

How To Stand Out In A Large Law Department

By **Melissa Maleske**

Law360, Chicago (February 15, 2017, 9:17 PM EST) -- In large law departments, in-house counsel who don't distinguish themselves are doomed to languish unnoticed among the masses. Here's how to make an impression with general counsel and other company leaders to move up the ranks.

Get Out of the Cubicle

In-house recruiter Mike Evers of Evers Legal says in-house counsel can stand out by getting out. In other words, once you venture out of your day-to-day duties, you're likely to meet and connect with people on the business side of your company. In law firms, lawyers have to impress their lawyer superiors, the partners and managing partners who will recommend them for partnership. In-house, it's just as important to get to become known on the client side.

Evers recommends breaking out of routines — and your routine set of coworkers — by participating in company-sponsored charitable causes and events, or to join the company's established centers of excellence or other task forces if available.

He cautions, however, to know your place when you're schmoozing with senior business leaders. It can be more appropriate to build relationships with someone outside of the law department who's at your corporate "grade level," Evers says. You can't just walk into the CEO's office because that's the general counsel's relationship.

"It's very effective for job security, and it's very effective for being well thought of when it comes to reviews and promotions," Evers said. "But there's some element of politics to it because if you're reporting to an associate general counsel or a general counsel who is protective of certain client relationships, you do have to have some political sensitivity and some understanding of who it's appropriate to build a bond with."

Think Big Picture

In-house clients don't just want to be told the black letter law. They need to understand how legal issues arise and can be mitigated within the context of their own business. But that's not always a natural transition for lawyers who've just made the jump from a law firm, according to legal career coach and consultant Shauna Bryce of Bryce Legal.

"They need to understand their company's business model, the industry, the overall corporate goals and the business realities and operational realities on the ground so that they can make sure they are giving legal advice that is practical and that is actually going to work on the ground," Bryce said.

Like Evers, Bryce recommends that corporate counsel leave their desks once in a while to get acquainted with the business they serve. Walk the halls, have lunch with a client outside your business unit or set up a site or manufacturing facility visit to see how things actually run. Those experiences will provide the context you need to become a key business adviser, not just a legal obstacle.

If you're a junior lawyer working on a little piece of work, remember that piece doesn't exist in a vacuum, Bryce says. It's part of the bigger pie, and if you understand what's going on at a broader level, you can do your job better.

"Lawyers are hired for technical expertise and overall judgment, and there really isn't any substitute for being very good at what you do, but that's the starting point," Bryce said. "The bigger point for a junior lawyer would be to spend some time with the senior lawyers to understand the context of their work."

Step Up to the Plate

Whether you're new to the legal department or you're a veteran, volunteering to do work before you're asked is a surefire way to get noticed, according to Michael Sachs, a former in-house counsel who is now a partner and in-house recruiter at Major Lindsey & Africa.

"Being able to go to others and say, 'Why don't I lead that initiative?' or 'Let me take a first shot at this,' or 'Why don't I take that off your plate?' will save other people time, and that makes you look really good for the company," Sachs said. "Anything that makes them find you invaluable is great."

Of course, some junior in-house counsel in large law departments work on such a discrete segment of work they may not even be aware of what other tasks or projects are up for grabs. In that case, Sachs says to focus on doing good work, being solutions-oriented and building relationships with senior business leaders within the organization. You want to be in the room where it happens, and to get an invitation, you need to earn some trust and respect, he says.

Know When to Jump Ship

The good news is that there are more opportunities for advancement in a large law department than in a group of five long-term in-house lawyers who don't look to be budging anytime soon. However, you may be working for a company where upward mobility remains elusive or where you feel stuck in your practice area. If you think that's the case, you may want to consider looking outside the law department or the company.

If you were hired as a subject matter expert, and that's all you've done, it's difficult to break out of that in a large law department, Evers says. You might want to look at smaller law departments where you would serve as more of a generalist.

Another approach if you feel that you're hitting a ceiling would be to explore how your expertise could service you in a nonlegal role in your company. If you're an employment attorney, you might segue into being the vice president of human resources. If you're a real estate attorney, you could do real estate business development work.

"Oftentimes in companies, the way to address this is not so much to try to take on a different legal expertise that you just don't have. It's to ask yourself what else you can do with your legal expertise outside of the legal department," Evers said.

If you're feeling stagnant or pigeonholed, and no opportunities exist in your company, that's when you want to consider looking elsewhere.

"If you're not continuing to grow as a lawyer as you want to, and that's not going to change within your company, then it may be time to look at what other companies are out there," Bryce said. "Because if you haven't grown as a lawyer in a long time, it can be a challenge to your job search later. You can only be stagnant for so long."

--Editing by Christine Chun and Catherine Sum.