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Chapter Spotlight: Australia

Skills and Professional Development





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Tell us about your background.

I started my legal career as a commercial litigator in one of Australia's leading law firms. Following a secondment at one of Australia's major financial institutions, I made the transition to in-house counsel in banking dispute resolution. I would later move into legal practice management and cross-border legal work. I am currently the manager legal and deputy company secretary at St Barbara Limited, an ASX 200 listed gold mining company.

What are some skills that in-house counsel need to hone and advance their careers?

I think it depends on what stage of your career you are at. For more junior in-house lawyers, commercial acumen, communication skills, and trust are important skills. However, more senior lawyers and those at the level of general counsel need to develop strategic thinking in a related discipline — such as corporate governance, risk management, or compliance.

How did you first become involved in the Australia Chapter, and can you highlight some key milestones of the Australia Chapter?

I have been involved in the Australian Chapter of ACC for over 10 years. Initially, I was chair of the social committee for the Victorian division and later the state president for Victoria. I joined the national board of what was then the Australian Corporate Lawyers Association (ACLA) over five years ago and am currently the national president. ACLA was formed more than 30 years ago and during that time, some of the major milestones for ACLA/ACC Australia have been:

- Merging each of the state divisions in Australia into a single national body and incorporating a single national board;
- Achieving the goal of 2000 members by 2000; and,

- Negotiating the alliance with ACC to become the Australian Chapter of the ACC.

How does your chapter promote meaningful connections and provide value to its members?

We have a number of ways we add value to our members, including the provision of over 150 free CPD events each year for our members, including our two day annual National Conference; holding several social events all around Australia; running CPD workshops on vital soft skills; access to publications like the Australian Corporate Lawyer; and, most recently, supply members with professional indemnity insurance as part of their membership.

The ACC Australia Chapter recently released a benchmarking report. Can you describe key findings?

As has been the case for a number of years, Australian in-house counsel are reporting increasing workloads and time pressures and limited resources and budgetary constraints, compounded by tightening regulation. The majority (60 percent) of Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) in-house lawyers reported pressure to reduce legal costs, while some (25 percent) experience pressure to minimise cost increases. The cost pressures are driven by:

- General cost reduction program within the organization;
- The operating environment/general market conditions; and,
- Economic conditions causing the business to operate cautiously.

For the first time in our benchmarking reports, women now account for 50 percent of head of legal functions. The ANZ in-house legal profession continues to lead the profession on gender diversity, where only 25 percent of law firm partners at 52 of Australia's largest law firms are women.

General counsel are also increasingly being promoted to the C-suite, with half of respondents' (50 percent) head of legal function reporting directly to the CEO or equivalent, followed by 28 percent who report to a person that reports directly to the CEO or equivalent. As a result, general counsel spend 51 percent of their time on urgent high importance/highly strategic work, followed by 25 percent of their time on high importance/highly strategic work that is not urgent.

As corporations rein in legal spend by increasingly bringing work in-house, the ranks of corporate legal departments have also increased. Greater legal and business alignment is also achieved when the legal function influences the business, contributes to the overall success of the organisation (89 percent), and increases the value of the legal function inside the organisation. A positive shift is underway in organisations, as the legal function is not viewed by the organisation as a cost centre. In-house counsel can facilitate this change by measuring and reporting on its operations in the organisation. CEO and/or business unit satisfaction/appraisals also elevate the in-house legal function's visibility internally.

The *2017 ACC Australia Benchmarks and Leading Practices Report* is available for purchase from the ACC Australia website: acla.acc.com.

How will these findings impact in-house counsel?

What we are seeing is a continuation of some key themes that we have seen over the last number of years being:

1. An increase in influence of general counsel within businesses, with more GCs represented in the C-suite and being involved in strategic issues;
2. Continued pressure on external legal costs, which in turn drives more legal departments to consider alternative “Newlaw” suppliers, such as contract lawyers, utilize direct briefing, and incorporate practice management systems or workflow management systems to drive efficiencies; and,
3. GCs are increasingly being required to be responsible for other non-legal functions such as compliance and governance.

How can members get involved with the chapter?

There are many ways members can be involved in our chapter, including attending our CPD events and conferences, participating in our mentoring program, joining one of our state committees, writing articles for our magazine, joining our LinkedIn discussion group, and providing input into our advocacy initiatives.

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