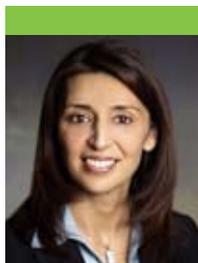


The Critical Guide to Career Development for In-House Counsel

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Congratulations! You are in one of the most sought after positions in law. For each one of you there are hundreds of lawyers that would love to be in your job. There's a huge demand amongst lawyers wanting to move in-house and not enough positions.

Do you recall what happened when you first moved in-house? Did you find the work of an unusually high level? Did you find it nerve-racking when your internal clients walked through your office door wanting solutions and not the twenty page memos you had become accustomed to writing? You may have gone in-house and become the sole counsel, were you aware of the amount of organization that was required or how long it would take to figure out the culture and politics? Those of you that became new managers, did you realize how difficult it was to build a team, retain and attract staff, and meet budgets, whilst at the same time trying to find the coffee machine and remember the receptionist's name? You probably found it daunting, its like that first day of school, but at the same time you were probably feeling challenged and excited. If that sounds familiar then you were in what is frequently referred to as the Education Phase of your career, the first of four phases:

Education In this phase you are challenged and excited, it's a steep learning curve and you feel overwhelmed. Don't worry, be patient, the good news is that you will soon enter the second phase.

Engagement You've learned the ropes, you are confident, motivated, accomplishing goals and achieving targets, you're not overwhelmed and you feel you are making a valuable contribution. This is a great phase, but it doesn't last forever.

Cruising The third phase—you're plateauing; you feel that you've done most of these things before and you're getting bored. You're not unhappy but you're not motivated. You're just cruising! You start thinking the grass is greener on the other side. If you are there now be warned, you will enter phase four.

Disengagement In this phase you are feeling frustrated, you're unhappy, you start seeing a lot of negatives in your current position, these are things that did not bother you before. You're going downhill and that grass is definitely a bright shade of green now. Beware, you may be heading for burnout.

Some studies have shown that there is a correlation between the four career phases and personal relationships. Phase one, you don't have time for a relationship or you are neglecting your current one because you are so occupied with learning the job. Phase two, this is the phase that most people start relationships, get engaged, married or remarried, you're happy and content. Phase three, you're bored, maybe have an affair and phase four is the break up stage and divorce, you're frustrated at work and you take your frustrations home. The key to career advancement is to ensure that you do not reach phase four and before you get to three, Cruising, you know where you want to go.

Surveys have shown that in-house counsel are quite satisfied or happy with their careers, but what is striking in these surveys is that the majority of them reported that opportunities for advancement were limited or non-existent, "there's no room at the top." Advancement for lawyers in-house depends on a number of factors mostly out of the lawyers control, such as the size of the department, the age of the lawyers, the health of the company, trends in the industry and usually a mix of all these. In private practice the career path is quite clear, from student to associate, to junior partner to senior partner. In comparison the path in-house is not as obvious. A lot of companies do not have formal career programs and as in-house counsel you must take charge of your career by figuring out where you want to go and how to get there.

The Critical Path

A career path is a direction you follow for personal fulfillment, there is nothing that you should be doing, it's what you want—there is no perfect plan, it's about your talents, values and aspirations and not what others expect of you. You have to really know yourself, your skills, your strengths and your preferred work environments.

The Critical Questions

- Do you want to move up to a more senior position in your legal dept? If no such opportunity exists, or will exist for a while, are you prepared to move to another company, if so, when should you move? If you are not sure speak to your mentor, career specialists or headhunters—but make sure they have the expertise and are not trying to push you into positions they are trying to fill, because now may not be the right time for you to move.
- Do you want to expand your legal expertise and specialize in other areas in addition to or instead of what you are doing now?
- Do you want to develop your management capabilities?
- Do you want to move to the business side? What do you see yourself doing? Are there opportunities at your company and will they be made available to you? Will you have to move companies?
- Do you want to stay in your current job and carve out a satisfactory, although flat, career path?
- Do you want to return to Private Practice? With the current economy, many law firms desperate for lawyers are turning to companies to try to recruit in-house counsel for their firms. In-house lawyers that haven't thought about a career path will often take up these opportunities, especially if they are in phase three or four of their careers, but I have found once they make the move they quickly get frustrated, after all there was a reason why they first moved in-house.

Whether its moving to a more senior position in the legal team, moving to the business side, management, back to private practice, or doing something completely different, any change will put you back into phase one of your career, (the education phase) you just have to accept that, but remember phase two can follow one pretty quickly.

So, you've figured out where you want to go; now you have to figure out how to get there. You need to map out your career plan. Remember, things can change that cause you to alter your plan and so review your plan on a regular basis. Commit the plan to writing. People will often say it's too time consuming, but if you don't make time you could quickly end up in phase four.

The Critical Plan

1. Identify your knowledge and skills gap and commit to learning the skills you need.
2. Network, it's often people who make the difference in your career, and it may not be the people you know but the ones they introduce you to.
3. Be visible—in today's fast paced world, hard work often goes unrecognized, make sure your supervisor is aware of your work.
4. Don't be afraid to stretch your abilities and be willing to work on projects outside your job description—it could serve as a springboard to career advancement.
5. Try to find balance in your life—learn to relax in free time, you'll be more effective in the office. Try to delegate more to direct reports allowing you to focus on your priorities. You have your career plan; you know what your priorities are.
6. Learn from your mistakes—maintain perspective, and look for ways to turn your challenges into opportunities.

By taking charge of your career, you will have greater job satisfaction and opportunities for advancement as well as ensuring that you don't enter phase four and hopefully your personal relationships will also be strong!

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