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Research Article

The Digital Divide in Philippine Litigation: A Phenomenological Study of Small-Firm Lawyers in the Province of Nueva Vizcaya Adapting to the Strategic Plan for Judicial Innovations (SPJI) 2022–2027

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine judiciary has initiated technological reforms aimed at modernizing court administration and improving the efficiency and accessibility of judicial processes. Through the Strategic Plan for Judicial Innovations (SPJI) 2022–2027, the judiciary introduced initiatives such as electronic filing systems, digital case management platforms, and virtual hearings. While these reforms are intended to streamline litigation procedures and reduce administrative delays, concerns remain regarding the technological readiness of legal practitioners outside major urban centers. Provincial law offices often operate with limited access to reliable technological infrastructure, which may affect their ability to comply with emerging digital court requirements. This study examines how small-firm lawyers in the Province of Nueva Vizcaya experience and adapt to the ongoing digital transformation of litigation procedures. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to explore the lived experiences of practicing lawyers engaged in provincial litigation practice. Eighteen participants were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured interview protocols designed to capture their experiences with electronic filing systems, virtual hearings, and other technology-based judicial processes. Interview transcripts were analyzed through thematic interpretation using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. The analysis revealed four central themes describing the digital divide in provincial litigation practice: constrained connectivity, negotiation of professional competence, adaptive strategies among practitioners, and uncertain expectations regarding the future of digital court systems. The findings suggest that digital judicial reforms create both opportunities and challenges for provincial practitioners and highlight the need for institutional support mechanisms that promote inclusive participation in emerging digital court systems.

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Background

The administration of justice in the Philippines has increasingly incorporated digital technologies as part of broader institutional reforms aimed at improving efficiency, transparency, and accessibility within the judiciary. Courts historically faced challenges such as case congestion, delays in the resolution of cases, and logistical difficulties in coordinating hearings and filing pleadings. These structural issues prompted judicial authorities to explore technological innovations capable of modernizing court procedures and enhancing the delivery of judicial services.

In response to these challenges, the Supreme Court of the Philippines introduced the Strategic Plan for Judicial Innovations (SPJI) 2022–2027, which emphasizes the integration of digital technologies into court administration. The reform agenda promotes the adoption of electronic filing systems, online case management platforms, and the use of video conferencing technology for remote hearings. These initiatives are intended to streamline judicial processes and expand access to justice by reducing the need for physical court appearances and minimizing administrative delays.

The digital transformation of justice systems has been widely discussed in legal scholarship. Susskind (2019) argues that technological innovation has the potential to fundamentally reshape the delivery of legal services and judicial processes by making legal systems more efficient, transparent, and accessible. Similarly, studies on digital governance suggest that the adoption of electronic platforms can enhance institutional performance and improve public access to government services (Fernandez, 2019). Within the judiciary, initiatives such as electronic court systems and digital case management platforms have been implemented in various jurisdictions to improve procedural efficiency and reduce case backlogs (Van Zyl & Aguilar, 2021).

Despite these potential benefits, the implementation of digital court systems also raises

concerns regarding inequalities in technological access and digital literacy. Scholars have identified the existence of a digital divide, which refers to disparities in access to information and communications technologies as well as differences in the ability of individuals to effectively utilize digital tools (Wyatt & Sabino, 2020). In professional contexts such as the legal sector, these disparities may influence how practitioners adapt to technological reforms and participate in digital court procedures.

Within the Philippine context, disparities in digital infrastructure between urban and provincial areas remain significant. Lawyers practicing in metropolitan regions such as Metro Manila typically benefit from reliable internet connectivity, advanced technological infrastructure, and greater institutional support. In contrast, practitioners operating in provincial jurisdictions may encounter infrastructural limitations that affect their ability to engage fully with digital court systems. Reports on national broadband development indicate that internet connectivity in many rural areas remains inconsistent compared with urban centers (Department of Information and Communications Technology, 2021).

These conditions suggest that the digital transformation of the judiciary may produce uneven outcomes depending on the technological resources available to legal practitioners. Small law firms operating in provincial areas may face greater challenges in adapting to digital litigation practices due to financial constraints, limited technological resources, and reduced access to institutional support networks.

Although previous studies have examined digital governance and technological reform within public institutions, relatively few empirical studies have explored how judicial digitalization affects the professional experiences of lawyers practicing outside major urban centers. This study addresses this gap by examining how small-firm lawyers in Nueva Vizcaya

experience the digital transformation of litigation practice and how they adapt to the technological requirements introduced through judicial modernization initiatives.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how provincial lawyers experience the digital transformation of litigation practice. Phenomenological research is particularly suited for examining how individuals interpret and respond to shared experiences within a specific professional context.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. To qualify for participation, respondents were required to actively practice litigation in Nueva Vizcaya, belong to a small law firm consisting of five or fewer lawyers, and have experience with digital court procedures such as electronic filing or virtual hearings. A total of eighteen lawyers participated in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide included questions regarding participants' experiences with electronic filing systems, virtual court hearings, technological challenges encountered in legal practice, and their perceptions regarding the broader implications of judicial digitalization.

Interviews were conducted individually and recorded with the consent of the participants. All recordings were transcribed for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which involves identifying significant statements, formulating meanings from these statements, clustering them into thematic categories, and synthesizing the results into a comprehensive description of shared experiences. Data saturation was achieved when subsequent interviews no longer generated new themes or insights.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Professional Profile of Participating Lawyers

Participant	Years of Practice	Firm Size	Technology Use
P1	5	3 lawyers	Basic
P2	8	4 lawyers	Moderate
P3	12	2 lawyers	Moderate
P4	15	Solo	Basic
P5	20	5 lawyers	Advanced
P6	7	3 lawyers	Moderate
P7	10	2 lawyers	Basic
P8	18	Solo	Basic
P9	9	4 lawyers	Moderate
P10	11	5 lawyers	Moderate
P11	14	3 lawyers	Moderate
P12	6	2 lawyers	Basic
P13	17	Solo	Basic
P14	21	4 lawyers	Moderate
P15	13	3 lawyers	Moderate
P16	16	2 lawyers	Basic
P17	19	5 lawyers	Moderate
P18	22	Solo	Basic

Table 2. Themes Describing the Digital Divide in Provincial Litigation

Theme	Description	Illustrative Statement
Constrained Connectivity	Infrastructure barriers affecting digital court participation	"My internet connection drops when it rains."
Negotiating Competence	Adjustment to technological court systems	"Law practice now requires technical skills."
Adaptive Strategies	Informal coping strategies among lawyers	"We share equipment with nearby offices."
Uncertain Future	Mixed expectations regarding digital courts	"Digital courts may help but access remains uneven."

The findings indicate that lawyers practicing in provincial jurisdictions encounter a range of challenges when adapting to digital court procedures. Participants frequently reported unstable internet connectivity and limited technological resources as obstacles to participating fully in electronic court processes. These infrastructural limitations illustrate how technological reforms within the judiciary may produce uneven outcomes across different geographic contexts.

In addition to infrastructural barriers, participants emphasized the need to acquire new technological competencies in order to effectively engage with digital court systems. Lawyers described the transition toward electronic filing and virtual hearings as requiring skills that were not traditionally part of legal training, including document digitization, online communication platforms, and remote case management tools.

Despite these challenges, many participants demonstrated adaptive strategies in navigating digital court procedures. Lawyers described relying on collaborative arrangements with colleagues who possess stronger internet connectivity, sharing technological resources among nearby law offices, and seeking assistance from technologically proficient staff members. These strategies highlight the resilience and adaptability of practitioners operating in resource-constrained environments.

The results support the concept of the second-level digital divide, which emphasizes disparities not only in access to technology but also in the ability to effectively use digital systems. In the context of litigation practice, this divide manifests through differences in digital literacy, technological infrastructure, and

institutional support available to legal practitioners.

Policy Recommendations

Several policy implications emerge from the findings of this study.

First, the judiciary may expand capacity-building programs designed to improve digital literacy among legal practitioners. Continuing legal education initiatives focusing on electronic filing procedures, virtual hearings, and digital case management systems could assist lawyers in adapting to emerging technological requirements.

Second, strengthening digital infrastructure in provincial areas will be essential for ensuring equitable participation in digital court systems. Reliable broadband connectivity and stable electricity supply are necessary conditions for the effective implementation of electronic judicial procedures.

Third, the establishment of regional digital litigation hubs may provide shared technological resources for small law offices that lack sufficient equipment. Such hubs could offer access to high-speed internet connections, electronic filing facilities, and technical assistance for lawyers navigating digital court platforms.

Conclusion

The digital transformation of the Philippine judiciary presents significant opportunities to improve efficiency and accessibility within the justice system. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that disparities in technological infrastructure and digital competencies may influence how legal practitioners experience these reforms.

Ensuring that lawyers practicing in provincial jurisdictions possess adequate technological resources and professional training will therefore be essential for achieving the broader goals of judicial modernization. Addressing disparities in digital infrastructure and digital literacy will help ensure that technological innovation strengthens rather than undermines equitable access to justice.

Future research may examine similar experiences in other regions of the Philippines to provide a broader understanding of how digital judicial reforms influence legal practice across different geographic contexts.

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