

Who's In Demand for In-House Counsel Positions?

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A new survey shows senior level lawyers are in particularly high demand for in-house counsel positions. The survey, by New York legal consulting firm Eoilis International Group, found an increase in attorney interviews at big corporations last year and, among them, were interviews of senior level lawyers and law firm partners.

Why Are Senior-Level Attorneys in Demand?

This is not surprising considering the state of the legal market. There is a plethora of highly skilled attorneys looking for work, and companies are taking full advantage of this market. They are seeking to hire experienced counsel, sometimes at junior-level prices, simply because they can. Also, law firms have not delivered the type of cost-savings companies were expecting during the downturn, and as a result companies have decided to take the legal work in-house and enjoy the savings.

Historically, in-house legal departments have not been good training grounds for attorneys, which is still the case today. Company lawyers are part of the "overhead," and therefore they must quickly add value to an organization to justify their existence. They do this by being able to work independently, with few resources, on a wide variety of matters. These are typically the traits of senior level attorneys who have been practicing for ten years or more. These attorneys have extensive practice area, management, and business experience all rolled into one. They not only know how to practice law, but they know how to manage people and budgets.

What Else Are Companies Looking For?

According to the survey, in-house positions weren't the only jobs up for grabs at big corporations. 38% of companies surveyed reported considering experienced attorneys for a wide range of positions, including quasi-legal and business roles. This study signifies two things: Corporations are hiring, BUT their in-house legal departments are looking for experienced lawyers who understand private practice.

"In-house departments are in the process of trying to revamp their images," says Nicky Mukerji, director of business intelligence at LegalBill. "Presenting hires with both legal and business experience sends a strong message to corporate executives and financial departments that law departments will be capable of handling all aspects of their caseloads."

What's a Recent Graduate or Junior-Level Attorney To Do?

Do not set yourself up for failure by applying to in-house positions for which you are not ready. Get experience with a law firm first. In-house legal departments do not hire attorneys without substantive experience, which usually translates to at least five years of experience. Moreover, all types of legal experience is not viewed the same by in-house legal departments. Companies tend to favor law firm-trained attorneys over those with government or private practice experience. Companies almost never hire solo practitioners. Companies also do not favor hiring government attorneys either, unless they have the type of regulatory experience that matches their industry. Finally, the great majority of in-house positions are in transactional practice areas, not litigation. Litigation positions are very rare and often reserved for partner-level candidates. If you want to improve your chances of landing an in-house job, focus on transactional practice areas with a law firm.

What's a Mid-Level Attorney To Do In Today's Job Market?

They need to wait for the market to improve and bulk up on their skills in the meantime. Being a very good attorney is no longer good enough to land an in-house position. You have to be versatile, adaptable, and efficient and know the business and industry of the companies you are targeting. Forget the general counsel position or golden job at a Fortune 500, at least for now. Instead, go for in-house counsel positions that allow for upward mobility, and refocus on small-to-medium-sized corporations in industries in which you have experience. In other words bid your time, try to get your foot in the door at a smaller organization and in a more junior-level role, and stand out by virtue of your work and business skills.

What About Senior-Level Attorneys and Partners?

It's not a panacea for them either. While experienced partners and attorneys are always more attractive to executives and general counsels, chances are unless you've already been a general counsel, not many companies will give you a shot at the top job unless you've already proven yourself. It's a chicken and egg dilemma. This can be overcome by a strong show of the skills and experiences we discussed above. That said, it's still a very competitive market, so be ready for a long process ahead.

There are still very few positions available and the requirements are increasingly demanding. You need to be able to do it all, be an expert in your field, knowledgeable in a variety of other practice areas, know how to manage, train and hire people, manage outside counsels, balance budgets effectively, and understand the business of the company. Oh, and be ready for a steep pay cut.

While Fortune 500 companies may still pay their general counsel handsomely, the odds of landing that kind of position is akin to winning the lottery. The vast majority of in-house positions are not with Fortune 500 companies, and do not come with a high compensation package. That's right, companies do not pay law firm salaries, and the compensation cuts from a law firm partner to an in-house legal position, even at the general counsel level, are on average about 50%, no matter how talented the candidate. While you may be ready for a pay cut, the real question is, how low can you go? If you are lucky enough to be selected for a position, be ready to make significant concessions to go to the in-house side.