

5 In-house Competencies to Turbocharge Your Success

Career Development



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For in-house counsel, success hinges on more than just having refined legal acumen. They must also have a firm grasp on law department operations, solid rapport with key stakeholders, and the soft skills necessary to lead and communicate clearly and effectively. These capabilities are critical for navigating the complexities of modern legal practice within organizations and ensuring a legal team can contribute strategically to overall business objectives.

Developing and honing the five competencies below can help you elevate your legal department and position you and your team as invaluable assets to the organization.

1. Relationship building and teamwork

Interacting with various internal and external stakeholders is a daily part of the job if you’re an in-house counsel. It’s imperative that you initiate and nurture relationships with compliance, risk management, finance, human resources, and other departments crucial to collaboration. For instance, maintaining strong connections with compliance and risk management functions is paramount, as these areas frequently intersect with legal concerns. Building and nurturing strong relationships across the enterprise helps ensure your legal department is seen as a partner, rather than an obstacle.

Developing connections with outside counsel and legal service providers is equally important. These relationships are vital for coordinating efforts and ensuring legal strategies align with the organization's goals. Effective collaboration with external legal advisors can also bring specialized expertise and additional resources to the table, enhancing your legal team's capabilities.

Relationship building should start with gaining a thorough understanding of the organization’s structure and key players. This knowledge allows you to provide tailored legal advice, anticipate potential issues, and effectively collaborate with various departments. Start with the steps below:

Step 1: Perform initial research

Review the latest organizational charts. This will provide an overview of the company's hierarchy, including departments, reporting lines, and key personnel. Familiarize yourself with the company's bylaws, articles of incorporation, and other governance documents to understand the legal framework and decision-making processes.

Step 2: Set up introductory meetings

Schedule get-to-know-you meetings with your direct supervisors and key members of the legal team. Discuss their roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Arrange meetings with heads of major departments (e.g., HR, finance, marketing, operations, IT) as well as other influential team members to learn about their functions, current projects, legal needs, and build rapport.

Step 3: Network internally

Maintain a high profile by participating in company-wide meetings, town halls, and social events. These settings provide excellent opportunities to interact with employees at different levels and gain insights into the organizational culture.

Step 4: Get up to speed on the company

Review internal reports, memos, and communication materials to stay informed about ongoing initiatives, strategic goals, and potential legal issues. Utilize the company's intranet or internal communication platforms to explore key resources and get a handle on the latest organizational news.

Step 5: Engage continuously

Create regular built-in touchpoints by establishing routine check-ins with key stakeholders. This enables you to stay abreast of their needs and any changes within their departments. Consider participating in or leading cross-functional teams and projects. This will enhance your understanding of how different parts of the organization work together and allow you to provide proactive legal support.

By following these steps, you'll gain a detailed understanding of your organization's structure and important players. This, in turn, will empower you to foster strong working relationships, provide more effective legal counsel, and better contribute to the company's success.

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2. Communication

Productive communication is crucial to clearly conveying legal concepts, strategic plans, protocols,

and processes to both your team and various stakeholders across the company. Being able to articulate legal issues in a way that’s accessible to non-legal stakeholders is an especially critical skill that will serve you well during high-stakes negotiations, risk and compliance discussions, and crisis management situations. For example:

During negotiations

Clear communication is necessary to articulate the company's position, understand the other party's demands, and find a mutually beneficial resolution. It ensures legal terms are understood by all stakeholders, avoiding potential misunderstandings that could derail these discussions.

In the context of risk and compliance

In-house counsel must be able to communicate complex regulatory requirements to non-legal staff in a digestible way. This might involve explaining new compliance protocols to the IT department to ensure data protection measures are in place or educating the HR team about new employment law changes.

During crisis management

The ability to communicate quickly and clearly can make a significant difference in terms of outcomes. For instance, if there is a data breach, in-house counsel must coordinate with the IT team, communicate with the PR team on the public response, and inform the executive team about legal implications and action plans.

Your communication skills also impact your ability to understand the needs and perspectives of different departments and people within the organization. Knowing how to ask leading questions can help you obtain all the information you need to engage with the other party. For instance, when working with the finance department on a new investment, asking the right questions can uncover potential legal risks that need to be addressed. You will then need to provide succinct and thoughtful answers to demonstrate your expertise and win their confidence.

Lastly, working within the legal team itself, you need to be able to set expectations and share goals. This involves holding regular meetings to discuss ongoing projects, providing constructive feedback, and ensuring everyone is aligned with the team's objectives. For example, when assigning tasks for a major litigation case, clear communication about deadlines, roles, and responsibilities will help eliminate confusion and ensure the team works efficiently and effectively.

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It is critical to have strong communication skills and set clear expectations to ensure understanding across different departments and stakeholders. 2506492425 / *Shutterstock.com*

By proactively mastering these important communication skills, you can foster strong collaboration, drive strategic initiatives, and mitigate risks across the organization.

3. Emotional intelligence

Having a high level of emotional intelligence is critical to navigating various personalities and situations. Emotional intelligence goes beyond understanding and managing your own emotions. You must also be able to empathize with others, actively listening to the challenges and solutions they are bringing to the table.

For instance, when handling sensitive issues such as employee disputes or compliance investigations, showing empathy and understanding can help de-escalate tensions and foster a more collaborative environment. Emotional intelligence also plays a role in leadership, where understanding team dynamics and individual motivations can lead to more effective management and team cohesion.

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Emotional intelligence is especially applicable when working within a global team and organization, since it can help you adeptly navigate cultural differences. Below is an example of how to apply various aspects of emotional intelligence to a sensitive negotiation that involves stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds:

Cultural awareness

Research and understand the cultural backgrounds of the parties involved. This includes learning about their communication styles, decision-making processes, and negotiation tactics.

Active listening

Pay close attention to what the other party is saying without interrupting. Show you value their perspective by paraphrasing their points and asking clarifying questions.

Empathy

Put yourself in the other party's shoes to understand their motivations, concerns, and goals. Acknowledge their feelings and viewpoints, even if they differ from your own.

Adaptability

Be flexible and willing to adjust your communication style to suit the cultural norms of the other party. This might include modifying your tone, body language, or negotiation approach.

Patience

Recognize that negotiations across cultures may take longer due to different paces and protocols. Exercise patience and avoid rushing the process.

Respect

Show respect for cultural differences by being mindful of customs, traditions, and etiquette. This can help you build trust and rapport, making the negotiation process smoother.

Emotional regulation

Manage your own emotions, especially in high-stress situations. Stay calm and composed to avoid escalating conflicts. Maintain a positive atmosphere.

Open-mindedness

Embrace different perspectives and solutions. Encourage collaborative problem-solving that takes into account the cultural context of all parties involved.

Clear communication

Use simple and clear language to avoid misunderstandings. Confirm that your messages are

understood correctly by seeking feedback and clarification.

Relationship building

Focus on cultivating long-term relationships — rather than just winning the negotiation. Establishing trust and mutual respect can set the stage for more successful outcomes in future interactions.

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4. Persuasion and influence

The ability to persuade stakeholders to adopt legal strategies or comply with legal requirements is also critical. Implementing an organization-wide compliance program, for example, requires buy-in from other department leaders.

Below are proven tips for gaining influence withing your department and the greater organization:

Demonstrate your knowledge and expertise

Build credibility by showing you have a deep understanding of legal matters relevant to the business. For example, provide insightful legal analysis during strategic meetings — or offer proactive legal solutions that align with business goals. Another way to increase your credibility is by highlighting your legal triumphs when appropriate, such as winning major cases or negotiating favorable contracts. Share your successful track record with key stakeholders to build your reputation as a reliable legal advisor.

Build trust

Practice consistent communication to keep stakeholders informed about pressing legal issues and developments. For instance, make it a habit to regularly update the executive team on ongoing litigation or compliance matters. Be transparent about potential risks and strategies to mitigate them.

Another way to build trust with clients is to be reliable and responsive. Make yourself readily available to address urgent legal concerns. Provide timely advice. Show the legal department is a dependable partner by promptly responding to queries and delivering on promises.

Foster a positive perception of the legal department

Be mindful of how the legal department is perceived within the organization and do your part to foster a favorable image. You will have more influence if others see you as credible.

To cultivate a positive “brand” for your legal team, work closely with other departments to understand their needs and provide tailored legal support. Effective persuasion often involves presenting legal

advice in a way that aligns with business goals. Instead of simply highlighting risks, frame your advice in terms of opportunities and strategic advantages. This approach can help you gain the support of business leaders and facilitate the implementation of legal initiatives. For example, collaborate with the marketing team to ensure advertising campaigns comply with regulations, while also respecting and supporting their creative goals.

Be proactive about engaging

Immerse yourself in cross-functional projects and actively contribute to the overall success of the organization. Participate in initiatives such as risk management workshops or compliance training sessions to demonstrate the legal department's commitment to the company's objectives.

By implementing these strategies, you can bolster your influence within the organization, leading to more effective collaboration and better alignment with business goals.

5. Leadership

As an in-house counsel, you must be adept at not just managing your team but also influencing the broader organization. Today’s in-house counsel often play a key role in shaping company policies, guiding corporate governance, and ensuring the organization adheres to legal and ethical standards.

By building your emotional intelligence, you’ll be better equipped to handle stress, resolve conflicts, and inspire your team, leading to improved morale and productivity. Additionally, emotional intelligence can help you make more informed decisions by considering the human impact of your words and actions. This fosters a positive work environment that supports employee engagement and retention.

Another critical leadership skill for in-house counsels is strategic thinking — in other words, your ability to intentionally analyze complex situations, assess risks, and make informed recommendations. This type of thinking helps you be proactive, align legal objectives with broader organizational goals, and anticipate potential legal issues that may impact the business.

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From a practical standpoint, you must also be able and willing to set clear objectives, delegate tasks effectively, and motivate your team to strive toward departmental goals. Creating a culture of engagement and continuous learning and development can help ensure your department stays agile and responsive to emerging legal challenges — both within and outside of the organization.

Lead with confidence and drive positive change

The in-house counsel role is no longer that of a one-dimensional, laser-focused legal watchdog.

Today, thriving in-house requires a comprehensive blend of legal expertise, business acumen, and well-developed emotional intelligence. The competencies discussed above can help you not only manage legal risks, but also foster a culture of compliance and ethical behavior and drive the organization's strategic initiatives. By mastering these skills, you will be empowered to lead with confidence and integrity and become truly indispensable to your corporate clients.

Join ACC

James Merklinger



Chief Advisor

ACC Credentialing Institute

James A. Merklinger oversees the institute In-house Counsel Certification Program and its Data Steward Program, assessing law firm data security practices. Having served ACC for over 20 years in a variety of key roles, Merklinger was named to the position of president of the ACC Credentialing Institute in 2017. In this role,

he is responsible for establishing standards and advancing ACC's ability to establish an in-house counsel credentialing program. Merklinger is also responsible for leading the ACC Data Steward Program to evaluate the security profile of law firms.

Previous to his role as the Institute's president, Merklinger served as ACC's vice president and chief legal officer. He represented ACC on all legal issues affecting the association, including mergers with the Australian Corporate Lawyers Association , the Hong Kong In-house Counsel Association and the Corporate Counsel Middle East. Merklinger advised the organization on meeting the needs of the in-house counsel community. He had also served as ACC deputy general counsel and vice president - legal resources, overseeing the development of ACC's array of resources to help in-house counsel do their jobs. In this position, he worked with 18 volunteer leadership committees, organized by practice areas, which contribute to the strategic development of the association's resources and education programs. Merklinger spearheaded ACC's regular benchmarking studies to provide members and the legal industry at large with key trends related to the in-house counsel practice and outside counsel management.

In addition to his non-profit legal experience, Merklinger served on the board of directors for the Tourette's Syndrome Association of Greater Washington, DC, the board of directors of the ACC Foundation, and President of the Washington Irish. Prior to joining ACC, he served as in-house counsel for DIAD, Inc. in Reston, Virginia. While at DIAD, he provided counsel in a variety of substantive areas, including commercial law, software licensing, disability law and issues affecting entrepreneurial development. Merklinger has served as faculty for CLE programs throughout the United States, Canada , Europe and the Middle East on a variety of in-house topics. Merklinger graduated from Wofford College and the University of South Carolina School of Law.

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Eskor Edem is a director at Major, Lindsey & Africa, where he sits in the firm's In-house Counsel Practice Group. He focuses on helping organizations recruit high-caliber legal and compliance professionals across several industries. Edem joined Major, Lindsey & Africa after a year of running his own boutique executive search firm based in New Jersey. There, he specialized in identifying and recruiting attorneys for law firms as well as privately held and publicly traded companies. He has made placements at all levels of seniority in Am Law 200, NLJ 500, and mid-sized law firms. In the corporate law department setting, he has successfully closed search engagements ranging from general counsel positions to legal counsel roles across various industries. Edem previously worked in the law department of a multibillion-dollar family office affiliated with a publicly traded real estate company.