

JOURNEY TO LEADERSHIP

Mrs. Sonal Tejpar, BCKK Chairperson & Partner, ALN Kenya | Anjarwalla & Khanna



Q1. Let's start by delving into your background. Could you tell us about your early experiences and how they shaped your career path?

I was born in Kenya but grew up in the UK, where my parents emigrated to when I was very small. London was a very different place when I was a child. I can remember that hardly any people of colour lived in our neighbourhood (North West London) but that slowly started to change in the 70s and '80s. After completing my law degree and the solicitor's exams, finding articles (the equivalent of a training contract or pupillage) with a law firm in London was difficult. I sent off so many applications and only secured a handful of interviews. I felt extremely lucky when I finally accepted a position with a small firm in Fleet Street, London. It felt to me that there was an unwritten rule that to demonstrate that I deserved being selected and justified my place as the only woman to be selected and a woman of colour to boot, I had to work harder and more efficiently than my male counterparts.

Q2. Tell us about your diverse experiences and years in this industry and what motivated you to become Partner at ALN Kenya | Anjarwalla & Khanna.

From about the age of 16 when I first started to study law at A level, there was never any question in my mind that I wanted to be anything other than a solicitor in the UK and with that becoming a partner is the natural progression. First a salaried partner then an equity partner and a real owner of the firm. My career trajectory took a massive hit when for family reasons, I left the firm I was with in London and my family moved to Kenya. (It was like getting to the snake's head on square 99 in Snakes & Ladders and descending backwards!).

When I joined Anjarwalla & Khanna (A&K) in 1997 at its only office in Mombasa as a young lawyer from London with no knowledge of Kenyan law or the legal landscape here, it was like starting all over again. Honestly, at the time I never expected to stay in Kenya very long as apart from my young children, all my family lived in the UK, and I didn't have any close family in Kenya. So, what I thought might be a sabbatical of sorts in my career changed when A&K opened an office in Nairobi and I moved here in 2001. When the Nairobi office began, we were essentially four lawyers and a few support staff trying to make a name for ourselves in the "big city". Everyone knew that we had come from Mombasa and therefore many thought of us as young upstarts trying to play with the "Big Boys" from legal practices that had been around for decades. Building A&K from those circumstances to what it is today is for me a rewarding and fulfilling experience.

We could not have imagined all those years ago the tremendous success and stature that the firm and ALN, the alliance of leading law firms across the continent that we founded in 2004, enjoy today. There is no question in my mind that this kind of growth and achievement is only possible when like-minded individuals work together and agree on a common goal: to be the best lawyers not only in Kenya but in Africa and demonstrate our core values at all times - to deliver the best for our clients while upholding our values of honesty, integrity and professionalism.

Q3. Shifting focus to ALN Kenya | Anjarwalla & Khanna, could you provide some insights into core values driving its growth and sustainability?

i) At ALN Kenya, we are driven by values prioritising client service, innovation, and sustainability. These values are central to our growth and long-term success. We pride ourselves on offering personalised, strategic legal solutions while staying ahead of industry trends through continuous innovation.

ii) It's easy to imagine, especially if you live in Kenya, where there's constant pressure to take shortcuts to get things done quickly, for example, paying someone. This is completely contrary to our core values and our success is a testament to the fact that it is possible to be a leader in your field by being honest!

iii) It is also necessary to be nimble and watchful of trends. Spotting where the next opportunity might lie whether in an explosion of cross-border services for clients who operate in more than one jurisdiction (which led to the formation of ALN), to recognising that tax services are critical in combination with legal services (which led to starting our Tax practice when all other lawyers relied on accountants for tax advice), to appreciating the value of offering forensics and investigations as part of our services (which led to our establishing the first Forensics & Investigations team as part of the law firm) are just some of the firsts that we are proud of.

On the non-legal services side, we are very conscious of our responsibilities in society both in Kenya and the region. In recognition of this, we implement various initiatives that are rapidly becoming integral to our law firm's identity and values. For example, we started the ALN Academy which apart from many other objectives, helps with legal training and education for people in Government.

Additionally, our CSR team was lauded as one of the most vibrant and effective in Kenya; and we have supported our partners, including The FlipFlopi Project to advocate for the ban on single-use plastics (SUPs) in East Africa by drafting the East African Community SUP bill which is currently at the East African Legislative Assembly legislature.

More recently, recognising that other countries have dedicated associations for insolvency and turnaround specialists, we established Kenya's first-ever Association of Turnaround & Insolvency (ATIK). I am honoured to serve as its inaugural chairperson.

Q4. How has your vision for the company evolved in response to recent challenges?

Our vision of being a leading law firm not only in Kenya but in Africa means amongst other things, that when we have particular challenges in one country, we have the benefit of switching focus to different markets. COVID-19 highlighted the benefits of technology in enabling seamless virtual meetings for work, connection, and collaboration. Our greater use of technology in our business reflects the physical restraints we got used to during the pandemic and the cost constraints which followed.

The legal landscape is evolving rapidly, and being able to pivot in the face of change is crucial for sustained success. By embracing digital transformation and innovative practices, we're better positioned to navigate the challenges that arise and continue delivering exceptional value to our clients.

Q5. Considering the organisational culture, what specific type of culture do you envision for the company, and what benefits do you believe it should yield?

I envision a culture at ALN Kenya that is collaborative, inclusive and focused on professional development. I believe a supportive and diverse workplace is key to unlocking creativity and delivering better client outcomes. By fostering an environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute, we not only enhance team satisfaction but also drive greater innovation and client satisfaction.

Q6. Reflecting on your journey to the CEO position, what are some of the most significant challenges you encountered as you progressed to this role?

One of the most significant challenges I've faced on the journey to becoming a Partner has been balancing client service demand with the broader responsibilities of contributing to the firm's strategic direction and at the same time being a single mother of two children with no family support on the ground. As a lawyer, you are deeply focused on achieving the best outcomes for your clients, but as a Partner, you also need to consider the firm's long-term growth and development.

Being a single mother as well is a struggle that most working mothers will be able to relate to! These various responsibilities have taught me the importance of time management and strategic prioritisation.

In addition, I strive to understand the evolving perspectives of younger generations, recognising the clear differences in how lawyers from my generation approach the profession compared to lawyers who are Gen Z. It's equally important to appreciate these generational shifts when engaging with clients and colleagues, as they shape interactions and expectations.



Mrs. Sonal Tejpar, Partner at Anjarwalla & Khanna (ALN Kenya), delivering opening remarks at the 2024 BCCK Public Private Dialogue (PPD) at Villa Rosa Kempinski, Nairobi.

Q7. Given the recent increased demand for integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into organizational activities, what is your perception of it, and how do you foresee its impact on businesses in the next five years?

AI is undoubtedly changing the legal and business landscape offering ways to streamline processes and increase efficiency. From legal research to document review, AI tools can significantly reduce the time spent on routine tasks, allowing lawyers to focus on more strategic aspects of their work. However, while AI will play a growing role in the next five years, it's important to maintain the human expertise that is essential to providing nuanced and thoughtful advice. We encourage our lawyers to leverage AI tools while rigorously fact-checking outputs to ensure accuracy and reliability.

Q8. What is your take on ESG and the key role it plays in organisations to address climate change?

ESG is critical in shaping the future of sustainable business practices, particularly in addressing climate change. Incorporating ESG principles into internal operations and client advisory services is a key aspect shaping different sectors helping organisations to be at the forefront as stewards of positive environmental change. In today's world, businesses that prioritise ESG are acting responsibly and building resilience for the future. At the same time, it is important to be mindful of some clients from more developed countries who are rethinking ESG and its importance vis à vis, for example, the need to return value to their shareholders. Balancing one's views about a particular issue such as climate change against one's client's views can be tricky if they are not aligned. In our firm when this occurs, it requires thoughtful and considered discussion before we agree to take on a matter.

Q9. As you reflect on your journey, what advice would you offer to growing leaders seeking to advance their careers?

My advice to growing leaders is to remain adaptable and embrace continuous learning to grow professionally and personally for you and others. The business and legal landscapes are constantly changing, and the ability to pivot and learn new skills is key to staying ahead. Building strong relationships within your organisation and with clients is crucial for personal and professional growth.

Lastly, be open to new challenges and opportunities that push you out of your comfort zone, as this is often where the most valuable growth occurs.

Q10. What three things would you advise aspiring business leaders looking to transition into leadership roles?

In a professional firm technical excellence is a prerequisite to becoming a partner so that has to be first and foremost. Coupled with that is developing strong communication skills since leadership demands clear communication and having the ability to bring on

Second, foster a collaborative mindset. Business success is rarely achieved in isolation, and creating a culture of collaboration will drive growth, results and better outcomes.

Third, embracing innovation and change. The world is evolving rapidly, and leaders who embrace new ideas and technologies will be better equipped to navigate challenges and lead their teams effectively.

Q11. Throughout your career, what three resources – books, movies, podcasts, etc. – have significantly influenced your journey?

Three books that have had a significant influence on me as a person and in turn helped me in my career are "Autobiography of a Yogi" by Paramhansa Yogananda which really kick started my spiritual journey. It has many important facets but the ones that remain with me the most is that people from different religions all used to think similarly at one time past and that the yearning for a career and material possessions are not the be all and end all of life. Being successful in one's work is not going to be sufficient to bring personal happiness.

I read "The Power of Now" by Eckhart Tolle soon after I moved to Nairobi when there was significant turmoil in my life both professionally and personally. It explains the importance of being present and not sweat about things that cannot be changed (for example, the past) or worry about what you cannot control (for instance, the future). Professor Richard Susskind's book on the "The End of Lawyers" which I read back in around 2010 was extremely prescient in predicting how technology would revolutionise the way that legal documents and services will be delivered and was well before its time. What he said then remains so true – that if lawyers do not seriously rethink the way they practice and embrace technology they will get left behind.

Parting Line

“ Thank you to the British Chamber of Commerce Kenya for this opportunity to share my journey and insights. It's an honour to be part of such a vibrant and dynamic business community in Kenya and the region. As we look to the future, I am excited about the opportunities that lie ahead for ALN Kenya and the broader business community.