

Building Experience Without Formal Employment



Contents:

Introduction 01

Reframing Experience in
African Fashion Law 03

What Counts as Legitimate
Experience 05

Students and Lawyers: Different
Risks, Different Paths 11

Ethical Boundaries and Reality
Checks 15

How to Document and Present
Early Experience 17

Key Takeaways 20

01.

INTRODUCTION

Across African fashion markets, the biggest barrier for students and early-career lawyers is not talent or interest. It is access.

Formal fashion law roles are limited. Entry-level positions are rare. Many opportunities are unstructured or invisible. As a result, aspiring practitioners are often told to “get experience” without clear guidance on how to do so ethically, strategically, or credibly.

This resource exists to address that gap.

Day 4 reframes experience as evidence of competence, not payroll status. It shows how early-stage lawyers can begin practicing responsibly, without misrepresenting expertise, exploiting themselves, or being exploited by others.

02.

REFRAMING EXPERIENCE IN AFRICAN
FASHION LAW

In many African fashion ecosystems, legal work already happens outside traditional employment structures. Brands rely on external advisors. Designers operate informally. Platforms move faster than regulation. Much legal engagement is advisory, educational, or preventative rather than transactional.

As a result, early experience often looks different.

Experience may be:

- Project-based rather than role-based
- Self-initiated rather than assigned
- Built gradually rather than granted

This does not make it less valid. It makes how you document and frame it more important.

03.

WHAT COUNTS AS LEGITIMATE
EXPERIENCE

Not all activity is experience. And not all experience is ethical.

Legitimate early experience must meet three standards:

1. It develops real skills
2. It respects professional boundaries
3. It produces evidence you can stand behind

Day 4 focuses on four pathways that meet these standards.

01. Portfolio Development

A portfolio is not a CV. It is a record of thinking, analysis, and application. In fashion law, portfolios may include:

- Short legal explainers written for non-lawyers
- Contract templates with commentary on use cases
- Regulatory summaries tailored to specific markets
- Risk checklists for small brands or creatives

A strong portfolio shows:

- How you identify legal issues
- How you adapt law to real business contexts
- How you communicate with industry stakeholders

Portfolios are especially powerful in markets where employers value demonstrated understanding over formal titles.

02. Research and Writing as Credibility Tools

Writing is one of the most ethical ways to build early credibility. This includes:

- Articles on local fashion law issues
- Research briefs on regulation, labour, or IP
- Commentary on emerging industry trends
- Case analysis grounded in African contexts

Early-stage practitioners should:

- Write within their level of competence
- Avoid presenting opinion as settled law
- Cite sources clearly
- Focus on explanation, not performance

Consistent, thoughtful writing builds trust long before employment does.

03. Supporting Small Brands Responsibly (Advisory, Not Representation)

Many aspiring lawyers begin by assisting small designers or emerging brands. This can be valuable, but it carries risk.

Responsible support means:

- Being clear about your level of qualification
- Avoiding court representation or regulated work where prohibited
- Providing education, templates, or issue-spotting rather than legal guarantees
- Knowing when to refer matters to qualified counsel

This type of work is about supporting better decision-making, not replacing professional services. Handled properly, it builds industry literacy and trust. Handled poorly, it damages reputations early.

04. Volunteering and Shadowing Pathways

Volunteering and shadowing remain valid entry points when done intentionally. These pathways work best when:

- The learning objective is clear
- Boundaries are defined
- Contributions are meaningful, not extractive

Examples include:

- Assisting on research projects
- Supporting compliance reviews under supervision
- Shadowing advisory work in firms or consultancies
- Contributing to industry initiatives or policy work

Unpaid does not mean unstructured. Learning must still be deliberate.

04.

STUDENTS AND LAWYERS: DIFFERENT
RISKS, DIFFERENT PATHS

Core question:

“If I am not formally employed in fashion law right now, what can I do that is legitimate, ethical, and actually counts?”

01. Students: Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Not Yet Called to the Bar

Where students are most vulnerable

- Overclaiming competence
- Being pushed into unpaid “legal” work
- Confusing exposure with experience

For students, portfolios can focus on:

- Research briefs
- Legal explainers
- Case analysis
- Regulatory mapping

Recommendations:

- Do not present portfolio work as client representation.
- Do not present yourself as a lawyer or provide legal assurances.

02. Lawyers: Newly Qualified or Junior Lawyers and Lawyers Specialising Outside Fashion Law

Where lawyers are most vulnerable

- Underestimating their competence
- Waiting passively for formal roles
- Doing work informally without documenting it

For lawyers, portfolios should include:

- Contract drafting samples
- Regulatory analyses tied to transactions
- Risk frameworks and advisory notes

Recommendations:

- Target shadowing first
- Volunteering should align with your long-term positioning
- Invest your time in projects intentionally

05.

ETHICAL BOUNDARIES AND REALITY
CHECKS

This is not permission to work endlessly for free. Unethical arrangements include:

- Performing advanced legal work without supervision
- Being positioned as “legal counsel” without qualification
- Replacing paid roles under the guise of exposure
- Accepting responsibility without authority

Professionalism early protects your future credibility.

06.

HOW TO DOCUMENT AND PRESENT EARLY EXPERIENCE

Evidence matters more than claims. Strong documentation includes:

- Clear descriptions of your role and scope
- Samples of written work or frameworks
- Reflections on what you learned
- Boundaries you observed

This allows others to assess your readiness honestly.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

- WHAT SKILLS CAN YOU PRACTICE ETHICALLY AT YOUR CURRENT LEVEL?
- WHAT EVIDENCE COULD YOU BEGIN BUILDING THIS MONTH?
- WHERE ARE YOU MOST AT RISK OF OVERSTEPPING, AND HOW WILL YOU AVOID IT?

07.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR DAY 4

- IN AFRICAN FASHION LAW, CAREERS ARE OFTEN BUILT BEFORE THEY ARE RECOGNISED.
- THOSE WHO SUCCEED EARLY ARE NOT THOSE WHO CLAIM EXPERIENCE THE LOUDEST, BUT THOSE WHO BUILD IT CAREFULLY, DOCUMENT IT HONESTLY, AND POSITION IT INTELLIGENTLY.
- YOU HAVE TO BE DOING THE WORK BEFORE THE TITLE ARRIVES.

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