



How to “Find Your Seat”

Career Development



Defining the role

When ACC Chair Jo Anne Schwendinger started as an in-house lawyer, there was no expectation for the lawyers to be strategic business partners. Her role was to review contracts and insurance policies, oversee litigation (handled by an outside firm), and take minutes for board meetings. There was a sharp delineation between business and legal issues — and in-house counsel were expected to appreciate this difference.

Today, however, the role of in-house lawyers runs the gamut: from public affairs to government relations to human resources and IT and compliance. In-house counsel are perfectly situated to establish guideposts for the company. Schwendinger says these roles should be added to law school curriculums: “Operationalizing rules of conduct and then figuring out how to develop programs to support our expectations of operational conduct are skills I had to develop on the job.”

Skills to excel

With the increasing remit of in-house counsel, they need to excel in more than one area of law, she advises. While it's good to gain expertise in a certain area of law, not being afraid to change gave her the perspective to identify and tackle legal issues across the organization.

Communication is also paramount:

Whether it's learning about how to manage change, taking a course on ESG, brushing up on corporate governance, or learning some aspect of your client's technology, it will pay off professionally and personally, Schwendinger advises. "Pick what catches your interest, and it may become a passion. And then remember that ACC almost certainly has resources to help you develop your passion."

Future of the in-house role

Our roles will continue to expand, Schwendinger predicts. Emotional intelligence will be viewed as necessary as a law degree she says: "It's really a non-negotiable job requirement."

By getting involved — and ACC is one of the best places to showcase your talent — any in-house counsel can earn their seat at the table.

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