



Embrace Your Ignorance

Skills and Professional Development



Even in-house lawyers can't be experts on everything. Ignorance is an acceptable excuse.

You may have been hired to work on antitrust law, employment matters or litigation. But I am confident that one of your colleagues will soon ask you about: (1) a pending divorce, (2) a relative's will or (3) that police speed trap on a local highway that simply must be "unconstitutional."

But it's not just legal topics. You're probably regularly involved in discussions that extend beyond your limits of comfortable knowledge and certainly outside the realm of expected experience.

In the course of an average in-house career, you may discuss effluent treatment and animal husbandry. You may have to opine on child psychology and textile manufacturing. Then there's that rather odd conversation about the scientific validity of tarot cards. And this is not an exclusive list. Weird stuff just comes your way.

That is the beauty of being a lawyer. It may be why you studied law in the first place. You have a lot of varied interests but not one that could provide a career. As an attorney, your clients could do anything so that means you can learn everything.

Of course, external counsel may face a similar variety. But it's different for the in-house bar. We are embedded with the business, expected to be the on-call resource for everything, regardless of our stated expertise.

It doesn't matter that you're a property lawyer or manage workman's compensation claims. You're an in-house attorney and you are there to help. And when called to work on esoteric topics, you are often hopelessly ignorant.

But ignorance is OK. You can safely say, "I'm just a lawyer" and soak in the wisdom of others. Personally, I relish these opportunities. It is one of the most enjoyable parts of my job, and rarely a day goes by where something new doesn't arrive on my desk.

In-house lawyers must embrace their ignorance. It would be foolish, even unethical, to hold ourselves out as experts on every topic. So rather than hide our lack of knowledge, we exploit it. We are allowed to ask the stupid questions, to play the outsider and to challenge the norm. Being ignorant is a useful trait.

The rest of academia is now finally catching up with lawyers. Professor Robert Proctor of Stanford University has started a line of inquiry that he calls agnotology — the study of ignorance. Sociologists are now specifically considering how different groups deal with a lack of knowledge, filling the void with theory, religion or even just pure conviction. Nature abhors a vacuum and human beings, looking for answers, are no different.

The side benefit of agnotology is that we are now safe to consider the positive attributes of ignorance. Rather than fill the unknown with emphatic theories and dogma — essentially "faking it" to preserve a façade of expertise — scientists and academics recognize the social and scientific importance of simply "not knowing" something. If a researcher admits her ignorance, a whole list of possible answers is available.

The study of agnotology is also working its way into business. A new book by Jamie Holmes titled *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* (Crown Publishing Group) was just released in October. The requisite slew of articles and interviews will follow. Ignorance could be the new hot topic in MBA seminars and business conferences.

And while all this is unfolding, you can sit back and smile. For as long as you have been a lawyer, and especially as you worked in-house, you have lived comfortably admitting you don't have all the answers.

The difference for lawyers, of course, is that ignorance is no excuse. We still have to solve the problem, especially if a novel dilemma takes the form of a complex transaction, a class action lawsuit or some other formal dispute.

Everything ends up, eventually, with legal — especially those "unconstitutional" speed traps. If you have an answer to that problem, I have a list of clients who would like to speak with you.

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