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Committee Spotlight: Chris Nowack, New to In-House Committee

Career Development



Chris Nowack

COUNSEL

GEICO

WASHINGTON, DC, USA

COMMITTEE AFFILIATION: NEW TO IN-HOUSE

Background and Law Department

After growing up in the Chicago suburbs, I graduated from Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., and then spent a summer in AmeriCorps. From there I headed to American University and earned my JD degree. Since graduating, I've lived in Washington, DC, and worked for GEICO, first as a law clerk and then as an attorney in the Office of the General Counsel. I bike to work when I can, volunteer with middle schoolers at Little Lights (a DC nonprofit focusing on DC children and families living in poverty), and am the proud owner (and semi-frequent user) of a karaoke machine with over 3,000-songs in its library. GEICO is the second largest private passenger auto insurer in the country, and the GEICO group provides a variety of property and casualty insurance products. GEICO is a member of the Berkshire Hathaway family of companies.

What interested you in the in-house practice of law and how did you come to be an attorney at GEICO?

I spent my 2L summer and six months of my 3L year as a law clerk at GEICO. I found the job extremely challenging and satisfying (much more so than 3L classes), and started considering in-house work as a career option. I stayed on at GEICO as a law clerk after graduation, and an attorney position opened up shortly before I received my law license. I ended up getting the job and have been in-house at GEICO ever since 2011.

What is the single greatest challenge that your law department is facing today, and how are you dealing with it?

GEICO's growth is substantial and consistent. For the past 10 years GEICO has been the fastest-growing insurer in its industry. That growth is great news and it's created the need to keep our costs in check by streamlining certain processes (e.g., certain recurring agreements, identifying and disseminating employment-law changes) and by providing training in areas where business units can help sort out everyday issues that previously were sent to attorneys.

In October 2015, you were elected as chair of the New to In-House Committee. How did you get involved initially?

GEICO has a small legal department and my boss recommended I attend Corporate Counsel University (CCU) to take advantage of more formal in-house training. I found the experience valuable, both from the availability of in-house-focused content, and in terms of engaging with other attorneys

in the same general situation I found myself in (new to the in-house world and trying to get my bearings and figure out how to succeed).

The following year I attended the new to in-house meeting at the ACC Annual Meeting. It was a breakfast meeting and I was one of the few non-officers there. I had a vague interest in serving on the committee, but the folks there are very gifted and very persuasive. To my surprise, I quickly became the program chair. After learning a lot and enjoying myself in that position, I moved on to be the vice chair and now the chair.

What are some of the ways that the New to In-House Committee provides value to its members?

Having a voice inside ACC that specifically focuses on those of us who are new to in-house work helps ensure that programming throughout ACC doesn't skip over new folks, especially since most leaders in the other parts of ACC are not new. And what I'm most proud of is the new to in-house guide that we created last year and are now keeping updated. It provides quick answers not only to many of the common questions new in-house attorneys have, but it also provides a framework for understanding what the different pieces of the in-house job are.

What substantive practice issues does your committee address?

The New to In-House Committee covers issues that are important to in-house counsel who have moved into their position fairly recently. Thus, rather than covering specific areas, we try to cover all the areas that would be important to someone new to the in-house environment at a level that would be helpful.

You won't find an in-depth explanation of how to run your ERISA plan, but we would hope to provide some basic information so you understand what an ERISA plan is, why that's important, and what questions to ask if you really do need to dig in further.

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