

Straight to In-house: Laura Grossi-Tyson on Creating a Successful Internship Program

Interviews and Profiles

Career Development





Laura Grossi-Tyson, senior director of benefits, employee relations, and HR operations at Independence Blue Cross, LLC, has been with the healthcare company since 1998. But she didn't start out in human resources — she previously served as the company's deputy general counsel,

overseeing litigation, labor and employment, and administration.

When asked why she made the move, she said she was looking for a career change and HR seemed like a good fit. "In the legal department, the majority of my time was spent dealing with issues. Working in the HR department, my role is more strategic in nature, and it's also working to benefit employees versus primarily dealing with the issues."

But the experience one gains in the legal department is invaluable, which is why Grossi-Tyson advocated for an intern program at Independence Blue Cross. Having worked with law students in a similar program in an in-house position at Sunoco, she understands firsthand how much students — and the organization — can gain through the implementation of such a program. Here she discusses the program and offers advice for others who may be interested in starting something similar at their organization.

An in-house intern program

ACC: I understand that you helped establish an intern program at Independence Blue Cross (Independence), similar to intern programs at law firms. Why was this a priority for you?



Laura Grossi-Tyson: When I came to Independence in 1998, they didn't have an intern program. Then a new general counsel joined us in 1999. We started talking about ways that we could bring in individuals and use their expertise for special projects, etc. I indicated that we had an intern program at Sunoco, and it was a great opportunity to bring in individuals from law school. They could take some of the lower level attorney work because that was an issue for the department.

The vast majority of the attorneys in the department were senior counsel, and there were few lower level attorneys. I felt that the students could assist with some of the lower level work, and that, in

addition to the summer, we could retain some interns during the school year. It also provided us with an opportunity to evaluate their performance; get an idea of what they were like, so when job openings came up in the future, they could be a part of the candidate pool.

ACC: Tell me about the program: How does Independence go about "recruiting" law students, and what sort of things do the interns work on?

Laura: We started the program in 2001, and it's still going strong — we've had a lot of interest in it and we've interviewed every year. In the fall we participate in the intern interviews at the local law schools in the same manner as the law firms. Independence interviews at law schools in the Philadelphia area. We interview at Drexel, Temple, Rutgers, Villanova, and Widener.

There's a committee that does the interviewing — we try to have the committee consist of alumni from each of those different schools. They go out to the school and interview all the candidates that have applied and bring back their top candidates. Then we usually bring back two of the top candidates from each school. In addition, the company interviews individuals from the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group. They are then interviewed by the committee and decisions are made as to who will participate in the program.

The number of interns we hire depends on the year. It depends on the amount of work and the budget, but generally, it's two individuals who are hired to work in the intern program. One intern is hired from the PDLG, and the other is hired from one of the law schools. During the summer we try to give them a broad-based experience to try to make sure they get assignments from all the different practice groups, for example: from the litigation practice group; the provider practice group; the corporate practice; the marketing practice group; and the labor and employment practice group. At the end of the program, we evaluate their performance, and those who are interested can maintain their employment through the school year on a part-time basis.

A win-win situation

ACC: I understand you don't technically hire directly from law schools. What are the benefits then, for students and companies?

Laura: I think the program has been a win-win for the students and the company. We are very upfront with students that our internship is somewhat different from a law firm internship. In most law firm internships — at least in the past — if you participated in the internship program, as long as they liked you, you were offered a job. We inform our candidates during the interview process that more likely than not, you will not be hired at the end of the program. This is because: (a) We have budget constraints that some firms don't have, and we need to have an opening in order to hire somebody; and (b), We may not feel that they have enough experience to jump right into a role. Because if we do have an opening, we need somebody who can hit the ground running.

That said, we still have had no problems getting candidates, and good quality candidates. Even though we don't have job opportunities for individuals, they have been very successful in finding jobs because we work with a lot of area law firms who are always willing to give our candidates interviews because of the experience they gain from working for the company.

> The other big benefit is that they are part of a corporation and are an integral part of how a corporation actually functions. They get to learn the business, which is not something that

you're going to get at a firm.

-Laura Grossi-Tyson, Senior Director, Benefits, Employee Relations & HR operations, Independence Blue Cross

ACC: Have you seen any of you interns go directly in-house, or do the majority of them still go to firms?

Laura: We see a majority of them go to either firms or the government. We've had a number of our interns go into government work, I guess because of the nature of our business. But I am not aware of any intern that actually went in-house after working with us. Now we do have some interns that we hired later on.

ACC: When you've hired previous interns, how much experience do they come back to you with?

Laura: After they've been with another organization for two to four years, we have considered them for a position. When we have an opening, we have reached out to former interns for several positions. Some have accepted positions, and some did not.

Challenges and opportunities

ACC: What would you say are the greatest challenges for new attorneys working within a company like Independence, fresh out of law school or with little-to-no in-house experience?

Laura: The biggest challenge is learning the business and forming relationships with your clients. In a corporation, you don't start as slowly as you would in a law firm. While there is certainly a learning curve, training, and mentoring, new hires are provided with substantive, high-level work immediately, and that can sometimes be a challenge for less experienced attorneys.

ACC: What about the opportunities presented that may not have been available as a first-year attorney at a firm?

Laura: Work-life balance. It's one of the biggest benefits of being in-house I know a lot of law firm attorneys that will put in an incredible amount of hours. They give up a great deal in their social life to work evenings and weekends to attain the billable hours requirements. While in-house attorneys work hard, there is no billable hours requirement, so there is more flexibility.

The other big benefit is that they are part of a corporation and are an integral part of how a corporation actually functions. They get to learn the business, which is not something that you're going to get at a firm, writing briefs and doing research in the library. They get real hands-on experience working with the clients and getting to see how a business or corporation operates.

Advice for corporations, students, and in-house counsel

ACC: What advice can you offer to legal departments considering implementing a similar program?

Laura: I would recommend that they do so. It is a win-win for both the corporation and the intern. Even if you don't plan on hiring them, it really is a good opportunity for the interns to see how a business operates, to see a different aspect of law, and to help them in making career decisions. They get a different experience than they would in a law firm, which I think is very valuable to them. It's even valuable if they don't go in-house immediately and instead go to law firms that would hire them because they do have that experience of working directly with clients — working in a business setting.

I think it's very valuable to the business too. You really get some good talent and it gives you an opportunity to evaluate that talent early, so that when you have job openings, you have a ready pool of individuals to reach out to. Further, it's cost-efficient for the business to have interns: corporations often have limited resources and smaller departments, so you end up doing a lot more work on your own than in a law firm. The interns can take some of that burden off full-time attorneys.

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ACC: In terms of starting a program like this from scratch, what are the first steps?

Laura: We started with the career departments at the law schools. I had an advantage that maybe another corporation wouldn't as I was in charge of the intern program at Sunoco, so I knew how it was set up. The other advantage is that we at Independence have an intern program outside of the law department. We also hire college interns and have an individual in HR whose primary responsibility is dealing with the college interns. So, we have a ready-made process built in.

I would suggest if a corporation is already doing a college internship program, that they [the law department] partner with the HR department because they already have connections with the different schools. They may not have connections at the law schools, but they may have connections with the individuals at the different universities who can connect them with the law schools. They may also already have a process built in for the hiring, etc.

ACC: What advice can you offer law students who aspire to begin their legal careers in-house? What can they do to prepare and stand out to a corporate employer?

Laura: To stand out really starts in undergrad. I know that when we are looking at résumés, individuals that have any type of work experience in college, or who took courses in business, are more attractive to us. The same applies to law school. A lot of the law schools now, and this is probably more specific to Independence, have healthcare cohorts. Therefore, individuals that are in the healthcare cohorts are very attractive to us.

Beyond that, I would think with other corporations the same would hold true, to the extent they have business cohorts, taking different business courses like corporate law, mergers and acquisitions, things of that nature, and any type of work experience that falls within that realm — is a good idea. Try

to focus on areas you might be interested in, and then tailor some of your courses to what might be attractive to that company or area.

ACC: According to 2016 statistics compiled by the Section of Legal Education and Admissions of the American Bar Association (ABA), 45.5 percent of graduates obtained positions with law firms while 13.5 percent obtained positions in business and industry. These numbers indicate that many law school graduates are still seeking firm positions, but is the "traditional" path still the way to go? Do you see more attorneys choosing an in-house path sooner in their careers? Why or why not?

Laura: I think more students want to take a path to in-house, but the barrier is the corporations themselves. Maybe now that the economy is picking up, things will be different. But corporations are different than law firms. You hear all the time about the rainmakers, people that generate the revenue. That's their [law firms] business. In a corporation, a law department is not a profit and loss area. It's a staff function and does not generate revenue for the business. So they don't have the luxury, like the law firms do, to just hire lawyers to evaluate talent. We're held to the same budget requirements as other departments, so we can only hire when we have openings, or if something does happen where there are some expansion and growth in the company as a whole.

Because of this constraint, most corporations prefer that an individual have a few years' experience before they are hired in-house. Corporations need to have attorneys who can come in and start working with the clients immediately. So, while there may be a lot of students interested — and the interest is there which is evidenced by the fact that we get a significant number of applicants to our intern program, and a lot of students ask me "how do I get a job in-house" — unfortunately the opportunities are not readily available.

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