Trying to Break into In-house Practice? Follow these Top 10 Action Items

Career Development

Cheat Sheet:

- **How to start**. Know the kind of role and business you want, research the industry and organization, network, and take business and other courses.
- **Foot in the door.** Prepare for the interview, be aware of your strengths, and leverage them in the interview.
- **Establish yourself.** Once at the job, become an expert in an area others need, be a problem solver, study to avoid pitfalls, learn the business, and be an ambassador for your organization.
- **Give back.** Pay it forward by helping others.

Companies are increasingly breaking with tradition by accepting recent law graduates and those with fewer than five or 10 years of non-in-house legal experience. With the right guidance, new-to-in-house attorneys can be molded into ideal team members able to learn and grow with the company at an impressive rate. Still, the odds are stacked against law students and recent grads who often struggle to find in-house opportunities. They can, however, utilize some savvy strategies to jump ahead of the competition.

Fresh perspectives are critical for innovation, and first-impression observations from industry newcomers can highlight what's hidden in plain sight. Whether you're being met with apprehension by wary employers, or being directly recruited by companies who routinely fill roles with new-to-in-house lawyers, these 10 action items will guide you in sequential order through the job hunt, interview process, and early stages of your new in-house role.

These action items are based on personal experience entering in-house practice and now as hiring manager for various in-house legal roles. They include: skill-mapping and identifying relevant skills, tackling the industry learning curve, effective use of outside counsel, and enjoying the journey of career development – bumps and all.

Action Item 1: Recalibrate your compass

Before starting to apply for a new role, take some time to do an honest gut-check. Reflect on what you liked and disliked about prior roles, and why. What's most important to you about your future in-house role? For example, entering a specific industry may matter more to you than the job location or role specifics. Or being involved in strategic decision-making may matter more to you than the industry.

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Some factors aren't readily ascertainable from job descriptions, like team dynamic and room for growth. Being in tune with what's actually important to you will help you make the most of interviews and be more discerning in evaluating offers.

Action Item 2: Do your research

Relying solely on what you already know through firsthand experience puts you at a huge disadvantage. For a better understanding of in-house practice areas, browse through online continuing legal education (CLE) courses and other materials designed for in-house counsel.

To prepare for an interview, pore over the company website and other publicly available materials; consider its history, competitors, media mentions, and industry outlook. Read the online profiles of your interviewers to find commonalities and plan thoughtful questions. Set up virtual coffee with someone you know in the industry or at the company and listen to their experiences. Your preparation will shine through, giving you an advantage over applicants who decided to wing it. It's up to you to feel comfortable with your own level of preparedness – you can only prepare so much — and the rest lies in many unknown factors and variables outside of your control and that oftentimes have nothing to do with you.

Action Item 3: Play to your strengths

The ability to issue-spot and synthesize information quickly are traits of a good in-house lawyer, as well as a fundamental understanding of business and finance basics, creativity, attention to detail, good judgment, and effective communication. These are qualities you've likely cultivated in prior roles. Make a list of these strengths and identify how they are valuable to in-house practice and the

role you seek.

Your network is a strength, too! Share your plans to enter in-house practice with people who know and support you, and ask that they keep you in mind if they hear of job or networking opportunities.

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As you review job openings, aim for those that have room to grow already built-in. If you meet 100 percent of the qualifications, you're probably overqualified. Similarly, review job openings two or three levels up from your current experience level. If one of these really catches your eye but you're sorely underqualified, congratulations: You've found a roadmap outlining exactly which skills to cultivate over the next few years. In the meantime, give yourself credit for the skills and strengths you already possess.

Action Item 4: Ask more strategically

You can expect to be asked during an interview, "Do you have any questions for me?" Use this time to your advantage instead of wasting it on questions you could have found through basic research. Ask questions rooted in what's genuinely important for you to know about the role and the company. For example, if a top priority for you is mentorship, ask about how the new hire will be trained and with which company leaders the new hire can expect to regularly interface.

To elicit a more thoughtful response, consider prefacing questions with some context about why you're asking. Adapt your questions based on the interviewer's background and role within the company; doing this will allow her or him to speak from firsthand experience rather than having to speculate. Your questions signal to the interviewer what is important to you, so if a question of yours was answered before you could ask it, say so and flag it as something that matters to you.

Action Item 5: Answer more strategically

Rather than trying to say what you think the interviewer wants to hear, in hopes of advancing, be sincere in your answers and think about the main points you wish to communicate. You can't control what you'll be asked, so be nimble enough to find natural opportunities to weave into the conversation the points you wish to highlight. For example, if you have no prior in-house experience but come from a family of small business owners, it's very much worth mentioning.

Cover letters are another excellent way to communicate important points that can't be known or inferred from your resume. Decision-makers naturally favor candidates who show a certain level of personal understanding and familiarity with the work, so make sure your answers highlight all the ways the role is a mutual fit. The logic behind Action Items 2-5 should become a regular focus and a way to work on effective communication, strategic negotiation, and executive presence.

Action Item 6: Hit the ground running

You got the job! Remember: You have the same fundamental legal training as your counterparts who've been in the industry for more than 20 years, and you bring a fresh perspective and a healthy curiosity of why things are the way they are. You will, however, need to quickly close the industry knowledge gap. Tackle the industry learning curve by implementing Action Item 2 all over again, but

now with research specifically tailored to the subject matters relevant to your role.

When you receive an assignment unfamiliar to you, incorporate Action Item 4 and do your future self a favor by asking key questions at the outset, like what is the deadline or how long you should spend on something.

Don’t ask something you could’ve easily found on your own in a company policy, procedure, or file history, or verified on your own in a statute, contract, or other governing document.

Bring proposed solutions and action plans rather than just the problems themselves. Instead of saying, “The counterparty requested to strike out this entire section in our template; what do we do?” — you can say, “The counterparty requested to strike out the entire section in our template, but if we propose to modify the language this way, it likely covers their concern and still achieves what we need; what do you think?” Stretch yourself like this and you’ll quickly become a valuable contributor.

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The legal and regulatory landscape is ever evolving, and industries are constantly innovating, so a great way to distinguish yourself is to become the resident expert on one or more relevant issues or topics that are brand new to the business, industry, or legal profession. This can be as simple as being the one who reads the full text of a newly amended statute and keeps track of relevant government directives. It’s OK to not know the answer to a question or not understand an issue, so long as you find an answer promptly.

Action Item 7: Get to know the business

Legal work is legal work, but the real magic happens when it’s applied with a deep understanding of the business and its objectives and challenges. Build relationships with key stakeholders who can describe the why's and how's of the business in their own words. Learn how to view issues through their viewpoint. Learn the jargon. To the extent you can, keep your finger on the pulse of business operations and priorities.

If your legal department is well-established and has strict processes, try to understand why those processes and guidelines are set up that way. If you’re playing a part in setting up legal and compliance programs, keep in mind the priorities of the various business units and departments affected. Aim for procedures that produce the least amount of friction for the business while remaining legally compliant and meeting internal risk-tolerance thresholds. Whether you’re a generalist or specialist, internal stakeholders should feel at ease approaching you because they know they’ll be met with constructive collaboration and problem-solving, not unnecessary roadblocks and friction.

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Take it a step further and become an ambassador of your company and industry, representing it well at professional functions and looking for potential business development opportunities to pass along.

Action Item 8: Avoid outside counsel pitfalls

Managing outside counsel is a bit of an art. Their work comes at a premium, so keep costs in mind when determining what to outsource and what to do internally. When an outside opinion or perspective is needed or required, come up with a clear ask and an anticipated project size and timeline, and discuss this openly to avoid any surprises when the invoice comes around.

As in-house counsel, you know the business best: Pay close attention to how the work is being done to ensure that your outside counsel isn't misinterpreting any aspect of the business objectives and that they know all the necessary and relevant facts and nuances. To that end, it's important to have mutual trust, mutual respect, and a good personal rapport. Rather than blind trust, have a working knowledge of their area of expertise so you can recognize red flags.

A sign of an excellent outside lawyer is one who not only produces quality work but also meets you at your experience level, explaining matters in such a way that equips you to be an effective intermediary. Keep the good ones close! Learning how to manage these relationships does take time: When in doubt, ask for advice from a more senior in-house attorney.

Action Item 9: Keep working on yourself

So long as your work obligations are being met, there's no limit to the ways in which you can enrich your career. Growing as a professional and growing as a person are essentially one in the same. If your goal is to add rocket fuel to your career trajectory, know that what you do beyond your job scope and in your spare time is key. Be genuine in the way you connect with others and build a strategic network and support system for yourself.

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Take the time to curate your personal brand and be mindful of the reputation you are creating. Hire a photographer for a fresh set of headshots that you actually love. Try a new hobby for the first time — anything — and get comfortable with the idea that, with enough time and strategic effort, you're capable of mastering anything at all. The bigger the challenge, the bigger the opportunity for growth. Refer back to Action Item 1 and be honest with yourself about what you want to do, in your career or just in general, and then go for it.

Action Item 10: Pay it forward

These 10 action items are a lot to juggle, and it’s unrealistic to focus on all of them simultaneously. There are many factors at play which are outside your control, but with time and consistency, you’ll see the benefits of implementing these tips during the natural ebbs and flows of your in-house career.

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Once things start to align for you, it’s time to pay it forward. Think of the people who went out of their way to lend you a helping hand or an encouraging nod, and be that person for others. At any given point in time in your career, what you know is incredibly valuable to someone who’s a step or two behind you and wishing to be exactly where you are now.

You don’t have to wait until 20-plus years into your career to inspire and give meaningful guidance to others. In fact, your message is likely better received and more impactful coming from a relatable peer.

Stay in tune with your gut

Being brand new to in-house as a new lawyer can be daunting, especially when an in-house lawyer with fewer than five or 10 years of legal experience is still the exception and not the norm. Getting comfortable exercising sound professional judgment while still learning is key. Boiled down, these 10 action items are a reminder to stay in tune with your gut, keep an open mind, and approach situations strategically through preparation. Celebrate your hard work and achievements thus far, and at each step of the way.

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