

Five Rules To Landing An In-House Job

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The desire to move in-house is as strong as it's ever been. Despite greater pressures to do more with less, in-house lawyers are just as eager to remain in their current practice or seek their next in-house job as they have ever been. What does it take to make it in-house? Candidates who succeed are not only excellent lawyers; they are savvy strategists who know how to market themselves successfully. Here are five rules to landing an in-house job:

Rule 1: Be Realistic

Not everyone fits the mold or is cut out to be an in-house lawyer. Before you start your job search, you need to evaluate whether you have the right background and motivation to make the transition. Most lawyers who want to go in-house are young law firm associates who are either tired of the law firm grind or who are seeking greener pastures. The vast majority of these associates tend to be too junior to have any realistic shot at landing an in-house position. What is the right level of experience?

The ideal in-house candidate is an experienced lawyer with at least five years of professional practice experience. That tends to be the bar set for the majority of in-house law departments. The "five year rule" is not completely arbitrary. Law departments seek experienced attorneys who can operate fairly independently, and lawyers with five years of private law practice have often been exposed to the type of depth and breadth of work to provide them with some independence in their practice. Because in-house legal departments tend to work with fewer resources, they are not considered good training grounds for recent law graduates and junior-level attorneys. Moreover, in-house attorneys, unlike their law firm counterparts, are viewed as part of overhead. Therefore, while attorneys are a necessity, they do not contribute to the financial bottom line of the companies they serve. Therefore, in-house legal departments have every incentive to want to hire experienced attorneys who require little training or supervision.

Rule 2: Be Strategic

If you have visions of practicing in-house, you need to make sure that your ducks are lined up accordingly. In other words, you have to plan ahead. The vast majority of in-house positions, well over ninety percent, are transactional positions. Since this is very much a numbers game, to improve your odds of moving in-house you should consider pursuing a general corporate practice that offers exposure to a lot of different areas. In other words, when it comes to in-house opportunities, not all practice areas are created equal. While corporate law departments do hire attorneys in a variety of specialized practice areas, including litigation, labor and employment, intellectual property, real estate, and tax – to name a few, these positions are few and far in between. In other words, there are very few in-house legal opportunities available for these practice areas. Moreover, because of the type of competition that is generated for these few positions, outstanding candidates are often kept from ever making the final cut.

While having a transactional background will allow you to be eligible for more in-house positions, to be more competitive you also need to develop "industry" experience. Companies overwhelmingly favor hiring lawyers who know and understand their business. Lawyers that are invested in a particular industry tend to be more competitive than those who do not have any industry experience, or those that have simply jumped from job-to-job irrespective of the industry. The fear that many lawyers have in specializing in an industry is to become pigeonholed into that industry and to have fewer opportunities available. While this is a legitimate concern, this needs to be balanced against the significant edge it provides them from having that specialization. A strategic lawyer will choose an industry that is poised for growth, and more likely to offer opportunities in the future. For instance, in-house lawyers that are specialized in healthcare and pharmaceuticals tend to be better insulated from market pressures and have more opportunities available.

Rule 3: Be Flexible

As recruiters that specialize in in-house attorney placement, we regularly speak to lawyers who want to make that transition in-house. They are often eager and want to appear flexible by being willing to make compromises for the “right” in-house position. That said there is a notable difference between wanting to go in-house and being ready to go in-house. These discussions inevitably turn to matters relating to money and type of positions, and all of the talk regarding flexibility and compromise appears to be a distant memory.

If you are looking to go in-house, be prepared to take a salary cut. While all potential candidates usually start by saying “I am willing to take a salary cut,” the question really turns to how deep are you willing to take this cut? Most law firm attorneys expect to take a 20-30% cut from their law firm compensation, while the reality is that most law firm attorneys transitioning in-house experience compensation reductions ranging between 50%-70%. The median base salaries for in-house attorneys with 5-10 years of experience ranges between \$100,000-\$150,000 per year. These are not easy to digest figures, with many law firm lawyers looking to make less than the first-year associates they are training.

To circumvent this sharp salary drop, many attorneys, most of whom have much more than the minimum five-years of required experience to go in-house, hold out for “general counsel positions only.” Those who like to show some flexibility will even consider “deputy general counsel” positions. That’s akin to a first-year associates saying that he/she only wants to consider partner positions. The hard truth is that general counsel positions are very few, and incredibly competitive. To give you an idea, a single general counsel position can generate as many as five hundred applications in less than ninety days. The top ten candidates selected to interview are most likely accomplished general counsels with more than twenty years of experience, who possess extensive industry-specific experience, and are ivy-league educated – at least. The vast majority of general counsel positions are never available to the greater public. They are often filled from within by succession plans, or candidates are handpicked by the CEO and/or Board of Directors from a pool of people they already know. In other words, through networking and relationships. Therefore, if you are looking to go in-house or transition in-house, you have to be willing to work your way up the ladder, and set your sights a little lower.

Rule 4: Be Visible

What does it take to land an in-house position? A good dose of luck, the right connections, and perfect timing. The first step is to make yourself visible. With so few positions available and one of the deepest and most competitive candidate pool seen in recent history, you need to be at the right time, in the right place, and know the right people. In other words, you have to network. There is no getting around it. The best way to land an in-house job is through connections. You have to make yourself visible to those who know about in-house positions before they hit the general candidate pool. The best way to cut through the long stack of resumes is to have someone vouch for you, or tell you about a position before it becomes available to the general public. To do that, you have to get the word out, mine the contacts you already have, and start meeting with people outside your current network.

You can work with a legal search firm as well, but it is by no means a shortcut. It is no substitute for networking. Networking is still the best method for identifying positions and making yourself available to them. If you are going to work with recruiters, be sure to contact search firms that either specialize in or have a significant part of their practice dedicated to in-house search. You should also try to contact several search firms. Unlike law firm searches, in-house searches tend to be handled on an exclusive basis – one search firm for one particular position and company. As a result, every search firm has its own select list of clients and positions, which may not be representative of all the opportunities available in the marketplace. Therefore, registering with several specialized search firms will allow you to be available to a good cross-section of in-house positions.

Rule 5: Be Patient

The saying “good things come to those who wait” has never been truer than for those who are seeking to go in-house. How long does it take to land an in-house job? Well, it depends on your qualifications, experience, flexibility, and the market in general. That said, for the most part, it takes about six months to a year, for most applicants to land a position. This is not for the faint of heart or impatient. You will have to endure a lot of rejection, often silent, before landing that coveted in-house position. The type of position you are seeking will also determine the length of time it will take for you to land an in-house job. The higher the level, the fewer jobs there are available. Most of the senior-level positions tend to be filled from within, by in-house counsels who have bid their time and are ready to get promoted. So if you are holding off for a more senior-level position within a company, you may have to wait that much longer for the opportunity to become available. The key is to be patient, to continue honing your skills, network, and when presented with an opportunity, grab it.

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