

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

How to Make the Move from Private Practice to In-House

Introduction:

The stimuli to move from private practice to in-house can be numerous but once the decision has been made, you need great thought and structure to execute the move. Making this transition is a career shaping move that may also define your lifestyle should you choose to stay in the in-house setting. The preparation needed for this move can be segregated in two phases – pre-selection preparation and post selection effort.

Pre-Selection Preparation

The most crucial starting-point before you embark upon the transition from private practice to in-house is to fully understand and assess your motivating factors. It is not uncommon for candidates to be blind-sided by the positives when conducting research into an in-house move, such as shorter working hours and a less stressful environment without the pressure of billable hours and new client acquisition. Although these are normally a big draw for those moving to in-house roles they should not be taken as comforts of the job and certainly decisions shouldn't be based solely on these attributes. In-house has a different set of challenges to offer, hence, one must evaluate his/her motivations thoroughly before committing to the move. In-house legal departments are places for people who are self starters, team players, people who are inclined towards being business-savvy and those who get excited by seeing their input impact the wider business. Moreover, in-house practice requires candidates to undergo a mandatory mind-set change in the way they approach day-to-day activities. If this change in mind-set is not thought through, it can instantly fill your mind with regret.

Once you have fully understood the range of potential challenges, it is advisable to condition yourself further to make sure the transition is smooth.

Preparations can start early, from the time you are in private practice. You can start by ensuring you have zeroed in on the firm and industry you want to transition to. You can research these firms whilst considering the parameters you feel are the most important. Keep in mind, this will be a long term move and the parameters need to be set accordingly, and could include factors such as domain/industry, company hierarchy, work culture, compensation patterns, benefits offered, growth opportunities and employee satisfaction. Mostly, information will be available online; however, for parameters such as employee satisfaction or work culture, you may want to tap into your professional network to find connections who can give you first hand information.

Once you have narrowed down the type of firm you want to move to, you need to start adjusting aspects of your working life that can be transferred to the new setting. Begin with actively participating in presentations that are circulated within your current private practice firm, client engagement talks and author documents for example. You need to ensure you are accessing broad exposure to the business of the firm to understand the full spectrum of issues that can arise, and not just those you have been assigned to date. This will also build your own brand value as an employee and will go a long way in getting you hired in the firm of your choosing.

Post Selection Effort

Once you get started, you will be subjected to an environment which will be new and might oppose the working style you were previously accustomed to. This is normal, and is part of the learning curve. To ease the transition, ensure you proactively take initiatives to learn about the company and its operating environment. You need to be a good listener and should be able to comprehend the state of affairs of the team you work with and the organisation on the whole. By making way for two-way communication you not only demonstrate respect and foster good relations, you also avoid wasting time due to misinterpretations over the course of long term working relationships. This impacts your overall efficiency of work and sets you on the right growth track.

You also need to be cognizant of the environment the business operates in and the nature of the industry at large. Your role as Counsel is likely to touch on a broad range of internal and external business activities therefore you should make it a priority to familiarise yourself with the wider business because your work is integral to business decisions. Tracking the recent developments of the company on their intranet can be a good way to keep abreast with the company current affairs. If you are working with a large multi-national organisation, their sheer size makes it impossible for the orientation team to give you a complete download of each and every event/activity of the company. This should not be a deterrent in you knowing important information required to perform your day-to-day activities.

In today's dynamic world it is mandatory for a business to evolve to maintain its competitive edge. The legal team of the organisation is no exception to this. As part of the in-house legal team you should be forthcoming in bringing about innovation in the legal function in terms of the processes, crisis management and other legal functions the firm engages in. You need to blend your aggression from private practice with the ability to maintain an objective mind to ensure you check off all your to-do in an efficient manner.

Conclusion

If all the above discussed areas are carefully thought about and prepared for, the move from private practice to an in-house setting can be a fruitful one. It can offer you the satisfaction of being a part of a large organisation and a feeling of accomplishment when your inputs help define the course your company takes in business critical decisions. If the reasons for your move tally with reality of the role, a move in-house can result in a long term and rewarding career.

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