



5 Strategies for Building Your GC Presence

Skills and Professional Development



Whether you are a general counsel emerging from a COVID “hangover” or a senior lawyer looking to step up, here are five strategies you can adopt to establish your value and influence as a GC.

1. Be authentically you

Being a lawyer is rewarding, but it is not an easy role. Carrying the weight of the law and the risk of your business can be a daunting experience, no matter how long you’ve sat in the chair or the size of your legal team. That burden is much heavier when you are pretending to be somebody else or constantly upholding the idea that lawyers are robots.

While we must always be professional and courteous, the tide has shifted to enable lawyers and GCs to embrace more of themselves outside of the law (including through the ACC’s #morethanalawyer movement).

During my first week at work, the leadership team hosted a quarterly town hall with the ANZ business, and I was called up to introduce myself. After giving my usual spiel that I’m Zoe with a double “e” and speaking about my experience, I decided to go a step further and share a few more personal facts about myself, including that my favourite movie is *Terminator 2* and I’m tragically obsessed with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Apart from being a great icebreaker, sharing helped me forge a great bond with my colleagues, especially my general manager, who is also a huge Arnie fan! For my birthday that year, my colleagues took me out for a celebratory lunch. The Outlook invitation was a picture of Arnold from

the movie, and the caption said, “Come with me if you want a Happy Birthday.” It doesn’t get much better than that!

On a more serious note, being authentically you could mean embracing and sharing other aspects of your life, including your health conditions. I openly share that I don’t drink caffeine because of my heart condition. Simply acknowledging I have a condition means it is just one of the many facets of being “Zoe.” Although that facet is a big part of my “why” as a lawyer in healthcare — I care deeply about patients, because I am one.

I know from my own experience that being authentic and vulnerable takes time. It’s not immediately comfortable to share your personal side. However, I encourage you to embrace who you are beyond the law as best you can. It may help you find the right cultural fit when seeking new opportunities, enable meaningful connections with your leadership team and clients well beyond your legal advice, and reduce some of the stressors that come with wearing a mask (and I don’t mean the COVID kind).

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2. Invest in development

GCs are expected to have an extensive breadth of knowledge, but it can be hard to invest in your development when the company needs you every day. It’s true — they absolutely need you! But they need you to know what’s coming to help them anticipate new risks and to be able to manage the pace of those new requirements alongside the day-to-day challenges.

I assume that you have held good intentions to attend many a lunch-time seminar but found yourself sending apologies on the day as you couldn’t break away from meetings. This is disappointing, but you can adopt different strategies to help you with your development journey:

1. Nominate one of your team members to attend in advance and ask them to present a summary of the learnings at the next team session. As an added bonus, you’ll give them a platform to help develop their discussion and presentation skills.
2. Form a buddy or mentor through ACC who can share the training load with you. It’s an excellent opportunity to catch up for a coffee and the discussion will likely cement things in both your brains more than merely listening.
3. Use proximity or a new location to your advantage. It can be hard to leave the office to make it to the sessions. Pre-COVID, I would travel to the Central Business District and work there for the morning before any development sessions. A new location helped ensure I was setting myself up for attendance success.

Lastly, drop the guilt and remember that learning is part of the job and a requirement to maintain your legal certificate or license. You are still working by attending a session!

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3. Support, encourage, empower

How often have you heard in your career that legal is a handbrake? Change hearts and minds, and establish your seat at the table, by positioning yourself as the supportive, encouraging, and empowering GC.

Support

Forget hiding in the corner and cheer on your clients loudly and proudly! There are so many ways to do this that involve very little time. Be seen to support the business by responding to the all-staff email chain to congratulate completing a major project and commenting on, liking, and sharing celebratory LinkedIn posts.

Encourage

Encourage positive actions as often as you call out what shouldn't be done. Clients have told me in the past that they get such a boost when they hear they have done something right from their lawyers, rather than only hearing when something goes wrong.

You can acknowledge a client through your company's rewards and recognition program, send a "thank you" email (or even better, a handwritten note), or call it out in meetings. Better still, establish a quarterly lunch or dinner opportunity with the leadership team to thank people for their efforts and enable them to pick your brains in an informal setting.

Empower

Help your clients need you less by creating resources that reduce the requirement to come to legal and provide practical training.

Resources

Enabling clients to self-serve is a great way to foster ownership and accountability and free you up for riskier activities. You don't even need to spend thousands of dollars on automation software and chatbots (although, if you have the budget, go for it!). It's easy and inexpensive to build intranet pages, checklists, playbooks, and interactive guides. If you are particularly creative, you can film and edit how-to videos on your iPhone — the possibilities are endless!

However, don't forget to engage your clients before you change processes and build self-service resources as their insights will be valuable. You can do this by creating surveys, interviewing them, and conducting process-mapping exercises (I call these "whiteboard sessions").

Training

PowerPoint presentations are so yesterday! You'll truly empower your clients by making training sessions practical, engaging, and relevant. Invest your time in creating training that suits the individual business unit. A few years ago, I launched a compliance program by taking my clients through "a week in the life" of the sales team. I built fake meeting agendas, hospitality receipts, scripts, and games based on the characters from the TV show *The Office*. The team walked away with an appreciation for compliance without even needing to open the guide (although, of course it was highly recommended)!

Some very smart cookies have established great tools to help take the strain off if training isn't your forte. If you have the budget, jump on the Kahoot bandwagon or trial new text message training capabilities. (Kahoot tip: You won't regret splurging on the top subscription tier for the boost in variety and functionality.)

4. Understand your clients to understand your business

It's so important to get to know your clients beyond the contract or project, and outside of a burning crisis. Stressed lawyers and clients do not make for a happy work marriage, and one poor interaction can damage the relationship and lead to negative outcomes for the business.

Getting to know your clients as people, and taking the time to understand what their role entails, can go a long way to building your credibility.

Open up the communication lines

Don't stay closed off in your lawyer lair. Even if you are working in a virtual environment, you can easily join your clients' team meetings, host a virtual morning tea, or arrange a platform for legal at the national conference.

Take a road trip

Make sure it's COVID-safe, but don't hesitate to join your clients "on the road." Often our expectations of what they experience is very different to their reality. Having first-hand knowledge can help you provide more tailored and appropriate advice and win over clients who will appreciate you taking the time out to walk in their shoes.

5. Enable trust — Be a safe refuge

Confidentiality and privilege are the cornerstones of any lawyer's practice, but an impactful GC does more than maintaining confidentiality and privilege. They act as a safe refuge for all within the company, especially their leadership team.

I have found it helpful to set good boundaries with clients when they need my advice.

- **Be present** — In most situations, clients are going to need your undivided attention when they are calling. You will either need to let what you were working on take the backburner (if appropriate) or schedule time with them where you will not be interrupted. Turn off Skype or Slack, mute your phone, and close your door. If necessary, find a different location that will put your client more at ease.
- **Walk them through the process** — Clients appreciate when you explain what to expect from a privileged conversation. I've found better results when I over-communicate. Share that you are there to listen and provide advice, not to judge. Tell them if you are taking notes, especially if you are on a call and they can't see you or you need more time to write things down. Be genuine with them if you don't understand something or wish to confirm the facts.
- **Clarify consent and establish the "vault"** — Since the introduction of whistleblower protections, it's more important than ever to confirm whether you have the person's consent to identify them if you have to take the matter further. In other examples, consent may not be needed, but it can help put the person's mind at ease to reiterate that what has been discussed stays

between the two of you unless you have their permission to discuss it with others — I call this the vault.

- Be aware of your tone, body language, and your verbal response to what people share with you. You can think what you like after they leave the room or the call, but now is the time to listen before reacting.

By setting clear boundaries and expectations, and strictly maintaining confidence, you will position yourself as a trusted GC. They will know not only to call on you when the crisis happens, but when they see a crisis form.

Where to start

Rather than implementing everything at once, I recommend starting with one suggestion and making that work for you before moving to the next. Continuously investing in your development and building on these strategies over time will make it feel more natural to you, which in turn will come across more authentically to your clients.

You will encourage your clients to approach you willingly and transparently for advice, which in turn enables you to troubleshoot issues legally, practically, and proactively. Building your presence will enhance your relationships, increase your voice and influence, and cement your legacy as an impactful GC.

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Zoe Bradley is a senior legal counsel in the medical device industry. She eschewed the traditional law firm training pathway and started her legal career in-house. Throughout her in-house career, she has supported clients across Asia-Pacific, Japan, the Middle East, and Europe across a variety of practice areas including marketing, distribution, privacy, and competition law.
