

Timeless and Timely Advice for Landing In-House Legal Roles

As a team of leadership advisers and former practicing lawyers, we speak daily with legal professionals evaluating potential career opportunities. Some candidates are considering a move for the first time in a long time; others are actively launching an aggressive search. Some are just curious about how best to establish themselves as a viable candidate for future general counsel positions.

This article offers a behind-the-curtain view into working with legal executive recruiters and tips to best prepare yourself for an intentional career trajectory, with advice specific to legal leadership roles.

You already know that preparation is key to success, and much in this post is timeless advice. Yet, time and again, we see the foundational elements of a job search being skipped over. Our overarching advice is to read this article with a critical lens on your own professional endeavors, spotting weak areas of your efforts so you can tighten your approach to building your legal career.

Your chances of securing the ideal next role increase exponentially with the right degree of practice, preparation and anticipation. Hone the way you approach your resume and interviews, and the relationships you build with recruiters will enrich your career progression over time.

Craft an impeccable resume

Whether you are actively pursuing a new role, or simply open to hearing from executive recruiters about potential in-house positions, you should have a strong resume ready. Yet, for so many busy legal professionals, when a recruiter approaches about a specific role, or it comes time to launch a job search, dusting off the old C.V. becomes an obstacle.

You don't have to get ready if you stay ready, so even if you're comfortable in your current role, our advice? Always keep your resume up to date. Whether you reach out to a recruiter or they reach out to you, an updated resume is the very first thing you will need, every time.

Here are four specific things to keep in mind when it comes to resumes for legal executives.

1. A strong resume always starts with a crisp executive summary

The very first thing a resume-reader should see is a high-level summary of who you are, what you've done and where you're going. While all of your resume should be impeccable, this part is particularly critical. Take the time to craft a one-liner that describes your brand as an attorney, for instance:

Business-oriented deal lawyer with a reputation for aligning legal teams with business strategy

This should be a statement that describes you at a glance. It can also double as your LinkedIn headline (more on LinkedIn in a bit).

2. Resumes can (and should) be more than one page

Beyond the opening summary, which should be crisp and concise, the rest of your resume can tell a story that goes beyond the old conventional wisdom of "one sheet of paper." Most resumes aren't viewed on paper anymore and, at any rate, the more you've accomplished in your career, the longer your resume will naturally be.

It should definitely include your education history (including what years you graduated from particular schools and programs); involvement in nonprofits, boards and other important groups; and extracurricular activities that help round out who you are as a person.

Father of two girls, amateur gourmet chef and basketball aficionado

In regard to that last point, you never know who will be reading your resume and have an "aha" moment when they find out that you, too, like to run marathons or have a passion for chess. We often hear confusion about whether that "personal stuff" is necessary, and our opinion is yes. It helps humanize your resume and could be the extra bit of information that puts you ahead or in the running.

And as you work on your resume, think about your contributions and the value you bring to your current role. How does it help position you for future roles?

3. Reverse chronological order

Why is this age-old resume standard still relevant? Because you want to demonstrate growth over time — all the titles you've held and the years you've held them. Your resume should tell a story in this way, yet still allow the reader to see your most recent, relevant role at a glance.

Don't be afraid to include your earliest roles out of school so that your entire career trajectory is apparent on your resume. Show how you got where you are now. Some attorneys came to the role from a previous career; others took a gap year to travel or jumped right into a clerkship before joining their current law firm. All of these are valid career paths. Be specific. Be detailed.

Incidentally, even if you've been with the same organization your entire career, break your resume down into roles and phases. Again, show progression, not just longevity in an organization. For example, you may have been promoted from associate general counsel to deputy general counsel within your organization, and it is powerful to show the dates you held each role, demonstrating your continued growth and steady upward trajectory.

4. Keep your LinkedIn profile up to date, too

Like your resume, keep your LinkedIn profile current and active: an updated photo, a short headline and key highlights. Both in-house recruiters and executive search firms use LinkedIn as a tool for finding great talent. These days, LinkedIn is just as important to your job search as your "paper" C.V.

Cultivate a long-term relationship with recruiters

If you're looking for a new job, networking is priceless, and recruiters are your allies. Be open to talking to recruiters any time, even if there's not a specific opportunity you're interested in — even if you're very happy in your current role! Building and maintaining relationships with a network of executive recruiters is simply good career hygiene. Taking those calls helps you stay knowledgeable about the market: what kinds of roles are out there, reporting structures, team sizes, remits, etc.

Sometimes, recruiters call you because they're looking for recommendations for other candidates, and those are important calls to take, too. Being willing to offer a recommendation demonstrates your credibility to recruiters, keeps you top of mind and builds a critical relationship that may come in handy later.

The recruiter's guide to interview prep

To ultimately land a coveted in-house attorney role, interviewing is an obstacle — or, more accurately, an opportunity — you'll encounter at least once. After an initial phone call, the first interview is typically a video conference with a recruiter. For this, be ready to spend 60 to 90 minutes on screen, as the recruiter assesses your fit for the role and gets to understand your background in more detail. Next will come interviews with hiring managers, executives and HR leaders.

For any and all interviews, our advice is consistent.

1. Internalize the role description

From the very first time you interview, even if it's with an external recruiter, come equipped with as much knowledge about the role and company as possible. Keep in mind that you want to be perceived as not just a legal leader but a business leader, so you should be prepared to talk about your current company's business, how the organization makes money and the value legal work brings. This helps to demonstrate your commercial acumen and shows you have a true understanding of your current organization's business objectives and challenges.

Also, be prepared with a self-assessment on your spike areas and your gaps as they relate to this particular job. Every leader has gaps! Understanding yours demonstrates self-awareness and EQ (emotional intelligence — critical for any legal job).

2. Answer questions succinctly, and answer them well

Don't veer off into an irrelevant topic. If you're stumped by a question, be up front and honest. But, the more prepared you are for the interview, the less likely you'll ever be stymied.

3. Present your experience like a good story

There's a narrative, and interviewers are eager to hear it! How are you the hero, and also, how have you been a supporting character in making others the hero and influencing the story arc? Make sure to highlight where you add value in your current role. For instance, describe a time you served as a trusted adviser to a client, helping to craft a solution so the business could achieve its goals, or a circumstance in which you needed to draw a firm line and successfully influence many stakeholders to ensure an outcome.

4. Come with questions, both substantive and tactical

Questions demonstrate that you've researched the role, thought about the fit and are examining the details. Such questions can be about the current state of the legal team, the culture of the organization, the key priorities for this role and who will be the primary stakeholders for this position.

- » What does success look like for this role in the first 12 months?
- » How is legal positioned within the organization today?
- » Where does the company stand with RTO policy?

5. Know exactly why you want this role

Ultimately, in any interview, you'll need to demonstrate not just your skill set but your true interest in this position. Best practice is to be authentic and transparent about why the role is of interest to you. Particularly as you engage with a recruiter or leadership adviser, this will help them understand your ideal career path.

6. Post-interview etiquette

Sending a follow-up note to the recruiter after the interview is not required, but is a nice touch. It is a way to reiterate your interest in the position and to thank the recruiter for their time. That brings us to the final piece of advice for legal professionals working their way toward eventual general counsel positions.

Stay in touch

Being open to conversations with recruiters is important to the progression of your career, whether you're looking for a new role right now or not. Responsiveness is key. Responding promptly to recruiter outreach and being honest about which roles interest you — and which do not — is critical to building strong, trustworthy relationships with recruiters. If we understand what you're looking for, we can keep you top of mind when that right role comes around.

Patience is also paramount! When actively looking for a new role, remember, the recruiter will always keep you informed — but we don't control the interview cycle. It may take some time for the right opportunity to surface in the first place.



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