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Africa's largest law firm shares why Learning Agility is essential for its graduate recruitment programme

Interview with



We interviewed ENSafrica's Lebitso Mokgatlé, HR Executive, and Thabang Ratau, Senior HRBP about their graduate programme, the role of Agility, and how they invest in the right talent.

ENSafrica is well renowned as Africa's largest law firm, with over 600 specialist practitioners and more than 200 years' experience. It is clearly no easy task to achieve and maintain this status. We sat down with two of their HR leaders to find out how they find the right talent fit for the organisation and what best practices they have learnt over the years.

ENSafrica's graduate programme brings on 30 to 40 candidate attorneys each year. Due to their pedigree, the firm attracts a lot of interest from law students with +- 520 applications per month. That is over 6,000 applications a year, or 150 applications per appointment.

There is tough competition between a large pool of talented candidates, with a lot of pressure to get it right. The onus is on HR to screen them effectively, select the right talent to invest in, and ensure that value is created as they grow in the business over time.



About Lebitso Mokgatlé:

Lebitso Mokgatlé is the HR Executive at ENSafrica and has been there for seven years. She is a qualified Coach and experienced Human Resources Executive with a demonstrated history of working in the professional services and financial services industries.



About Thabang Ratau:

Thabang Ratau has been at ENSafrica since 2016 and, as a Senior HR Business Partner, heads up their candidate attorney graduate programme. He has a long history of experience within specialist graduate recruitment at large South African law firms.



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Could you give us an idea of how you find the best talent in your graduate recruitment process?

Thabang: After screening based on academic performance, we do an initial interview to ascertain their career goals and get a first impression. Thereafter, we move on to the scientific assessment phase where we look at competencies, cognitive ability, motivations and Learning Agility. We also do a written technical test and a two-on-two debate exercise.

For successful candidates, there is a second round interview with the HR executive and an ENSafrica director. This interview is a mix of determining fit with the firm, structured competency-based questions from the Talentindex platform, and technical knowledge. Then we make an offer.

Where we are not 100% sure, we assess the student during a two-week vacation placement, where they work in teams and there is the opportunity to assess their soft skills, technical skills and how they manage deadlines over time.

Tell us about the value and impact of measuring Agility in your programme. How does this fit into and benefit the business?

Lebitso: Learning Agility has been a game changer for us. Before we actively measured it, we didn't realise what we didn't have. The level of candidates we have recruited since we started assessing agility has improved. People's ability to learn and take on feedback has increased; the business is definitely happier.

Thabang: Learning Agility is key to our graduate placement. It is all about whether a candidate can take information and use it effectively in a short space of time. In the past we have seen problems with placements where certain Agility measurements were too low.

Lebitso: We track ROI in terms of how many graduates stay on and are retained as associates. We aim to retain between 60% - 80% of our candidate attorneys. We now keep more than 70% and still have an upwards trend in retention. For example, in the 2019 placement group we retained approximately 80% of our graduates.

What is it like to work at ENSafrica, and how do new appointments experience the culture?

Lebitso: What makes ENS great are the people. Everyone is super smart and constantly challenged across the organisation, both in the legal department and in support services. The environment really pushes you to do better, because there is a fast pace with high expectations and everyone is operating at that level.

Thabang: There is a strong commitment to excellence, high workloads and a clear focus on quality. It is a great place to grow as a professional. Graduates find it very fast-paced, perhaps more so than they are used to. They really enjoy the caliber of clients and matters that they have the opportunity to deal with and are often surprised that they are able to contribute to such complex matters so early in their careers.



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What does it take to be a high performer at ENS?

Lebitso: Graduates need to have a great attitude. They need to be open to feedback, ready to learn and driven to do better. Those graduates who do well are focused on improving their performance and adding value to the team. They need to work hard at the foundational tasks to work up to the complex tasks.

Thabang: That's right, attitude gets you there quicker. It's important to be learning agile to be able to change gears and adapt. A big part of this is Self-awareness and being open to trying and failing, rather than being afraid to try.

How do graduates fit into your business strategy and contribute to the success of ENSAfrica?

Lebitso: Graduates are a core part of our strategy. We don't grow without them; graduates become our pipeline of future directors. Retention is extremely important to us, and we measure our current directors on their ability to obtain and retain graduates all the way through the pipeline.

Thabang: Graduates help us solve short, medium and long term strategic goals. The end goal is to create more directors and partners who will grow the firm, bring on work and set up their own teams. In the short to medium term, teams are set up with different charge-out rates to clients, and candidate attorneys are strategically important to keep project costs manageable.

What impact does the graduate programme have on the business from a human perspective?

Thabang: The impact of graduates is huge. If we don't retain candidates throughout their career track, there can be issues in the team makeup down the line. If you lose an associate, over time the balance of the department is thrown out. This can compromise future training and leadership development, because people simply don't have time and there is a larger threat of burnout. This underscores the importance of hiring and retaining the right talent.

Lebitso: Graduates are critical within the firm. It's up to HR to hire people who will help the team do well. If something goes wrong, it has the potential to be quite catastrophic. To avoid this, we invest a lot in training and expect directors to take responsibility for their candidates in terms of costs, time and effort.

What are some of the challenges you have experienced with graduate recruitment over the years, and how have you solved them?

Lebitso: In the past, we have tried to be everything to everyone. Now we are far more deliberate about the type of person we are looking for, as we know who will succeed. Sometimes, even the most brilliant people aren't going to be successful. We figure out as many things as possible about candidates before taking them on.

Thabang: HR is not only responsible for the candidate's career, we are responsible for the firm. As a consequence of being specific about the talent we hire, the business is far happier that we hit the mark more and more. We look for people with a good fit and who want to be at the firm; they need to get the most out of it.

What advice would you give to someone running a graduate recruitment programme?

Lebitso: You need to know why you have a graduate programme to start with, and what value it adds to the business. This impacts on how you structure it, who you recruit, how people relate to it and who invests in it.

Thabang: I think my biggest lesson is to always stick to your guns and know what you are looking for.



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Unlocking the strategic value of talent

Partner with Lumenii to deeply understand the value your talent brings to your business and untap their full potential.

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