

The T-Shaped Lawyer: To Thrive, Do More Business

Career Development



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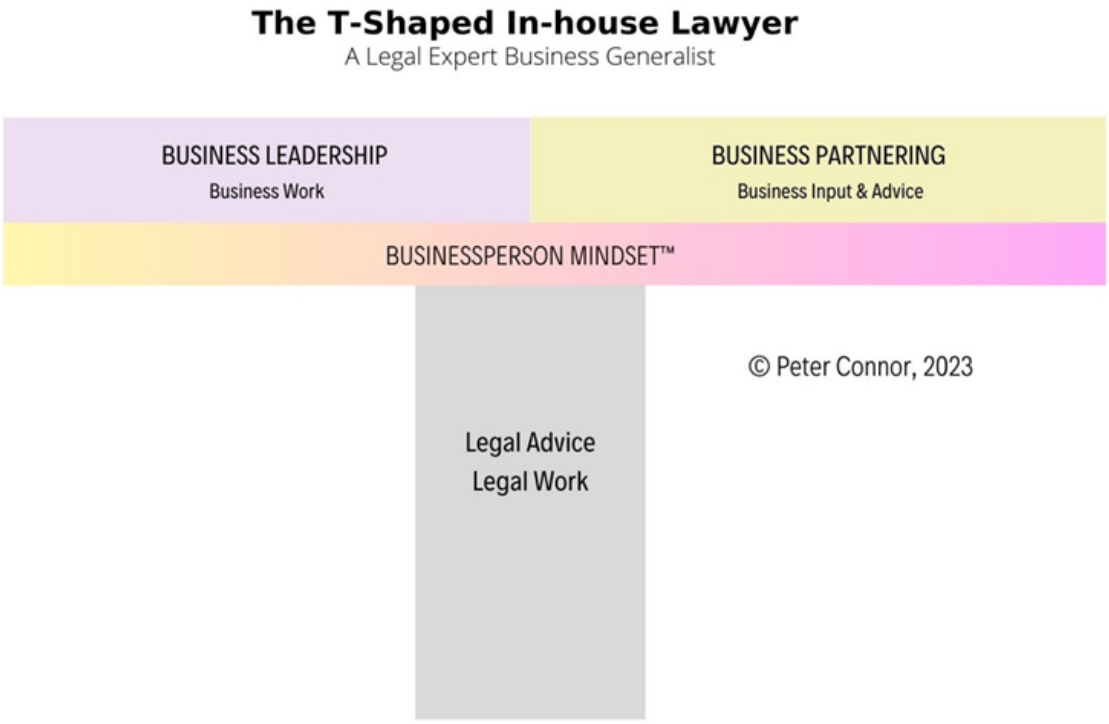
The first in this series of articles identified some underlying problems faced by most in-house lawyers and legal department leaders including how to add more value to be more valued. My free book, A New Vision for Corporate Lawyers, outlines the change imperative and explains how a new direction offers the promise of addressing most of those frustrations, concerns, and aspirations. This article briefly highlights some key points.

The key to this new direction is not, as some have suggested, technology. It is not empathy. It is not

legal design. All of those are important but the one thing that matters most to those who should matter most to an in-house lawyer is *the business.*

It's a simple equation from the perspective of your company: Law + Business = >2X Value

The new vision that I am proposing is for every in-house lawyer to aspire to be a businessperson, not just a lawyer, to provide business input and advice, not just legal advice. They should do business work, not just legal work, for the benefit of the business, not just the legal department.



The expert generalist concept helps explain the vision I am proposing, because it can be applied to come up with the self-explanatory label of a Legal Expert Business Generalist. The term expert generalist was coined by Orit Gadiesh, the chairperson of Bain & Company, to describe what she believes to be someone who is more able than a specialist to work effectively in teams, to solve complex problems, and generally contribute more to their organizations. The concept of the T-shaped professional similarly underscores the idea of cultivating a wide yet less intensive range of skills and experiences to complement the deep expertise within a professional's primary domain.

I first applied the T-shaped professional concept to in-house lawyers in my 2015 workshops. My *ACC Docket* article entitled The T-Shaped In-house Lawyer explains this initial idea in more detail. Then, my priority was to capture the most important non-legal skills based on my experience using my in-house career. However, over the last eight years working with in-house teams all over the world, I have realized that there is much more to it than skills.

The third article in this current series will explain this point in more detail. I also realized that skills are part of "**how"** to become a T-Shaped Lawyer, and that I needed to explain more clearly "**what"** a T-Shaped Lawyer is, because the major benefit from developing non-legal skills is to do non-legal work.

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Expanding the scope of your work

The recent focus on legal operations in legal departments is one example of non-legal or business work primarily for the benefit of the legal department. Lawyers need to at least understand and support that work. Additionally, I am proposing that lawyers do business work for the benefit of the business. Doing business "for the legal department," such as legal operations, is also an important example of doing business that in-house lawyers need to understand, and support, but not necessarily do themselves.

There are two broad ways that in-house lawyers can contribute, beyond legal advice and doing legal work, to help prevent and solve business problems and identify and implement business opportunities **for the business**, not just the legal department:

1. Business partnering which involves providing regular business input and advice.
2. Business leadership which involves devoting more time to do work that may be adjacent, but is separate, to any legal work.



Through business partnering and business leadership skills, in-house counsel provide benefits for both the business and legal department. Golden Sikorka / *Shutterstock.com*

> Being a business partner is a noun and a necessary but not sufficient condition to engage in the crucial activity of business partnering, the verb.

Let’s collectively refer to these activities as “**doing business.”** It is important to be clear and precise because otherwise you may misunderstand the idea or believe that it is not a new idea. The fourth article in this series will explain why being precise about the language of change is as important as it is for the language of a legal document. But for now, let me highlight a few key points:

- "Doing law" provides a certain value to the business that varies depending on the extent to which legal considerations are involved. Doing business offers the potential, more frequently, to provide significantly more value from the perspective of your business and functional colleagues.
- It is now widely accepted that GCs should "do business." However, all legal department members, including even junior ones or those in specialist legal or legal ops roles, can and should do business. My T-shaped Lawyer model can be adapted to fit every situation.
- Adopting what I have termed a Businessperson Mindset™ is crucial to becoming a T-Shaped Lawyer. As the book explains in detail, that involves thinking of yourself as a businessperson who is part of the business team and thinking about the business, not just your legal tasks. It extends well beyond being business minded or having business acumen or knowledge.

- Some lawyers do business to some extent, but they do it less than they might think, and they do not call it out to their business or legal colleagues or spell it out clearly.
- Spelling it out clearly is crucial. The problem with general and vague expressions like “business partner, trusted advisor, business-minded, strategic, or higher value work” is that they do not provide a clear enough picture for all lawyers to understand what this means and which direction to head in.
- The expression “business partner” is used by many, but not all, in-house lawyers. However, as I pointed out in the book and in my 2004 *ACC Docket* article, being a business partner is a noun and a necessary but not sufficient condition to engage in the crucial activity of business partnering, the verb.

Charting your new path

This new vision is not a prediction of the future. Rather, it is a direction for you to follow to create your own future. You do not need to wait to start with business partnering. That said, you can use professional development to enhance your capability to do law + business using the T-Shaped Lawyer Framework™, and that is the topic of the next article in the series.

Peter Connor is the Founder and CEO of AlternativelyLegal.

His book — *A New Vision for Corporate Lawyers: Part 1 of the T-Shaped Lawyer Series* is available for free at https://peterconnor.legalbusinesslibrary.com/ or you can reach him at info@alternativelylegal.com or connect with him on LinkedIn.

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Peter Connor



Founder and CEO

AlternativelyLegal

After a 25-year career working in the United States, Hong Kong, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland in various regional general counsel and compliance roles with Sun Microsystems and Citrix, Peter Connor established AlternativelyLegal to provide unique training and consulting for in-house lawyers.