

Career Path: Why It’s So Hard Being a Good In-house Lawyer

Career Development



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If you want to become a good in-house lawyer you face a number of problems. Let me depress you for a few minutes by describing what some of those problems are:

Law school didn’t teach you practical skills

To start with, your **law school did not teach you many practical skills** and tools necessary to be effective. Here's a quote from the New York State Bar Association Task Force on the Future of the Legal Profession:

> We used to think that being a good lawyer simply meant knowing the law. Today, we are more likely to think that good lawyers know how to *do* useful things with the law to help solve client problems.
>
> New York State Bar Association Task Force on the Future of the Legal Profession:

So it's not enough to know the law; you have to know how to *do* useful things with it to solve your

organization's problems. Now, the law school method of how to teach someone to become a lawyer is largely unchanged for the last 150 years. I hope we'd all agree that the practice of at least in-house counsel has moved on since then.

Law firms and bar associations believe law schools should pick up the slack, not them. But for the sake of argument, let's say law schools are doing what they should, because someone has to teach you about the substantive law, and how to think analytically.

Law firms can’t prepare you

Your next problem is what happens after you graduate from law school. Let's assume you start working at a law firm. Law firms are good at many things but **law firms simply don't know everything** that an in-house counsel needs to know.

There are entire areas of skills that are relevant in-house that are not relevant in a law firm. And as we've seen, they don't think it's their job to train lawyers for in-house practice. So you won't get your in-house training in a law firm either.

> ... You won't get your in-house training in a law firm ... .

You can’t count on company training

Now let's assume you've made the switch to a company, government agency, or another organization, and you're actually practicing in-house. All clear, right?

Unfortunately, your search is not over because **it is a rare organization that trains its in-house counsel in a systematic way** across all disciplines that might be relevant. What training exists is either ad hoc or narrowly focused. Ad hoc training often takes place in smaller teams that don't have the resources to do systematic training. And in the bigger organizations that do have training resources, lawyers often become specialized, so your exposure to broad issues is limited.

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You’ll learn most by doing

What this means is that **most of your learning is on-the-job training**, or learning by doing. This can be very good indeed but, under the *best of circumstances*, it can take years and years of experience to become truly effective as in-house counsel – at least from the perspective of having broad awareness and skills across many topics, i.e., being a corporate generalist.

> ... It can take years and years of experience to become
> truly effective ... .

Ultimately, whether you become a well-rounded generalist who is capable of not just handling the daily work but anticipating challenges and strategically planning ahead is largely a matter of luck. The

right organization, the right team, the right time, etc.

With this depressing background out of the way, how do you improve your odds of getting ahead?*Here's my personal view: The best thing you can do is to become highly valuable to your organization starting with what you're doing right now. In other words, do such a good job where you are with what's in front of you that your legal team, your business colleagues, and everyone you interact with, all think "now there's a person I'd want to work with again if I ever got a chance."

In the next few articles, I am going to lay bare my best secrets on how to create a good impression with your colleagues as part of a series on **Master Skills to be Effective In-house Counsel**.

Master Skills to be Effective In-house Counsel

This article begins a series:

- The challenge (this article);
- The Day You Become Smarter (writing plainly and clearly);
- Write Better Emails Today (taming the email monster);
- Maybe Don't Go to that Meeting (avoiding time-wasting meetings);
- Persuade Like Aristotle (influencing others); and
- Listen Up Already! (engaging with others).

But you can cut the line

Although it took me years of experiment and practice to develop this guidance, I want you to cut right to the front of the line. Why am I sharing these secrets with you? It's because I saw the wonderful impact they can have on a company and its culture.

Initially I saw the benefit among my team members, who became some of our most appreciated employees. The interesting thing was when people saw how effective our communication practices were, they clamored to have them spread across the company.

It's because I know how hard your job is and appreciate how much you do that I want to help you be more effective. Stay tuned.

Be well.

*If you are in Switzerland or a nearby country, you have another alternative. The Europa Institute of the University of Zurich offers a Certificate of Advanced Studies In-House Counsel course. It is designed to address these shortcomings and give aspiring in-house counsel a broad overview of how to get better in their roles. Disclosure: I serve on the Advisory Board for this course, as well as one of the faculty. And you can get credentialed through the ACC In-house Counsel Certification Program, which has been offering virtual courses.

Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau about this or other columns.

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Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.