

# **Beyond the Wig: Practical Steps into Legal Practice with A Focus ON Both Public and Private Sector Career Pathways**

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, distinguished colleagues and young legal professionals.

I am honoured to join this important conversation on practical career pathways in the legal profession. My thanks go to the Nigerian Bar Association Mentorship Committee for creating a platform like this to guide and inspire the next generation of lawyers. Today, I will reflect on my personal journey through private and public legal practice, and share insights on how young lawyers can navigate the diverse opportunities available in both sectors. In doing so, I hope to encourage thoughtful career decisions anchored on values, purpose, and professionalism.

## **The Value and Scope of Mentorship in Legal Practice**

Most of us here are mentors in some capacity, but I value this formal effort by the NBA to promote this spirit within the legal community. Mentoring isn't limited to family and acquaintances alone. It involves guiding the younger generation towards both professional and personal growth, considering societal development, trends, and socio-economic realities. Experts often emphasise that mentoring is not just about imparting knowledge, basic training, or transmitting technical skills, but also about instilling ethical values and sound judgment in the execution of professional duties.

## **Career Options for Young Lawyers: Public vs. Private Sector**

The law influences all aspects of life; therefore, career options for young lawyers are unlimited. In Nigeria, a young professional generally has two main choices: the **public sector** or the **private sector**.

## **The Private Sector**

Private practitioners are permitted to operate under their own names, either individually or as a firm. They have the freedom to decide on strategies, jurisdiction (firm location), briefs, areas of specialisation, and even clientele. The financial and social prospects are endless, which makes the field particularly appealing to young minds.

However, research has shown that for financial reasons, Nigerian lawyers in the private sector tend to engage in general practice, rather than aim for a specialised area of expertise. Very few lawyers handle cases that are of any particular interest to them, and the bar society is intensely stratified according to status. The clients select their legal representation based on their ability to afford the lawyer's services, which has very little to do with competence. Ultimately, a lawyer's clientele shapes his area of expertise.

## **The Public Service**

The public service, on the other hand, is anonymous in nature. The lawyer represents an institution or organisation and does not enjoy personal glory or choose his briefs. His duty and code of conduct are outlined by the Public Service Rules (PSR), in addition to his professional code of conduct. Public service is rendered to fulfil the mandates of an organisation, which often becomes the area of specialisation for the legal practitioner in the long term.

Regrettably, the common perception in Nigeria is that the public service is a slow and ineffective institution. Despite the promise of a consistent income, legal officers are often seen as lacking potential due to the structural and bureaucratic nature of their roles and the limited career progression. The system is underfunded and bureaucratic, attracting mainly young lawyers with no clear goals or interests, as well as those whose prospects in the private sector are not promising.

## **My Journey: From Private Practice to Public Service**

My personal experience started with private practice, where I directly worked under four seniors. The sector is highly competitive and prestigious, but with hard work, dedication, and humility, I was able to make a mark. Time management and multitasking are feasible with flexible working hours. During my years in private practice, I was able to engage in research and publish various scholarly works in different fields of law. Nonetheless,

it was at the point that I crossed into public service that I had the opportunity to touch a lot of lives, especially the underprivileged and voiceless in society. I ensured cases of rape were dealt with seriously in our states. To the best of my knowledge, there is no state from 2019 – 2023 where its Attorney-General has vigorously prosecuted rape cases and challenged light sentencing of rapists like the way it was done during my time as Attorney General in Jigawa State. Those cases, especially those at the Court of Appeal, have been reported.

When I was appointed the Attorney General of Jigawa State in the year 2019, I was able to make direct and meaningful contributions to the legal system in the State, notably in the areas of criminal justice sector and reforms in other sectors, which include the passing of Child Protection Law, Social Protection Law, etc. I was also able to review and advocate for the implementation of transparency in the Judicial Service Commission's selection of candidates for submission to the National Judicial Council (NJC) for the appointment of judicial officers in the State.

While engaging in all of the above activities, I actively handle civil and criminal cases at the trial and appellate courts. One of the cases is the Naira redesignation suit, in which some of us (State Attorneys General) challenged the Federal Government's decision to change certain naira denominations.

I was focused and determined to become a Senior Advocate of Nigeria, and in 2023, Almighty God, in His infinite mercy, enabled me to attain the esteemed rank of a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) despite the challenges I faced and six days thereafter, I was named the 5th Chairman of ICPC by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu GCFR.

### **Current Role at ICPC and Future Outlook**

As the Chairman of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), I have the opportunity to do much more. The Commission's legal officers are highly dedicated and competent lawyers with whom I am proud to discharge my duty every day.

So far, we have been able to focus on restorative justice, specifically asset recovery of proceeds of crime, expanding the prosecution mandates of the Commission to include money laundering, illicit financial flows and cybercrimes. The Commission is being more transparent by keeping its

website active with daily activities and digitising case management and reporting systems to reduce bureaucracy and speed up the work process. It is my observation also that preventive measures are very effective in curbing corruption and saving the economy, which is why we involve State Attorneys-General and the media into the system.

The shortcomings of the public service cannot be attributed to human resources alone, and efficiency varies from one tier to the other and from one organisation to the other.

## **Navigating the Public Service Landscape**

While the public service is often perceived as slow, ineffective, and bureaucratic, these challenges aren't insurmountable. My journey demonstrates that with strategic effort, a public servant can initiate significant change. The perceived "lack of potential" often stems from underfunding and rigid structures, yet these very constraints can foster ingenuity. By focusing on areas like criminal justice reform, advocating for transparency, and championing crucial legislation as I did in Jigawa State, legal officers can overcome systemic hurdles and drive impactful change. The key lies in identifying critical areas for reform and persistently pursuing solutions within the framework, proving that public service can indeed offer a dynamic and rewarding career path.

## **A Closer Look: Public vs. Private Practice**

When choosing a career path, young lawyers should consider the distinct characteristics of private and public practice. In **private practice**, you'll find a highly competitive environment with flexible hours, offering a broad range of cases that often shape your specialization based on client needs. While the financial prospects can be substantial, success often hinges on securing high-paying clients. In contrast, **public service** offers a stable income and the unique opportunity to contribute directly to institutional mandates, often leading to deep specialization in specific areas of law, such as anti-corruption or human rights. While personal glory is less evident, the impact on public welfare can be profoundly rewarding. Your work-life balance and progression path will vary significantly between the two, with public service often following structured advancement, while private practice offers more entrepreneurial freedom.

## **Tailoring Your Career Path**

Choosing between the public and private sector requires self-reflection. Consider your core motivations: are you driven by entrepreneurial spirit and direct client relationships, or by the desire to contribute to systemic change and public welfare? Reflect on your strengths: do you thrive in a highly competitive, client-acquisition-focused environment, or in a structured setting with a clear mandate? My own experience taught me that early exposure to diverse legal fields, even in private practice, built a foundational understanding that later proved invaluable in public service. As you explore options, actively seek out internships or pro bono opportunities in both sectors to gauge where your aptitudes and interests truly align. This practical experience, combined with a mentor's guidance, will empower you to make an informed decision that aligns with your professional aspirations and personal values.

### **The Indispensable Role of Mentorship**

Regardless of a lawyer's area of interest at the time of call to the bar, a mentor must not channel a mentee's experience towards a chosen or preferred area of practice without prior assessment of his performance on the field. The best approach is to expose the young lawyer to a variety of options, so that his choices are well informed and natural potential can be realized.

The role of mentorship is twofold. First is to pass knowledge, experience and good ethics to enable career progression and secondly, to provide moral and psychological support to foster responsibility and diligence in the discharge of professional duties. It is no secret, that the legal profession in Nigeria today is under intense scrutiny for falling standards of professionalism and ethics. It is very easy for an ambitious new wig to become absorbed in unethical conduct due to overzealousness, greed, prevalent corruption, economic hardship or client's expectations without proper guidance. A lawyer's duty, whether to a client or employer, in the public or private sector is mainly that of upholding the rule of law, protection of fundamental human rights and the pursuit of justice, which requires a higher standard of decorum than the client.

The importance of good ethical conduct for a lawyer cannot be overstated. Rule 1 of the Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners 2023 provides as follows:

“A lawyer shall uphold and observe the rule of law, promote, and foster the course of justice, maintain a high standard of professional conduct, and shall not engage in any conduct which is unbecoming of a legal practitioner.”

A young lawyer’s mind is full of pride, fulfilment and ambition. His vision is that of success and valour, but in an era of time constraints, shortage of opportunities and heightened professional demands, young minds are easily swayed by prestige and immediate benefits in making career choices. Real success is a product of proficiency which requires a taste of general practice to gain a broad perspective on different fields of practice. This is how mentorship becomes relevant in making career choices.

Mentorship is every experienced practitioner’s duty to the younger generation and to the nation. Thankfully, technology has provided tools for learning and connection that make discharging this responsibility easier. With limited resources, young lawyers can be mentored by anyone from any jurisdiction electronically or virtually. It is even possible to have multiple mentors in different areas of specialisation at the same time. This makes learning and gaining experience easier and faster.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, whether you choose public service or private practice, the key to a successful legal career lies in ethical conduct, professional excellence, and a clear sense of purpose. Embrace mentorship, explore widely, and stay grounded in service to justice and society. With focus, discipline, and the right guidance, every young lawyer can chart a rewarding and impactful path. Before drawing the curtains, I must acknowledge the roles played by my mentors: the late *Alhaji Aliyu Umar, SAN, former Attorney General of Kano State, Justice M.K. Dabo, Esq., Prof. Nasiru Adamu Aliyu, SAN, and Mr. Peter Aki.*

I thank the NBA once again for this opportunity to contribute to shaping the future of our noble profession.

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