



Look for Your Next Mentor Outside the Legal Department

Career Development



CHEAT SHEET

- **Mentor benefits.** A mentor outside the legal department can help you learn the fundamentals of your business and can connect you to others who can also teach you necessary skills.
- **Extra insight.** Spending time with a non-lawyer mentor can help you identify gaps or opportunities in business processes or strategies you might otherwise miss.
- **Feel the connection.** Compatibility with your mentor is important. If it's difficult to converse on topics early on, consider another match.
- **Mutually beneficial.** Remember that a mentor also benefits from their relationship with a mentee, whether in inspiration, legal insight, or the satisfaction of helping others succeed.

One of the keys to a successful career is finding a mentor who can encourage your development, correct your mistakes, be your guide in making big decisions, and provide advice as you navigate difficult situations throughout your professional life. A mentor can be a sounding board for your frustrations or concerns. A mentor often acts as a counselor who helps you cope with — and understand — setbacks. For in-house lawyers, there is no substitute for having a more experienced lawyer as a mentor. But there are other people in your company who can also play an important part in career development.

You can learn a lot about how the business runs from the people who run it every day — who are, almost exclusively, non-lawyers

These mentors can help you acquire skills that are often crucially important and difficult to learn and can help you become the kind of strategic business partner you need to be in order to advance to senior positions in the legal department. Who are they? They're in every department in the company — the leaders of non-legal business functions who understand how your company works and how to succeed within it. Learn from them, and you'll be well on your way to becoming the business-savvy legal partner that thrives in an in-house environment.

What can an in-house lawyer learn from a mentor outside the legal department? There are three categories of business-related skills that a non-legal mentor could be invaluable in developing: business acumen, cross-functional strategies, and communication with non-lawyers.

Business acumen: Not taught in law school

Countless articles have chronicled the increasing reliance that chief executives have placed on their in-house counsel — not just as legal advisors — but as business partners. Even junior attorneys need to understand the business context in which they are working and rendering advice. According to [an article on landing an in-house position by international recruiting firm Major, Lindsey & Africa](#), this is a key requirement for any in-house lawyer. But how does a person go from being a legal advisor to a business partner?

First, you have to understand your company's business. How does it operate? How does it make

money? What are the key drivers (known as key performance indicators or KPIs in business-speak) of success and failure? What is your company's overall attitude about risk, and what is the company's level of general risk tolerance? Until you understand your company inside and out, you won't be able to understand what legal issues could cripple your business, and which issues are not as great of a threat or even merely theoretical.

It's hard to imagine anyone answering these questions better than the people who run the various functions of the company. A leader on the finance team can tell you what happens in the company that spurs good or poor financial performance. Which financial factors are within the company's control (and which are not)? A supply chain leader can tell you first-hand how fluctuations in commodity pricing or international trade restrictions affect operations, which will help you make decisions about provisions in your customer agreements. A sales team leader can help you understand who your client base is, what they care about, and how the sales relationships generally work. A long-term, stable customer base may be less likely to engage in litigation, which may impact how you draft indemnity provisions in your client contracts. An accounting expert can help you understand your company's financial statements better, which will help you review financial reporting documents like US Securities and Exchange Commission statements. You can learn a lot about how the business runs from the people who run it every day — who are, almost exclusively, non-lawyers. A mentor working in one of these functions can be an invaluable resource in learning the strategic interests, day-to-day worries, and performance objectives of the various constituencies that make up your company.

Second, once you understand what matters to other departments and operations, you have to learn how to provide legal advice that creates neither a roadblock nor a rubber stamp. Unlike a law firm, no one wants the citation to the case or the statute you're relying on to provide your legal analysis. They want you to explain the issue in plain English. That's not always easy when you've been talking to lawyers for years. Learning the lingo of other disciplines is a great way to bridge communication gaps and to connect your colleagues to the legal issues you need them to understand. Talking about how an increase in litigation will be expensive isn't as helpful as talking about how an increase in litigation may impact third-quarter margins.

Third, you have to understand that your business solves problems, and your job can be to recommend solutions to those problems. Lawyers who say, "No, you can't do that," or "There is a law against that," will find themselves uninvited from key meetings and excluded from important conversations. You have to learn that the legal analysis is only the first step. Solving the business problem is the important next step. Suggesting how to reach that step in a way that assumes an appropriate level of risk is why you're there. Alternatives and workarounds can be developed only by a lawyer who fully understands both the business objectives and the practical limitations faced by the company. A true business partner should not only provide options that reduce risk (and accomplish the objectives) but also provide recommendations about what other options might work best — and why.

A mentor outside the law department can help you learn the basics of your business and, more importantly, can connect you to even more people who can help you learn what you need to know. Non-lawyers can also be a valuable test audience for the way you deliver legal advice and increase the chances that your proposed solutions to the problems your clients are facing will be accepted, admired, and implemented.

Business terminology to know

ASSETS	The economic resources of a business, including equipment, products, trademarks, or copyrights.
BALANCE SHEET	A key financial document that provides a picture of business assets, liabilities, and owner's equity.
B2B	Business-to-business. When the purpose of the business is to supply goods/services to other businesses.
B2C	Business-to-consumer. When the purpose of the business is to supply goods/serves to the consumer.
CANNIBALIZATION	Sales loss caused by the introduction of a new product that displaces an older product instead of increasing the overall market share.
COMPOUND ANNUAL GROWTH RATE	Measure of business growth over multiple time periods — from initial investment value to ending investment value.
DIFFERENTIATION	Marketing process that communicates the unique qualities of a product compared to competing products.
INTRAPRENEURSHIP	A system that allows employees to act like an entrepreneur within the company.
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	A measurable value that demonstrates how effectively a company is achieving identified business objectives.
LIABILITIES	Debt accrued by the business.
RATE OF RETURN	Annual investment income as a percentage of the original investment.
SCRUB THE NUMBERS	Find errors or mistakes in financial reports or accounting spreadsheets.
SOCIALIZE	Telling people informally about a product/initiative to see what the reaction is; like “testing the waters.”
VALUE PROPOSITION	A promise of value to be delivered or experienced to a user or customer of a service or thing.
VALUATION	An estimate of the overall worth of the business.

In any company, career success and progression depend on building a reputation and a brand — not just in the legal department but company-wide.

Non-lawyers can teach you to work with lawyers and non-lawyers

In-house lawyers are often assigned to cross-functional teams to help develop products or strategies, resolve tough business problems, or optimize internal processes. An in-house lawyer will only be successful if they can cooperate and collaborate with the stakeholders and partners from other

departments. Having a mentor outside the legal department can help you understand how other departments work and how to get things done efficiently and effectively. Any success on a cross-functional team will make you better at your job while enhancing your reputation both within the legal department and outside of it.

On the flip side, having detractors who do not support legal projects or understand the purpose of the legal department can be a serious hurdle both to accomplishing your day-to-day work and to accomplishing your career goals. In some organizations, there are parts of the company that interact with legal only when there is trouble afoot. This creates a negative perception of the legal department and can impact your ability to work cross-functionally when you need to (and as a GC, almost everything you'll do is cross-functional). Developing mentoring relationships with people in those functions can allow you to be seen in a whole new, and much more positive, light.

Those who have risen through the ranks into top legal jobs find that “soft skills” can be the hardest to learn — often because these skills are not taught in law school or acquired in a law firm setting. Soft skills include fostering a strong work ethic; communicating positively and clearly with others; giving and receiving criticism calmly; and acting as a team player, giving credit where credit is due. Leaders outside the legal department may have more training and experience in leadership than your mentors in the legal department. Learning from effective business leaders may help you accelerate the learning curve you need to go from merely a legal resource to a true business partner and enable you to stand out as a leader inside and outside the legal department.

Build your reputation with non-lawyers

In any company, career success and progression depend on building a reputation and a brand — not just in the legal department but companywide. One pathway to building that reputation is to find ways to add value to the company through paths that might not be expected from a lawyer. Spending time with a mentor (and others whom the mentor recommends) can help you see gaps or opportunities in business processes or strategies that you might not otherwise notice. And if there is a role for a lawyer to play in filling those gaps, or exploiting those opportunities, volunteer to help. You've thus identified yourself as a proactive, solutions-oriented player in the organization — someone who will always be in demand in any profession.

Furthermore, if you have your sights set on landing the top in-house job, you won't be interviewing with attorneys — you'll be interviewing with the CEO, the CFO, and other C-Suite executives. Do you understand what they do and what is important to them in a legal partner? Do you understand the big picture when it comes to how the business works and the process of decision-making within the company? Have you shown that you know how to partner with other parts of the organization? A mentor outside the legal department can help you gain invaluable perspective to answer these questions.

How to find a mentor outside the legal department

Once you've decided that a mentor outside the legal department is something you'd like to have, how do you identify someone who would be a good mentor for you? Most importantly, your mentor has to be someone that you naturally connect with. Mentoring relationships that seem like they should work based on common biographical or other interests sometimes fizzle when there is no personal connection or rapport between mentor and mentee. If you're straining to hold back thoughts and ideas that come from your conversation with someone, that's a great sign; if you're struggling to

come up with conversation topics two minutes in, you know the person isn't the right fit for you. Second, the person must be someone that has enough experience beyond you that they can teach you something, but that isn't at a level so far removed from where you are that you're not ready for the lessons they have to give. Third, they have to be the kind of person who wants to be a mentor and believes that mentoring is a valuable experience for both the mentor and mentee.

If you've already identified someone that you think might be a great mentor, don't be afraid to approach them. If you haven't, start talking with people who attend meetings with you, in a break room, during lunch, in the elevator, or elsewhere. If your company simply doesn't have anyone that would make a good mentor, consider attending local Chamber of Commerce meetings, get involved with a nonprofit organization, or talk to people where you spend non-working time — at the gym, at religious services, etc. Once you start taking an interest in the people around you, both at work and in your community, you're bound to find someone who would make a great mentor.

Once you've found a potential mentor, the best way to make a connection is to build the relationship's foundation on something that is real and meaningful to both you and your potential mentor. Start with a conversation that you can both relate to — whether about a mutual interest, a recent company event, or other people in the company that you both know and like. Perhaps your potential mentor did something that you particularly admired or sparked your curiosity — these topics are a great way to make an authentic connection. For example, if the person handled a difficult transition or conflict well, you can express your admiration of their skill or resilience. If they're working on a new project you are interested in, pose questions about it. Tell them you think what they're doing is interesting and you'd like to learn more about it. Ask the person for some of their time for a conversation over coffee, lunch, or even just a quick walk down the hall between meetings. Build on this relationship as you would any other. Almost everyone will be open to talking to you if you approach them with respect and genuine curiosity and interest in who they are and what they do.

This all may sound great, but you might be wondering: Can I actually do this? Many of us stumble when asking someone for their time, advice, or mentorship. It may feel greedy and demanding, or just uncomfortable and awkward. But we all have something to offer, and the mentor-mentee relationship is no different. In any good mentoring relationship, your mentor will also benefit from time spent with you. Maybe your curiosity will inspire a new idea, or your enthusiasm will spur renewed energy for a long-term project. Or, on a more practical level, perhaps your mentor needs something from the legal department, or could benefit from having a direct relationship with a legal team member. Perhaps your mentor has a project that has positive risk management or legal implications that you identify. Just as a mentor outside the legal department helps you develop your business acumen, a legal department mentee may provide your mentor with risk identification or legal acumen that will help your mentor work better. Aside from these benefits, good mentors enjoy sharing their perspective and wisdom with less experienced colleagues and relish seeing those that they help to succeed.

While there is no substitute for the career guidance and professional development that can be gained from a great legal mentor, in-house counsel should be mindful of the many other skills that determine in-house success. A mentor outside the legal department might be the missing piece you need to advance your career and find continued success in-house.

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