

How Did They Do It?

Finding that elusive in-house job takes a certain amount of creativity, an understanding of business jargon, and the stamina to show up at lots of meetings.

By MARY W. LEGG

Let's say you've made the decision to look for a job as in-house counsel. What's your next step? Finding a job as an experienced attorney will be different from finding your first job out of law school when law firms conduct on-campus interviews.

It is important to recognize there are far more law firm positions than in-house positions. In other words, finding an in-house position might take more creativity than getting one in a law firm.

To make matters more difficult, many attorneys—particularly after years of toiling away in a law firm—decide they want a change of pace. At the same time, only a few attorneys seem to want to make the switch from corporate to firm work—and fewer still are viable candidates for firm work, even if they do seek it.

But it's not impossible to find in-house employment. One of the most useful things to do is to look at the variety of ways others have found their in-house positions. In my legal search business, I work with in-house attorneys every day. I have compiled information from a group of attorneys who have made the leap to in-house counsel. How did they find their jobs? What do they like about them? Do they have any regrets?

Robert Stern, senior vice president and general counsel of Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexho Inc., and immediate past president of the Washington Metropolitan Association of Corporate Counsel America (WMACCA), found his first in-house job through an ad he saw at American University's placement office. Stern worked at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom for about a year and a half immediately out of law school.

He says, "The firm was fantastic as a training experience, with very challenging work, but the sacrifices required in one's per-

sonal life were significant." He sought more control over his schedule and "less time in the office."

At AU, he spied an ad for a junior attorney at the Marriott Corp. "Marriott had such a strong reputation as a great place to work that the decision to make the leap was easy, notwithstanding the substantial pay cut," he says.

The job turned out to be more demanding and intense than he expected. "All things are relative, however, and the trade-offs I made to achieve a saner lifestyle were well worth it, and I've never looked back." Many years later, Stern became general counsel for Sodexho, a company created as part of Marriott's spinoff and merger transaction.

David Meltzer, general counsel and executive vice president for regulatory affairs at the D.C.-based Intelsat Global Service Corp., also spent the first few years of his legal career in private practice.

He soon realized, though, that he did not want to become a specialist in a narrow area of the law. In fact, he enjoyed "proactively preventing fires more than the reactive law firm mode of putting fires out." Meltzer found a junior position at Intelsat through an ad in *Legal Times*.

He spent the next seven years working with departments throughout the company on increasingly important matters. He then moved over to head Intelsat's procurement department, which is responsible for buying communications satellites, launch services, and other goods and services. Meltzer's responsibilities in the business arena grew, and he was ultimately appointed general counsel.

Meltzer has no regrets about the decision to go in-house, even though he works long hours and does a lot of international travel. His jobs have allowed him to "learn the satellite communications business from both a legal and business perspective," he says. "When I look back on my career choice to move in-house, I can honestly say that I made the best decision. . . . I have become part of a team of people who are building a unique company, and that is an experience that would have been difficult to achieve if I had remained in private practice."

Surprisingly, even the top general counsel position can come through a newspaper ad. Kathy Barlow, former vice president and general counsel of the Bernstein Cos., a privately held D.C. real estate company, found her GC position through a blind ad in *Legal Times*. Barlow had previously worked in-house for seven years and thereafter at Arent Fox for two years. The ad did not say the company was seeking a general counsel, but some tough negotiating earned her the title. Barlow, the current president of WMACCA, notes that her search was based on networking within the in-house legal community and using newspaper job listings, headhunters, and online ads. Additionally, Barlow tried to speak with as many in-house lawyers in large legal departments as she could.

Simply doing good work can often lead to an in-house position. Joe Titlebaum had been at the New York office of Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton for eight years after law school. One of his clients was an early investor in XM Satellite Radio. When he learned the company was hiring, Titlebaum quietly let the chief executive officer know of his possible interest in the general counsel job. He was happy at his law firm, but had worked with what is now XM when it was in its earliest stages and bidding for its Federal Communications Commission license. As the legal needs of the nascent company solidified, the executives agreed that Titlebaum's financial experience was the company's top need, and they hired him as general counsel.

Titlebaum finds the job to be "extremely interesting and rewarding," with lots of diversity. The diversity, however, has drawbacks: "While I'm an expert in some things, I'm not a deep expert in anything. It is difficult to develop a deep substantive expertise when you are general counsel," he says.

When seriously conducting a job search, you should not scorn any search method. One happy attorney found his general counsel position through the Internet. Stuart Soberman, general counsel at Maxim Healthcare Services, a health care staffing company based in Columbia, Md., found his job through the online job search engine Monster.com. He had found other jobs through networking, either with clients or through local investment bankers or partners at local large law firms. But Soberman also "took advantage of all avenues."

Not every in-house lawyer loves the job, of course. Others—who would not talk on the record—are more disgruntled. Some complain about little upward mobility, a lack of stability in their company or industry, and, occasionally, the lower compensation levels.

PLAN OF ATTACK

Knowing all of this, if you're still interested in working in-house, here's what to do. Despite the difficult economy, some companies are hiring.

First, start networking, carefully and systematically. Contact your colleagues in law firms and corporations. Let them know your goals. Don't ask them for a job, but do ask them if they can refer you to someone who may know of an in-house position. Periodically, but politely, follow up. Attend meetings that may attract in-house counsel. Be conscientious of their time and motives for attending the meeting, and be careful not to be overbearing. As Rob Lavet, vice president and assistant general counsel at Sallie Mae, says, "I found my position at Sallie Mae

because I knew people at the corporation." You must market yourself. Additionally, start attending at least two professional meetings a month and introduce yourself to at least two new people at each one. Follow up with them.

Second, concentrate on only those positions for which you are qualified. Corporate legal departments have almost always had the luxury of being choosy about their next hire. Once the company has decided what it needs—the type of skills and skill level—your résumé must match their requirements. Typically, corporations do not have the staff, time, or possibly even the expertise to train their in-house counsel. Even a junior attorney is expected to handle matters with minimal supervision. If you are a litigator, you're wasting your time selling yourself as a corporate transaction attorney.

Similarly, attempts to convince a corporation that you would happily accept a position designed for an attorney with three years' experience—despite the fact that you have more than 20 years of experience or have served as a general counsel elsewhere—rarely prompt a dramatic change in the job description. Arguments that you would be satisfied with a junior compensation level, that you have willingly, even joyfully, handled menial tasks, and would not mind being supervised by someone with 15 fewer years of experience, are not often convincing.

I'm not saying such pleas never work. Occasionally during the hiring process a company thinks of other practice areas that could be covered by their new in-house attorney and the company changes the job description. However, the company will be more motivated by your abilities than your desires to change the job description.

If your skills and your tenure don't fit within the company's parameters, you'll fall into the category of a "long shot." Long shots work best when there isn't as big a supply of in-house counsel. If the company does the advertising and hiring process itself, it could get 200 to 300 résumés. The person responsible for the initial screening will quickly eliminate those whose level or type of experience doesn't closely fit. This person, typically not an attorney, will be looking for key buzzwords in the résumés to match those in the job description.

Accordingly, make sure your résumé accurately reflects your skills and experience, and that you use any important industry jargon. After all, only 10 or 20 people will make it to the second stage for a closer review by an attorney.

Of course, there are always exceptions. When a company needs to fill a position that requires a unique expertise, like import-export control or biotech patent, or geographically specific expertise, it may not receive many résumés of qualified attorneys. Then the company may have more flexibility.

Third, broaden your job search. Contact reputable search firms. Since search firms are inundated with résumés, try to contact them through a referral from one of your colleagues so that your résumé has a better chance of standing out. Work with the placement office of your law school. Regularly check Web sites, weekly if possible.

Finally, keep trying. The D.C. legal community is very close-knit, and you will get out of it what you put into it.

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