Global Chief Legal Officers Focus on Strategic Leadership Amid Rising Business Complexities

Community

Career Development



A new survey released by the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) in collaboration with FTI Consulting reveals that Chief Legal Officers (CLOs) are taking a more expansive role in driving business strategy, while simultaneously grappling with an increasingly complex global landscape.

The 2025 ACC Chief Legal Officers Survey, which marks its 26th year, provides key insights into how CLOs are adapting to mounting challenges in risk, compliance, data privacy, and regulatory changes. Drawing responses from 772 CLOs across 48 countries, the survey underscores the growing responsibilities of legal leaders beyond traditional legal tasks.

ACC President and CEO Veta T. Richardson commented, “CLOs are key strategic business partners, their responsibilities beyond legal roles are growing, and they are assuming greater leadership across organizations. This is happening amid numerous internal and external challenges, such as a complex regulatory landscape, geopolitical instability, and mounting budget pressures.”

Share ideas and best practices with other CLOs at ACC's Chief Legal Officer Global Summit in Barcelona, Spain, 21-23 May, 2025.

Evolving role of CLOs: Strategic business partners

The role of CLOs is evolving significantly. While traditionally focused on legal matters, today's CLOs are overseeing an expanding array of functions across their organizations. According to the survey, 70 percent of CLOs manage at least two additional areas, including risk, compliance, privacy, and ethics. This growing influence is evident in their involvement in key business decisions: 58 percent report being heavily engaged in mergers and acquisitions, while 44 percent say advising the CEO and shaping business strategy are their most impactful contributions.

This shift toward strategic leadership is further reflected in CLOs' growing involvement in high-level business decisions, as they aim to align legal and business objectives.

While worldwide CLOS are increasing their influence, Australian CLOs are not keeping pace. Find other Australia-specific findings in this special supplement.

Rising complexity in litigation and investigations

While CLOs are taking on broader roles, they are also facing heightened operational challenges. The survey reports a significant uptick in the volume, cost, and complexity of disputes and investigations. Forty-four percent of CLOs noted an increase in litigation, while 42 percent observed a rise in internal investigations. The costs associated with litigation and investigations have also grown. Approximately 60 percent of CLOs noted an increase in litigation costs, and nearly 30 percent saw costs for internal and external investigations rise.

Such trends signal a growing pressure on legal departments to manage more complex and expensive matters with limited resources.

Regulatory concerns dominate CLOs' priorities

With global regulations becoming increasingly stringent, CLOs are placing a high priority on staying ahead of regulatory changes. More than 70 percent of CLOs identified industry-specific enforcement as their primary regulatory concern. Other top concerns included labor and employment issues (37 percent) and third-party risk management enforcement (35 percent). Among larger companies, antitrust (41 percent) and AI regulatory enforcement (26 percent) were significant areas of focus.

In response to these growing regulatory challenges, 43 percent of CLOs said they anticipate an increase in their use of outside counsel, driven largely by the global complexity of compliance.

CLOs in Europe ranked regulatory uncertainty as the highest barrier to success, more than their global peers. Find other Europe-specific findings in this special supplement.

Talent development and technology adoption

As business needs evolve, CLOs are investing in talent development and technology to drive efficiency. A primary challenge identified by respondents was understaffing, with 30 percent planning to hire more lawyers in the coming year — an increase that rises to 50 percent among larger organizations.

At the same time, CLOs are increasingly turning to technology to optimize legal operations. Forty-four percent of CLOs indicated plans to adopt new legal technology to enhance efficiency, with popular initiatives including contract management (62 percent), document management (32 percent), and workflow tools (26 percent).

Resilience amid challenges

Despite the many obstacles they face, CLOs continue to demonstrate resilience and creativity in their roles. FTI Technology's Sophie Ross noted that CLOs are seizing the opportunity to improve their organizations' legal efficiency and mitigate digital risks. "Legal departments have become much more sophisticated in their approach to technology, and this shift is enabling them to address the rising risks and complexity in today's business environment," Ross said.

Looking ahead

The 2025 ACC CLO Survey highlights the critical role CLOs are playing in navigating a rapidly changing and challenging business landscape. As organizations continue to grapple with complex legal, regulatory, and technological issues, CLOs are stepping up as key business leaders, ensuring their companies remain agile and well-equipped to handle future risks.

For a deeper dive into the findings, ACC will host a live webinar on February 12 at 12 p.m. EST to discuss the survey results.

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