

# Attorneys Seeking Greener Pastures In-House

In-House News:

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What is it about going in-house that seems to increasingly draw attorneys from law firms to in-house legal departments? According to a recent survey conducted by NALP, the attrition rate for experienced attorneys with about five years of experience jumped dramatically from 60% in 2000 to 78% in 2005.

A BCG Attorney Search survey concluded that approximately 80% of attorneys actively seeking positions were interested in in-house opportunities. These attorneys expressed concerns regarding their work/life balances, rising billable requirements, business development demands, repetitive work, and unlikely prospects of becoming partners.

To fully understand this trend, one needs to take a closer look at the factors prompting a growing number of attorneys to transition from law firms to in-house legal departments.

### **1. In-House Positions Afford Attorneys More Opportunities to Play Active Roles in Their Clients' Business Decisions.**

Most attorneys looking to transition into in-house positions express interest in becoming more involved in a single company's overall business. These attorneys also hold real interest in working more closely with the decision makers and exerting influence beyond the legal arena. The obvious advantage

of working on behalf of only one company, rather than servicing the needs of numerous companies, is that it offers the opportunity to become more invested in that company's business.

Today's general counsel are engaged in partnering with their companies' business functions and facilitating the achievement of business goals. For the majority of attorneys who come from law firms, this represents a major shift from “putting out fires” and providing pure legal advice to acting as legal counselors articulating the risks and benefits of making certain business decisions. The appeal is obvious; attorneys practicing in-house are looked upon as business advisors providing tangible solutions to business matters, rather than as pure technical experts identifying legal problems.

## **2. In-House Positions Require Attorneys to Take on Fewer Rainmaking Responsibilities.**

As law firms enter an age of globalization, the escalating competition for clients and legal work, along with the pressures of mounting billing rates and associate salaries, has required attorneys to generate business sooner and faster. As a result, associates today are expected to both produce new business from existing clients and develop new client relationships on behalf of their firms.

While there are attorneys who enjoy the rainmaking aspects of their practices, many lack the skills, predilection, or enthusiasm for business development. For the latter category, the chances of surviving and thriving under current law firm models remain slim, at best. The ability to effectively develop business remains one of the main requirements used by law firms to elevate associates to partnerships, as well as to decide whether to retain current partners. In-house

attorneys are exempt from the pressures of developing new business; the work and the clients are already there. As a result, attorneys who prefer to focus on their legal work and on the business dealings of their clients typically transition in-house.

### **3. Working In-House Can Lead to a More Balanced Lifestyle.**

There is an ongoing debate over whether in-house counsel work fewer hours than their law firm counterparts. According to a 2005 Corporate Counsel quality of life survey, about 59% of attorneys working in law firms with more than 20 attorneys put in an average of more than 50 hours per week, with 28% working more than 60 hours per week. However, only 36% of in-house lawyers reported that they worked more than 50 hours per week. A 50-hour workweek may still seem long—except when compared to a work week at a law firm where even more billable hours are required each week and business development is expected in addition to billable time.

The reality is that in-house hours can vary a great deal across companies, industries, markets, and levels within a legal department. There are large in-house legal departments involved in crisis management and high-level transactions that average hours comparable to those of large national law firms, and there are quieter departments at various levels of development that work significantly fewer hours than their law firm counterparts.

While many in-house attorneys find themselves working long hours, most of them seem to agree that they have achieved more balanced lifestyles. When pressed to explain this newfound balance, these attorneys do not necessarily point to reductions in hours but rather to the predictability of their schedules. As

a function of working for individual clients, in-house attorneys experience more schedule predictability than do their law firm counterparts, each of whom serves numerous clients at any one time; thus, in-house attorneys tend to enjoy greatly improved work/life balances.

## **The Reality of Moving In-House**

In the winter of 2005, *Corporate Counsel* surveyed about 1,000 in-house lawyers around the country, asking them about their hours, compensation, benefits, and abilities to juggle work and home. 82% of survey respondents said they were “satisfied” or even “very happy” with their jobs.

Not surprisingly, our own survey revealed that more than 95% of the law firm attorneys we placed in-house were “happy” to “very happy” with their decisions to practice in-house and would look for other in-house opportunities if they were to leave their current jobs. The attorneys we surveyed also cited high levels of satisfaction due to the nature of their work, improved work/life balance, and fewer pressures to generate business.

Given that the desire for career and family balance is increasingly affecting our decisions to change courses in our careers, it is safe to predict that the number of attorneys transitioning from law firms to in-house legal departments will likely continue to increase in the coming years.

## **On the Net**

BCG Attorney Search

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