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In search of the elusive in-house job

by Maria Kantzavelos

Some of the lawyers in the legal department of Exelon Corp. have a nickname for their workplace.

"They say we're Jenner & Block South," said general counsel William A. Von Hoene Jr., one of about a half dozen Exelon in-house lawyers who came from the firm.

Many of the 62 lawyers in Exelon's law department have transitioned from a handful of firms the company uses, Von Hoene said.

"We have culled lawyers, at one time or another, from all of our core firms to serve in our legal department, and many of them are still here," Von Hoene said.

A company's partnership with outside counsel often leads a law firm lawyer to an in-house position.

"As outside counsel, you're working with in-house counsel on a daily basis," said Michael R. Booden, an attorney for the U.S. Postal Service and a former president of the Chicago Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel. "They get to know you; you get to know them. You get to know their business."

Moving from firm to client is only one of the more common paths into a coveted spot as an in-house lawyer. Despite what is generally seen as lower pay in-house, many lawyers cite the work for a single client, greater roles in making business decisions and a more manageable schedule as reasons enough to try to make the jump.

It's competitive, though. In-house

jobs don't come open often, and lawyers must have the skills marketable to potential employers. Then they can take advantage of help from recruiters and work the networks they have built up to try to land the jobs.

Lisa Henrickson said it took her many months of searching and pursuing "anything that looked even half-way interesting" in advertised in-house job listings, and in talking with former associates and partners who moved in-house before she landed a position at Verizon Business. She said she wanted out of the law firm work environment, and out of her litigation practice.

"Chicago's in-house market doesn't turn over very often," Henrickson said. "For me, it took a bit longer because I was switching completely from law firm life to in-house, and jumping out of litigation and into something else."

When you're ready

Although it is not impossible, most lawyers don't begin their legal careers in-house, lawyers practicing in those positions said. Rather, they said, law departments generally tend to hire laterals with several years of experience in law firms, government or other corporate law departments.

"I would always tell a young lawyer to get at least four or five years under his or her belt at a law firm," said Susan R. Lichtenstein, general counsel for Baxter International Inc. "Corporations are not set up to train lawyers, and law firms do that very well."

Kathryn Kimura Mlsna, managing counsel at Oak Brook-based McDonald's Corp., joined the company directly after graduating from Northwestern University School of Law.

"Back in the late '70s, McDonald's was one of the few corporations hiring new lawyers," Mlsna said, speaking to lawyers about in-house careers during a February job fair presented by the Chicago Bar Association.

Indeed, a move in-house isn't for everyone. Because the nature of the role differs from that of lawyers in law firms, it takes a certain mindset to survive a transition, said Mike Evers, founder of Chicago-based Evers Legal Search.

"The partner with lots of clients at a law firm is a revenue producer. That equation changes when we're talking about an in-house law department," Evers said. "The revenue producers at a company are the salespeople, the marketing people and the people creating the products. A lawyer moving in-house has to have much more of a service mentality, a team mentality. Almost every company I talk with says, 'Check your ego at the door.'"

An interest in business, sharpened interpersonal and organizational skills, and a propensity to view legal work in a broader context are some of the qualities corporate law departments look for in prospective in-house counsel, corporate law leaders said.

Sara Lee Corp. General Counsel Roderick A. Palmore said he gener-

ally hires in-house attorneys from an equal mix of firms and other companies.

“I’m looking for folks who realize that they will not have the luxury — nor do I want them to want the luxury — of just focusing very narrowly on legal issues,” Palmore said. “I want them to partner with our business colleagues.”

At the CBA career fair, several high-ranking in-house counsel shared some tips on how lawyers can position themselves for an in-house move, and what it takes to succeed in the job.

“Understand the business’ goals, where it wants to be and how it can get there,” Mlsna said. “It’s nice to have the legal skills, but unless you’re able to apply it in a real way, it’s hard to be successful in-house.”

Before moving in-house, be sure to learn all you can about the culture of a company or organization. Once you’re there, the approach to the practice of law should emphasize helping your client reach business solutions, in-house lawyers said.

“Always look at ways to get to ‘yes’ and not just say ‘no,’” said Matthew Myren, vice president and deputy general counsel of merchandising, marketing and intellectual property at Sears Holdings Management Corp.

“Business people want answers,” said Paul Liebenson, assistant

general counsel for Tellabs Inc. “They don’t want analysis; they want a business partner.”

Building skills

Law department leaders said a lawyer who wants to move in-house should seek out opportunities to gain client counseling skills. If those opportunities don’t exist in a law firm setting, seek out pro bono work or join associations where you can communicate with clients and speak in public, they said.

“Get that face-to-face contact with the client. Those skills are absolutely critical to being successful in-house,” said Gary P. Schmidt, senior vice president and general counsel for Alberto-Culver Co.

Mlsna cut to the chase in hiring decisions: “If I have two resumes that are absolutely equal, but one of them is showing skills with working with a client, I’ll go with that one,” she said.

Mary Beth S. Tighe, vice president and general counsel for RR Donnelley & Sons Co., said prospective in-house lawyers should seize opportunities to volunteer with service organizations or other groups.

“From being on those boards you learn how to serve, which is what you’re doing in-house,” Tighe said. “You become known in the community. It is about people watching the

work you did.”

Because positions in corporate law departments are often filled without the help of search firms or advertised postings, networking can be the key to landing a job. Don’t be bashful about getting the word out that you want to move in-house, corporate counsel said.

Those networks can start with the firm’s own clients.

Although law firms don’t necessarily like to lose their premier talent, the loss can be easier to swallow when it’s to a firm’s client, Evers said. The crossover, he added, can help solidify the relationship between the company and the law firm, increasing the likelihood that the newly-hired in-house lawyer would turn to his former firm to provide services.

“When a law firm lawyer moves to go in-house, there’s generally a very nice, well attended going-away party. Whereas, when someone goes across the street to another law firm, it’s, ‘Clear your desk out quickly, please,’” Evers said.

Several counsel said prospective in-house lawyers should focus their efforts on expanding their networks.

“You have to have an open mind in your search. I call it ‘guerrilla marketing,’” Schmidt said. “Don’t hesitate to reach out. Don’t let yourself be stuck at the HR department; go directly to the lawyers.”★