

Considering an In-House Legal Career in Compliance Law

By: Karen Anderson

“Sit,” I said firmly. Nothing. “Stella, sit.” This time with a little more authority and perhaps a tad louder. Still nothing. “Oh, you’re such a good girl and I know you want to do what Mommy says. Now sit down sweetie,” I said so sickeningly sweet that even I would rebuff me. “Doggone it Stella, sit your little fanny down right now!” Yep, you guessed it...nothing. I tried the authoritative route, the super sweet route, and the frustrated route and I get nothing but passive stares from her tiny brown Chihuahua eyes. It finally dawns on me that I am not convincing enough. I reach for a dog treat and gently say, “sit, girl.” Boom! Her little brown fanny hits the floor into a sitting position faster than a wink.

Stella was not as compliant as I had hoped perhaps because I was not as convincing as I could have been. Ultimately we had to find the middle ground where I was convincing enough and she was willing enough to comply. Are you savvy in the art of convincing? Do you know what should be done and enjoy the challenge of convincing others to follow your counsel? If you answered yes, then you might want to consider an in-house legal career in compliance law. In-house compliance attorneys don’t educate corporations on a law; they convince them of what they should do with a law.

Today, being an in-house compliance attorney means something completely different than it did, say, 20 years ago. Compliance 20 years ago was indeed a subset practice within a larger risk management practice. Meaning that there wasn’t much to do or many attorneys being hired for the function by in-house legal departments. With so many industries being regulated by the government these days, compliance law is a growing legal practice. And, as we all know, growth can mean opportunity, especially in if you are seeking an in-house attorney position.

Currently, the government regulates the health care industry, communications, finance, and others. These are huge industries that touch virtually every human being in the United States or the planet for that matter. If you found yourself with a modicum of knowledge in one of these industries and a J.D., you might have just found yourself a decent to pretty good paying job as an in-house compliance attorney. Add to your list of accomplishments a professional certification in ethics and compliance and you just moved 22 percent higher on the pay scale. Yes, you read that correctly: Twenty-two percent higher (2013 Compliance Staff Salary Survey reported by the Wall Street Journal). Now throw in some international experience and you have yourself a very lucrative in-house legal career.

Interestingly, the unemployment rate for legal professionals in the compliance area is a tiny 5.7 percent (unpublished Bureau of Labor Statistics stats reported in the Wall Street Journal). Let’s not forget that the majority of these compliance positions are in-house with corporations, not law firms. While this might mean a slightly lower pay rate initially, it also means a different life. Some would say a more meaningful life off the proverbial hamster wheel.

I wish that I had thought of the dog treat first and saved myself some frustration.