

Legal Legacy

[Becca Challis](#) speaks to Funke Abimbola about racial prejudice and representation in the law industry

Tuesday 3 October 2017

As graduation looms, and other students like myself face the daunting prospect of 'entering the real world', I am becoming increasingly concerned with which career it is that I should be pursuing. The general advice is to think about what matters to you – how it is that you can help make a difference. As someone who is clueless as to what this is for me, I find myself looking for more advice. However, when I heard Funke Abimbola's story, there was no generic job-acquiring advice to sift through, but instead an emphasis on the values needed to overcome the obstacles that everyone will face at some point in their career, as well as in beginning one: perseverance, determination, hard work and ingenuity. It is through Abimbola's stronghold on these values that she has gone on to become a multi-award winning lawyer.

Funke Abimbola was born in Nigeria, into a family of medics. At the age of 16 she set out to convince her father that rather than "follow in the footsteps of the rest of her family in studying Medicine, she should study Law. As the eldest child, she knew that this would not be an easy task. She has clear advice for others who are facing the same challenge: "Remain focused and resolute about what you want to do and why. Have solid, valid reasons to back you up." She adds, "get the support of your teachers. My teachers played a key role in convincing my father to let me read law and I have no doubt that, had they not intervened, I would have ended up studying medicine."

Abimbola was able to persuade her father, "to continue funding my studies at a private school and then as an overseas student reading law at Newcastle." It was immediately after graduating from university that Abimbola "returned to Nigeria for the summer holiday and ended up staying for almost three years." Enrolling in the Nigerian Law School, Abimbola studied towards the Nigerian Bar, as well as gaining over two years' experience at a top law firm in Lagos. She was then admitted "as a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Nigeria" but decided to return to the UK, "completing the transfer test to qualify as a solicitor here."

On arrival in the UK, Abimbola applied to the Law Society to reduce her training contract based on her experience in Nigeria. They reduced her pre-admission training requirement from two years to just six months, however Abimbola found it difficult to find a firm to work with. She admits, "I thought the six months would be easy to find, but had underestimated the amount of cultural and racial bias that I would experience because of my obviously African name and being black." She had dreamed of becoming a corporate lawyer, but faced multiple opponents, one recruiter even saying that "corporate law was too competitive for a black woman."



Image: Funke Abimbola

At this point, with others telling her the impossibility of the task, Abimbola could have given up her aspirations entirely or gone back to Nigeria. But ‘giving up’ does not appear to be in Abimbola’s vocabulary. Determined to prove the recruiters wrong, she “cold-called the top 100 UK corporate law firms and 50 in-house legal teams, speaking to the team leaders in each to convince them to interview me.”

In her twenties and determined to get to where she wanted to be, Abimbola did the only thing she could – force people to see and speak to her. The reactions were mixed: “Some hung up or refused to take my call but some did agree to speak to me.” After securing several interviews, Abimbola accepted an offer to qualify within a large, fully-listed PLC within the entertainment sector, eventually being admitted as a solicitor in September 2000.

Abimbola’s Nigerian heritage and her time in Nigeria may have made her entrance into the legal world a difficult one, but she now sees this as an asset: it allows her “to relate to corporate clients from a broad range of cultures and backgrounds.” She adds that “many of my clients had actually worked in Nigeria at some point in their career, making me stand out even more.” Her name is particularly important to this: “Ironically, having initially struggled to find six months experience due to my African name, my name then made me unique and became my USP. There aren’t many UK corporate solicitors called Funke!”

From here, the only way was up for Abimbola. After working as an Assistant Solicitor for a few firms, she was promoted to Associate before becoming a Senior Solicitor at IBB. Soon, however, Abimbola was again facing obstacles in the workplace. She had her son at 28 and returning to work after a year of maternity leave “found that no-one else working in corporate law at my firm was having children at that age.” Childcare was difficult as “flexible working simply did not work when I was working in Central London due to the long hours culture”. She found this an “isolating and difficult time”, especially “coupled with my marriage breaking down “and becoming a single mother.”

Abimbola decided to relocate, moving out of London to “regional law firms that presented a much better life balance.” Determined to continue pursuing her career, her only option was to employ an au pair. This wasn’t necessarily her preferred choice, finding it “a huge compromise in terms of having someone in our house who wasn’t a family member, but the trade-off was the flexibility of this option.” Abimbola and her son employed au pairs for 11 years, and many have become “lifelong friends”.

“
I underestimated the amount of cultural and racial bias that I would experience because of being black

..

“

Abimbola began her work at Roche Pharmaceuticals in 2012. She was promoted to her current position as General Counsel (the chief lawyer providing legal advice to a company) in 2015. Abimbola lists this as her career highlight so far. She explains, “I am the first black She has also received both national and General Counsel in Roche’s history and currently the most senior black lawyer working in the Association of Women Solicitors, the Law Society, the National Diversity Awards and “determined to blaze a trail for others from under-represented groups to follow.” In working for Roche, Abimbola has also found a way to combine her legal passion with the medical legacy of her family. She says, “my father sadly passed away five years ago, but he was alive when I got my first job with Roche and was over the moon. He always felt proud of my legal career but also sad that I hadn’t pursued medicine like the rest of the family. He was delighted to see me able to combine law and medicine.”

Abimbola truly is passionate about her work at Roche: “The work we do at Roche is of the utmost importance to patient care. Roche is a truly innovative organisation to work for and the world’s largest biotech. I have worked with some extraordinary colleagues and none of us are ever too far away from the science underlying our work.”

Her work at Roche has been recognised by many organisations. Abimbola was listed by Debrett’s 500 as the most influential black lawyer in the UK which was “the icing on the cake” for her. Abimbola says that “it was surreal seeing my name listed with other leaders in law including Attorney General Jeremy Wright, Lord Neuberger (recently retired Supreme Court President) and Lady Hale (current Supreme Court President).”

She has also received both national and international recognition for her work from the Association of Women Solicitors, the Law Society, the National Diversity Awards and from the European Diversity Awards, among others. Most recently, Abimbola received recognition in the Queen’s birthday honours list. She was awarded an MBE in June 2017 for her services to diversity in the legal profession and to young people.

“

I am the first black General Counsel in Roche’s history and the most senior black lawyer in the UK pharmaceutical industry

”

She says this honour was “a wonderful surprise and a genuine shock!” She had to keep her news secret for six weeks until the list was officially announced. She says that “once the news became public, I received hundreds of messages of congratulations.” Abimbola had been nominated by multiple individuals and “over 35 letters of support had been sent to the Cabinet Office.”

Abimbola’s work towards greater diversity is something she’s deeply passionate about. She also has very clear steps that she believes we should follow to improve the situation: “We need targeted interventions starting from school, focusing on bright students from a broad range of backgrounds and supporting them early. Bursary schemes and early outreach programmes that include mentoring have proven very successful in developing more diverse entry-level talent into both law and business.” She also recognises that changing attitudes in recruitment is beginning to make a difference: “Many organisations now recruit from universities outside the Russell Group which has resulted in more diverse talent”, while “other organisations support apprenticeships, doing away with the need to go to university altogether.”

However, as Abimbola states, “diversity is half the battle.” She believes that, “to gain true equality, we

have to work on inclusion too. This means embracing differences as a means of gaining a competitive edge and supporting employees so they feel they belong.”

This can be done through the creation of “employee networks (supported by committed, senior leaders and allies), mentoring programmes (including reverse mentoring) and the sponsorship of diverse talent for key, senior roles.” A more hands-on approach is needed, as Abimbola says, “the main point to make is that this does not happen by accident – targeted and focused interventions are needed.”

Abimbola is also dedicated to gender equality in the workplace. She believes that the gender wage gap can be decreased by “developing a pipeline of female talent and supporting that pipeline into senior leadership.” Abimbola highlights that attitudinal changes are integral to developing this: “there are many barriers to women progressing into senior leadership including systemic challenges, our own limiting beliefs and societal challenges.

“To become a senior leader requires a great deal of courage, motivation and self-belief. You do need to master the art of promoting yourself, yet women are often more harshly judged for promoting themselves than men, simply because society does not expect women to do so.”

This is shown in the approach to job applications, as Abimbola details: “Research has shown that a man will sometimes apply for a job if he only meets five to ten per cent of the criteria whereas a woman won’t consider applying unless she meets close to 100 per cent of the criteria. Yet every job advert describes the ideal candidate who simply does not exist.”

Helping women’s confidence in the workplace can be done “with targeted interventions like coaching on how [women can] network and market themselves” and Abimbola emphasises her beliefs that this will “really help to close that gap.” She also feels that “gender based leadership targets are also key”, adding that “what doesn’t get measured doesn’t get done.”



Image: Funke Abimbola

However, the promotion of women in the workplace cannot be done by women alone. Abimbola believes “firmly in the important role of male gender champions in being allies in championing women for senior roles”. After all, only 24 per cent of senior business roles are held globally by women, according to Forbes, and 33 per cent of global firms have no women in senior management. Change, therefore, needs to be affected not only by women, but by men too.

Abimbola has tried to instil the importance of this in her son, now 15. She says he is “very independent – he cooks, helps me with chores around the house, does his own ironing, walks himself to and from school with friends and so on.”

Despite being a “typical teenager in many ways”, it sounds as though he has inherited his mother’s fighting spirit: “He has been coming with me to my diversity talks and speaking engagements since he was nine years old, so the cause has become second nature to him too, as has networking and public

speaking. He has been with me to Parliament and met MPs and other politicians. He signed up to UN Women's 'He For She' initiative when he was 13 and is a male gender champion." Abimbola adds that he is "always being recognised for his leadership at school - long may this continue!"

Hopefully with the changes that Abimbola is fighting for in diversity and gender equality, management can become more varied and representative. Not only is Abimbola seeking to make significant changes in these fields, but she is also working for a pharmaceutical company which is innovating the ways in which we treat cancer and many other diseases. Funke Abimbola really is making a difference. M



Most Read

Discussed

1. [The World's Rudest Word](#)
2. [The F**k it Philosophy](#)
3. [Life behind closed doors: the hidden York sex trade](#)
4. [Fresher Initiations](#)
5. [A good face for radio](#)
6. [York: The UK's Human Rights City](#)

Write for Nouse Features

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

More in Features

[York: The UK's Human Rights City](#)

[Q & A with Mark Smith](#)

[Heartaches and Pain](#)

[A Quirky Christmas](#)

[Extinction Rebellion Q&A](#)

[That \(Not So\) Festive Feeling](#)

[About Nouse](#)
[Who's Nouse](#)
[Website Credits](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Archives](#)
[Student Discounts](#)
[Print Editions](#)

Mini-Sites

[Nouse on Twitter](#)

[Nouse on Facebook](#)

[Nouse on Google+](#)

© 1964–2018 Nouse

[Policies](#) |

