

In-House Legal Departments Are Re-Thinking Hiring Traditions

By: Vanessa Vidal

We all have our traditions that we hang on to year after year; a turkey dinner on Thanksgiving, no white shoes after Labor Day, hot wings for the Super Bowl. Before you dwell too much on not wearing white shoes after Labor Day, think of breaking some of those traditions. Maybe even think about how you could create some new traditions or perhaps re-work an old tradition with a distinctly modern twist. It seems that today in the world of legal recruiting, some in-house legal departments are re-thinking hiring traditions and forging new traditions by hiring attorneys fresh out of law school while other organizations are mired in old traditions that might not position them for success in the future.

Let's face it; things are different today than they were even 5 years ago. From how much you pay for groceries and real estate to how much you get paid, things cost more and we get paid less. The job market is, well, less than appealing especially for the newly minted attorney. It's during times like these when we have to study the face of tradition, examine it, and determine whether we should move forward with the tradition or change it.

Conventional thinking is that attorney's fresh out of law school need first to work in a law firm so that they can gain a wider range of legal experience. It is thought that the pay is better, and that it allows the attorney to define a specific skill set. After a 3-5 year history with a traditional law firm, the new attorney now has enough experience to make them marketable as in-house attorneys to corporations or to place them on an upwardly mobile track in a law firm. From there, tradition holds that attorney's can then choose the path they find most desirable.

It all sounds logical. It appears to be reasonable, get experience and climb upward. Now let's throw in a recession. Everyone is getting squeezed financially and law firms are not immune.

In-House legal departments aren't immune to the recession either. They are re-thinking their own traditions. Typically, in-House legal departments hired attorneys with 3-5 years experience who could immediately bill for their time and could reduce the need to hire outside counsel. Now legal departments at companies like Hewlett Packard, SOLO, McDonalds, and Allstate are hiring attorney's fresh out of law school and providing them with a hands-on, closely monitored work environment (See <http://chicagolawyeromagazine.com/Archives/2012/03/In-House-Counsel.aspx>). The salaries are not as high as traditional law firms, but the stability of a large corporation more than makes up for the lack of compensation.

In-House legal departments are finding that fresh attorneys don't come with the habits that attorneys with 3-5 years of experience have. They can, in a sense, create their own specialized attorneys. Additionally, we're also seeing that these corporate attorneys are getting the same experience as law firm attorneys. In-House legal departments can no longer afford to pay outside counsel for specialized jobs. Instead, they are training their new attorneys to do it. In the end, everybody wins.

In-House legal departments have eliminated the worries of compensation, stability, and experience, but what about career progression? Some in house attorneys still believe that they will need to change companies to gain more experience and compensation, or to move to the top job. While that may be true, others believe that it's not about the corporate ladder, but rather doing satisfying work.

Now let's throw a wrench into the machine. Notice that the corporations mentioned previously are considerably large corporations with a career track. You may not see the same opportunities or training with the smaller businesses. This is where the critical thinking that you sharpened in law school will come in to play. What is it that made you go into law in the first place? Was it the salary? Was it the challenge? Was it a love of the law? Only you can decide what is best for you.

Before you decide on your career path, first consider whether or not you need to re-think tradition?

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