

# Your General Counsel Needs to Be Much More Than a Legal Expert

One of the principal reasons for which businesses hire General Counsel is to moderate work processes with external law firms, and act as a bridge between company objectives and business objectives of external law firms.

In day-to-day business activities, external law firms help by bringing in their professional expertise gathered from dealing in multiple matters of multiple clients. This is a level of service and expert guidance that is required by businesses, because it is difficult to generate that in-house. But such expert help, when external to the organization, can also lead to unseen business costs, unwanted dependence, and undue exploitation. Businesses hire General Counsel to provide checks and balances so that the indispensable expertise provided by external law firms do not allow them to gain unfair advantages to the detriment of company objectives and business dynamics.

The role of a General Counsel as the representative and decision-maker of a company vis-À-vis external law firms, and as a policy and strategy builder with regard to work processes concerning external law firms, needs to be thoroughly understood by recruiters to find a person who truly fits organizational requirements.

Primarily, businesses started the trend of hiring in-house counsel to break the bilateral monopolies that existed between companies and external law firms. General Counsel in the 80s and 90s enabled businesses to move forward from legal work processes of the company monopolized by particular law firms to a spot contracting model where legal services were procured on the basis of need, and bypassing a primary external law firm.

However, over the years, law firms have responded to the loss of advantage in business dynamics created by in-house legal departments by pooling resources through merger and acquisitions and leaving businesses with a lesser number of options in specialized legal services. This movement has helped law firms grow and become able to provide more cost-effective services, while at the same time changing the dynamics of the scenario, which created the need for in house counsel, in the first place.

Two changes are immediately visible in the post-recession economy and in the eco-systems built around legal work of businesses. First, a shift in employer employee dynamics has occurred over the last decades reducing continuance commitment from General Counsel towards employers. Second, external law firms have adapted to an extent sufficient to imperil the abilities of General Counsel to provide checks and balances.

So, today's General Counsel has to oversee a complex relationship of interdependencies between external law firms and businesses, where the General Counsel tries continuously and consistently to maintain a productive environment and promote resource optimization. To do this, the General Counsel needs to take stock of billings raised by external law firms, categorize work according to priority and level of expertise needed, streamline systems, act as auctioneer for company legal work, and ensure quality compliance by homing in on a selected and few external law firms. The General Counsel does not only need to check personally that no law firm is taking unfair advantage of the business, but also needs to put into place processes to ensure minimal risks. At the same time, resource optimization and return on investment in legal work has to be ensured by the General Counsel by overseeing company legal work and helping external law firms to remain productive.

While the scope of the role of a General Counsel in a company can be too big to visualize comfortably for recruiting purposes, the principal tasks associated with the role of a General Counsel in moderating work processes with external law firms can be easily understood. And an understanding of these vital functions associated with the job of a General Counsel helps immensely in choosing the right candidate.

In the current market, simple legal expertise, domain knowledge, professional integrity, and a sharp mind are insufficient to carry out the tasks of a General Counsel, because the tasks also involve excellent managerial ability, strategic vision, executive abilities, financial understanding, and an understanding of business processes.