

7 Tips for Women New to In-house Law

Career Development





In honor of International Women’s Day on March 8, my first article as ACCDocket.com’s Career Columnist will focus on advice for women new to corporate law. Of course, much of this advice will apply to in-house counsel of all genders. However, research shows that female in-house counsel are

more likely to earn less, take temporary leave from work, and face difficulties returning to work after said leave than their male counterparts. With these obstacles in mind, here are the lessons I've learned that can help fellow female in-house counsel as they start their careers in this industry.

1. Find a mentor

First things first, find a mentor — someone who will guide and train you in your current role and champion your career journey along the way.

This can be a fellow attorney who's more experienced in corporate law or a business colleague who can teach you more about your company's inner workings. Ideally, you'll have more than one person to champion your career, and you can learn something different from each of them.

If you already have a mentor, you're one step ahead! Cultivate that relationship or those relationships and always be on the lookout for more helpful peers.

Of course, when you're established in your career, remember to pay it forward and mentor others. It feels good to help people as you have been helped. Often, these relationships can become reciprocal as well.

I have mentors who tell me that they consider me their mentor, much to my surprise the first time it happened. Those are particularly fun and rare relationships.

2. Network

If you don't have mentors yet, network. The concept of networking means something different to everyone, but it should be based, at its heart, on connecting with other human beings.

If you connect with people over a strong work ethic, compassion, or similar interests, eventually, you'll build a powerful and meaningful network. These should be people (both attorneys and non-attorneys) who support you and your career.

But what if you don't find networking easy? Join or volunteer on one of your company's committees or service groups. For example, I'm on my company's Corporate Citizenship Committee, which is committed to working in harmony with our community because being a good corporate citizen is essential to the growth and success of our company. A group of employees from various departments meet and consider our impact and the value we can bring to society in every aspect of our business. Participating in groups within the company helps you meet other people, get to know them, and contribute to your organization.

3. Be a leader

As in-house counsel, your title often makes others see you as a leader, even on day one. This feels like a burden at times, but it's really an opportunity for you and the company to grow.

In your role, you can find many ways to be a leader like by volunteering to take on a project or task. I did this when appearing before a town's Planning Board on behalf of my company. It turned into several appearances for various projects to gain approval for physical improvements to my organization's headquarters. I learned a great deal, worked with many internal clients I would not

usually work with, and I helped ease the workload of my colleagues by volunteering to help.

It's also important to jump in and help when others' workloads are too demanding. For example, our legal administrator helps me with contract reviews, but she supports many attorneys, so her workload is high.

When she's exceptionally busy with work for one of our other attorneys, I jump in on the contract reviews she usually handles for me. This sends a message to her that we are a team — because we are. By assisting colleagues, you show true leadership and encourage everyone to pitch in by following your example.

Another great way to be a good leader is to build others up by giving credit where credit is due. If someone you're working with does a good job, tell her, her boss, or the team working on the matter. If someone you're working with mentions an important bit of language in a contract that they helped write, acknowledge that. Thank someone in a "reply all" so that others might take your lead in expressing appreciation.

As REES Capital Managing Partner Amy Rees Anderson said, "A person who feels appreciated will always do more than what is expected." So, not only will you make someone feel pride in a job well done, but you may encourage continued great work. You might also inspire others to show appreciation and give credit when due to their team.

4. Learn the business

One of the most important pieces of advice I have for those new to in-house roles is to learn the business as best as you can. This is advice I continue to follow myself because I work for an organization with a lot of facets, so the learning process is constant. In many organizations, perhaps all, learning the business will likely be a continual process.

It is important because your internal clients rely on you to protect the company against risk while helping to drive the business. To properly or best advise them, you must understand their concerns and how your advice will affect the business.

5. Never let them see you sweat

It is easy to feel intimidated or overwhelmed when you're new to in-house law — or even when you've been doing this for a while.

You have a direct boss, executives who feel like bosses, internal clients, and probably customers. Factoring in your workload and the personalities involved, there will be times when you're nervous, stressed, or some combination of them.

Perhaps you're meeting with an intimidating executive for the first time, your workload is too much, or you're dealing with a challenging matter or negotiation. Whatever's happening, take a breath and gather yourself privately.

Then, stand tall, speak confidently, be firm when appropriate, and don't be afraid. You are in your position for a reason, so show up prepared and do your job. In my practice, I've found that being prepared and honest serves me extremely well.

I work with many men who respect my work, and I have many male mentors and champions, so please do not mistake my next sentence as a negative statement about men. However, as a woman, I never want to give anyone (man or woman) cause to criticize my work or my preparedness.

As lawyers, we are in a historically male role, and as lawyers in corporations, we are in a historically male work environment. Thus, there may be underlying, sometimes even subconscious thoughts that women are not as adequate as men in a corporate law role. I never want to give anyone an opportunity to prove that preconceived notion, so I try to “never let them see me sweat.” I just do my job well.

There are a couple of caveats to this advice, including:

1. Don’t be fake. People gravitate toward real human beings, so you should be yourself, but also show up prepared and work hard without any sign of being overwhelmed. I use this strategy, and both male and female colleagues respond positively to me and my work. This approach also makes gender discrimination very clear because if you’re working hard and doing everything that you’re supposed to in your role, discrimination based on gender stands out and is easier to prove. Hopefully, you’ll never have to worry about that!
2. Do not hide any real concerns you’re having. If your workload truly is too much to competently serve your internal clients, talk to your boss. If you’re struggling with serious anxiety because of your role, seek professional help. You should never feel embarrassed or ashamed if you’re struggling mentally. My advice is meant for the sometimes hectic daily routine, not for mental health struggles, which should be addressed immediately. Lawyers are at high risk for mental health issues, so please do not hesitate to get help if you need it.

6. De-stress

I’ve struggled with this one for some time. I like my job, so I work a lot. But I’ve learned that I can work hard and often, but still take time for myself. When I haven’t done this in the past, I lost some of the passion for my work. I still did my job competently, but I didn’t enjoy it as much as I did when I first started my job. When I took time for myself, I found the passion and love for my work again.

For example, I live in a tropical area, so I visit different islands on weekends to clear my head. Taking a break from my work has helped me be even more productive when I return to the office. Even if you don’t live near a sunny island, explore your surroundings and try new things, whether it’s the newly opened nitro-brewed coffee shop or that spin class you’ve been meaning to try.

So, enjoy your happy places and stress-free actives in your time off the clock. It will help your performance, not hurt it, I promise.

7. Take time for loved ones

According to the *2014 ACC Global Work-Life Balance Report*, female attorneys, in particular, struggle with balancing work responsibilities with caregiving responsibilities for parents and children. In fact, 25 percent of female respondents said that they had to take temporary leave or quit a job as an in-house counsel to provide full-time care for a dependent.

Be prepared for these hurdles and, if you need help, get help. Look into caregiving support your company may offer or talk to your boss about taking time from work or having a flex schedule to meet

your familial obligations.

If you're simply looking to have more meaningful time with your family without work interruptions, aim to finish more projects during your workday. The best, yet sometimes trickiest, way is to reduce distractions.

To be more productive at the office, install an anti-distraction application on your computer or smart phone, such as Freedom, RescueTime, or even iPhone's Screen Time settings. The more you're focused on work from 9-to-5, the more time you can spend time with your family and friends offline.

In closing, congratulations on your in-house role! I wasn't sure if I would like in-house work when I started doing it years ago, but I love it, and I hope you do too. There will be difficulties, just as there would be in any other field. But, with the right resources and networks, you're off to a solid start.

Elizabeth A. Colombo



Senior Legal Counsel

Vendavo, Inc.

In her role as senior legal counsel with Vendavo, Inc., Colombo works cross-functionally with the relevant business teams and stakeholders, providing legal advice on a broad range of topics and guiding the business on legal compliance with a particular focus on drafting, managing, and negotiating client and vendor contracts of moderate-to-high complexity from the bid phase through contract execution, including software licensing and SaaS-specific provisions, as well as matters related to contractual liability and risk-shifting provisions, data privacy, intellectual property, and

products.