

Case Study

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Von Seidels
Intellectual Property
Attorneys

How to build a digital advantage

“Success occurs when preparation meets opportunity.”

Erik van der Vyver, patent attorney and founding partner, explains how investment in digitalization enabled IP law firm Von Seidels to create a platform for growth into Africa – even through the pandemic.

It was back in 2006, while sitting on outdoor garden furniture in a small rental office in Cape Town, South Africa, that patent attorney Erik van der Vyver and his co-founding partners put into motion the plans for the Von Seidels IP firm. The small team of eight IP specialists (six attorneys and two admin professionals) had left a larger commercial law firm with the aim of setting up an IP boutique to serve the Cape Town market and provide a fresh, substantive alternative to local and foreign clients.

“At the time, most South African IP firms tended to be based up north in Pretoria or Johannesburg, close to the patent and trademark office CIPC,” explains Erik, adding that many well-meaning peers advised them against opening in the port city, also affectionately called the ‘Mother City’. “They didn’t think there would be enough IP activity in Cape Town and that it wouldn’t work, so in a sense, it represented a significant risk.”

However, Erik and his partners had the foresight to understand that digitalization could make all the difference: “We knew that if we were going to compete with those larger and more established firms, we needed to focus on technology and design our systems to be as slick and efficient as possible,” he says. “The first thing we did was invest in an IT server. The second was to invest in an IP management system.”

Erik and his partners had used Patricia™ in their previous firm, so it was the natural choice for the newly formed Von Seidels. “We’d had a good experience with the people from Patrix and understood the potential of the Patricia IP management system,” says Erik. “We had our first meeting with the Patrix team over that same outdoor garden furniture in that same rental office.”

Patricia: Support from the ground up

The implementation of Patricia was core to the firm’s strategy: “We had the benefit of starting from scratch, without any legacy systems or basements full of files to manage,” he explains, “so, we took the opportunity to sit back and customize Patricia based on how we wanted it to work. For example, keeping what we liked from using it at our previous firm, but also taking the time to change or improve things we thought could be done better.”

Patricia also played a vital role in the beginning by helping to reassure customers of the new firm’s professionalism. “We wanted our customers to be comfortable about the quality of our processes. That’s also why we applied for and achieved ISO 9000 certification for quality management,” agrees Erik, “and that also might not have been possible without Patricia.”

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As it turned out, Cape Town had a phenomenal client base, from academic spin-outs to technology start-ups, just waiting for an IP firm of substance to open on their doorstep. In addition, the continent of Africa – and its potential audience of 1.5 billion people – has also begun to be taken far more seriously by international brands over the past decades. Today, the eight employees at Von Seidels' official launch in March 2007 has grown into a team of more than 100, with additional offices opened in Johannesburg, Abuja in Nigeria, Namibia for the ARIPO member states, and Cameroon to serve the OAPI territory.

Patricia functions as the engine behind all that activity, with dedicated workflows established for each country or zone, within the one system. "Patricia has grown with us and also supported our growth," says Erik, explaining that while a lot of IP firms that expand typically do so via merger or acquisition, leaving them with legacy systems that they need to merge, Von Seidels purposefully did the opposite: "We wanted to work from one common system as we grew."

This coincided with Patrix's own investment in developing a web-based and digital platform for customers. "We were able to expand to new locations more easily because we could do it digitally," agrees Erik. "The new browser is so advanced, you can log straight into the main system securely from anywhere."

Early adoption of Patricia's Extended Document Management System (DMS) also enabled Von Seidels to "achieve the holy grail" of paperless working: "The DMS formed a core part of the installation because we knew from the beginning we wanted to manage paperless files," he explains.

"It has given us a significant advantage, especially as the Patricia™ search functionality has increased. It's so quick now to find documents."

The importance of customization

For Erik, it is also the ability to customize Patricia™ that has made a major difference as Von Seidels has expanded. "Attempting to keep track of IP across the continent without Patricia would not be easy," he says. "You can't simply 'file an IP right in Africa,' there are a multitude of different jurisdictions to navigate, each with their own rules or procedures."

Much of the African IP system itself is still reliant on paper, of course, notes Erik: "But Patricia enables us to access information -for the relevant paperwork- at one click of a button, which eliminates error and makes the process more seamless. Plus, the continent is digitalizing fast, and as more patent and trademark offices come online, we'll be poised to harness the potential for automation."

In addition, as the continent's population has become more digital, "enforcement has become a much bigger deal. We've invested significantly in our anti-counterfeiting footprint, and that's also all managed via Patricia. It takes the guesswork out of the management of our suppliers and enforcement activities and helps us to soak up the pressure of time-sensitive activities, such as raids."

Erik's advice to other IP professionals is to not be scared of customizing Patricia. "Being able to tailor it to how you want to work is one of the system's major strengths," he says. "Not only can customization help to centralize and streamline day-to-day processes, but it also enables you to use the system as a content management system for your own organization."



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For example, we also use Patricia to keep track of business development activities, such as tenders, so that we're automatically reminded of deadlines and the data is stored for future use."

While digitalization has been a core strategy for Von Seidels from the start, Erik notes that you don't have to have IT or Patricia expertise in-house to make the best use of the system. Not only is the Patrix team always on hand to support but, as a customer, you also get a say in how the system is evolved. He says: "Their development roadmap is to a large extent dictated by the users and you really do feel like you have input into what they're developing. It's a great organization in this respect as, if enough users feel strongly about an improvement, Patrix will take it on."

Prepare to succeed

As a self-proclaimed Xennial – a term used to describe the generation born in the 70s and 80s who experienced an analog childhood, but digital adulthood – Erik and his partners seem to have had a sixth sense for the need to move towards a more digitalized way of working. The unexpected shift to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic provides a case in point. The firm had already been preparing for remote working for some time and had implemented a work-from-home policy the previous year as a perk for long servers.

"When COVID-19 hit, it meant we knew what to do," he says, "within three days, our entire team was set up to work from home, and much of that time was spent on purchasing laptops, as we'd had the luxury of already stress-testing the system."

Patricia was an indispensable factor in that roll-out, but so too was the firm's approach to technology as a tool to help employees build a better work-life balance. "It's a way of thanking people for their dedication," agrees Erik, adding: "Could we have anticipated that we would all be working from home at some point in the future? Yes, I think so. What is unexpected was when and how it happened, not that it did."

About Patrix IP management software

Patrix specializes in software solutions with Patricia™, an all-inclusive, platform agnostic, IP case management system that has helped professionals for over 20 years. While Patricia delivers all the bells and whistles you come to expect from an industry standard, it is our company's philosophy that sets us apart. We understand that implementing a new system is a big investment in time, money, internal resources, and knowledge. Our philosophy is to safeguard that investment for years to come by providing continuity to our clients in our product development, choice of technology, and upgrade path. Choosing Patrix as a partner means zero upgrade fees, full transparency on costs, and the latest technology at your fingertips.



Erik van der Vyver
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