

The Role of Product Counsel

Law Department Management

Career Development



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What is a product counsel?

Product lawyers work with clients to create and maintain risk-managed user experiences. A lead product counsel at Meta described their role as a "mini general counsel" for products they supported. They engaged in project legal management, acting as a liaison between the product team and other departments to mitigate risks to the company.



A product counsel is always on the look out for areas of opportunity within the business. Artwork by Edge Creative / *Shutterstock.com*

The guidance of a product counsel is essential for businesses bringing products to market. The role blends various practice areas including, but not limited to, commercial contract, regulatory, privacy, intellectual property, marketing, and consumer protection. A product lawyer's job is to maintain both a business and legal focus while collaborating with all teams to support that duty.

A product counsel's goals

Product counsel are driven by three strategic goals: (1) advance the business, (2) protect the company, and (3) act as a liaison between all departments.

1. Advance the business

When trying to build a product, it is wise to have consistency from conception to launch. A product counsel should be involved in every step to maintain consistency and credibility. They must understand business goals, products, objectives, timing, and process to advance the business. To effectively perform, they must have an end-to-end understanding of the product management process (from feature request to release), so they can effectively spot issues and advance the business.

2. Protect the company

A product counsel is responsible for protecting the interests of the business. They must identify potential risks from all departments, source subject matter experts for gaps, and develop risk mitigation if need be.

Like your caregivers, a product counsel cannot (and should not) always say yes or no. A product counsel is more like the well-rounded caregiver: one that takes the time to understand your goals and desires. From that understanding, they ultimately look out for your best interests and do not lead you astray. An effective product counsel protects the company's bottom line and appreciates the desire of teams they support.

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In addition, data privacy, protection, and compliance should be top of mind to protect end users. A product counsel may be responsible for ongoing research of data privacy regulations and subsequent education of internal teams.

3. Connect the dots as a departmental liaison

Building trust, and emphasizing collaboration and communication, are qualities that enable product counsel to excel at their jobs. Successful product counselors serve as important connectors between business and legal, educating their business partners on regulatory issues and educating legal partners on business issues so legal can more effectively drive toward business goals.

Product counsel coordinate across legal and subject matter experts to build a product launch plan and include functional teams like policy, marketing and communications, product, and engineering to mitigate risk.

Example:

A software company released an update to their messaging feature. The update removed a mandatory two factor authentication for third party users. Essentially, the software update made two-factor authentication optional for the company's clients' users.

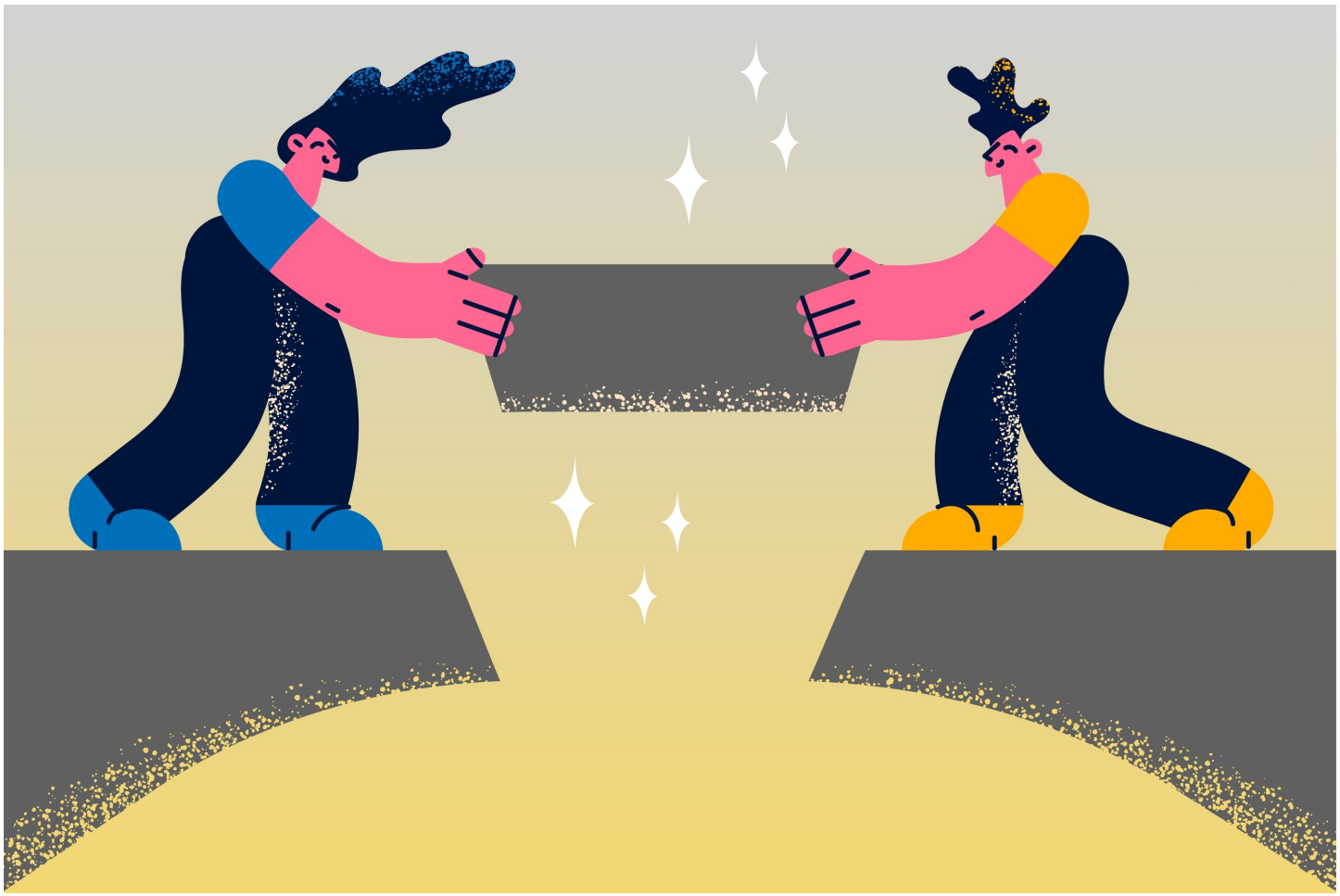
The Customer Success Team was quickly asked to send communication to their clients informing them of the change. Why? If clients were using the messaging feature under the assumption the security was working one way, and it was not, they needed notice of such change. The Customer Success Team was also informed the change would be reverted in a later version, and thus notice to clients would need to be provided once more.

Given the opportunity, a product counsel or similar role could have spotted this issue during the development stage, perhaps coming up with a solution that impacts both the product and clients in a smoother way and does not compromise security.

What kind of background makes for a successful product counsel?

Companies often transition an existing attorney to a new product counsel role because of their familiarity with the product and company process. While there is no set background required to be a

successful product counsel, a general understanding of various legal areas is helpful. Some product counsel earn certifications in data privacy (for example CIPP certification) to be efficient.



A collaborative mindset will bridge talents and lead to more creative solutions. Artwork by Alphavector / *Shutterstock.com*

A good product counsel will have diversity of thought and perspective while maintaining the ability to collaborate. "The role is not so much about your credentials but the impact a candidate will have on the product and company."

How did I wind up as product counsel?

About a year after graduating from law school, I started working for a small startup technology company whose primary product was geared for small law firm case management. I applied for their “Account Manager” role late one night. I thought, why not? Within two weeks of applying, I was offered the role and hired as employee no. 42.

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I had the pleasure of traveling around the United States, meeting with some of the most brilliant business owners and gaining true insight on building products for end users. I trained clients and staff on the product, found innovative ways to make the product work for users, and compiled feedback to

report back to our product team.

Over time, I began working closely with our product, sales, support, and marketing teams. I would be asked:

- Jessica, what do you think about this new feature we are building?
- Jessica, can we make this promise in this sales agreement for a new or renewal client?
- Jessica, our terms of service are outdated, can you take a look?

Then, I started asking myself questions. Is our privacy policy clear? Does this feature consider accessibility considerations? Can we say that in marketing? What can our support team tell clients? I was invited to join the company's SME (subject matter expert) meetings, and there I found a space to collaborate, ask questions, and discover. I loved it.

One day our general counsel asked, Jessica have you ever heard of the role product counsel? A what? The googling began, and after my search I thought, wow, I am pretty sure this is what I am doing right now.

At the time, the company did not have a product counsel role. I submitted a proposal to our leadership team with an overview of what a product counsel is, the goals of a product counsel, and why they wanted one. My memo was compiled of various articles, webinars, and an interview I conducted with the lead product counsel at Meta.

> **Pro tip**: if you are unsure on the day-to-day of a specific role, find someone on LinkedIn with said role and ask for a meet and greet. I find most people are open and willing to share if you just ask. That meeting confirmed my next career move: product counsel.

Important considerations

The majority of product counsel work involves facilitating connection between departments, keeping business partners up to date on the regulatory needs of the company, and mitigating risks. Product counsel focus on the whole lifecycle of a product from idea generation, through launch, and then maintenance and refinement.

Some companies opt for an outside lawyer with the title "of counsel" for the work, and, in truth, partnering with specialists is wise. On the other hand, there is value in an internal team player whose professional instincts align more with the interests of the company. Outside counsel may provide more conservative advice which may or may not consider the company goals or inner workings.

So, what is a product counsel and why have one? The better question: Why not? I stumbled into the world of technology and have since learned the possibilities to build connections are endless. When asked what I do, I say, "I support products that improve our world."

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Jessica K. Robinson is a senior product counsel at RingCentral, where she focuses on the evolving AI regulatory landscape, helping shape compliance strategies for AI-driven initiatives. She

collaborates with cross-functional teams to ensure the company's AI innovations meet ethical and legal standards, keeping ahead of fast-developing regulations in the tech space.

Before joining RingCentral, Robinson was a product counsel at GitHub, where she provided legal support to various engineering, product, and development teams, addressing complex legal challenges as the company continued to expand in products like Copilot. Robinson began her legal career in the tech industry, supporting a startup before fully transitioning to product counseling. She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of South Florida and a juris doctor from DePaul University College of Law. Driven by curiosity and a passion for technology, her career has evolved into one centered on innovation, creative problem-solving, and fostering connection among tech-driven legal professionals. She is also deeply committed to increasing diversity in the legal tech community and mentoring peers navigating this dynamic intersection of law and technology.