

Katy Motiey: General Counsel as the Ultimate Business Leader

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



Those who know Katy Motiey for her fearless business leadership and in-house expertise may be surprised to hear that corporate law wasn't her first calling. Those who've benefited from her talent, however, are undoubtedly thankful that her path led Motiey to the corporate world. Motiey was born in Iran, moved to the United States when she was a month old, but then moved back to Iran with her family when she was a young child.

When she finally returned to the United States, following a dramatic experience during the Iranian revolution, she set her sights on law school to become an immigration lawyer. After a successful undergraduate career at Georgetown University, Motiey was accepted into the Early Assurance Program at Georgetown University Law Center, entering law school without even taking the LSAT.

During law school, she joined the Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics as Notes and Comments Editors and wrote an often-cited article on ethical violations by immigration lawyers. Despite her early interest in immigration law, Motiey soon realized her talent for corporate law. After a judicial clerkship, Motiey spent time at Skadden Arps, but found her true calling when she took her first job in-house with Alta Vista. After a brief stint as outside counsel, Motiey cemented her path and grew a successful, if not — to some — an enviable, career as an in-house professional in Silicon Valley.



“While I initially thought I would go into immigration law,” Motiey explains, “I am very happy with where my career has taken me as it has allowed me to follow my passions and really gather the foundational skills required to become a trusted business leader and partner.”

Identifying and pushing boundaries

Motiey attributes a great deal of her success to learning about existing business boundaries and knowing how and when to push their limits. “When it comes to civil legal issues, I don’t think of boundaries as limitations; rather, I see them as a tool to understand each specific organization’s risk-tolerance,” she says. “Armed with this knowledge, I can fully weigh business risks and practically advise whether a certain course of action is something worth pursuing or could turn into something an organization will consider excessively costly.”

Throughout her career, Motiey has always been a listener first. “I try to be a good listener. I am good at sitting back and assessing a situation. Over the years, I have learned that having a bird’s eye view is critical in understanding each company’s sensitivities,” says Motiey. However, Motiey’s success

is also due to her never-ending curiosity. “It’s incredibly important to listen to feedback from my boss, the executive team, and other employees as each brings his or her own incredibly valuable perspective,” she points out. “Yet, by staying curious, I have the freedom to ask questions, spot opportunities where I can stretch what the then-existing boundaries are in a non-threatening way. It’s really a win-win.”

The general counsel — a “business leader with a legal background”

After immigrating between countries during her childhood, Motiey became skilled at navigating two different cultures. Today, she transfers those skills to navigating two different industries. Motiey is attracted to the crossroads of legal and business. “As general counsel, we have a good understanding of issues that come up, but we aren’t practicing law in the traditional sense where we’re the ultimate arbiter and decision-maker from a legal standpoint,” Motiey explains. “Ultimately, general counsel are business professionals with legal training who have a good understanding of legal issues and can serve as both assessors of risk and business-savvy advisors. We are business leaders with a legal background. This is a really unique role within a company.”

Broadening her horizons and continually committing to providing the best business advice possible means that, over the years, Motiey has seen more complex situations and addressed so many issues that it’s nearly impossible to faze her. “I’ve been in many difficult business situations — and often it’s as the only woman and the youngest person in the room — because of that I can’t imagine a challenge I wouldn’t want to take on,” says Motiey. “My business-minded approach and sense of ‘there’s nothing I can’t figure out’ has given me the curiosity to keep tackling more business tasks even in areas that are new to me.”

She is also quick to point out that her disinterest in ego has greatly helped her build the type of trust required to truly transcend any limitations. “I don’t make anything up and I have no shame in saying ‘I don’t understand, what does this mean?’” Motiey explains. Indeed, Motiey believes her sincere and honest attitude breeds a desire within her colleagues to explain and provide her with the support she needs to succeed. This tenacity and honesty has helped Motiey excel at the intersection of practical business decisions and thoughtful legal advice.

Taking the mantra to the next level

Motiey perceives her contributions as general counsel as a great potential launching pad to become a true business leader at the highest level. “While I know it’s not the traditional path, I believe general counsel are uniquely positioned to become leaders at every level of the company,” she explains. “Over our years of experiences, there isn’t an operational facet a general counsel isn’t exposed to.” Motiey is one of many general counsel who expand their roles to fulfill their passions and their companies’ needs. Initially, Motiey was hired at Extreme Networks to lead as general counsel. However, the CEO quickly realized the value of her broad range of skills and noted she was perfectly poised to take on a multitude of administrative tasks.

Motiey doesn’t believe that the skills she’s gained as general counsel have limitations. Her current position utilizes her skills beyond the legal profession. She is currently the executive vice president, chief administrative officer — HR, legal, and corporate secretary. This means, in addition to being the general counsel, she is in charge of the human resources department and managing the entire Extreme Networks real estate portfolio, which consists of 35 properties globally. Motiey is excited to expand her business skills and push more boundaries — perhaps even as a public company board member. She sees her in-house history and experience as a potential benefit in future board service.

“Ultimately, though it’s not the conventional wisdom, I believe general counsel could make great board members,” says Motiey. “We are used to providing candid advice, observing the various moving parts at a company, and taking a bird’s eye view on managing risk. In many ways, our whole careers are rooted in gathering the necessary skills to become effective and efficient board members.”

With her advanced skills and experience in both business and law, Motiey is poised to take the next step as a business leader at the highest level, despite the unusual path she’s taken to get there. Ever since her unconventional childhood immigration, and throughout her business and legal career, Motiey has been used to defying and questioning accepted standards. Although general counsel aren’t often seen as board members, Motiey is ready to push that boundary and forge a new path at the intersection of law and business.

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat, Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

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Katia Bloom is a fast-paced and strategic commercial lawyer. Currently, she is the associate general counsel at ForgeRock. Previously, she headed up legal for Avira, Inc., was a founding partner at E Squared Law Group, advising many start-up clients and was in-house counsel at Anesiva. She is actively involved in the Association of Corporate Counsel and a number of organizations promoting

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