



Legal Expertise Isn't Enough: Lawyers Must Now Think Like CEOs to Stay Competitive

Law Department Management



Banner artwork by TierneyMJ / Shutterstock.com

Cheat Sheet

- **Legal expertise is increasingly becoming table stakes.** The real differentiator is the ability to integrate legal advice with business, operational, technological, and geopolitical realities.
- **Lead enterprise risk holistically.** Modern GCs are evolving into enterprise risk leaders who operate horizontally across organizations rather than within traditional legal silos.
- **The “more-for-less” challenge is evolving.** From a pure efficiency exercise into a broader capability-building transformation focused on legal operations, workflow redesign, and AI-enabled delivery models.
- **Deliver integrated advice at enterprise speed.** The lawyers and firms that thrive will be those who combine legal expertise with commercial understanding, contextual judgement, and the ability to deliver integrated advice at enterprise speed.

There is a dangerous assumption still embedded in parts of the legal profession: that legal expertise alone guarantees relevance.

In reality, the capability landscape for lawyers is changing rapidly. In an era defined by geopolitical instability, accelerating regulation, AI-driven disruption, and continuous business transformation, the differentiator is no longer simply what lawyers know. Increasingly, it is how effectively they help organizations navigate complexity, manage enterprise risk, and enable strategic decision-making at speed.

Legal expertise remains essential, but on its own it is no longer sufficient.

As businesses become more digital, data-driven, interconnected, and globally exposed, their legal departments are being forced to evolve alongside them. That evolution is reshaping not only how in-house legal teams operate, but also what they increasingly expect from their outside counsel.

Three interconnected forces are reshaping the role of the modern General Counsel and, in turn, changing what clients increasingly require from their law firms.

The first is the growing complexity and interconnectedness of enterprise risk.

Historically, GCs were viewed primarily as senior legal experts responsible for contracts, litigation, and helping the organization avoid legal missteps. Today, however, that description captures only part of the role. Modern GCs are increasingly expected to act as strategic advisers, enterprise risk leaders, crisis managers, diplomats, and organizational architects.

In many organizations, the GC now oversees not only legal matters, but also compliance, enterprise risk, ESG, public policy, cybersecurity, corporate security, investigations, communications, and even elements of human resources. And even where those functions do not formally report into legal, GCs are increasingly expected to act as the connective tissue across them, coordinating responses, aligning perspectives, and ensuring that risk is managed coherently rather than in isolation.

Much of this evolution reflects a more fundamental reality: risk itself no longer exists in silos.

A sanctions issue may simultaneously be a supply-chain issue, a reputational issue, a cybersecurity issue, and a geopolitical issue. An AI deployment question may also involve intellectual property, employment law, ethics, product liability, data governance, and public policy.

Risk itself no longer exists in silos.

Increasingly, many GCs are evolving toward what Anthea Roberts and Miranda Forsyth have termed “Dragonfly Thinking”: a multidimensional approach to decision-making inspired by the dragonfly. Dragonflies catch 97 percent of their prey. The reason lies in their eyes: up to 30,000 lenses giving them a near-360-degree field of vision. They see multiple dimensions simultaneously and respond in real time. Rather than approaching problems through narrow binary choices, Dragonfly Thinking seeks to synthesize multiple perspectives, competing risks, and interconnected variables into a more holistic understanding of the enterprise.

Traditional Enterprise Risk Management frameworks brought important structure and discipline to corporate risk oversight. But COVID-19, cyberattacks, geopolitical fragmentation, sanctions regimes, supply-chain disruption, and AI-driven volatility have exposed the limits of static risk models built primarily around prediction and mitigation.

Increasingly, sophisticated organizations are shifting toward resilience: building adaptive systems capable of responding effectively under conditions of continuous uncertainty. Some are going further still toward what Nassim Nicholas Taleb has termed “[antifragility](#)” — the capacity to emerge stronger from disruption itself.

That shift has significant implications for legal departments. Increasingly, legal teams are being valued not merely for technical legal analysis, but for their ability to synthesize complexity across the enterprise and help organizations make adaptive decisions under conditions of ambiguity.

[Explore the CLO Club and elevate your experience at the 2026 ACC Annual Meeting.](#)

The second force reshaping legal departments is the evolution of the “more-for-less” challenge.

For much of the past decade, legal departments faced relentless pressure to reduce cost while absorbing expanding workloads. Richard Susskind's “more-for-less” challenge became one of the defining realities of modern in-house practice.

But something important is beginning to change.

Legal budgets are now rising again in many organizations, reflecting the increasingly strategic and cross-functional role many GCs are being asked to play. More importantly, the investment focus itself is shifting. The money is not primarily going into larger legal teams, but into capability building, including legal operations, workflow redesign, automation, data infrastructure, and technology-enabled delivery models. Recent surveys suggest that nearly 87 percent of GCs are increasing investment in legal operations.

In other words, the “more-for-less” equation is evolving. Efficiency pressure has not disappeared, but the strategic focus is increasingly shifting toward the more side of the equation. Legal departments are building capability.

Technology, automation, legal operations, flexible talent platforms, managed services providers, and alternative legal service providers are therefore no longer peripheral innovations. Increasingly, they are becoming core components of the modern legal operating model.

The third force is the broader AI-driven transformation of the enterprise itself.

Much of the legal industry still discusses AI primarily as a legal technology story. In reality, the deeper shift is organizational. Corporations are increasingly reorganizing themselves around AI-enabled operating models that continuously learn, rapidly experiment, and automate decision-making at scale.

As companies transform, their legal departments are being forced to evolve alongside them.

This is increasingly producing an outside-in transformation of the legal industry. Changing client operating models are reshaping what legal providers themselves must become.

Increasingly, clients expect their outside providers not simply to deliver technical legal expertise, but to integrate into broader operational, technological, and strategic workflows.

ACC Association of
Corporate Counsel

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE



July 21-24 / Chicago

Technology-enabled sourcing providers such as Priori Legal and PERSUIT already connect clients with lawyers based on specific business needs. But these models are also well positioned to evolve into broader AI-era legal platforms because they already possess the essential ingredients: clients, suppliers, workflow integration, and data. Over time, they may evolve from marketplaces into orchestration layers managing the routing, pricing, and performance analytics of legal work across internal teams and external providers.

The result could be a seamless, technology-enabled legal value chain in which work is intelligently triaged and routed in real time between clients, internal legal teams, and outside providers.

As that model emerges, the central strategic question for law firms will increasingly shift from whether they have the best lawyers to whether they are sufficiently embedded within the client ecosystem to

deliver at enterprise speed.

To succeed in this environment, lawyers increasingly need to think less like isolated technical specialists and more like enterprise leaders.

Thinking like a “mini-CEO” does not mean lawyers suddenly become amateur CFOs or operational executives. But it does mean recognizing that modern legal leadership involves prioritization, orchestration, trade-offs, and resource allocation under conditions of uncertainty.

The best legal leaders increasingly think in terms of enterprise outcomes rather than isolated legal tasks. They ask where legal can create the greatest strategic leverage, which risks genuinely threaten enterprise value, which workstreams can be automated or outsourced, and where scarce expert attention should be concentrated.

This evolution is also reshaping what clients expect from law firms.

The best legal leaders increasingly think in terms of enterprise outcomes rather than isolated legal tasks.

From the client's perspective, legal expertise has become table stakes. What differentiates advisers today is contextual intelligence: the ability to integrate legal analysis into the client's broader operational, technological, financial, and geopolitical reality.

The boundaries between legal, operational, reputational, financial, and geopolitical risk are dissolving. Outside counsel who address only the legal slice of multidimensional business problems are increasingly providing just one piece of a much larger puzzle.

This is not an argument against specialization. Deep expertise remains indispensable. But expertise without context is becoming less valuable. Judgement is the name of the game in an era of disruptive change.

The firms that thrive in the coming decade are unlikely to be those that simply provide technically correct answers faster. They will be the ones that help clients navigate the multidimensional business problems they face more effectively; by combining legal expertise with commercial understanding, technological fluency, and contextual judgement.

The legal profession is undergoing a broader structural realignment driven by changes taking place inside the corporations it serves. As companies become more interconnected, AI-enabled, and exposed to multidimensional risk, their legal departments are evolving alongside them. Those shifts will increasingly reshape what clients value, how legal work is organized, and which firms remain competitively relevant.

Legal expertise will remain essential. But increasingly it is just the starting point.

[Join ACC for more leadership insights!](#)

Disclaimer: The information in any resource in this website should not be construed as legal advice or as a legal opinion on specific facts, and should not be considered representing the views of its authors, its authors' employers, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

[Bjarne P. Tellmann](#)



CEO

FjordStream Advisors

Bjarne P. Tellmann is CEO of FjordStream Advisors GmbH and a Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics. He previously served as Founding General Counsel and Executive Committee member at Haleon plc (FTSE 20), and as Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel at Pearson plc (FTSE 100). He is the author of two books: *Law in the Era of AI: Clients, Firms, and the Future of the Legal Industry* (Wiley, 2026) and *Building an Outstanding Legal Team* (Globe Law and Business, 2017). Tellmann speaks and teaches regularly at numerous academic institutions, including Harvard and the London School of Economics, as well as at leading global conferences and executive leadership forums. His honors include General Counsel of the Year at the British Legal Awards, the Burton Award for Legends in the Law, and inclusion in the Chambers GC Influencers Global 100.