

What Attorneys Need to Know About Going In-House

By: Vanessa Vidal

If you are in private practice, either as an associate or a partner at a law firm, you've probably wondered at one time or another what it might be like to go in-house. You may have envisioned a world without billable requirements, business development, free weekends, and possibly less stress. Perhaps you are intrigued by the prospect of working with a single client, knowing where the work will come next, and have an interest in being viewed more a business partner, and less as a fire extinguisher. The grass being "greener" on the other side is not necessarily a reality. In fact, the reality often looks quite different. But when it comes to going in-house, law firm attorneys seem convinced that this is a better way to practice law, and whether that's true for most, the in-house call remains irresistible.

Since the recession, the legal market has never quite bounced back. Talk of signs of improvements in hiring and compensation are true, but it is also relative. We experienced one of the most massive and deepest bloodletting the legal market has ever experienced. Therefore, while the legal market may no longer be hemorrhaging, it's not exactly thriving either.

We never completely reabsorbed the thousands of attorneys who were laid off because of the recession; not to mention scores of others who were unsatisfied with their current jobs but held off by their skin of their teeth to ward off the specter of long-term unemployment; as well as those near retirement who saw their life savings dwindle and decided to stay on in the hopes of replenishing their nest egg. Of course, that does not account for the perfectly happy law firm attorneys with dreams of going in-house, or in-house attorneys looking for a raise, advance, or simply a change. That's quite a crowd!

To say that today's market for in-house jobs is extremely competitive is an understatement at best. The number of applicants for each in-house position can often run into the hundreds, if not more, and employers have the luxury of being able to wait for the perfect candidate – and sometimes the "impossible to find dream candidate." Finding an in-house job in this legal market can be quite a challenge.

Our firm handles hundreds of in-house searches each year, ranging from general counsel positions with Fortune 100 companies to junior lawyer positions with small, privately held companies. We speak with thousands of lawyers each month, and scores of corporate legal employers. We have a pretty good sense of the trends and general state of the in-house legal market. If the desire to move in-house has not dampened, the success rate on the other hands has dipped.

If you are still convinced that going in-house is the right move for you, let me offer some advice regarding what attorneys need to know about going in-house:

The Road In-House Is a Long And Tedious One

When you are starting to put a resume out there, the first question you might have is, how long is it going to take me to find an in-house job? The obvious answer will be, it depends. Factor that affect how long a job search will have has to do with the applicant's specific experience, background, financial flexibility, geography and willingness to relocate, and the type of positions he/she is seeking. If you are looking for a GC-level position with a publicly traded Fortune 500 company – the wait might as long as winning the lottery. That said, a good rule of thumb is anywhere between six months to a year, and in many cases a lot more.

Why the long wait? It's a simple economic formula of supply and demand. Very little demand and a whole lot of supply equal a long road to success. Also, unlike law firms, which are very "flat" organizations, corporate legal departments are typically pyramidal. Therefore, the higher the level, the fewer jobs there are available. Of course, not all candidates are created equals, so the more exceptional the background and experience, and the more flexible the candidate, the shorter the road. Then again, a road that can take anywhere between six months to a year, it not what I would necessarily call short.

Why are there so few in-house legal positions? While the state of economy provides part of the answer, the other has to do with the manner in which corporate legal departments are structured. Unlike in the law firms that are always looking for opportunities to hire lawyers that will improve their bottom line or service their clients, corporations are not often looking to add great legal talent. Whereas law firm lawyers are valued for bringing in business and generating income, in-house lawyers at corporations are viewed as part of the overhead. Rather than generate profit, they tend to cost money. Therefore, corporations have to do a cost-value analysis whenever they are considering adding a legal professional. That analysis has certainly been a lot more stringent as corporate legal departments have to do more with less, which also means fewer people.

Fortunately, the push of companies to save money has also forced them to rely less on expensive outside counsel, and more on their in-house legal departments. This has translated in some hiring efforts by companies; however, hiring has been very selective, and attorneys have been stretched to do more. Therefore, while you may feel that your legal expertise is exceptional, if the corporation already has someone else handling those responsibilities in a capable manner, there is little upside to having two people handle the same tasks. You have to be the right person, at the right place, and at the right time.

Legal Recruiting Firms are Not Job Placement Firms

When there are so few positions advertised, it's easy to understand why candidates decide to work with legal recruiters. However, before you send that resume or make that phone call, you should understand the advantages and limitations of working with legal recruiters. For example, the in-house searches that our firm agrees to undertake are done on an exclusive basis, which is the case for most other legal search firms. This means that our firm is the only search firm being engaged to fill the position and that the company will not accept resume from any other search firm. This means two things: Our client list is unique to us, and we only present candidates to our clients to fill a specific job opening.

In the in-house context, a search firm is not a placement firm. We are hired only to fill those in-house jobs for which we have been retained. Companies generally don't want search firms to send on resume unless the company has already identified a new need and asked the search firm to assist it with the search. So although you may be an exceptional candidate, a search firm is typically constrained by the companies that have engaged it to conduct searches for them.

Finally, because our clients retain us, the positions we are working on do not represent all of the in-house opportunities that are available out. Therefore, reaching out to just one search firm isn't enough for those people looking to go in house. Applicants instead need to find out who handles the in-house searches in their market and reach out to all of them. If the applicant is seeking a law position, my advice is the opposite. That candidate should only pick one recruiter to represent him or her.

What's the greatest tool for finding a new in-house job? Your connections. In other words, you have to network and let people know you're looking. While there might be some risk of your boss or colleagues ultimately finding out, we think that the benefits to networking far outweigh those risks. Networking is the most effective way to get leads and land an in-house job.

If I had a dollar for every applicant that sent a resume for a position they were not qualified for, I might be able to give Bill Gates a run for his money. The problem I believe is twofold: applicants send their resumes to jobs that sounds interesting and that they would like to have, whether or not

they are truly qualified for them, and/or they are so desperate to find a job that that they will throw their resumes at everything under the sun, hoping that something will “stick.”

Whatever the reasoning, do not waste your time applying for positions for which you are not a perfect fit – rather than maybe qualified to do. Why? Because the lack of response will soon frustrate you, despite all of your well-meaning efforts. If the position calls for someone who has fluency in Chinese and software licensing experience, the fact that you took a Chinese course in college and drafted one licensing agreement does not make you a perfect fit. You need to be as exacting about your skills and qualifications as a legal employer will be. What do I mean by “perfect fit?” The test is quite simple: After having read the job description, can you honestly say you meet each and every single one of the requirements listed? If the answer isn't yes, move on.

The road to an in-house position is not an easy one. But to help your chances of success, you need to first be ready for a long process, be honest about your qualifications, and make the effort to grow your internal network. Anything less, and you might never get that shot at an in-house position.

© 2015 ESQ Recruiting LLC. All rights reserved.