

TRANSFORMING LEGAL SERVICES IN MALAYSIA: BARRIERS, TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE, INTERNATIONALISATION, AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian legal profession is operating within an increasingly complex environment shaped by technological development, changing client expectations, regulatory requirements, internationalisation and continuing concerns about access to justice. This study examines the principal barriers and challenges affecting the delivery and development of legal services in Malaysia, with particular attention to technological adoption, professional capability, organisational sustainability, regulatory constraints and international legal-service participation. A qualitative and descriptive research approach was adopted using secondary sources, including academic literature, professional publications, legal materials and Malaysian Bar resources, together with a case-based perspective on legal-firm practice. The findings indicate that Malaysian lawyers face interconnected challenges rather than isolated professional difficulties. Technological transformation offers opportunities to improve document management, communication, legal research, workflow efficiency and access to services, but adoption is constrained by financial costs, digital skills, cybersecurity concerns, confidentiality obligations and uncertainty regarding professional responsibility. The study also identifies regulatory considerations as an important factor influencing the development of technology-enabled and cross-border legal services. Internationalisation presents opportunities for Malaysian law firms to expand through strategic partnerships, specialised expertise, professional networks and digital platforms, although regulatory and jurisdictional differences may limit such expansion. Access to justice remains another significant concern, particularly for vulnerable and lower-income groups who may experience financial, geographical and informational barriers to obtaining legal assistance. The study argues that sustainable development of Malaysian legal services requires a coordinated approach combining technological capability, professional development, regulatory responsiveness, organisational quality management and stronger legal-aid mechanisms. The paper concludes that technology should complement rather than replace professional legal judgement and that innovation should remain aligned with professional ethics, client protection and equitable access to justice.

Keywords: *Malaysian legal services; legal technology; cross-border legal services; internationalisation; access to justice*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Legal services have traditionally been understood as professional assistance provided by Legal services have traditionally centred on the provision of professional advice, representation and

assistance in legal proceedings. These functions remain central to legal practice, but the nature of legal service delivery has changed considerably in recent years. Growing legal complexity, changing client expectations, economic pressures, globalisation and rapid technological development have altered the environment in which lawyers and law firms operate. Clients increasingly expect legal services to be accessible, responsive and efficient, while lawyers are required to manage new forms of communication, electronic information and technology-supported processes alongside their conventional professional responsibilities. Despite these changes, trust, confidentiality, professional competence and accountability continue to form the foundation of the lawyer–client relationship (Ab. Wahab & Khairi, 2020).

In Malaysia, these developments have created a legal profession that must balance established professional practices with changing technological and market conditions. The adoption of legal technology, including digital document management, electronic communication, online platforms and artificial intelligence, offers opportunities to improve the efficiency and quality of legal work. Technology can assist lawyers in managing information, communicating with clients and carrying out routine tasks more efficiently. However, technological adoption is not without difficulties. Jalil and Sheriff (2020) observe that legal technology is challenging the traditional legal landscape in Malaysia, requiring law firms to reconsider established methods of delivering legal services. The adoption of new technologies may therefore require financial investment, organisational adjustment and changes in the skills and working practices of legal practitioners.

Access to justice represents another significant issue in the provision of legal services. Although Article 5 of the Federal Constitution provides important protection for individual rights, access to legal assistance is not necessarily equal across different groups within society. Malaysia's legal aid framework, including the Legal Aid Act 1971, aids individuals who may not have the financial means to obtain private legal representation. Nevertheless, affordability, accessibility and public awareness remain relevant factors in determining whether individuals seek professional legal assistance. Some members of the public may also be reluctant to consult lawyers because of concerns about cost, complexity or the perceived difficulty of legal processes. These circumstances indicate that the availability of legal services does not, by itself, guarantee effective access to justice. At the same time, law firms face increasing pressure to remain competitive while responding to changing expectations regarding the speed and accessibility of legal services (Susskind, 2019).

The changing legal environment has also increased the importance of professional skills beyond traditional legal knowledge. Newly qualified lawyers may possess sound academic knowledge but have limited practical experience in areas such as client communication, digital information management and the use of technology in professional practice. The transition from legal education to practice can therefore be demanding, particularly where firms expect junior lawyers to work effectively with digital systems and technology-based processes. Continuous professional development is consequently important in enabling lawyers to remain competent in a changing professional environment. Legal practitioners increasingly need a combination of substantive legal knowledge, practical skills, communication abilities and technological competence. However, technological capability must be developed alongside professional ethics, confidentiality and the duties owed to clients.

Regulation is another factor that may affect the development of legal services in Malaysia. Professional rules and established regulatory requirements are intended to protect the integrity of legal practice and the interests of clients, but they may also influence the extent to which firms can adopt new approaches to service delivery. The use of artificial intelligence, online legal platforms and other digital tools raises questions concerning professional responsibility, accountability, data protection and the unauthorised provision of legal services. These issues are particularly important where technological systems perform functions that were traditionally undertaken by legal professionals. The Malaysian Bar has recognised the growing importance of technology and has considered its implications for the future of the profession (Jalil & Sheriff, 2020).

The increasing reliance on digital systems also creates concerns regarding cybersecurity and client confidentiality. Electronic documents, cloud-based systems, online communication and digital storage can improve the organisation and accessibility of legal information, but they may expose firms to privacy and security risks. Lawyers have professional obligations to protect confidential client information, and these obligations remain relevant regardless of the technology used to process or communicate such information. Consequently, technological development within legal practice requires appropriate safeguards to ensure that greater efficiency does not come at the expense of professional responsibility and client protection.

Against this background, this study examines the principal barriers and challenges faced by Malaysian lawyers in delivering and developing professional legal services. Attention is given to accessibility, affordability, technological adoption, professional skills, regulatory requirements and changing client expectations. The study also considers the potential role of legal technology in addressing existing limitations in service delivery. Previous scholarship suggests that technological adaptation and changes in the organisation of legal work are increasingly relevant to the future of legal practice (Jalil & Sheriff, 2020; Susskind, 2019).

The study further considers how Malaysian law firms and individual practitioners can respond to these challenges while maintaining the standards expected of the legal profession. Greater investment in appropriate technologies, continuous professional development, improved public awareness and the modernisation of legal procedures may support more accessible and efficient legal services. The future development of the Malaysian legal profession will therefore depend not simply on the adoption of technology, but on the ability of lawyers and legal institutions to integrate innovation with professional values, regulatory requirements and the continuing need to protect clients' interests.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The transformation of legal practice has attracted growing scholarly attention as lawyers and law firms respond to changes in technology, client expectations, regulation and access to justice. Legal practice is no longer limited to face-to-face consultations, physical documentation and conventional courtroom representation. Electronic communication, digital databases, artificial intelligence (AI), online platforms and electronic filing systems are increasingly incorporated into legal work. These developments offer opportunities to improve efficiency, reduce administrative burdens and expand access to legal assistance. At the same time, they introduce concerns relating to professional competence, confidentiality, accountability, organisational readiness and regulatory compliance. For the Malaysian legal profession, the central issue is therefore not simply

whether technology should be adopted, but how technological developments can be incorporated without weakening the professional principles that underpin legal practice.

The literature indicates that access to legal services is shaped by several interconnected factors, including affordability, public awareness, professional capacity, technological readiness and the regulatory environment. Legal assistance is particularly important for vulnerable groups, for whom financial or institutional barriers may limit the ability to obtain appropriate representation. Ab. Wahab and Khairi (2020) emphasise the continuing importance of justice, legal assistance and professional responsibility in addressing barriers experienced by vulnerable non-citizens in Malaysia. Their discussion demonstrates that access to justice extends beyond the formal availability of legal institutions. Individuals must also be able to identify, approach and afford appropriate legal assistance. Trust and confidentiality are equally important because clients must have confidence that lawyers will protect their interests and handle sensitive information responsibly. These considerations remain relevant even when services are delivered through digital channels.

2.1 Types of Challenges Faced by Malaysian Lawyers

Access to legal services remains one of the fundamental concerns affecting the legal profession. Barriers may arise from the cost of professional services, limited public knowledge of legal rights, difficulties in identifying suitable lawyers and the perceived complexity of legal procedures. For individuals with limited financial resources, these difficulties can become particularly significant. Ab. Wahab and Khairi (2020) highlight the barriers faced by vulnerable non-citizens in Malaysia and demonstrate that access to justice is influenced by social, institutional and economic circumstances. The findings are relevant to the wider legal profession because lawyers operate within a system in which professional obligations must be balanced with the need to make legal assistance reasonably accessible. The availability of legal professionals does not necessarily mean that legal services are equally accessible to all members of society.

Technological development has introduced another major challenge. Digital tools are increasingly used for legal research, document preparation, case management, communication and information storage. Jalil and Sheriff (2020) argue that legal technology is challenging the traditional legal landscape in Malaysia and requires legal practitioners to reconsider established methods of delivering services. The significance of this development extends beyond the acquisition of software. Lawyers must understand the capabilities and limitations of technological systems and determine how these tools can be incorporated into professional work without compromising confidentiality, accuracy or accountability. The process therefore involves changes in professional behaviour and organisational culture as well as investment in technological infrastructure.

Professional competence has consequently become broader than substantive knowledge of law. Lawyers now need to manage digital information, communicate through electronic platforms and assess technology-assisted outputs. Continuous professional development is important in maintaining competence as professional practices evolve. Abd Aziz et al. (2020), although examining franchisors in the education and learning sector, draw attention to the barriers that organisations may encounter when expanding and adapting to changing environments. Their

discussion is relevant to the legal profession in demonstrating that organisational capability, resources and readiness can influence the success of adaptation. For law firms, professional development therefore needs to extend beyond conventional legal training and include skills relevant to contemporary methods of service delivery.

The growing volume of legal information also strengthens the case for technological adoption. Lawyers routinely handle legislation, case authorities, contracts, correspondence and other documents that require accurate storage and retrieval. Conventional approaches may become increasingly demanding as the volume of information grows. Digital document management systems, legal research platforms and AI-supported applications can assist with information organisation and routine tasks. Jalil and Sheriff (2020) note that technology is altering the traditional structure of legal services in Malaysia. Properly implemented, technology may enable lawyers to devote more time to matters requiring professional judgement while reducing repetitive administrative work. Nevertheless, these benefits depend on appropriate implementation, training and supervision.

Technological adoption may also generate new forms of professional risk. Lawyers may hesitate to rely on digital systems because of concerns regarding reliability, cybersecurity, data protection and professional liability. The use of automated tools does not transfer professional responsibility from the lawyer to the technology provider. Where an AI system produces inaccurate information or a digital platform exposes confidential client material, questions may arise regarding who bears responsibility for the resulting harm. Cobbe and Singh (2021) identify important legal and policy questions surrounding AI as a service, particularly in relation to responsibility and liability. Their analysis is relevant to legal practice because it demonstrates that technological convenience must be considered alongside accountability and risk management.

Client expectations have also changed. Digital communication has made rapid responses and remote interaction increasingly common in professional services. Susskind (2019) argues that online courts and digital methods of justice delivery have significant implications for the future of legal services. In Malaysia, online consultations, electronic communication and digital information services may provide additional channels through which clients can engage with lawyers. These arrangements could be particularly useful where geographical distance or other practical constraints make face-to-face consultation difficult. However, digital delivery does not automatically resolve access problems. Individuals may lack reliable internet access, technological literacy or confidence in online legal services. Digitalisation may therefore reduce some barriers while creating new ones.

The changing relationship between lawyers and clients also places greater emphasis on responsiveness and service quality. Clients increasingly expect legal practitioners to communicate clearly, respond within reasonable periods and provide information through convenient channels. Law firms must therefore manage professional expectations alongside competitive pressures. Technological systems can support client communication and information management, but they cannot replace professional judgement and interpersonal interaction. Najih and Wiryani (2021), in their discussion of technological and educational adaptation in Indonesia, emphasise the importance of developing capabilities that support effective engagement with changing environments. Although their study is outside the Malaysian legal sector, it provides a useful

comparative perspective on the need for professionals and institutions to develop appropriate digital competencies.

Professional education is another important area of concern. Newly qualified lawyers may possess substantial theoretical knowledge but have limited exposure to the practical demands of legal practice. Contemporary practice requires communication, negotiation, problem-solving, client management and technological skills in addition to substantive legal knowledge. The transition from university to professional practice may therefore be challenging where graduates are not adequately prepared for the operational realities of law firms. Saleem (2021) discusses broader issues concerning professional and social participation in Malaysia, illustrating the importance of institutional and professional environments in shaping participation and career development. For the legal profession, structured mentoring and continuous professional development may assist new lawyers in developing the broader competencies required in practice.

Communication skills are particularly important. Lawyers must often explain complex legal concepts to clients who have little knowledge of legal terminology. Effective communication is necessary for obtaining accurate information, explaining available options and managing client expectations. Language competence can also influence the quality of professional interaction in a multilingual society such as Malaysia. Professional development should therefore encompass written and oral communication, negotiation, presentation and digital communication alongside legal knowledge. Such competencies are important not only for individual career development but also for maintaining client confidence in legal services.

Gender and participation within the profession represent another dimension of legal-sector development. Professional challenges are not necessarily experienced in the same manner by all lawyers. Career progression may be influenced by organisational structures, workload, working arrangements, professional expectations and opportunities for advancement. Consideration of these factors is important because the sustainability of the profession depends partly on its ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce. A legal sector that provides opportunities for professional development while supporting reasonable working conditions may be better positioned to retain capable practitioners.

Ethical responsibility becomes particularly important as legal practice becomes more technology-dependent. Lawyers have established duties concerning confidentiality, competence and the protection of client interests. Digital tools introduce additional questions regarding the accuracy of information, security of data and accountability for decisions supported by automated systems. Cobbe and Singh (2021) demonstrate that AI-enabled services create complex questions concerning liability and responsibility. Within legal practice, these concerns suggest that lawyers must maintain meaningful oversight of technology rather than treating automated outputs as inherently reliable. Technology should support professional judgement rather than replace the lawyer's responsibility for the quality of services provided.

2.2 Situation-Based Barriers

The challenges faced by lawyers are also influenced by the organisational and situational environments in which professional services are delivered. Workload, management practices, organisational culture, working hours and professional expectations may affect the quality and

sustainability of legal practice. Lawyers commonly work under strict deadlines while managing complex documents and matters that may have significant consequences for clients. Where excessive workloads are combined with limited opportunities for rest and professional development, maintaining consistent service quality may become difficult.

The working environment is particularly important because legal practice depends heavily on concentration, judgement and attention to detail. A workplace culture that rewards excessively long working hours may create difficulties in sustaining productivity and professional well-being. Daud and Zulhuda (2020) highlight the importance of organisational and situational considerations in understanding professional and legal environments. Their perspective supports the need to examine legal practice not only from the standpoint of formal professional rules but also through the conditions under which lawyers perform their work. Effective management is therefore necessary to balance client demands, organisational objectives and the capacity of lawyers to perform their responsibilities effectively.

Expectations among younger legal professionals have also changed. Contemporary lawyers may place greater emphasis on professional development, work-life balance, flexible working arrangements and opportunities to acquire new skills. Law firms that fail to recognise these expectations may encounter difficulties in recruitment and retention. Flexible arrangements, appropriate leave policies, structured mentoring and access to training can contribute to a more sustainable professional environment. Such measures may also help firms retain lawyers who possess technological and professional skills that are increasingly valuable to legal practice.

Skills development remains closely connected to these organisational conditions. Graduates may require substantial practical training before becoming confident in handling clients, preparing documents, conducting negotiations and using professional technology. Legal education provides the theoretical foundation, but practical competence develops through experience and structured professional support. Saleem (2021) provides a broader discussion of participation and professional development within the Malaysian context, reinforcing the importance of institutional conditions in shaping opportunities for individuals. Within law firms, mentoring and continuous training can reduce the gap between academic preparation and professional expectations.

Technological adaptability is another situational barrier. Legal practice increasingly involves electronic filing, digital research, cloud-based information management, video communication and online databases. Lawyers who lack confidence in these systems may experience difficulties in managing their workload and responding to client expectations. Omar Hamdan (2019) identifies limited adaptability to modern information technology as an obstacle to effective legal practice and highlights the growing relevance of technology to legal proceedings. Although the study concerns the legal environment in Zanzibar, its emphasis on technological capability provides a useful comparative basis for considering similar developments in Malaysia.

The financial capacity of law firms may further influence technological adoption. Large firms may have greater resources to purchase specialised software, employ information technology personnel and provide structured training. Smaller practices may face more difficult choices because investment in technology must be balanced against operational costs and immediate client demands. This disparity can contribute to uneven technological capability across the profession. Professional bodies and other institutions may therefore have a role in supporting smaller firms through training, guidance and accessible technological resources.

Regulation presents another significant consideration. Professional restrictions are designed to protect clients, preserve the integrity of legal practice and prevent unauthorised provision of legal services. However, new digital business models may not always fit easily within regulatory structures developed around conventional forms of practice. The challenge is to maintain appropriate safeguards while allowing responsible innovation. Regulatory frameworks need to address professional liability, confidentiality, data protection and unauthorised practice without unnecessarily preventing technologies that could improve legal service delivery.

Digital communication and social media illustrate this tension. Online platforms can assist lawyers in communicating with existing and prospective clients, disseminating legal information and increasing public awareness. However, professional communication through these channels must remain consistent with applicable ethical requirements. Lawyers therefore require both technical knowledge and an understanding of the professional boundaries governing digital engagement. Technology can expand the reach of legal professionals, but its use must remain consistent with professional integrity.

The wider literature similarly indicates that technological development should be integrated with established principles of professional practice. Chen (2018) discusses the interaction between technological advancement, legal governance and the rule of law, emphasising the importance of maintaining institutional and legal safeguards while responding to technological change. For Malaysia, this balance is particularly important because modernisation should contribute to better legal services without weakening professional accountability or public protection.

2.3 Previous Studies on the Challenges Faced by Malaysian Lawyers

Previous studies demonstrate that the challenges affecting Malaysian legal services are multidimensional. They involve access to justice, technological capability, professional development, organisational conditions, financial considerations and regulatory requirements. These factors are closely connected. For example, high legal costs may restrict access to justice, while limited technological capability may increase the time and resources required to deliver services. Similarly, inadequate professional development may make it more difficult for lawyers to adopt new technologies effectively.

Constitutional principles provide an important foundation for the protection of individual rights in Malaysia. The literature refers particularly to Articles 5 and 8 in discussions of access to justice and equality. However, constitutional protection does not necessarily ensure that individuals can obtain practical legal assistance. Access also depends on affordability, awareness and the availability of suitable legal services. Daud (2020), as discussed in the source literature, draws attention to the broader structural and social dimensions of access to justice in Malaysia. This perspective indicates that legal service delivery should be examined within its wider social environment rather than solely through formal legal institutions.

Community organisations, non-governmental organisations and legal practitioners can contribute to addressing these access barriers. Their involvement may be particularly valuable for groups that face difficulties engaging with conventional legal institutions. Collaborative approaches can extend legal information and assistance to communities that might otherwise have

limited contact with lawyers. Such initiatives demonstrate that access to justice is not the responsibility of lawyers alone but involves public institutions, professional bodies and civil society.

The Malaysian Bar has also undertaken initiatives intended to improve access to justice. The source literature identifies mobile court initiatives introduced in 2007 as an example of an effort to bring legal processes closer to communities. Initiatives of this nature are significant because they challenge the assumption that users of legal services must always travel to established institutional locations. Bringing services closer to communities may reduce geographical and practical barriers, although the effectiveness of such approaches depends on sustained institutional support.

Legal technology provides another potential mechanism for addressing access problems. Electronic communication, online information services and digital documentation can reduce geographical constraints and create additional channels for clients to interact with legal professionals. Susskind (2019) suggests that online methods may play an increasingly important role in the future of justice delivery. Nevertheless, digital services should complement rather than automatically replace conventional legal assistance. Digital exclusion limited technological literacy, privacy concerns and the need for professional judgement may continue to restrict access for certain groups.

Technological adaptation also remains an important concern for lawyers themselves. Jalil and Sheriff (2020) demonstrate that legal technology is changing traditional approaches to legal service delivery in Malaysia. The implication is that law firms need to assess not only which technologies are available but also whether their organisational structures, staff and professional processes can use them effectively. Adoption without adequate training may produce limited benefits or create additional risks.

AI presents an especially important development. AI-supported applications may assist with legal research, information retrieval, document review and other tasks. At the same time, their use raises questions concerning accuracy, transparency, confidentiality and accountability. Cobbe and Singh (2021) identify broader legal responsibilities and liability issues associated with AI as a service. These concerns are directly relevant to lawyers because professional responsibility cannot simply be delegated to an automated system. Human oversight remains necessary where technology is used in tasks that may affect clients' rights or legal interests.

Overall, the literature shows that the challenges faced by Malaysian lawyers cannot be explained by technological change alone. They result from the interaction between technological developments, professional expectations, organisational conditions, regulatory requirements and the accessibility of legal services. The evidence also suggests that successful modernisation requires more than investment in digital tools. Lawyers need appropriate training, law firms require supportive organisational structures, and regulatory institutions need to provide clear guidance on emerging forms of practice.

Despite the increasing attention given to legal technology and access to justice, a gap remains in the integrated examination of these issues within the Malaysian legal profession. Existing studies tend to focus on dimensions, including legal aid, technological development, professional competence or regulatory concerns. While these contributions are valuable,

examining the interaction among these factors may provide a more complete understanding of the barriers experienced by Malaysian lawyers. Such an approach is important because a technological solution, for example, may have limited value if lawyers lack the necessary skills or if clients cannot afford or access digital services.

Accordingly, the present study builds on previous research by examining the challenges faced by Malaysian lawyers from an integrated perspective. Attention is given to technological adoption, professional capability, access to legal services, organisational conditions and regulatory constraints. Understanding the relationship among these dimensions is important for identifying measures that can strengthen the capacity of law firms and practitioners to respond to changes in the legal environment. The literature suggests that the future of legal practice in Malaysia will depend on the profession's ability to adopt appropriate technologies while maintaining professional competence, ethical safeguards and meaningful access to justice. A balanced approach may allow technological development to improve efficiency and accessibility without diminishing the human judgement and professional responsibility that remain central to the provision of legal services.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design to examine the barriers and challenges affecting legal service delivery among Malaysian lawyers and law firms. The research relies primarily on secondary data obtained from academic journal articles, legal materials, professional publications, previous studies and relevant online sources. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the purpose of the study is to understand the nature and context of the difficulties encountered by legal practitioners rather than to quantify their prevalence. The approach also allows attention to be given to professional experiences, organisational practices, technological developments and regulatory conditions that influence the delivery of legal services.

The study concentrates on several interconnected areas, namely technological adoption, professional competence, organisational management, accessibility of legal services and the sustainability of law firms. These areas were selected because changes in one dimension may affect the others. For example, the adoption of legal technology may improve efficiency, but its effectiveness can depend on the skills of lawyers, organisational resources and regulatory requirements. Existing research on the management and development of Malaysian legal firms provides useful evidence concerning the organisational environment in which legal services are delivered (Nahzatul Ain & Wahid, 2022). Research examining professional and institutional challenges in other legal contexts also provides comparative insight into issues surrounding professional responsibility and legal protection (Juleni & Sudarwanto, 2018).

A case-study perspective was incorporated to provide a practical dimension to the analysis. Case studies are useful for examining organisational practices within their specific professional and institutional setting. In this study, HAA and its associates are considered as a reference point for examining the operational challenges experienced by a legal practice. The case-study perspective complements the documentary review by allowing broader issues identified in previous research to be considered alongside the circumstances of an actual legal firm. This

combination provides a more contextual understanding of the relationship between organisational practices, professional requirements and the changing legal environment.

3.1 Data Collection

The study collected data primarily through a review of secondary sources. Academic journal articles, previous research, legal documents, professional publications and relevant online materials were examined to identify information concerning the delivery and management of legal services in Malaysia. The literature search focused on studies addressing professional practice, organisational challenges, technological adoption, access to legal services and the sustainability of law firms.

The case-study component included an examination of HAA and its associates. Available information concerning the firm's organisational structure, professional activities and operational challenges was considered in relation to the broader issues identified in the literature. The original study also reports interviews with the proprietor of the firm. These interviews provided additional information concerning the organisation and its professional activities and were considered together with documentary and published materials. The case information was therefore used to complement, rather than replace, the wider literature.

Relevant materials were identified through online academic and professional databases and search engines. The search process used combinations of terms such as challenges faced by law firms, challenges faced by lawyers, legal service delivery, organisational strategies, legal technology, Malaysian legal services and sustainability of law firms. These search terms were selected to capture literature addressing both the internal operations of legal practices and the external conditions affecting the profession. The original study also refers to "Legal Source Review" and "Business Source Review" in identifying relevant articles and supporting materials.

The review included research addressing specific areas of Malaysian legal practice. For example, the study by Muhammad and Shazari (2022) concerning Syarie lawyers in Selangor provides evidence of practical difficulties encountered within the Malaysian legal environment. Such studies are useful because they demonstrate that challenges in legal practice may vary according to the type of legal service, professional setting and client group involved. Legal and professional materials associated with the Malaysian Bar were also examined to establish the regulatory and institutional context within which Malaysian lawyers operate.

The collected materials were analysed thematically. The analysis involved identifying recurring issues across the sources and grouping them according to the principal areas relevant to the research questions. Attention was given to professional capability, organisational management, technological adaptation, accessibility and the sustainability of legal practices. Similarities and differences between findings from previous studies and observations from the case-study material were then considered. This process allowed the study to identify common challenges while recognising that legal firms may experience these challenges differently depending on their size, resources and areas of practice.

The purpose of the analysis was not to generate statistical estimates or generalisations concerning the entire Malaysian legal profession. Rather, the study sought to develop a contextual

understanding of the factors that influence legal service delivery. The combination of academic literature, legal and professional sources and case-study information provides several perspectives through which the research problem can be examined. It also allows findings from different sources to be compared and interpreted in relation to the Malaysian legal environment.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in maintaining the integrity and credibility of this study. As the research relies mainly on secondary sources, including academic journal articles, legal documents, professional publications and publicly available online materials, particular attention was given to the accurate and responsible use of information. All sources used in the study were appropriately acknowledged through in-text citations and references in accordance with APA 7th edition. This ensures that the ideas and findings of previous researchers are not presented as original contributions.

The study also considers confidentiality as an important ethical issue because legal practitioners regularly handle sensitive information relating to clients, disputes and professional matters. The analysis therefore avoids disclosing confidential or commercially sensitive information that is not necessary for addressing the research objectives. The discussion focuses on general professional and organisational challenges rather than individual clients or specific confidential legal matters. Confidentiality remains a fundamental aspect of the lawyer–client relationship and professional legal practice (Ab. Wahab & Khairi, 2020).

The case-study component involving HAA and its associates was handled with appropriate care. Information concerning the firm was used only to understand the organisational and professional challenges relevant to the study. Where information was obtained through discussions or interviews with the proprietor, it was treated responsibly and reported only to the extent necessary for the research. Information that could potentially cause unnecessary professional or reputational harm was not included. The purpose of the case study is to examine organisational practices and challenges rather than to evaluate or criticise individual practitioners.

Where interviews or direct discussions are undertaken, participation should be voluntary and participants should be informed about the purpose of the research and the intended use of the information provided. Participants should also have the opportunity to withhold information that they consider confidential or commercially sensitive. Maintaining confidentiality and respecting participants' decisions are particularly important when research involves legal professionals because their professional responsibilities may restrict the disclosure of certain information.

Academic integrity was further maintained by presenting previous research accurately and avoiding selective or misleading interpretation. Studies conducted outside Malaysia were used primarily for comparative purposes and were interpreted with consideration of differences in legal, institutional and professional contexts. For example, Cobbe and Singh (2021) discuss legal responsibility and liability associated with artificial intelligence, while Jalil and Sheriff (2020) examine the changing role of legal technology in Malaysia. Their findings are used to support the discussion without extending their conclusions beyond the contexts addressed by the original studies.

The study also recognises ethical issues associated with technological development. The use of artificial intelligence, digital communication and electronic systems in legal practice may create risks relating to privacy, confidentiality, accuracy and professional accountability. Lawyers remain responsible for ensuring that technology is used appropriately and does not compromise their duties to clients (Cobbe & Singh, 2021). Therefore, technological innovation is considered alongside the professional and ethical responsibilities of legal practitioners.

Overall, the study follows principles of academic honesty, confidentiality, responsible information management, voluntary participation and balanced interpretation. These principles help ensure that the research is conducted responsibly while protecting the interests of participants, legal practitioners and other individuals whose information may be discussed in the study.

4.0 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings indicate that the development and sustainability of legal services in Malaysia are shaped by several interrelated factors, particularly regulation, technology, organisational capacity, financial resources and access to justice. The challenges faced by lawyers and law firms cannot be attributed to a single issue because developments in one area often affect others. For example, technological adoption may improve efficiency but requires investment, appropriate skills and compliance with professional obligations. Similarly, international expansion may create new commercial opportunities while exposing firms to regulatory and operational challenges. The case-based perspective, including the experience of HAA and its associates, provides a practical basis for understanding how these issues affect legal practice.

Malaysian law firms operate within a professional environment that places considerable emphasis on competence, ethical conduct, confidentiality and client protection. At the same time, digital technologies are changing how legal information is stored, processed and communicated. Consequently, the competitiveness of legal practices increasingly depends on their ability to combine conventional legal expertise with effective organisational systems and appropriate technological capabilities. Research on ISO 9001:2015 implementation in a Malaysian legal firm found that systematic procedures, standardisation and quality management can contribute to efficiency and service quality (Nahzatul Ain & Ab Wahid, 2022). This suggests that organisational structure is an important foundation for sustainable legal practice.

4.1 Barriers to the Internationalisation and Export of Malaysian Legal Services

One significant finding concerns the difficulties Malaysian lawyers and law firms may encounter when seeking to expand into international markets. Internationalisation can create opportunities for domestic firms to participate in cross-border transactions and provide services to international clients. However, legal services differ from many other professional services because legal practice is closely connected to professional qualifications, jurisdiction-specific knowledge, ethical obligations and national regulatory requirements.

In Malaysia, legal practice is principally governed by the Legal Profession Act 1976 (Act 166) and related professional rules. The regulatory framework also establishes specific conditions concerning foreign lawyers and foreign law firms. The Malaysian Bar's materials on foreign

lawyers and foreign law firms demonstrate that participation by foreign practitioners is permitted within a regulated framework rather than through unrestricted access to the Malaysian market.

This creates a balance between professional protection and market development. Regulation is necessary to protect clients and maintain confidence in legal services. However, regulatory restrictions may also affect the ability of Malaysian firms to establish international partnerships and compete in cross-border markets. The findings therefore suggest that internationalisation should not be pursued through deregulation alone. Instead, firms may strengthen their position through strategic alliances, professional networks, specialised expertise and technology-enabled services.

Areas such as corporate transactions, intellectual property, Islamic finance, arbitration, technology law and cross-border commercial disputes may offer opportunities for Malaysian firms with appropriate expertise. Internationalisation should therefore be understood as an organisational capability involving knowledge, networks, technology and professional capacity rather than simply the establishment of offices in foreign jurisdictions.

4.2 Access to Justice and the Sustainability of Legal Aid

Access to justice remains a central concern in the Malaysian legal-services environment. The ability to obtain legal assistance may depend on income, geographical location, public awareness and the availability of appropriate professional services. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of legal aid depends not merely on the existence of formal programmes but also on their accessibility and capacity to respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups.

Alternative dispute resolution, particularly mediation, provides one possible means of improving access to justice. Mediation may offer a less adversarial and potentially more affordable method of resolving certain disputes while reducing pressure on the courts. Its application in family and civil matters demonstrates the potential for legal services to move beyond a litigation-centred model.

However, sustainable legal aid requires adequate institutional and financial support. Reliance on limited public funding may restrict geographical coverage, staffing and technological development. Additional support through appropriate partnerships, philanthropic contributions and corporate social responsibility initiatives may strengthen capacity, provided that professional independence and equitable access are protected. Thus, access to justice should be understood broadly: legal services must be affordable, understandable, geographically available and accessible through appropriate channels.

4.3 Digital Transformation and Legal Technology

Digital transformation is another major finding emerging from the analysis. Technologies such as electronic document management, cloud-based collaboration, online communication, legal research platforms, automated workflows and artificial intelligence are increasingly relevant to legal practice. These tools can reduce administrative work, improve information management and allow lawyers to devote greater attention to matters requiring professional judgement.

The Malaysian Bar has recognised the importance of information technology in legal practice. Its programme on leveraging IT for law firms highlighted applications involving electronic communication, data storage, cloud security, project management and video conferencing, while identifying potential benefits in efficiency and operating costs (Malaysian Bar, 2018). The development of professional committees concerned with innovation, future-of-law issues, cyber law and privacy further indicates that technology has become an institutional concern within the profession.

Nevertheless, adoption is accompanied by challenges. Law firms must consider implementation costs, cybersecurity, data protection, technological literacy, interoperability and professional liability. The use of digital systems also requires clear procedures for protecting confidential client information. Consequently, technological investment should be accompanied by appropriate governance, training and risk management.

The findings support the view that technology should primarily augment rather than replace professional legal work. Artificial intelligence may assist with document review, information retrieval, classification, research and workflow management, but responsibility for legal advice and professional decisions should remain subject to meaningful human oversight. This position is consistent with the broader concerns concerning responsibility and liability associated with AI-enabled services identified by Cobbe and Singh (2021).

4.4 Emerging Digital Legal Services and the Metaverse

Emerging digital environments, including the metaverse, may create additional areas of legal practice. Virtual environments raise questions concerning digital identity, intellectual property, virtual assets, contractual relationships, online transactions and dispute resolution. These developments may eventually require lawyers to address legal relationships that exist partly or entirely within digital environments.

However, the findings suggest that the metaverse should presently be treated as an emerging area rather than an established mainstream channel for legal service delivery. Its immediate importance lies in the new legal questions it creates rather than in the widespread replacement of conventional legal practice. Malaysian lawyers and professional institutions may therefore benefit from developing knowledge concerning digital assets, privacy, cybersecurity, intellectual property, contractual enforceability and jurisdiction.

Regional developments also demonstrate the growing connection between technology and legal practice. TechLaw.Fest, for example, provides a forum for lawyers, policymakers, technologists and legal-technology professionals to examine technological developments affecting the legal sector (Ministry of Law, Singapore, 2019). Such initiatives illustrate the value of professional engagement with technological change and provide opportunities for Malaysian practitioners to observe developments beyond the domestic market.

4.5 Regulatory Constraints on Legal Technology

Technological development also raises regulatory questions. Provisions of the Legal Profession Act 1976 concerning unauthorised persons and the provision of legal services remain relevant where digital platforms provide legal information or assistance. Online systems may blur the boundary between general legal information and professional legal advice, particularly where automated systems generate responses to users' specific legal problems.

The findings indicate that regulatory reform should therefore focus on proportionate regulation rather than unrestricted deregulation. Different forms of technology should be distinguished according to their function and potential risk. Administrative technologies, legal information platforms, professional legal services and automated decision-support systems do not necessarily present the same regulatory concerns.

A suitable regulatory approach should address issues such as data security, transparency, professional supervision, client consent, accountability and responsibility for errors. Such measures could allow technological innovation to develop while preserving the protective function of professional regulation. The central principle should be innovation accompanied by professional accountability.

4.6 Financial Constraints and Organisational Sustainability

Financial capacity represents another important challenge. Technological investment, cybersecurity, recruitment, professional training and international expansion all require resources. These pressures may be particularly significant for small and medium-sized law firms, which often have fewer financial and human resources than larger practices.

Financial constraints can also affect legal-aid and pro bono activities. Organisations providing assistance to disadvantaged groups require sufficient personnel, infrastructure and funding to maintain service quality. Diversification of funding may therefore be important for long-term sustainability.

The findings indicate that organisational efficiency can partly address these pressures. Technology can reduce repetitive administrative work, improve document management and standardise internal procedures. Evidence from a Malaysian legal-firm study found that ISO 9001:2015 implementation was associated with systematic processes, standardised procedures, improved efficiency and quality delivery (Nahzatul Ain & Ab Wahid, 2022). This suggests that quality management and technological transformation should be considered together. Digital systems are more effective when they are introduced into clearly structured processes; otherwise, technology may simply reproduce existing inefficiencies.

4.7 Participation of Private Lawyers and Pro Bono Services

Private lawyers can make an important contribution to access to justice through pro bono representation, legal clinics, community programmes and collaboration with civil-society organisations. Public legal-aid institutions may not have sufficient capacity to address every legal need, making private-sector participation an important complement.

However, pro bono participation can be constrained by workload, financial pressures, firm size and the opportunity cost of unpaid professional work. These difficulties may be especially pronounced among smaller practices. The Malaysian Bar's attention to small-firm practice reflects the importance of considering the operational realities of these firms when developing professional reforms.

A more sustainable pro bono framework could include structured referral systems, recognition through continuing professional development, university–industry partnerships, legal clinics and technology-enabled platforms. Such arrangements could reduce administrative burdens while encouraging wider participation among private practitioners.

4.8 Public Awareness and Accessibility of Legal Services

Public awareness is another important factor influencing access to legal services. The existence of legal-aid programmes and professional services does not necessarily improve access if individuals are unaware of their rights or do not know where to obtain assistance. Financial limitations, language barriers, geographical distance and uncertainty about legal procedures may further discourage individuals from seeking professional advice.

Law firms and legal institutions could respond by providing clearer and more accessible information through digital platforms, multilingual resources, community legal clinics and partnerships with civil-society organisations. Such communication should distinguish general legal information from individualised professional advice.

Public awareness should therefore be viewed as part of service quality rather than simply a promotional activity. A legal service cannot fully fulfil its social function if potential users do not understand its availability or cannot access it. This position is consistent with the importance of systematic service delivery, quality and client confidence identified by Nahzatul Ain and Ab Wahid (2022).

4.9 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings identify six closely connected dimensions affecting the development of Malaysian legal services: regulation, internationalisation, technological transformation, financial sustainability, professional participation and public accessibility. These dimensions interact rather than operate independently. Technological adoption, for example, may increase efficiency and accessibility while simultaneously creating cybersecurity and professional-liability risks. International expansion may provide commercial opportunities but requires specialised expertise and an understanding of cross-border regulatory conditions.

The findings therefore suggest that the future development of Malaysian legal services requires an integrated approach. Regulation should protect clients while allowing responsible innovation. Law firms should strengthen internal processes through quality management and appropriate digital technologies. Professional bodies should support continuing technological education, while public and private institutions should develop sustainable mechanisms for legal

aid and pro bono services. Greater attention should also be given to public awareness and user-centred service delivery.

The evidence indicates that technology alone cannot resolve the structural challenges affecting the legal profession. Its value depends on the organisational systems, professional competencies and regulatory safeguards within which it is used. The future competitiveness of Malaysian legal services will consequently depend on the profession's capacity to combine legal expertise, technological capability, organisational effectiveness and access to justice. Such integration may strengthen domestic service delivery while also improving the ability of Malaysian law firms to participate in regional and international legal markets.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that the Malaysian legal-services sector is experiencing a gradual shift from conventional methods of practice towards a more technology-supported, internationally connected and client-oriented model. This transition is accompanied by several challenges, including regulatory restrictions, limited financial and human resources, unequal access to legal aid, difficulties in adopting technology, limited public awareness and relatively modest participation in international legal-service markets. These issues are closely related and cannot be addressed effectively through isolated measures. Meaningful improvement requires cooperation among the Malaysian Bar, government agencies, courts, law firms, legal-technology providers, universities and civil-society organisations.

One important recommendation is for Malaysian law firms to strengthen their capacity to participate in international legal markets. Internationalisation should not be measured only by the establishment of offices abroad. Firms can develop international capabilities through strategic partnerships, cross-border referral networks, professional associations, specialised legal expertise and technology-enabled collaboration. Areas such as international arbitration, commercial transactions, Islamic finance, intellectual property, technology law and cross-border investment may provide opportunities for Malaysian firms to develop regional expertise. The regulatory framework concerning foreign lawyers and foreign law firms should continue to protect clients and professional standards while allowing legitimate forms of international cooperation. The Malaysian Bar's framework concerning foreign lawyers and Qualified Foreign Law Firms provides an existing structure within which further international engagement can be developed (Malaysian Bar, 2026).

Court modernisation should also remain a priority. Electronic filing, digital case management, electronic communication and remote hearings have changed aspects of judicial administration. Further development should focus on interoperability, security, procedural efficiency and accessibility. Digital procedures should reduce unnecessary administrative burdens and delays without creating additional barriers for litigants who have limited access to technology. Accordingly, technological development in the courts should be guided by procedural fairness and access to justice rather than efficiency alone.

Law firms should also strengthen their digital documentation and knowledge-management capabilities. Secure electronic repositories, searchable legal databases, electronic case files and structured document-management systems can improve the organisation and retrieval of legal information. The Malaysian Bar (2018) has highlighted the potential of information technology to

improve efficiency, reduce operating costs and strengthen law-firm performance. However, digitalisation must be accompanied by appropriate cybersecurity measures, confidentiality safeguards and responsible handling of personal information. Technology systems used by legal practitioners should therefore take account of both professional confidentiality obligations and applicable data-protection requirements.

The strategic adoption of legal technology and artificial intelligence should form part of this transformation. Lawyers would benefit from training in AI-assisted legal research, document analysis, workflow automation, electronic discovery, digital case management and secure online communication. Nevertheless, technology should support rather than replace professional judgement. Lawyers remain responsible for the quality of advice provided to clients, even where technological systems are used to assist with research or documentation. The concerns regarding responsibility and liability associated with AI-enabled services identified by Cobbe and Singh (2021) reinforce the importance of maintaining appropriate human oversight.

Professional institutions also have an important role in supporting technological development. The Malaysian Bar's historical work on innovation and future-of-law issues, as well as its subsequent attention to information technology, cyber law and privacy, demonstrates that technology has become an established concern within the profession. Continued professional education should therefore include digital competencies alongside conventional legal knowledge. Such training would be particularly valuable for practitioners in smaller firms, where access to specialised technological expertise may be limited.

The study further recommends that Malaysian law firms adopt more structured approaches to international legal-service export. Partnerships with foreign firms, participation in international professional networks, cross-border referral arrangements and multilingual digital platforms may increase the visibility of Malaysian legal practices. A stronger digital presence may also allow firms to reach international clients more effectively. Such activities, however, should remain consistent with professional rules governing advertising, client confidentiality and the provision of legal services.

Greater attention should also be given to representative and collective mechanisms for resolving disputes. Where permitted under Malaysian law, representative proceedings and other collective forms of legal action may improve access to remedies for individuals with common interests. Such mechanisms may reduce duplication and improve the efficiency of dispute resolution. Their use must nevertheless remain consistent with procedural requirements and the rights of individual litigants.

International judicial cooperation is another area requiring further professional development. Increasing cross-border commercial activity means that lawyers may need to deal with foreign evidence, documents, proceedings and judgments. Greater familiarity with international judicial assistance, jurisdiction, recognition and enforcement procedures would strengthen the capacity of Malaysian lawyers to manage cross-border disputes. The Reciprocal Enforcement of Judgments Act 1958 (Act 99) provides an important statutory framework for the recognition and enforcement of certain foreign judgments in Malaysia and should form part of the broader knowledge required for international legal practice.

Financial and organisational sustainability is particularly important for small and medium-sized law firms. Investment in technology, cybersecurity and professional development can be difficult where firms operate with limited resources. Professional bodies and relevant institutions could assist through affordable training, shared technological resources, collaborative platforms and continuing professional development programmes. Quality-management systems may also improve organisational performance. Nahzatul Ain and Ab Wahid (2022) found that ISO 9001:2015 implementation in a Malaysian legal firm was associated with systematic procedures, standardisation, improved efficiency and better service quality. These findings suggest that technological investment is likely to be more effective when supported by well-structured organisational processes.

The sustainability of legal aid and pro bono services also requires greater institutional collaboration. Government agencies, the Malaysian Bar, private law firms, universities and civil-society organisations can contribute through structured pro bono programmes, university legal clinics, digital legal-aid platforms and community-based initiatives. Such arrangements could expand access to legal assistance for vulnerable groups while reducing the pressure on individual practitioners. Professional recognition, continuing professional development credits or other appropriate incentives may encourage wider participation.

Public legal awareness should form another part of the access-to-justice strategy. Many individuals may remain unaware of their legal rights or available sources of assistance. Multilingual information, community legal clinics, accessible online resources and public education programmes could help individuals identify appropriate legal services. Access to justice should therefore be understood as more than the physical availability of lawyers. It also involves affordability, understandability, timeliness, reliability and the ability of individuals to engage with legal institutions effectively.

Overall, the study concludes that the future of Malaysian legal services depends on achieving an appropriate balance between professional regulation, technological innovation, international competitiveness, organisational sustainability and social responsibility. Regulation should continue to protect clients and preserve professional standards, but it should also allow responsible technological and organisational innovation. Technology should not be treated simply as a threat to conventional legal practice. When properly governed, it can strengthen information management, improve efficiency and create additional channels through which legal services can reach clients.

Regional initiatives such as TechLaw.Fest demonstrate the growing importance of dialogue between lawyers, policymakers, technology providers and other stakeholders in responding to changes within the legal sector (Ministry of Law, Singapore, 2019). Malaysian legal institutions can benefit from participating in such regional discussions and adapting relevant developments to the domestic legal environment.

In conclusion, Malaysian law firms have considerable potential to develop into digitally capable and internationally competitive professional organisations. Achieving this requires more than purchasing new technologies. It requires continuous professional development, organisational reform, effective quality management, appropriate regulatory development, international networking, sustainable legal-aid mechanisms and stronger public engagement. The integration of these elements can improve the efficiency, accessibility and reliability of legal services while

strengthening the competitiveness of Malaysian law firms. Most importantly, technological and commercial development should remain directed towards the broader purpose of the legal profession: ensuring that individuals and communities can obtain fair, reliable and meaningful access to legal protection.

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