

6 Questions to Ask About Soft Skills to Excel in an In-house Legal Department

Career Development



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Cheat Sheet

- **Cause and effect.** In-house counsel that can effectively utilize soft skills set themselves apart and tend to build better workplace relationships.

- **Key skills.** Mastering specific soft skills such as empathy, problem-solving, and communication establishes trust with others and boosts effective collaboration.

- **Self-assessment.** Regularly assess your soft skills. Reflect on areas where you have room for improvement.

- **Ways to improve.** Stay committed to learning. Be open to constructive criticism and opportunities that can help elevate your success.

The role of an in-house attorney requires a delicate balancing act of managing risk without being seen as a detriment to the growth of the business. As a result, having sound knowledge of the law is typically not enough to excel as in-house counsel. The position requires many skills that aren't typically taught in law school. Success depends on a reputation for being a trusted business partner to their non-attorney counterparts. This requires a concerted effort.

Most lawyers are risk-averse by nature, but in the business world risk tolerance is necessary for achieving growth. Accordingly, an in-house attorney plays a strategic role in aligning legalities with business goals. He or she should be seen as business partner that helps safeguard the organization's long-term reputation and prosperity. For this reason, it is critical to develop excellent interpersonal and behavioral skills, sometimes referred to as "soft skills," which are typically only learned on the job.

What are soft skills?


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Soft skills are attributes that we commonly think of as "people skills." In the workplace, these are the interpersonal skills and character traits that define someone's ability to work well with others. It can be as simple as clear communication and being personable. These attributes are very different than hard skills, which typically refer to an employee's knowledge and occupational abilities. Hard skills are measurable and obtained either through education, training, or experience, and they can be honed over time. Soft skills, on the other hand, include things like empathy, resilience, compassion, adaptability, effective communication, teamwork, motivational skills, analytical skills, problem-solving skills, conflict-resolution skills, compassion, honesty, integrity, and adaptability.

Why are soft skills important?

Soft skills are important because they enable employees to interact effectively with others in the workplace. As a result, soft skills are often what set high performers apart from their peers. Specifically, those who excel in the soft skills are more likely to be trusted by their co-workers, and that leads to better collaboration, improved productivity, increased creativity, and more. As a result, those who have mastered the art of effectively utilizing these soft skills to build good relationships in the workplace are likely to find that they are able to work more productively and feel more satisfied with their jobs.

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the workplace.

Soft skills are particularly important for leaders because they are key for building good relationships. Managers who excel in the soft skills are likely to experience greater retention and more motivated team members.

What unique factors apply to in-house attorneys?

A mastery of certain soft skills is key for in-house lawyers. For example, since in-house attorneys are often seen by their peers on the business team as being an “obstacle” to doing business, it is important for in-house attorneys to build strong relationships and earn the trust of their business partners. Soft skills are instrumental because they allow the in-house attorney to more effectively communicate risk and to have their opinions considered by business managers.

To help, it is important at the outset to get on the same page as your leadership team about the company’s risk tolerance. Also, discussing whether the legal function is seen as mitigating risks and avoiding legal exposure (i.e., compliance function) or whether strategic partnerships and expansions have more priority (i.e., acquisitions, vendor relations, office leases, IP etc.) can be a key part of building successful relationships and trust with the leadership team.

Many in-house counsel engage in negotiation as a regular part of their jobs, whether it’s negotiating contracts with vendors, suppliers, or customers; negotiating M&A deals, partnerships, joint ventures, and other deals; negotiating terms of outside counsel arrangements, and more. Soft skills are key to negotiating well because successful negotiation often requires empathy, problem-solving, and strategic thinking.

Good communication skills are also crucial for in-house counsel, who frequently need to communicate complex legal situations to non-lawyers who typically prefer clear and concise communication. When in-house counsel communicate well with their business partners, stronger relationships are likely to result.

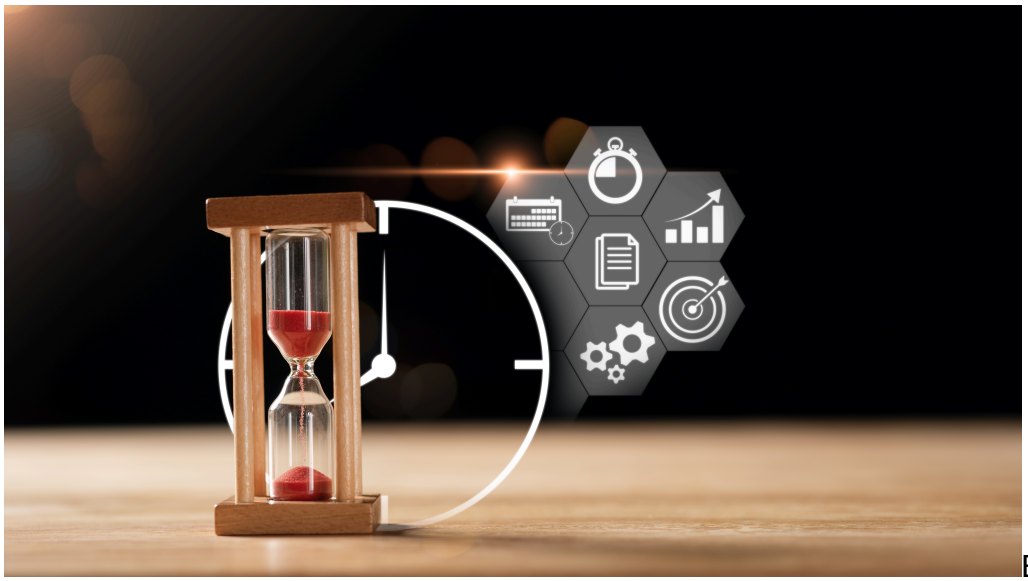
This means expressing your voice with confidence and authority when speaking – avoiding “ums” and “likes” as well as slang, sarcasm, or other types of unprofessional speech that might irritate or offend a listener. In-house counsel regularly need to inform management on the status of a legal matter or to educate employees as to how to comply with company policies. To do this effectively, presentations should be rehearsed, organized, and customized to the needs of the audience. Visual slides should be minimal and specifics should be shared in a conversational manner.

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Which specific soft skills are most important for in-house counsel?

The role of an in-house attorney requires strong relationships based on trust. Building and maintaining those relationships requires emotional intelligence including empathy, compassion, and self-awareness. In addition, since corporate counsel regularly work with business managers to find

creative ways to achieve business goals with an acceptable level of risk, problem-solving skills are key.


Effective time management is crucial to the success of in-house counsel. BUAY khem / *Shutterstock.com*

Time management and prioritization are also key skills for in-house lawyers, who are typically very busy and working with limited resources. For many corporate counsel, there is always an endless amount of work to do, and it can't all be made a priority, or even given full attention, so figuring out how to prioritize and balance is crucial to success.

The soft skills of teamwork and collaboration are also important because in-house lawyers must work with other departments that have different perspectives, goals, and priorities. Effective collaboration is essential to ensure that the legal department can have an impact on the business from both a business and legal perspective.

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Further, many in-house attorneys are viewed as leaders in their organization, and it's common for in-house attorneys to strive for a promotion to a general counsel position, so leadership skills are key. This means soft skills such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, conflict resolution, strategic thinking, and teamwork are important.

In addition, corporate counsel often find that they are in a position of needing to propose creative solutions to help a company meet its business objectives with minimal risk. This requires creativity, imagination, and the ability to think outside the box.

What are the best ways to assess your own soft skills?

Embrace feedback

Evaluating your own soft skills can be difficult, but there are some things you can do that are effective. One method is to pay close attention to the advice and comments you receive in formal

reviews. Also, it can be helpful to ask your supervisor or another trusted resource for informal feedback on your soft skills, and specifically about which of your soft skills could be improved to better position you for career success.

Analyze your workplace relationships

Another good option is to think about the relationships you have in the workplace, and how they compare to the working relationships your peers, co-workers, and the leaders in your organization have formed. If you find that everyone around you has stronger relationship in the workplace than you do, that could be a sign that your interpersonal skills could be improved.

Reflect on past workplace challenges

It also can be helpful to think through how you've handled some difficult workplace situations, as that can be a good way to figure out the areas in which you excelled in the soft skills and the areas where you have room for improvement. For instance, if you spend some time thinking about how you handled a recent disagreement with a co-worker, a difficult conversation, or a challenging situation which you were tasked with solving, that may give you some insight into which scenarios you handled well, and which you think you could have handled better. When you think about the situations that didn't go well, you can gain some insight into how an improvement in certain soft skills may have led to a different outcome.

How can you improve your soft skills?

Be open to constructive criticism

Improving your soft skills can take a concerted effort, especially if long-time habits and tendencies need to be changed. One of the best things you can do to improve is to be open to feedback from others who you trust. Having people close to you let you know about your strengths and weaknesses can be invaluable. Once you receive this feedback, spend some time reflecting on which of the soft skills are the most important, and then make it a priority to focus on those.

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Learn from others who excel at soft skills

It's also helpful to observe others who excel at the soft skills. You can identify them because they tend to be well-liked, admired leaders who are often brought into big projects and important discussions. If you pay close attention to how these people interact with others, behave in meetings, and tackle challenging situations, you may see some good examples of how to use soft skills to excel.

Practice empathy, active listening, and concise communication

When working to master soft skills, it is a good idea to put yourself in the shoes of the people with whom you interact, to be sure you are seeing things from their perspective. It's also helpful to be cognizant of how others react to their interactions with you, as that can be a good indication of

whether you've been able to build good relationships based on trust. Practice active listening by consciously listening more than you speak. Enhance this skill by paying full attention to the speaker, acknowledging their points, and giving thoughtful feedback. Work on managing your emotions so you convey emotional intelligence and sound judgment. Focus on clear and concise communication. Practice writing and speaking in a way that is easily understood by non-legal professionals.

Strengthen relationships through in-person interactions

In-person interactions can also be a great way to strengthen relationships, because soft skills can be easier to demonstrate in-person than over Zoom or Teams. If you are working in a remote or hybrid environment, consider making an extra effort to spend some time in-person with your most valuable business partners. Know them on a professional level mostly, but some awareness on a personal level helps build a stronger connection. Seek out opportunities to gain leadership experience, take on new challenges, get experience working on teams, and hone your organizational and time-management skills. Also, make sure you get in the habit of leading by example by doing things such as taking the initiative to propose proactive projects, beating deadlines, and otherwise demonstrating a strong work ethic, as all of these things can go a long way toward improving your ability to build good relationships and earn trust.



Go the extra mile to build stronger, more meaningful relationships in the workplace. ASDF_MEDIA / *Shutterstock.com*

Commit to continuous learning

Continuous learning is an in-house counsel's asset. Stay curious and committed to learning. This can involve taking courses, attending workshops, reading industry publications, and seeking mentorship from experienced professionals. By focusing on these areas, you can develop a well-rounded set of

business acumen skills that will enhance your ability to contribute to your organization's success. Finally, ask your superior to give you constructive feedback for improvement.

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In the modern in-house workplace, soft skills are more important than ever due to the post-pandemic popularity of hybrid working arrangements and virtual meetings. In addition, the increased competition for coveted in-house roles and promotions has created a further challenge for professional advancement, but attorneys who are able to master soft skills (in addition to the hard skills needed for their role) will find they are better positioned for success. Anyone can know the law, but your differentiator is the ability to build relationships that drive the business forward.

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Ashoo Sharma



General Counsel

HomeServices of America

As General Counsel for four real estate brokerage brands across Georgia and Alabama owned by HomeServices of America, a Berkshire Hathaway company (Harry Norman, Realtors, BHHSGA Properties, RealtySouth, and Roberts Brothers), Ashoo Sharma oversees all legal and compliance matters. As part of the senior leadership team, she also impacts company culture goals and for this work earned the Diversity Champion awards from Fulton County Daily Report and Atlanta Business Chronicle. For her professional excellence and industry impact, she has earned several awards, including 2024 RISMedia Newsmakers “Crusader” award, “Georgia Rising Stars" by Super Lawyers, "GC Impact Award" by Fulton County Daily Report, Top 50 Corporate Counsel by OnConferences,

GC Powerlist Atlanta award by The Legal 500. Sharma serves on Georgia's Association of Corporate Counsel Board, was member of Georgia's 2024 prestigious Leadership of Atlanta Class, and serves on Emory's Board of Visitors and University of Georgia Law School's Corporate Counsel Advisory Board. As part of her civic duties, she was appointed by Georgia's Governor to the Equal Opportunity Commission's Advisory Board to help safeguard Georgians from housing discrimination and most recently, appointed as Georgia advisor to the US Commission on Civil Rights. Established in 1957, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan federal agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights matters and issuing an annual federal civil rights enforcement report. Sharma is often asked to speak on panels regarding industry best practices and is considered a legal and civic leader in Georgia.

Kimberly D. Lerman



Partner

Legacy Executive Search

Kimberly Lerman is a seasoned legal professional with over 25 years of experience. She currently serves as a legal recruiter at Legacy Executive Search. Her career has spanned both law practice and legal recruitment, providing her with a unique perspective on the industry. Lerman has dedicated the past decade to attorney recruitment, specializing in placing legal professionalism various roles across multiple sectors. Her placements include roles such as general counsel, associate general counsel, division general counsel, and senior counsel in industries ranging from financial services to hospitality. Before starting her recruiting career, she practiced law for fifteen years. Her legal career culminated in her role as Vice President & Associate General Counsel for a large company based in Atlanta. She also acquired valuable experience as a litigation associate at well-known law firms, including King &Spalding and Eversheds Sutherland. Lerman holds a J.D. from Duke University School of Law and a B.A. from Emory University, where she graduated magna cum laude. She remained actively involved with both institutions, co-chairing the Duke Atlanta Women's Forum and serving as a Duke Law Atlanta Board member. Lerman also volunteers with Emory Connects,

mentoring students interested in pursuing legal careers. Outside of her professional life, Lerman is an accomplished athlete and outdoor enthusiast. She has completed 21 Ironman® triathlons and enjoys various activities, including scuba diving, stand-up paddleboarding, hiking, and nature photography. She also dedicates time to mentoring busy professionals who strive to balance endurance sports with their careers and family commitments. She currently serves on the Board of Officers for the Southern Appalachian Bicycle Association, demonstrating her commitment to community engagement and passion for outdoor activities.