


# 2024 ACC Top 10 30-Somethings: Erica Zinkie

**Interviews and Profiles**



*The ACC Top 10 30-Somethings awards recognize in-house counsel between the ages of 30 and 39 for their innovation, approach to challenges, well-rounded perspectives, contributions to the in-house community, and pro bono and volunteer work.*




The pressure cooker of Big Law is often thought of as the traditional way to start a legal career. But after graduating into the glum prospects of the 2011 recession, Erica Zinkie decided to try a different

route. Her achievements at OneDigital, where she is now senior vice president, legal and compliance, and her climb to senior leadership before she was even eligible for this award (that is, 30 years old), prove that Big Law isn't the only route to becoming a corporate counsel.

Erica's career started as a compliance specialist from which she was soon promoted. Her start in employee benefits law, eventually led her to OneDigital.

Among her responsibilities is leading a team of approximately 40 internal lawyers, outside counsel, and risk and licensing professions, while also providing leadership and strategic business guidance at the executive and board level.

## Success comes from more places than Big Law

"As a young lawyer, I definitely felt that not getting a position in Big Law would hamper my trajectory. And I thought it might hamper my overall success. But over time you learn that success is so much more than Big Law.," she reflects.

In lieu of Big Law experience, Erica "consistently strived to implement process improvements to enhance the customer service experience for her clients and stakeholders." And now, "I don't feel a miss not having worked in Big Law because I feel my approach has developed in a way that is flexible and focused on meeting business needs."

She also doesn't look at Big Law as criteria for her hires, saying: "I don't look at any of the traditional things that some look at as making a good lawyer, including where you worked, where you went to school. I look at your experience and that you don't have a stuffy approach to your work."

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>
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## Quirky, rather than classic

Not being stuffy, at least for Erica, includes being quirky. "I might blurt out a personal tidbit when overwhelmed. I might send a gif. The only typical lawyer way I speak is maybe saying "it depends" too much."

But it's more than being quirky. Building relationships with staff, clients, and stakeholders is key. "I feel that being personal helps build trust. And when I make mistakes, I own them."

When it comes to the work itself, however, Erica's style is serious. And her list of accomplishments is long. She built the in-house legal and risk team from initiation, increasing staff from two to 40 in three years and instituting operational changes resulting in saving more than half a million dollars per year by reducing outside spend.

"Surprise, surprise," she says, "lawyers are cheaper inside than outside!"

Erica invested US$500,000 in new technology resources such as a ticketing system for incoming

work requests rather than their coming in via email and requiring an employee to review, update, and assign regularly. She also instituted an enterprise risk management system in governance, risk, and compliance (GRC) which helps track risk and provides executive level reporting so they can easily evaluate and see if they need to improve their risk avoidance strategies.

“I’m a big believer in working smarter, not harder,” she summarizes.

## Helping others inside and outside work

Working in the employee benefits field is the “passion” Erica found early. “Initially it was fun because it combined two interests of mine — health and labor & employment law.”

She helps the company in other ways. She serves on several OneDigital executive committees and is the diversity, equity, inclusion, and belong steering council’s secretary and is the executive sponsor of the Neurodiversity Employee Resource Group.

She has raised funds via OneDigital’s DigitalDash to support which Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, Bert’s Big Adventure, and various other local charities. And she officially mentors junior members of the legal and compliance team.

“Just be there for your staff. Make sure staff know they are supported by you as the company grows,” she says.

Her secret sauce to significant growth in a relatively short period of time? “Think outside of your traditional legal functions to find ways in which you can be an operational change maker. Start with strong generalists and then go to specialists.”

As for starting out your career whether in Big Law or not, “Don’t try to be what you think you are supposed to be. I have found the most success comes from being authentic. It’s exhausting to try and fake it,” she advises. To forward your career, “Don’t wait on someone to give you the opportunities you are looking for — ask for it and tout your accomplishments.”

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