

BECOMING GENERAL COUNSEL

Tips & Insights from
Seasoned Legal Leaders



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What attorneys want from their careers has evolved and shifted over the years. In decades past, many aspired to complete the partnership track, finding challenges and prestige at the head of a law firm. Yet times have changed, as have the opportunities across practice settings, and more attorneys are embracing careers within corporate law departments.

In addition to abandoning the grind of billable hours, corporate counsel can focus on one client, diversify practice area knowledge, and wield some control over their work/life balance. Plus, they have access to a wider spectrum of career options, something that can't be said for the single-track mindset of your average law firm.

Between **1997 and 2020**, there was a staggering difference in the growth of in-house and law firm headcount:



As a result, more attorneys are ready and eager to pursue opportunities as General Counsel for corporations large and small. Better yet, there are an abundance of pathways to reach this destination, whether the attorney starts in-house or transitions from a law firm, works in the private or public sector, or possesses any number of practice-area experiences. The key is identifying General Counsel fundamentals and developing skills in each one.

In a recent roundtable discussion, **“Pathways to Becoming General Counsel,”** Assigned Counsel brought together a panel of accomplished GCs to discuss their individual pathways to their first chief legal officer post. The panelists reflected on their struggles, successes, and strategies, offering invaluable insights and advice to aspiring General Counsel.

Understanding the Business

The General Counsel role has evolved in recent years to not only oversee all legal issues, but to supplement the C-Suite as an in-house expert. The [2022 ACC Chief Legal Officers Survey](#) found that 80% of respondents were reporting directly to the CEO, helping overcome operational issues and weighing in on key business decisions. Moreover, legal leaders are increasingly managing a growing number of business functions, including the following:

80%

Compliance

55%

Ethics

51%

Privacy

40%

Business Risk

If you are currently working for a law firm, and looking to move in-house, you'll benefit from getting to know distinct aspects of business functions: finance, project and people management, and negotiation, to name a few. While much of this can be learned on the job, a business degree or certificate is never a bad idea, and there are numerous Continuing Legal Education (CLE) programs available online and in person.

If you already work as part of a corporate law department, you likely have some exposure to thinking beyond your function. That said, understanding the whole business—the roles that keep it running like a well-oiled machine—and building relationships with the leaders in your organization will continue to make you a versatile attorney and prepare you for a leadership role.

With almost 25 years of in-house legal experience, Sterling Miller summarized the value of **strategic thinking** for in-house attorneys well:



It is impossible to think strategically without a thorough understanding of a) how your company makes money; b) its products and services; c) its important customers and vendors; d) its competitors; e) its business plans and strategy.

This aligns with the reasoning **Rosemarie Thomas, Esq.**, Executive Vice President and General Counsel, shared at our roundtable:



As you take the initiative to learn the intricacies of the business — learn the products, the services, learn how the business makes its bottom-line revenue — then you inherently become able to speak in key business terms as well as incorporate the legal necessities. As a result, you gain a valuable seat at the table because they're no longer envisioning you as the lawyer who's going to shut down what they want to do but as asset in assisting the business to the end game.

What's another major way to show you understand the business? Differentiate yourself as a can-do lawyer, impacting business goals rather than just presenting a list of risks and liabilities. Sometimes, the legal department can be seen as a black hole that swallows up initiatives, projects, or contracts. Attorneys who can show they are flexible and inventive can prove themselves among the ranks of the C-Suite, driving revenue growth and enhancing performance.

This is an essential steppingstone on the path to becoming General Counsel. As **Nancy Peterson, Esq.**, Executive Vice President and North America General Counsel for an international security company, pointed out:



Watch the choreography and the cadence in the organization. Watch how things get done, who is called to what meetings, even who is CC'd on certain emails. These nuances are important within the organizational dynamics of companies of all sizes and industries. At the end of the day, you are judged on your effectiveness and results, so the ebb and flow of the company's functional subtleties are critical to navigate in order to deliver legal services that advance the business goals of the company.



Growing Your Network and Nurturing Relationships

The old saying “it’s not what you know but who” is half right for the legal profession. Though your practice area expertise and business acumen are critical for rising to the position of General Counsel, your network of connections (whether in law firms, corporations, or nonprofits) can provide support and offer opportunities throughout your career.

National, State & Local Bar Associations

An association is a fitting place to build connections with other attorneys, whether new or seasoned. By discussing the latest developments within your legal community, you not only sharpen your skills but bolster relationships through seminars and programs offered.

Industry or Business Events

Outside of the legal world, it’s vital to connect with professionals at the C-Suite level. These connections allow you to learn about corporate challenges, find early advocates for your career, and keep your ear to the ground for new opportunities. These individuals are in the know about upcoming senior-level or General Counsel opportunities.

Nancy Peterson, Esq., shared her thoughts on the topic:




While lawyers in law firms are driven to build their client base with external customers, it’s just as important to network within your firm and with attorneys practicing in different areas. This enables you to develop a deeper knowledge of what others are working on, both for reference’s sake and the chance to identify projects that could use your legal expertise. It will also broaden your experiences and raise your sophistication levels, allowing you to take on more complex assignments and build your brand within the entire firm (not just your department). And should you wish to transition to an in-house environment, you’ll often find lawyers you’ve worked with in other departments will recommend you for those types of opportunities.


Pro Bono & Volunteer Work

Attorneys are a public-spirited group. Surveys conducted by [The Bar Examiner](#) about the top reason undergraduates were pursuing a J.D. found that 35% wanted opportunities to be helpful to others and give back to society and 33% wanted a chance to advocate for social change. Even those who don't end up as public defenders or policy analysts often funnel their passion into pro bono work. For those looking to become General Counsel, these activities provide opportunities to build relationships with like-minded professionals.

Paul Murphy, Esq., Retired Legal and Administrative Counsel, spoke about how non-profit work elevated his career:

 **I was able to take advantage of this network of contacts that I had developed with all of these non-profit boards that I had been on [...]** When I became the administrative partner, I took it on because I thought it would be a challenge, but I had no idea what it might lead to in the future. **Cultivate your network of contacts because you never know when they can be helpful, who they know, and it can pay off and it's fun. And keep an open mind regarding career options.**

And, as **John Wright, Esq.**, Retired General Counsel and Law Firm Partner, stated, this aspect of the journey can be very enjoyable:

 **[Networking is] fun and you actually meet a lot of great people along the way. Cultivate those relationships -- you never know where they are going to end up.**

Mentoring: Nurturing Your Career & Others'

Here's a secret: when asked point blank, the majority of executives will tell you they want mentorship.


Even at the top of the corporate hierarchy, leaders crave and benefit from the perspective and mentorship of other leaders. Aspiring General Counsel are no exception.

Why It's the Right Move

Let's get one major point of contention out of the way: asking for support and assistance is a sign of growth, not weakness, although some attorneys may hesitate to reach out for mentoring.

In an academic study calling for mandatory mentoring for junior attorneys, the most common barriers that prevent attorneys from seeking help are their fear of judgment by others (50.6%) and concerns regarding confidentiality (44.2%). Though people sometimes assume asking for help is a sign of weakness, it's the hidden recipe for how leaders surmount challenges and rise through the ranks.

Kamil Ali-Jackson, Esq., co-founder and retired Chief Legal Officer and Chief Compliance Officer, said this of her own experience:


I didn't have a mentor. I think you need a mentor because you need somebody to help tell you in advance that there's a hole you're getting ready to fall into. But also, you need a mentor because they can help you dig out of the hole. That's one of the things that I wish I had along my pathway to becoming a General Counsel.

Her point cannot be ignored. Mentors provide professional development that cannot be gained from a classroom or by reading academic journals (although both have their place). For aspiring General Counsel, a mentor can be a sounding board, providing experience-based perspective when challenges arise.

Finding Your Own Mentor

Finding a mentor can be a little tricky at times. If you're an in-house attorney, you might be working under a General Counsel or Chief Legal Officer, but that person won't always be the right fit, skilled at mentorship, or available to coach you regularly. In these instances, networking efforts can open up doors to relationships with seasoned legal leaders. From connections at state and local associations to the professionals you meet in your volunteer work, the individuals you admire in these circles may be the perfect candidates for providing mentorship.



Of course, your ideal mentor is going to be an experienced General Counsel, but that should only be one facet of your overall criteria. Ask yourself: Should this GC possess skills and experiences that are parallel to your own? Or would you benefit from the guidance of someone trained in the skills, practice areas, and/or industry experience you need to build for the companies where you want to work? The answer should always be to choose whoever will simplify the pursuit of your ultimate goals.

Locating the right person is only half of it. You'll need to convince any GC you pick to take you under his or her wing. Do some research on your target advisor—getting to know their personality, goals, and background—before you broach the topic of mentorship. That should be the groundwork for creating an elevator pitch of sorts, combining your knowledge of the GC with your own highlight reel to persuade them to accept your offer.

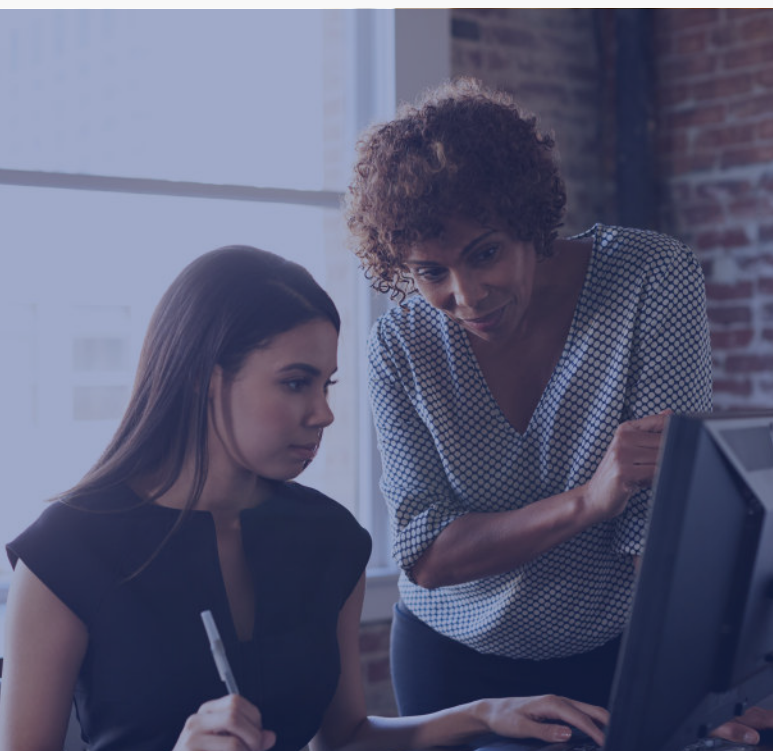
Mentor Brand New Attorneys

Sometimes the best way to learn is to become a mentor yourself. A key role of General Counsel at mid-sized or larger enterprises is to coordinate and coach in-house counsel, helping them navigate business challenges and leverage practice area expertise. Embracing your potential as a mentor can help you to learn your craft better and prepare yourself for future executive positions.

Rosemarie Thomas, Esq., noted further potential value of pioneering mentorship opportunities:



One of the things that I worked on from the ground floor was the development of a women’s mentoring program. The program was designed to match women who had moved up in the organization with women who had just come into the organization. The purpose was to try to not only maneuver the many facets of the organization, but to provide insight on how to become a successful attorney and simultaneously, maintain a work-life balance. That program was very well received and very successful.



Her program shows how taking the initiative to formalize mentorship not only provides support to entry-level attorneys but can strengthen your own resume. Creating a mentorship program can build your credibility and demonstrate your vision for growth and cultivation long before you’re ready to apply for your first GC position.

Developing the Right Skills

Building up your knowledge as the corporate small-to-medium-sized enterprise expert is the right start for any skilled General Counsel, but the best of the best also focus on cultivating the perfect blend of hard and soft skills. Varied practice area proficiencies can give you multiple lenses to review risk and measure strategic value. Further than that, successful GCs refine character traits and interpersonal skills to give extra heft to their marketability.

Staying Open to Learning

It's important to remember that you are not going to know everything right off the bat, and that's ok. Acknowledging this and knowing where to turn for help will prove indispensable as you progress through your in-house career. **Marianne Schimelfenig, Esq.**, former higher education General Counsel and founder of Higher Education Legal Professionals (HELP), had this to say about continuous learning:



If you're going to be a General Counsel and you've been a specialist in some other area, particularly a trial lawyer, you really have to, in my opinion, have a comfort level with some level of legal 'ignorance' and the necessity of learning new areas of practice. It's like snorkeling, you don't do deep dives all the time. You take a look at what's down there. Some of the fish you'll know better than others. Others you need help and the "equipment" to go down and get.

As Ronak Ray put it in an article for [Law.com](https://www.law.com), modern GCs “celebrate controlled experimentation, applying lessons learned for the sake of continuous improvement.” This means an attorney aspiring to become General Counsel needs to embrace an ethos of ongoing education and cultivate the confidence to take calculated risks. Unlike other milestones in your career journey, this is only going to happen through trial and error.

However, this mentality can prove counterintuitive for some attorneys, especially those coming from a law firm background. Your law school education and on-the-job experience teach you to maintain a healthy amount of skepticism about unnecessary risk. **Nancy Peterson, Esq.**, had these words of encouragement about anyone trepidatious about taking chances:



Do not let a new legal subject matter intimidate you or prevent you from moving to the next level. Have the confidence you'll learn it. As the industry I work in has evolved and we acquired new lines of business, our whole department has had to engage in some very steep learning exercises in order to deliver excellent results and services to our internal business colleagues. Those are good growing and learning pains. So, if you feel like your supervisor is helping nudge you out of your comfort zone – my recommendation is to welcome it even though it can feel a little bit awkward and uncertain. You'll start to build those skills and understand how to frame and solve different legal issues even in areas that maybe are not your home base. You're going to be pulled into more interesting matters, instill confidence in your leadership, and overall have a more dynamic and fulfilling career.

Thinking Like a Leader

Developing a leadership mentality takes practice. Some attorneys might be exceptional when it comes to completing tasks and providing tactical assistance but fall short when it comes to making strategic contributions to the big picture or prioritizing the holistic needs of the business.

Some naturally have a comprehensive mindset and only improve by flexing that muscle. Others need to train themselves to look beyond practice area concerns and think about how they can contribute to financial goals, sales and marketing strategies, IT initiatives, and other elements of the business. Both starting points are fine if the attorney commits to continuous improvement.

Leaders also need the ability to motivate, direct, and delegate to members of the in-house legal team. Though networking can help you develop some of these aptitudes, volunteering to lead projects, committees, or other internal groups can give you first-hand experience guiding professionals across disciplines (as well as diversifying your own talents).

When it comes to leadership, **Nancy Peterson, Esq.**, has this to say:



It's important to have the ability to inspire others to action, to persuade people to the can-do approach from the lawyer perspective. But also, be an independent thinker while listening to a lot of different points of view [...] Try to put yourself out there and think like a leader before you are one. Try to think without the safety net because it's not always going to be there and you're going to want to be able to stand in that arena.

Unifying These Lessons

The pathway to becoming General Counsel can take unexpected twists and turns. Regardless of how you arrive at the role, there are numerous opportunities along the way to build your knowledge base, grow your network, and prime yourself to handle legal and business strategy, all while practicing a leadership mentality.

If you rely on the wealth of resources and interactions—everyone from seasoned GCs and C-Suite leaders to coworkers in other functions and even junior attorneys—you'll grow your talents as an attorney in fundamental and intentional ways. And hopefully each step you take on your journey to your first General Counsel role will be as rewarding as the last.



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