

Business & Careers

Looking outside for in-house development



David Namkung
The Headhunter

All too often, we meet with in-house lawyer candidates who feel stuck in their career development—regularly in consideration or a finalist for advancement opportunities, but never the successful candidate.

While in-house lawyers can find they are working just as hard or even harder than they did in private practice, in-house positions are not usually tailored and adjusted to align with a lawyer's evolving career ambitions—continued success and a lawyer's professional development are more closely related in private practice.

Your in-house responsibilities as leasing, corporate or litigation counsel may not naturally lead you to directing the group, and your role directing the group may not necessarily put you in contention for general counsel, so if your ambitions extend beyond your current position you have a greater responsibility to take professional development into your own hands. The leading in-house candidates tend to be defined by demonstrating continued growth in their legal, networking and leadership skills, so taking initiative beyond your day-to-day role maximizes your career options.

If you feel stuck, carefully consider where your profile may be missing the mark.

Relevant skills

In-house responsibilities tend to either be much broader (jack of all trades) or narrower (specialist in compliance, litigation, employment, etc.) than in private practice, and as leadership positions often require a wide range of expertise, consider whether the scope and depth of your skills requires some fine-tuning of your goals. Beyond your immediate role requirements, consider the resources you have internally and externally. External resources can be less evident, so take the time to identify the continuing education opportunities that might be applicable to you.

"In law firms, professional development opportunities are at your fingertips," says Sena Byun, senior counsel at Telus. "Even though my team is robust at Telus, it is still not the same as the law firm environment, where professional development expectations are clear, so I have to take more initiative to stay on top of legal developments."



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She stays current with the corporate governance law relevant to her practice by taking advantage of the resources and programs offered by professional organizations and their subgroups, including the Canadian Bar Association, Association of Corporate Counsel, Canadian Corporate Counsel Association and the Canadian Society of Corporate Secretaries. To broaden her understanding, while Sena is a member of a specialist team at Telus, she also sits on an internal subcommittee on privacy law as this rapidly developing area is having a growing impact on various aspects of their business.

"When you have some time, take advantage of opportunities to help when other teams are busier," she suggests.

Network internally so your colleagues can keep you in mind when they need help with a project that is relevant to an area you are curious about.

Visibility

Whether your goal is to become general counsel or return to private practice, your Rolodex is a key asset to your success. While in-house, your contacts are critical when you need to replace or find additional external counsel, compete for bids, hire for your team, or consider new career opportunities—as employers often first approach candidates who they know before advertising opportunities to the public, it is key to stay on the radar in the market. One of the biggest challenges to going in-house, however, is that it can dramatically reduce your visibility within the legal profession.

Sergio Custodio, a partner with Fasken Martineau's Vancouver office, recognized the risk of losing his contacts when he took an in-house position earlier in his career with the Vancouver Airport Authority located in Richmond, a suburb in the Greater Vancouver Area.

"While it was out of the way for me, I made sure to head into town every other week to have breakfast with my key contacts," says Custodio. Instead of slowing down his networking efforts, he ramped them up. His efforts kept him visible with his connections, allowing him to return to private practice during a down economy, accelerated the growth of his client base and thus fast-tracked his path to partnership.

As in-house counsel, you will have access to a new layer of contacts, including current and prospective external counsel, management, other professional service providers and suppliers and business partners, so make the most of the opportunity by reaching out and expanding your base of relationships—you never know where they will lead to.

Leadership

For those with ambitions for director or executive-level positions, it is also crucial to start developing leadership, management and budgeting skills internally and externally, or advancement opportunities will be out of reach. This is often the main barrier for legal counsel candidates who are seeking management or director-level positions—employers will prioritize candidates with any track record of leadership over those who have only been led in their careers.

Leadership positions typically require a demonstrated ability to supervise a number of directly reporting staff, so if you do not currently have any direct reports or have never held a leadership position, you must be more resourceful in finding opportunities to gain leadership skills. Internally, seek out opportunities to directly or indirectly supervise, train or mentor other staff, and volunteer to lead committees. Externally, seek leadership positions in industry or professional organizations, complete relevant courses or additional degrees, or formally mentor young professionals/students.

In the end, your career options will be a reflection of the initiative you take to develop yourself towards your goals. Even if you have been stuck in a particular position for some time, carefully consider what aspects of your day-to-day role may be limiting you in light of your ambitions—it is never too late to gear up or adjust your efforts.

You may already be working incredibly hard in fulfilling your duties to your organization, but the key is to also work smart to ensure your efforts are actually moving you where you want to go.

David Namkung is a partner with The Counsel Network in Vancouver, vice-president of the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers (B.C. Chapter) and a board member/volunteer of WorkingGear.ca. You can follow him on Twitter @DNamkung.

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We are pleased to announce that Adam Way and Nathaniel Turner have joined our firm as Associates.

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