals), but also efficiently mines vast amounts of data to locate, structure and map the most important information a user may require, even before they know they need it. One of Evolve’s most popular features is visual ‘mapping’ of a particular judgment’s treatment in other courts. The tool vividly shows where a judgment has been mentioned, criticised, confirmed, or overruled. This gives the user a clear and instant sense of whether the judgment is good law, controversial law, or obsolete, and also what the other most important cases are on the relevant point of law.



LEGAL

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Juta and Company 2 Mar 2021



The key to building powerful, tech-enhanced legal research tools such as Evolve is to treat each legal source — whether it be a judgment, statute, regulation or authoritative academic opinion — as a data point, and to use insights from data science to establish relationships between these data. These relationships can then be represented and linked graphically.

“Many first-time users are awestruck by the power of seeing the law laid out in front of them in a graphical representation. These kinds of insights were previously only available to the intuitions of the most learned of lawyers and, even then, were subject to cognitive bias and error,” Patel observes.

This does not mean that machines will replace lawyers altogether, in Patel’s opinion. “What this shows is that even at a highly skilled, professional level, humans and machines can develop a symbiotic relationship. Machines specialise in offering insights into data, and humans specialise in being creative with those insights. The point is, machines can free up cognitive capacity so that human effort can best be directed towards creativity, and this delivers huge benefits to the business.”

The possibilities of machine-aided practice are just beginning to be uncovered. Some large law firms in South Africa have even begun applying artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to automate some of the necessary tasks on major transactions, especially due diligence in mergers and acquisitions. Machines can quickly search hundreds of thousands of pages of information when vetting supplier contracts, for example, dramatically expediting the process and reducing the cost for the client.

Enhancing access to law

What is most exciting for Kamal, though, is that technology is offering a greater number of people access to law than ever before.

“As someone who has founded and run an SMME, I have personally experienced the frustration of the high costs of compliance with South African legislation and regulations, and the substantial legal fees small businesses sometimes have to pay to have a contract or shareholder agreement prepared. Many individuals and SMMEs are priced out of the market for legal services.”

Again, Patel believes that technology can be the solution: “For the first time, we are able to build online platforms that enable users requiring legal assistance to self-serve with a high degree of accuracy and effectiveness. Our goal is to get users as far as they can, guided by tech alone, so that the eventual cost of a lawyer’s time is kept to a minimum.”

Far from stealing business from lawyers, Patel believes that lowering barriers to entry will actually increase the size of the market for legal services. “Much of this is work that lawyers did not have access to in the past because the overall cost for the client was too high,” Patel says.



HR & MANAGEMENT

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Melinde Coetzee, Juta and Company 14 Feb 2019



The future of legal education

“Of all the developments we have witnessed over the course of the pandemic, the one that concerns me the most are the challenges being faced by students in our higher educational institutions,” says Patel, who believes this is something that should also concern anyone who cares about the legal profession’s future.

Most law schools across the country remain closed to in-person teaching due to the pandemic. As a result of this, the bulk of undergraduate teaching and learning has moved online, which has revealed deficiencies in the learning materials and support available to our future lawyers.

Despite some local publishers having started investing in good-quality online content before the pandemic in the form of ‘e-books’, much of this content did not make the most of the possibilities that online content has to offer. While having access to online books is certainly useful, tech-enhancement of text allows publishers to make their content more useful and interesting to students, and to cater for a wide range of learning needs and styles.

Juta has begun to develop a series of highly accessible multimedia online textbooks — a first in the South African market. In order to maximise their learning benefits to students, these ‘e-pubs’ are enhanced with a variety of media, including visual aids, audio glossaries, integrated video lectures and interactive quizzes that allow students to track their progress.

“Given that the rollout of vaccines in South Africa is progressing slowly, and future ‘waves’ of Covid-19 infections seem quite possible,” Patel says, “it is likely that e-learning on its own or in combination with some in-person tuition is here to stay.

“The first three law-focused multimedia e--ubs — which cover the law of contract, the law of persons and commercial law — have been incredibly well received by the market. The feedback we are getting from law students is that they love the opportunity to learn at their own pace, and select the tools that they find are most useful in aiding their individual understanding. This approach is really elevating the content from a dry read to an interactive learning experience,” Patel says.

“At this point in history, it is no longer possible to just fall back on our comfortable, old ways of doing things, especially not

in law and especially not in a country that is crying out for new ways of solving problems,” Patel concludes. “Juta remains committed to helping our country transform the challenges we face into opportunities to improve and grow, and we believe in the tools we have to do just this.”

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