

CASE MANAGEMENT: TRACKING AND MANAGING CASES TO DISPOSITION*

PROLOG

The letter dated 23rd December, 2024 from the Administrator of the National Judicial Institute (NJI), Hon. Justice Salisu Garba Abdullahi, requesting me to write and present this paper, came to me as a pleasant surprise on 14th January, 2025. I wish to thank immensely the Board of Governors of the NJI, under the able Chairmanship of the Hon., the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Hon. Justice Kudirat Kekere-Ekun, GCON, the Administrator of the NJI, Hon. Justice Salisu Garba Abdullahi, the Director of Studies, NJI, Mr. Gilbert Tor and other Coordinators of this highly esteemed Course for nominating and inviting me to write and present this paper. I feel highly honoured and very delighted and I do not take this opportunity for granted. I hope my presentation meets your high expectation.

INTRODUCTION

For a very long time, the problem of delay in the Administration of justice has been a very worrisome feature of our justice delivery system. With increasing caseloads, courts worldwide face challenges in ensuring timely justice. Delays undermine public trust and violate the principle that justice delayed is justice denied. Delay encountered by court users increases the cost of litigation in both time and money. It is more worrisome when the case is a criminal matter because of the likelihood that the accused person might be in detention, where he is not granted bail, pending the determination of the suit, resulting in overcrowded prisons.¹ An indolent Judicial Officer is unproductive, a clog in the wheel of justice, and is unfit for the bench.²

* Hon. Justice Comfort Chinyere Ani, PhD. was Head of Department, Akinola Aguda School of Postgraduate Studies, Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, (NIALS) before she was appointed Judge of the High Court of Enugu State in 2015. She also serves as an ADR Judge and member of several Committees in the Enugu State Judiciary. In year 2020, she became the first High Court Judge to hold virtual court proceedings in South East Nigeria.

¹ *Case Management and Tracking*, available at:

https://www.britishcouncil.org.ng/sites/default/files/case_management_system_and_tracking.pdf, accessed on 17/1/2024

² Hon. Justice Rakiya Haastrup, “Performance Management and Evaluation”, paper delivered at the Induction Course for Newly Appointed Judges and Kadis on Inculcating Judicial Excellence in Newly Appointed Judicial Officers on 31st May, 2016, p. 9.

A Judge must be seen to perform his judicial duties skillfully and expeditiously without bias or prejudice and must always remember that every justice delayed is justice equally denied. A lot of factors are responsible for the pervading delays encountered in justice administration. Effective management of cases and handling of court dockets are critical components of a well-functioning judicial system. Efficient case management is vital for ensuring timely justice and reducing backlogs in the judicial system. Case management, tracking, and disposition of court dockets are critical processes that support judicial efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

The Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) and the NJC have constantly urged and mandated Courts in Nigeria to embrace the use of ICT in case management to resolve issues of delay, corruption and inefficiency in our judicial system. There are a lot of changes in the judicial landscape in Nigeria such as electronic service of processes, emailing of court processes, virtual hearing of cases, etc.

This Paper explores these processes in detail, highlighting their importance, challenges, and best practices in the context of modern Nigerian judicial system. It explores practical and innovative strategies for courts to track and manage cases efficiently, achieving timely dispositions.

Case Management

Case Management is a judicial process which provides effective, efficient and purposeful judicial management of a case so as to achieve a timely and qualitative resolution of a dispute. It assists in the early identification of disputed issues of fact and law, the establishment of a procedural calendar for the life of the case and the exploration of possibility of resolution of the dispute through methods other than the Court trial³.

Case management in the judicial system involves overseeing the progression of cases from filing to resolution. It ensures that cases move through the legal process efficiently and that

³ Niranjan J. Bhatt, “Case Management - A Modern Concept”, available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/461874033/VIMPP>, Accessed on 21/1/2025

resources are allocated appropriately. It helps resolve disputes in a court of law efficiently and fairly. It involves identifying issues, establishing a schedule, and encouraging collaboration between parties. Lack of adequate case management mechanism has been a contributory factor to congestion and delays in trials in both civil and criminal justice systems in Nigeria⁴.

Court case tracking is the process of monitoring the progress of a court case. It can help identify delays and bottlenecks in the court system. Goals of case management and tracking includes to improve accountability, reduce costs, reduce delays, resolve disputes fairly and reduce prison congestion.

Understanding Court Dockets

A court docket is a record of cases scheduled for hearings or decisions within a court. It includes essential details such as case numbers, parties involved, scheduled dates, and the status of proceedings. Proper management of these dockets ensures that cases are addressed systematically and without unnecessary delays.

BEST PRACTICES/STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE JUDICIAL CASE MANAGEMENT

Judges play a vital role in maintaining the momentum of cases. Effective case management strategies are essential for tracking and managing cases efficiently, ensuring timely disposition, and maintaining high levels of productivity. Below are some best practices.

1. Adhering to the Front-Loading System

The front-loading system was first introduced by the Lagos State Civil procedure Rules, 2004, is now applicable in other Courts in Nigeria. By this System, the oral and documentary evidence to be led in support of the pleadings are filed and served along with the pleadings. List of witnesses, the Written Statements on oath of such witnesses and copies of every

⁴ See B. Owasanoye and C. C. Ani, “Judicial Reform and Transformation in Nigeria, Improving Case Management Coordination amongst the Police, Prosecution, and Court”, in Epiphany Azinge and Dakas C.J. Dakas (Eds.) *Judicial Reform and Transformation in Nigeria*, (NIALS), 2013, pp. 192-226.

document to be relied on at the trial must accompany the statement of claim at the time it is filed.⁵ This has obliterated the earlier practice of witnesses giving long evidence in chief with the attendant recording of the evidence in chief in long hand by the Judicial Officer.

2. Effective Pre-Trial Conference (PTC) or Case Management Conference (CMC)

Pre-trial Conference (PTC), which can also be called Case Management Conference is a good mechanism of case management. It is important for the Judicial Officer to conduct early case conferences to identify issues and set realistic timelines. It is an opportunity for the parties to consider whether or not they should go to trial.⁶ PTC is a Case Management strategy for easy flow and prompt disposition of the case. The following are the case management benefits of effective PTC:

- a. It offers opportunity to dispose non contentious matters, which must or can be dealt with on interlocutory application.
- b. It gives room for admissions of facts and other evidence by consent of the parties.
- c. Issues are formulated and settled at this stage, which can help to delineate contentions and streamline the issues. It is also a good chance for the Court to get acquainted with the nature of the case. It has been observed that while most Rules of Court contain provisions on settlement of issues, most Judicial Officers do not take advantage of this enriching mechanism.⁷
- d. It prepares the parties and the Judicial Officer on what to expect during the trial, such as: the number and nature of the witnesses; whether expert witnesses are expected; whether special interpreter will be required; whether subpoena will be required for any witness-The number of witnesses can be abridged and streamlined.
- e. PTC is an opportunity for the Judge to promote amicable settlement of the case by Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Obviously, promoting ADR mechanisms like mediation, arbitration, or settlement conferences can reduce the court's caseload. The Court can refer

⁵ See for instance, Order 3 Rule 2 of the High Court Rules of Enugu State, 2020.

⁶ B. Owasanoye and C. C. Ani, "Judicial Reform and Transformation in Nigeria, Improving Case Management Coordination amongst the Police, Prosecution, and Court", *op. cit.*

⁷ Hon. Justice (Prof.) C. A. Obiozor, "Challenges in the Administration of Justice: Present Day Realities and Possible Solutions", paper presented at The National Judicial Institute All Nigeria Judges' Conference of the Superior Courts, held on 13th November, 2023, p. 20.

eligible cases to court connected Multi Door Court or allow parties to settle on their own and report back to the Court. The terms of settlement are filed in court for the Judge to adopt as a consent judgment. A bulk of cases are speedily disposed through this initiative as ADR can decrease the case load, and cause the just, efficient and speedy dispensation of justice.⁸ However, it has been observed that counsels whose sole purpose is to frustrate proceedings, will not submit to ADR, thus wasting valuable time.⁹

f. PTC provides opportunity for the court to enter a Scheduling Order¹⁰ for disposing applications such as: joinder of other parties; amendment of pleadings or any other processes; setting time lines for the case by apportioning hearing dates depending on the number of witnesses, apportioning time for cross examination, re-examination, prefixing cost payable upon default in appearance or for truncate the proceeding by any of the parties

3. Establishing Clear Procedural Timelines and Enforcing Them

In ensuring timeliness on the part of Judicial Officers, *Rule 2 (6) of the Revised Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2016*, provides that a Judicial Officer should promptly dispose of the business of Court. That in order to achieve this, he is required to devote adequate time to his duties, to be punctual in attending court and expeditious in bringing to a conclusion and determining matters under submission. Unless ill or unable, for good reason to come to court, a Judicial Officer must appear regularly for work, avoid tardiness and maintain official hours of the court.

The setting of timeframes is a condition *sine qua non* to start measuring and comparing case processing delays.¹¹ Courts should enforce strict procedural timelines to prevent unnecessary

⁸ Hon. Justice Rakiya Haastrup, “Performance Management and Evaluation”, paper delivered at the Induction Course for Newly Appointed Judges and Kadis on Inculcating Judicial Excellence in Newly Appointed Judicial Officers on 31st May, 2016, p. 13.

⁹ Hon. Justice O. O. Atilade, “Use of Pre-Trial Conferences, Discoveries and Interrogatories as Tools for Speedy Dispensation of Justice” paper presented at the National Judicial Institute Induction Course for Newly Appointed Judges and Kadis, 23rd May-3rd June, 2016, p. 12.

¹⁰ See for instance, Order 25 of the High Court Rules of Enugu State, 2020.

¹¹ Hadiza Saeed, “Time Management for Improved Adjudicatory Performance,” paper presented at the National Judicial Institute, Abuja, National Workshop for Judicial Officers on Ethics, Management Skills and Information Technology, on 8th May, 2012, p. 6.

delays. The various Court rules already set specific deadlines for each stage of litigation (e.g. time for filling pleadings, motions, Fundamental Rights, final written addresses, etc). It is important for Courts to emphasize adherence to these deadlines and regularly reviewing case progress and addressing delays proactively. The court can enforce compliance with procedural orders and deadlines by activating its powers to award costs against defaulting parties.

4. Ability to Deliver Bench Rulings on Preliminary and Interlocutory Matters

A Judicial Officer should strive to give bench rulings on some preliminary matters where the legal issues are straight forward, without the need for deferring such matters for ruling in order to attend to the substantive matters speedily. A Judicial Officer should be able to decide on some applications such as bail, joinder of parties, amendments, objections on admissibility of documents and other simple applications on the spot without adjourning for long rulings. Electronic law library can be very handy in performing this on the spot and daunting task.

5. Prioritizing and Categorizing Cases

Effective case prioritization ensures resources are allocated optimally. A Judicial Officer can:

- a. Categorize cases into fast-track, standard, or complex pathways.
- b. Give precedence to time-sensitive cases, such as fundamental rights cases, criminal trials, especially cases where defendant is in custody matters and child custody disputes.

A judicial Officer should endeavor to give special attention to old cases pending in his Court especially those above 5 years old and criminal cases.¹² A judicial Officer must monitor and take active part in constituting the cause list, ensuring that cases are fixed realistically.

7. Constant Monitoring and Evaluation (Self-Assessment)

Continuous monitoring of court dockets is essential to identifying stagnated cases, bottlenecks and improving speed of processes. The Judicial Officer must conduct regular/periodic performance audits of court dockets to identify and address inefficiencies, at least twice in a

¹² See *Guidelines on Performance Evaluation of Judicial Officers of Superior Courts of Record*, (National Judicial Council) 2021, p. 4

quarter. A Judicial Officer is expected to periodically undertake a comprehensive physical case file audit to determine the actual number of cases in his court.¹³

A Judicial Officer is to constantly assess himself to enable him appraise his own performance against the evaluation of the National Judicial Council (NJC) to objectively rate his own performance. A Judicial officer is to pay particular attention to the figures on his NJC Quarterly Performance Evaluation Forms. Most importantly a Judicial Officer should be concerned about **Form NJC/MCPJ/3c** (for individual Judges) or **Form NJC/MCPJ/3d** (for panels) and **Form NJC/MCPJ/5b**. He must endeavor to track Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) like clearance rates, backlog reduction, and average case duration. The Officer must always look at and pay serious attention to the first page of the NJC Quarterly Returns Form **NJC/MCPJ/3c** or **Form NJC/MCPJ/3d** as well as the last form, **Form NJC/MCPJ/5b**.

In **Form NJC/MCPJ/3c** or **Form NJC/MCPJ/3d (Annexure 1)**, the third, fourth, fifth and 6th rows are named CIVIL, CRIMINAL, MOTION and FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS, signifying the type of cases. The total figures of each are entered with respect to the corresponding columns. The seventh row is the total of the cumulative sum of each column. Attention should be paid on all the columns, especially column on Number of Cases Assigned, Number of Contested Cases & Judgements Given in the Quarter; Total Number of Cases Disposed off During the Quarter and Total Number of Cases Pending at the End of the Quarter. The Officer must carry out self-assessment and strive to ensure that a high number of cases are disposed in each quarter. He must also as far as possible see that the disparity between the cases assigned in each quarter and the cases disposed is not much. Preferably, the number of cases disposed in each quarter should surpass the number of cases assigned in the quarter.

Form NJC/MCPJ/5b (Annexure 2), contains the details of all the cases pending in a particular court. It contains types of cases, case numbers, dates of filling, dates of assignment of the cases,

¹³ *Guidelines on Performance Evaluation of Judicial Officers of Superior Courts of Record, op. cit. P. 5*

dates of commencement of hearing and age of the cases. The column for age of cases is divided into three groups- >2yrs, 2yrs-5yrs and >5yrs. It also has column on remarks where the stage of the stage of the case is stated, e.g. Arraigned, Hearing, PTC, Motion, PW2, DW3, Final Written Addresses, etc. By observing his performance by a careful study of these Performance Evaluation Forms, a Judicial Officer should know whether there are over aged cases in his court and also see the cases that are getting stagnated.

8. Technology for Case Management and Tracking

There is need to implement a Case Management System (CMS) in every judiciary for a robust Case Management System (CMS). This is critical for tracking and managing cases efficiently. States like Lagos, Rivers and Bayelsa have automated their case management systems and adopted electronic filing and service of legal documents. Through the utilization of technology, courts can enhance access to justice, alleviate administrative burdens, and expedite the resolution of cases.¹⁴ The features of Modern CMS platforms include:

- a) Centralizes case data, filings, schedules, and communications.
- b) Provides real-time updates and reporting tools to track case progress.
- c) Allows seamless integration with e-filing, payment systems, and legal databases.

The Nigerian Judiciary has a Judicial Information Technology Policy with a Committee in place chaired by the CJN. The Committee, in collaboration with the NBA, pioneered the use of a secure legal email system that enables Legal Practitioners to safely transfer processes and correspondence between the Supreme Court and Legal Practitioners. The Court of Appeal Rules 2021 now provides for service of Notice of Appeal by electronic mail, electronic filling.¹⁵ Courts can harness technology to improve case management processes. This Case Management System is still in its rudimentary stages in some states, while in other States like Enugu State,

¹⁴ Hon. Justice Maurice Ahembwa Ikpambese, “Case Flow Management for Judicial Officers” paper presented at the National Judicial Institute, Hybrid Refresher Course for Judicial Officers, 2024, on 27th – 1st March, 2024, p.12.

¹⁵ See Order 2 and Order 20 of *the Court of Appeal Rules, 2021*. See also Chibuzo Ekwekwuo, “The Justice System and Role of ICT Post Covid-19”, paper presented at The National Judicial Institute, Annual Refresher Course for Judges and Kadis on 24th March, 2022, p. 2.

the Platform is still being developed. By leveraging technology in case management. Courts can reduce manual errors, improve data accessibility, and enhance overall efficiency.

Dedicated Platforms can be deployed in a court system to provide the following services for ease of case management and tracking: **E-Filing Systems:** Enable electronic submission of case documents, reducing paperwork; **E- Payment:** Enables ease of Court fees from any part of the world and at any time of the day; **Case tracking:** Judges, lawyers and litigants can gain access to the judiciary platform and know the progress of their cases; **Judicial website and emailing system:** dedicated website for activities of the judiciary whereby past judgements and rulings can be accessed and emails can be sent and received; **Verbatim Recording and transcribing:** This is a technology that will eliminate the practice of Judicial Officers recording in long hand. Anambra and Enugu States and some others are already advanced in the process of building their platforms for digitalization and automation of their judiciary. The Supreme Court Rules, 2024 also provides for deployment of Case Management Platform whenever it is in place.

9. Virtual Hearings

Virtual hearing of cases facilitates remote proceedings, especially for matters where parties or witnesses are far away. It can also help in curbing delays that would have been encountered as a result of insecurity in some arrears or in times of emergency such as during the Covid 19 pandemic. With the use of platforms like Zoom and Google Meet, the Court, Lawyers and Litigants can meet virtually and transact the court business virtually.

Some of the advantages of virtual hearing include:

1. **Eliminates the risk and cost of travels-** Virtual court sitting offers a sustainable alternative, significantly reducing the risk associated with travelling for in-person hearing and its attendant costs. Lawyers and litigants can even attend proceedings here in Nigeria from overseas.
2. **Easy scheduling-** Since the need to travel is entirely removed virtual hearing is often easy to schedule and as well save considerable time and cost. While in the comfort of a lawyer's office,

he can quickly connect and have his matter conducted. A lawyer can even attend more than one court at a time effectively.

3. **Flexibility-** virtual court sitting offers unparalleled flexibility, thereby accommodating the busy schedules of the parties, counsel involved and the Judge.¹⁶
4. **Convenience-** Virtual hearing offers a convenient choice that eliminates to a great extent the need for adjournments for reason of unavailability of counsel or witness as the person can connect to the Court from any location.

Virtual hearing is not without its pitfalls. Slow internet connections and power outages remain a problem to contend with in virtual hearing. Resistance of some Lawyers and litigants to the new system is also a problem.

7. Enhancing Communication and Collaboration

Clear communication among stakeholders ensures smooth case progression. Courts can deploy digital tools for updates, notifications, and scheduling- Court WhatsApp group operated by the Court Registrar as the Admin is a good way to have on the go mass dissemination of court information. Information such as the cause list is published ahead of the date for lawyers to see the cases coming up in Court. Information about case rescheduling and status; unavailability of the judge, etc. can be communicated through the WhatsApp group.

Order 7 Rule 5 of the High Court Rules of Enugu State, 2020, introduced service by electronic means as part of substituted service. **Order 58 (10) High Court Rules Enugu 2020** also provides that service of Court. Order 2 Rule 1 of the Court of Appeal Rules, 2021, provides that a notice of appeal may be served by electronic mail especially if the party gave an e-mail addresses during the proceedings at the lower court.

Service of processes may be effected by E-mail, WhatsApp or as otherwise directed by the

¹⁶ Ajulu Ugwuanyi, “Virtual Court Proceeding” paper presented at the Training of Registrars and other Court Staff of Enugu State Judiciary on Digitization of Court, in August, 2024, pp.2-3.

Court. The Rules now require phone numbers and email addresses on documents to be filed. This is necessary as e-filing is envisaged by the rules. The Supreme Court in the case of **ENL Consortium Limited v. Shambilat Shelter (Nig.) Limited (2018) LPELR-43902 (SC) Pg. 15**) approved the use of telephone (phone call mode) as a means for service. Service of hearing notices through electronic means is cost and time effective. The notice gets to the desired recipient very quickly.

8. Legal Aid for Criminal Matters

Inability of a defendant in a criminal case to secure counsel of his choice to defend can be a delay factor. The Court should not hesitate to be proactive in ensuring that free legal aid is provided for indigent defendants as soon as practicable to avoid delays especially in capital offences.

9. Deployment of ICT in Judicial Work

Judicial work is tedious but much more tedious when it is performed manually. The mastery of computer usage and computer programs such as Microsoft Word, internet browser, etc. can speed up the work of the Judge. ICT can help the Judicial Officer in the following ways: Easy Legal research (Using legal electronic resources/library such as Law Pavilion, Legalpedia, NWLR, etc.); Writing Judgements and Rulings becomes less cumbersome as the Judge can work with electronic versions of the processes filed in Court; bench rulings are easier and accurate with laws and case citations; easy retrieval of past decisions and precedents; judgements are typed and ready even before they are delivered in court.

The use of ICT also makes it easy for the Judicial Officer to build up precedents for easy reference and use. Computers are used to process data (Precedents are easily stored and reproduced for court processes, deeds, company incorporation, etc.); Use of already stored/saved precedents saves a lot of time; Production of neat and professionally looking documents including text and graphics; Spellings and grammar checkers help to ensure accuracy and elegance; Final documents can be printed and copies saved which can be called up at a later date or used as a template for similar documents; Electronic Law Library is an invaluable ICT tool for lawyers (Law Pavilion, Legalpedia and NWLR); Quick online legal research via the internet.

10. Deployment of Research Assistants

Research Assistant can help the Judicial Officer perform some tasks that would otherwise have taken a chunk of his time, such as proof reading, searching out authorities, etc. Hon. Justice

Benedict Kanyip had opined that the job descriptions of Research/Legal Assistants would ordinarily include the following: drafting and vetting of legal documents; rendering legal advice or opinion and assisting in research work. He noted that while both the Executive and the Legislature have many aides to assist them in the discharge of their duties, the Judiciary does not enjoy the same measure of luxury.¹⁷ The learned Jurist opined that the thing with the role of research /legal assistants regarding judgement writing is the choice between the decision making and decision enhancing roles. The extent to which judges can delegate their judicial work to research /legal assistants if taken to far, can threaten the integrity of the Court. Each judge must retain for himself control, not merely of the outcome of the case, but of the explanation of the outcome.¹⁸

10. Capacity Building for Judicial Officers and Court Staff

A well-trained workforce ensures effective case management. It is important to train and continue to train Judicial Officers and other court staff on new technologies, case management practices, and virtual hearing of cases.

CASE DISPOSITION

Case disposition refers to the final resolution of a case, marking the end of its journey within the court system, unless it goes on appeal. The end of the litigation circle is usually marked with writing judgements and rulings and it is sometimes a herculean task. The law requires that the judgement or ruling must be delivered within 90 days of the adoption of addresses¹⁹. The essence of the spirit behind the 90 days in Section 294 (1) of the 1999 Constitution as amended is to ensure that the decision of the Court is written and delivered when the facts of the case, the inference from the facts and the impression created by the witnesses are still fresh in the

¹⁷ Hon. Justice Benedict Bakwaph Kanyip, “Judgement Writing, The Role of Research/Legal Assistants”, in Hon. Justice Umaru Eri (Ed.) *Judgement Writing and Judgement Delivery*, (National Judicial Institute), 2013, Hon. Justice Umaru Eri (Ed.) *Judgement Writing and Judgement Delivery*, p. 169

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Section 294 (1) of the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*.

memory of the Judge²⁰. Delivering judgement outside the specified period has very serious consequence particularly on appeal. This is so because when a Judge delivers judgement outside the prescribed period, such Judgement is said to have been delivered without jurisdiction.²¹

Every Judicial Officer must conform to delivering judgements within the prescribed 90 days after adoption of final written addresses. This ensures that the judiciary is seen to uphold the rule of law and respect the fundamental liberties and human rights of its people.²² The Officer must be very calculative in fixing dates for adoptions to avoid excessive adoptions with little time to write and deliver the judgements, which may lead to exceeding the 90 days target or delivery of substandard and hurried judgements or rulings.

A Judicial Officer is human and extremely busy. There are possibilities that there may be an oversight on judgements and rulings dates if particular attention is not paid to that. Therefore, apart from the habit of recording cases and judgements in a dedicated diary and reminders by the Court Registrar, the Officer should also put in place some other back up means of reminders and not rely on the diary and Registrar of Court as the diary may be muddled with other cases and the Registrar may also forget the dates. It is advisable for the Officer to always have handy, a desk jotter strictly for recording adjourned dates for judgements and rulings in cases, the Judicial Officer can go a little bit further by using the calendar in his mobile phone devise to activate alarm reminders on dates of fixed judgements, even ahead of the dates. That way, the issue of oversight on judgements and rulings dates will be eliminated.

²⁰ Failure to deliver the Courts decision after 90 days is a disciplinary matter for the National Judicial Council, (NJC). In *Akoma & Anor. v. Osenwokwu & Ors.*, (2014) 11 NWLR (Pt. 1419) 462

²¹ Hon. Justice I. N. Auta, “Judgement Writing: Styles and Techniques (Federal and State High Court Perspective), paper presented at National Judicial Institute, Abuja, Induction Course for Newly Appointed Judges and Kadis on the theme: *Inculcating Judicial Excellence in Newly Appointed Judicial Officers*, 23rd May – 3rd June, 2016, p. 15

²² Hon. Justice M. B. Idris, “Constraints in the Administration of Justice” Paper presented at the All Nigeria Judges’ Conference 2019, on 26th November, 2019, p. 23.

The task of writing judgement or ruling can be made less cumbersome by deploying digital technology. The Court may receive electronic versions of the court processes including final Written Addresses in a dedicated e-mail address. Once down loaded and saved, the processes can be easily accessed on the computer and used by the judge.

The use of ICT in judgements and rulings cannot be over emphasized as it is a very useful tool used in accessing vast resources and electronic libraries. At the tap of a button, legal authorities in form of case law and statutes can be down loaded and used, by copying and pasting directly into the judgement or ruling. Latest Court decisions can be accessed with lightning speed and at very low cost.

Proper documentation and communication of case outcomes are essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring judicial accountability. The law is that a Judicial Officer is to furnish all parties in the cause or matter with duly authenticated copies of the decision within seven (7) days of the delivery of the Judgement.²³ This requirement is not a challenge to officers that have the capacity to personally type their judgements and rulings. Such Officers already have their decisions ready for printing at the time the judgement is being delivered in court. Where Secretaries perform this task, issues may come up requiring back and forth corrections, leading to delays and backlogs.

It is desirable to make it possible for courts to forward their encrypted and technologically well protected judgements and rulings electronically to parties and Counsel. This will save a lot of costs for consumables like paper and toner and also speed up the time for receipt of the decisions by the parties.

²³ Section 294 (1) of the 1999 *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. See also Rule 2 (7) of the *Revised Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*.

Challenges in Managing Court Dockets

Managing court dockets comes with its own set of challenges, including: **Backlogs:** High caseloads can overwhelm court systems and lead to delays; **Limited Resources:** Budget constraints may hinder the implementation of advanced case management tools; **Complexity of Cases:** Some cases require extensive time and effort due to their legal or factual intricacies. **Resistance to Change:** Adopting new technologies and methodologies may face resistance from stakeholders; **Gimmicks by Counsel to Cause Delays:** The lackadaisical and sharp practices on the part of some lawyers in the way they handle their cases cause a clog in the wheel of administration of justice in courts. Sometimes lawyers employ a lot of unethical behaviors and tactics to undermine the speedy administration of justice.

CONCLUSION

The judicial system is often burdened with overwhelming caseloads, tight deadlines, and the need for meticulous record-keeping. Managing and tracking court cases efficiently is critical for ensuring timely justice and maintaining public trust. Effective management, tracking, and disposition of court dockets are vital for maintaining the integrity and efficiency of the judicial system. By adopting best practices, leveraging technology, proactive case handling, and collaborative approaches, courts can ensure timely justice and uphold public confidence in the legal process. In a world increasingly reliant on digital solutions, modernizing docket management is not just a necessity but a cornerstone of judicial reform that will ensure that cases are resolved efficiently and fairly. The focus must remain on innovation and adaptability to uphold the principle of justice delayed is justice denied. The Quarterly Returns submitted every quarter to the NJC is a veritable data source that can help the Judicial Officer to track the cases in his Court and know the position of the cases.

Thank you for your patient listening.

*Hon. Justice Comfort Chinyere Ani PhD.
High Court of Enugu State*