Recruiting Tomorrow’s General Counsel: Navigating Talent Challenges in an Evolving Legal Landscape

Law Department Management

Banner artwork by Shutterstock AI / *Shutterstock.com*

The Evolution of the General Counsel

The role of the General Counsel (GC), also referred to as the Chief Legal Officer (CLO), has undergone a significant transformation over the last decade or more, and continues to evolve. Once viewed primarily as the organization's chief legal adviser and legal risk mitigator; today's CLO is expected to serve as a more comprehensive strategic business partner and leader to organizational management and to the board of directors. In addition, this role acts as an enterprise risk manager, technology advocate, crisis navigator, and importantly, trusted advisor and indispensable member of the executive leadership team.

As the expectations placed on both newly appointed and seasoned GCs continue to grow, identifying and recruiting the right leader for the legal department has become more complex. Being a technically strong lawyer, while important, is simply the foundation, with organizations looking to recruit seasoned attorneys who are well-versed in the business side of things, crisis management, artificial intelligence, and more.

The 2026 ACC Chief Legal Officer Survey 2026 (CLO survey) underscores just how dramatically the role has evolved, and in turn how organizational leaders are, and should be, thinking about recruitment strategies. The survey found that 84 percent of CLOs now report directly to the CEO, reflecting the legal function's growing influence at the highest levels of decision-making. The report also highlights that broader shift from head lawyer to business executive, with leaders of the legal department increasingly responsible for guiding organizations through regulatory complexity, cybersecurity threats, technological disruption, and geopolitical uncertainty. In fact, ACC's recent flash poll examining How Legal Departments Are Adapting to Geopolitical Uncertainty, found that current CLOs are actively looking for geopolitical risk intelligence capabilities, including scenario modeling, early-warning monitoring, and real-time regulatory tracking — expecting department leaders to shift from reactive crisis management to proactive legal strategy.

Other findings from the CLO survey further emphasize expectations coming out of the C-suite, with 36 percent of those surveyed reporting they are actively deploying generative AI solutions in their departments. However, the intention is not to have the tech replace department roles: 63 percent of surveyed CLOs expect headcount to remain stable, focusing instead on upskilling their legal teams to achieve greater efficiency and higher-value work through AI adoption.

These findings illustrate a critical reality: legal departments are not simply adding new responsibilities; they are fundamentally redefining what effective legal leadership looks like. In turn, how organizations recruit in-house legal professionals, including the CLOs of tomorrow, is undergoing a redefining moment as well.

The Impact of AI: Hiring Trends and Shifting Expectations

Artificial intelligence adds a major layer of complexity to the search for legal leadership talent. AI automates routine legal work such as contract review, document analysis, knowledge management, and regulatory monitoring. Legal departments are redirecting attention towards strategic activities that require human judgment and business insight. ACC's CLO survey found that nearly half of CEOs expect CLOs to strengthen their AI proficiency and technology capabilities, demonstrating how quickly expectations are changing.

Consequently, organizations are again seeking general counsel who are comfortable evaluating emerging technologies, governing AI risk, and leveraging innovation to improve legal service delivery. In other words, organizational leaders are looking for AI-fluent lawyers, who increasingly utilize GenAI in legal training, talent development, and staffing.

According to another ACC survey, The Role of Generative AI in Proving Corporate Law Department Value, 76 percent of respondents believe GenAI will most significantly improve internal team efficiency and resourcing. Study results re-emphasize that the primary focus for legal departments using GenAI is on streamlining internal workflows, automating routine tasks, and optimizing how their teams are staffed.

Recruitment strategies are evolving accordingly, with executive search firms and organizations alike increasingly assessing candidates for legal operations expertise, technology implementation experience, data-driven decision-making capabilities, change management leadership, and cross-functional collaboration skills. In parallel, this requires organizations to invest in leadership development programs designed to prepare future legal leaders for broader executive responsibilities. In addition, training programs focused on development in areas like data analytics, automation, AI literacy and management, and process improvement, are equally important.

Finding the Right Fit: Recruitment Challenges

In-house counsel, who have always worn many hats when it came to traditional legal issues, now must be able to balance legal risk with business opportunity, while also expected to manage complex stakeholder relationships, drive transformation initiatives, and respond decisively to crises. The modern GC must be equally comfortable discussing AI governance, regulatory compliance, litigation strategy, ESG commitments, boardroom strategy, and more.

This expanding reality is creating significant recruitment challenges across industries. At the same time, in-house teams are increasingly being asked to do more with less. ACC's 2026 Law Department Management Benchmarking Report found that the median in-house lawyer now supports 367 company employees, up from 290 employees just last year — highlighting how legal teams are managing larger internal client bases and heavier workloads without proportional growth in department size. That said, organizational leaders at a fundamental level are looking for ways to address workload in cost effective and efficient ways, including investing in technology and people.

The data indicates that in-house legal recruitment is currently driven by strategic expansion, budget caps, and the need for talent that is multi-skilled and willing to upskill. In-house team members must demonstrate the ability to collaborate across functions and understand the operational needs of the business, which in and of itself can demonstrate a challenge in recruitment.

Given the wide range of responsibilities, recruiting from traditional law firms, for example, is only part of the equation or strategy. Departments are looking to recruit diverse hires from a variety of legal

backgrounds, and may look to other in-house legal departments, recruitment firms, and traditional law firms for potential candidates. When it comes to what a successful candidate looks like on paper, hiring managers may continue to evaluate potential talent by traditional or “safe” success markers like prestigious law firm experience, elite credentials, impressive résumés, or prior GC titles. However, those who emphasize other leadership qualities such as adaptability, empathy, emotional intelligence, AI-proficiency, and relationship-building skills for example, will be better positioned to build teams equipped to face the current environment, as these skills enhance one’s ability to assess risk within a more complete context.

Competition for top legal talent is another challenge. Presenting an attractive environment and company culture can be just as important as compensation when potential and new hires are evaluating an organization. The issue of fit is important to both sides, with talent looking for work-life balance for example, and employers looking for individuals able to balance the demands of a typical in-house workday. The talent pool is vast and increasingly diverse in what it offers, which means organizations must put their best foot forward to attract top-tier legal professionals. This includes demonstrating commitment to things like flexibility, professional development opportunities, and innovation.

The Retention Conversation

Once you have beat out the competition, and attracted the talent to come in-house, retention often enters the recruitment conversation, as sometimes those “safe hires” who have for instance followed a more traditional career path can have difficulty adapting to in-house practice. According to a study looking at the short tenures of Fortune 500 general counsel, of the 65 who departed their role in 2025, 31 percent did so within three years of their appointment, and 70 percent of those exits involved external hires (from firms). Further, a recent Law.com article examining why those so-called safe general counsel hires are leaving their in-house roles quickly, first time GC’s often fall back on their traditional legal background and accomplishments, failing to demonstrate Legal’s ability to add value to the business. This can lead to lower job satisfaction, and premature decisions about fitness for the role.

First-time general counsel (and those who aspire to the role) do well to show how they contribute to organizational growth and innovation, as leadership, including the board, are interested in leaders who not only identify risk, but can move the business forward, specifically in times of uncertainty. Former general counsel of four Fortune 500 companies, Mark Roellig, highlighted several critical success factors for newly appointed GCs in an ACC article, including quickly learning the company's business and culture; building relationships with key stakeholders; and establishing a clear leadership philosophy and strategic vision for the legal function. These capabilities reflect the reality that successful modern GCs must become business leaders first and legal advisers second.

Why is this important in a conversation about recruitment? Well, organizations that invest in the personal development and upskilling of their staff — while also leveraging technology to manage growing workloads without overextending resources — are likely to retain the talent they recruit. ACC offers training for in-house counsel at all stages of their careers to do just that, including the In-house Legal Impact Certificate. Designed to help in-house counsel with 1-4 years’ experience as well as those transitioning to an in-house role from another legal position to become that effective partner to the business, the program offers strategies to grow business acumen and impact.

The Next Generation of In-house Counsel

The transformation of the GC role has important implications for the broader legal profession. Future legal leaders will need more than exceptional legal training. Success increasingly requires a combination of business judgment, leadership capability, technology literacy, adaptability, and ethical decision-making.

Initiatives such as ACC Foundation's TEDLaw programming, reflect growing recognition that lawyers must strengthen skills related to judgment, leadership, communication, and navigating complexity, alongside traditional legal competencies.

For organizations seeking to attract and retain the next generation of general counsel, consider adding the following to your recruitment strategy:

- Recruit for leadership potential, not just legal pedigree.
- Prioritize commercial acumen and business understanding.
- Assess technology fluency and willingness to embrace innovation.
- Create development pathways that include operational and strategic responsibilities.
- Invest in continuous learning for legal teams.
- Foster cultures that support adaptability, collaboration, and inclusion.

The greatest recruitment challenges are no longer simply finding experienced lawyers. They involve identifying leaders who can combine legal excellence with technological fluency, commercial insight, strategic vision, and emotional intelligence. That said, successful organizations go beyond recruiting for credentials alone, instead evaluating candidates on their ability to lead through ambiguity, build trust across the enterprise, embrace innovation, and create measurable business value.

In an era defined by rapid technological change and increasing complexity, the CLO who thrives will not simply protect the organization, they will help shape its future.

Join ACC for more 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.

Jason L. Brown

President & CEO

Association of Corporate Counsel

Jason L. Brown is the president and CEO of the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC), leading the world’s largest global organization for in-house counsel and advancing its mission to support, connect, and advocate for the profession worldwide.

Before joining ACC, Jason served as vice president, general counsel, and secretary for GE Appliances, where he led global legal strategy, compliance, governance, and government affairs. He

previously held senior legal leadership roles at Dyson, Inc. and MillerCoors and began his career in private practice in Minneapolis before moving into corporate law.

Jason has also served as executive director of NAMWOLF and held legal leadership positions at Pepsi Beverages Company. He currently serves on the board of directors for Legal Prep Charter Academy and the Howard University School of Law Board of Visitors.

A proud graduate of Howard University, Jason earned both his undergraduate and law degrees there and serves as president of the Howard University School of Law International Alumni Association.