

Mentorship That Lasts: Inside the ACC Mentor Match Experience

Career Development

Interviews and Profiles



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Mentoring relationships are often described as career accelerators — but for in-house counsel, they can also be a lifeline: a trusted space to talk through ambiguity, compare perspectives, and build confidence in the choices that shape a career. That was the throughline of a recent ACC webinar spotlighting **ACC Mentor Match**, the association's mentoring program designed exclusively for ACC members.

The session — available to watch on demand — featured **Dani Sanchez**, Senior Associate General Counsel – Litigation & Employment at **Academy Sports + Outdoors** (mentor), and **Anthony Risucci**, Senior Counsel – People at **Patagonia** (mentee). Together, they shared why they joined the program, how they approached matching, what kept their relationship strong over time, and what they learned from each other along the way.



Dani Sanchez, Senior Associate General Counsel – Litigation & Employment, **Academy Sports + Outdoors**



Anthony Risucci, Senior Counsel – People, **Patagonia**

Beyond the six-month framework

ACC Mentor Match is structured around an initial six-month mentoring term, but the program's goal is bigger than a start-and-stop engagement. As the webinar host noted, many pairs continue their conversations well beyond the formal timeframe. Sanchez and Risucci are a clear example.

"I don't think we completed our mentoring program," Sanchez said. "I think Anthony and I will

have a perpetual, professional relationship, because we've gotten so much out of this. It's an ongoing mentorship in both directions." For them, what began as a structured match quickly became a professional partnership — and, in Risucci's words, a genuine friendship.

That "two-way" theme came up repeatedly. While the ACC Mentor Match is built to connect mentors with mentees, both speakers emphasized that the strongest relationships don't run in a single direction. They are built on shared commitment, mutual curiosity, and the willingness to show up consistently — especially when schedules, workloads, and priorities shift.

Watch the full recording here

A moment of transition — and a commitment to give back

Sanchez joined Mentor Match as a mentor with a mindset grounded in long-term professional community. She described herself as "a really big believer in all kinds of mentoring," and she framed mentorship as closely connected to networking — not transactional networking, but relationship-building with purpose.

"Mentoring is, in a lot of ways, another form of networking," she said, emphasizing that both serve the same aim: connecting people — and that connection is at the center of professional life for lawyers. Whether she's on the mentee side earlier in her career or mentoring later, she said she's "always willing, happy, and wants to be engaged."

For Risucci, the motivation was more urgent and personal: he was in transition. After spending his entire early career in private practice, he moved in-house at Patagonia — something he never expected to do. "I never thought I'd be an in-house lawyer," he shared. And once he made the leap, he found himself without the familiar "ladder" of law firm progression.

In private practice, the milestones can feel straightforward: promotion cycles, partnership tracks, defined roles. In-house is different. As Risucci put it, he suddenly faced a new question: "What do I want for my career?" And because in-house counsel are immersed in the business — "You're part of your client. You're not just outside looking in" — the learning curve can be steep.

"I didn't feel like I had the tools to really understand what I wanted out of my career, and how to make sense of all the things coming my way," he said. Even though he mentors law students and younger lawyers himself, he recognized that he needed that same kind of guidance to navigate his own shift and clarify what direction he wanted to take.

The power of choosing your mentor

A defining feature of ACC Mentor Match is that **mentees select mentors** — a design choice that both speakers credited as foundational. During the webinar, Risucci described his matching process as a deliberate search rather than a passive pairing. He learned about the program through ACC emails, logged into the platform, and started looking through the mentor database with a specific need in mind: direction.

"A mentorship relationship is what you make it," he said — adding the phrase he returned to

throughout the conversation: “The grass is green where you water it.” That mindset shaped the way he approached the platform. He used filters for practice area and industry, narrowing to labor and employment and retail, then reviewed potential mentors through that lens.

When he found Sanchez, he did what many lawyers do when evaluating fit: he researched. He looked her up on LinkedIn and saw enough overlap — despite different brands, geographies, and customer bases — to feel confident in the connection. Then he clicked to request the match. “We set up our first meetings,” he said, and “it’s been history ever since.”

Sanchez underscored that this mentee-led approach changes the dynamic. It was, she said, the first program she participated in where mentees pick their mentors — and she called that “one of the great” distinctions of the ACC model. Why? Because it signals investment.

“I already know how invested Anthony is,” she explained, because he “did the work” before ever reaching out — thinking through what he needed, what they shared, and what perspectives she could offer. That early intentionality helped her understand what value she could bring and how to contribute “in those meaningful, thoughtful ways.” In short, the match didn’t just connect two people; it created a shared sense of purpose from day one.

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Keeping momentum in mentorship

Like many mentoring relationships, theirs evolved over time. Risucci described an early phase with more frequent meetings — because he was working through foundational questions: “Do I want to be a general counsel? Do I not?” As clarity increased, the cadence shifted.

They “gradually decreased” how often they met while keeping it regular, adapting to busy schedules and changing needs. His most practical tip: set a recurring meeting. “The best tool is just to set a recurring meeting in Outlook,” he said, so the time is protected before calendars fill up. And, importantly, revisit what’s working — monthly, bi-weekly, bi-monthly — without treating the cadence as fixed.

Sanchez emphasized something equally important: flexibility without guilt. What contributed most to their success, she said, was being respectful of each other’s schedules and communicating openly. Travel came up. PTO came up. Last-minute changes happened. But rescheduling didn’t damage the relationship.

“Missing something that is scheduled isn’t a big deal on either side,” she said, “as long as you’re still committed to meeting.” In her view, trust and reliability are built early — through regularity on the front end — so that later, the relationship can accommodate real life without losing momentum.

Risucci added another layer: sometimes the best meetings weren’t planned around an agenda — they were timely. There were moments when both were confronting similar issues in real time, and their scheduled conversation became an opportunity to compare notes and trade approaches.

For lawyers, that kind of exchange can be more than helpful; it can be grounding. “There’s so much

uncertainty, so much gray," he said. "It's a lonely profession sometimes … you're in the weeds trying to figure out what's the right thing to do." For someone newer in-house, "that little reassurance that someone else out there is dealing with the same problem" can be "so meaningful."

They also didn't limit their relationship to work. They talked about life, exchanged books, and revisited ideas over time — elements that strengthened their bond and helped keep the relationship active beyond the immediate demands of a job. The takeaway: Structure matters, but connection sustains.

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Seeing beyond your "company bubble"

When asked to share a moment that illustrates learning in both directions, Sanchez pointed to something many in-house counsel experience but don't always name: the way company culture shapes legal thinking — and how valuable it is to hear a perspective outside your own environment.

Because both work in labor and employment, they often "digest" substantive developments together. Sanchez recalled discussing a Supreme Court decision in the Title VII space. Their companies, she noted, have different identities and profiles, one is publicly traded, the other privately held — and that difference surfaced in the way they talked through the case.

"Nothing is more valuable than hearing a perspective that may not be the perspective you have when we get in our bubbles," she said. For in-house counsel, she argued, the ability to understand competing viewpoints — whether or not you agree — makes you a stronger lawyer.

"We are the best lawyers when we understand what the opposing perspective may be," Sanchez said. That understanding helps lawyers anticipate reactions, counsel effectively, and test assumptions. "Iron sharpens iron," she added, describing the way dialogue sharpened both of their thinking.

Risucci echoed that theme and offered a practical expansion: don't over-limit your search criteria. Even though he initially filtered for labor and employment and retail experience, he emphasized that members can gain enormous value from mentors with different backgrounds — because "different professional experiences" broaden how you frame issues.

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Defining your in-house career

When asked what he's still using from the mentorship today, Risucci returned to the biggest mindset shift he experienced: realizing how much agency in-house counsel can have in shaping their roles.

"Your career is what you make of it," he said — acknowledging it can sound corny, but insisting it's real. In-house, he explained, there's more room than in private practice to define not only what you do, but how you show up, what you're known for, and what your "brand" is inside the

organization.

Risucci and Sanchez's conversations covered goal-setting, focus, and tradeoffs: how to "whittle" priorities down so you're doing fewer things better, rather than everything at once. They even talked about language — how the words you use with colleagues can shape perceptions of your work and your value.

For many in-house lawyers — especially those moving from firm life — that focus on self-definition can be transformative.

Explore ACC's Mentor Match program

Start by exploring

As the discussion closed, both speakers offered simple advice for anyone curious about the ACC Mentor Match but unsure where to start: explore the platform.

Sanchez emphasized that ACC's program is "unique," and members shouldn't assume it will resemble other mentoring experiences they've had. "Don't assume that the ACC mentorship program is going to be similar to any other mentorship program," she said. Her recommendation was straightforward: log in, look around, and discover what's possible — because "you don't know what you don't know." And, ultimately, your outcome depends on what you put into it. "Where you land and finish is really based on what it is that you're doing between those two points," she said.

Risucci echoed that message. "Just hop on the platform and explore," he advised. For him, even browsing mentor profiles was valuable: it exposes members to different industries, career paths, and professional identities — helping you imagine what you might want (or not want) next. And while time is scarce for everyone, he argued the investment is worth it if it leads to a strong mentoring relationship.

"The investment of time … if you find a really great mentorship relationship, it's so worth it," he said, pointing back to what participants cited in the poll: networking, professional development, learning, and connection. He closed with a reminder that in a demanding profession — one full of uncertainty and fast-moving change — lawyers benefit from looking out for each other.

More than a program

ACC's Mentor Match program is structured, practical, and easy to initiate — but the real value, as Sanchez and Risucci described it, comes from what participants build after the match is made: a relationship rooted in intentionality, sustained by consistency and flexibility, and strengthened by honest conversation.

For members navigating change, looking for clarity, or simply seeking a broader perspective outside their company walls, ACC Mentor Match offers more than guidance. It offers community — and, sometimes, the kind of professional relationship that lasts well beyond the six-month mark.

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