


IS IT TIME TO TRANSITION?

SPACE
EXECUTIVE



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MOVING FROM LEGAL PRIVATE PRACTICE TO IN-HOUSE COUNSEL

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Over the past decade, there has been a growing trend for companies to create in-house legal functions rather than the traditional approach of appointing law firms. This has been fuelled by organisations looking to cut costs, achieve efficiencies and realising the value of having the legal expertise available for the wider business.

In addition to this, the consequence of the pandemic has meant people have had a chance to re-evaluate their work priorities and career plans. The difficulties around making partner in commercial law firms and the desire for a different work/life balance has resulted in a growing trend for lawyers to move out of the traditional law practice and into an in-house legal role.

Making the move from legal private practice to in-house can seem like a challenging step for some; however, using our **Top Five Tips - Transitioning from Legal Private Practice to In-House** will help you settle into a new role quickly.



+7,000 in-house lawyers in Singapore*

55% have 15 years work experience or less

400+ in-house lawyers are served by the ACC Singapore Chapter



28,400 in-house lawyers in UK

22% of all UK lawyers in are in-house

*more than 7K profiles on LinkedIn suggest they currently hold an in-house counsel role in Singapore.

Top Five Tips :

**Transitioning from Legal
Private Practice to In-House**

1. Understand the business you are joining

A key element of success is understanding the organisation and the industry it operates within. This means doing deep-dive research about the major players, the burning sector issues and the challenges being faced. Finding out how the company operates, who they work with and their core values will be essential.

2. Develop your internal network

Moving from practice to in-house means a move from a fee-earner to a cost centre. Being able to demonstrate the value-add that you bring to the business is an important element. While diaries and workloads are increasingly overloaded, making the time to meet key stakeholders and build relationships both at the Board level and with day-to-day contacts will pay dividends. Listen to what they believe are the company's key challenges and understand what their own personal drivers are.

By removing the legal silo ensures the legal element becomes part of the operations. The result is being able to fluently converse about the financial impacts with the CFO or CEO on legal elements.



3. Be prepared – becoming the in-house legal expert

Being an in-house lawyer means that you will be involved with all aspects of the business. Unlike law practices where teams function in specific areas and develop specialist niches, you will need to be a generalist, responding to questions from across the organisation.

The different functions will assume you have the answer to their legal questions, be prepared to shed risk aversion and make decisions.

This means the type of work you are asked about could range from employment, advising HR on employee matters or handling risk management. There may be elements of commercial work, assisting on projects and handling trade agreements; in addition, you may be involved in copyright and trademark law, or simply ensuring the business is legally compliant at all times. Be resourceful in how you approach the work and continue to develop your skill-set and knowledge.



4. Create flexibility and don't say 'no'

The pace of the business may well mean that rapid turnarounds are required or quick decisions need to be made. Organising your workload to allow for these develops you as an asset for the business, providing advice and solving company problems. Similarly the ability to remove objections and blockages and come up with legally compliant solutions are all seen as valuable within the organisation.

5. Develop your management and people skills

Being part of the team means developing both commercial management skills and softer people skills. Depending upon your role, being able to be seen as a leader who is both inspirational and empathetic is vital. It is worthwhile considering honing and refining these skills in line with your legal skills and experience.



Insights from the Inside :

Experiences and Opinions of In-House Lawyers

Interview with Wenshan Huang, General Counsel, Wavemaker Partners

“ Having started originally as an IP lawyer working for firms such as Bird & Bird and Rodyk & Davidson, I have been an in-house legal counsel for over seven years working for a variety of startup organisations.

I have often joined companies where there has been no legal function and as the in-house lawyer my work goes way beyond just the commercial contracts, regulatory responses and handling IP and copyright. It is about leading a function from the ground-up where you need to build the integration of legal within the business.

I made the transition because I enjoy being part of the commercial world, dealing with the business day-to-day. I know some people make the transition because they think it is a better work/life balance, but that's a little bit of a cliché. Not all companies are the same, and the working culture really varies. Being part of private practice can make the legal function seem removed. You are advising and recommending rather than being involved day-to-day. If you are thinking of making the transition then you need to consider 'are you comfortable discussing things other than the law?'

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Being able to shift towards a business focus means that your recommendations need to be legally sound but they also need to solve the problem and show a value-add to the business.

You have to be able to know what the operational problems are, and present legal solutions in an easily consumed way so that non-legal colleagues can understand and buy into. It means becoming more creative than simply applying legal precedents.

You also need to recognise you are no longer a fee earner, and being a cost-centre you have to be able to demonstrate value as the bottom line is a key consideration. Thinking about how you demonstrate value is challenging – it's not about the number of contracts you've handled. One thing I always consider is stakeholder management, showing I can contribute to deeper problem-solving.

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I see more companies looking at appointing their own legal counsels. When companies reach a certain size they need help around data protection, legislation constraints and contracts. The more affordable law firms aren't necessarily adapting to growing startup businesses and so an in-house solution becomes more attractive for the business, provided the cost makes sense.

As part of the legal function's development I have been responsible for recruiting junior counsels; there is an urban myth that anyone transitioning needs four years' experience. It's great to get candidates with that experience, but some of the junior counsels I have recruited only had a couple of years' experience, but were flexible in their approach and keen to learn. The only requisite has to be that they have been called to the bar.

From my perspective moving to being an in-house counsel was a good career choice, I enjoy the challenge of being part of a business. If anyone is considering it then I would suggest speaking to someone who has made that change, it's always good to share experience. ”

Wenshan Huang, General Counsel, Wavemaker Partners

Interview with Gerald Tan, Regional Legal Counsel, APAC at Amadeus




As a second-career lawyer I have worked for several major law firms, namely Drew & Napier, Bird & Bird and Osborne Clarke in Singapore, initially within the intellectual property (IP) and commercial litigation disputes before moving to non-contentious technology work under the TMT practice area. My experience has been around IP, technology, cybersecurity, AI, data protection and telecommunications.

During this time, I was fortunate enough to have a part-time secondment to Lazada, a fully owned subsidiary of Alibaba, working two days a week. This gave me valuable insight into whether I was suited for an in-house role.

I made the transition seven years after being in private practice. I am currently APAC Regional Legal Counsel for Amadeus, a global leader in travel technology. The company employs about 17,000 people globally. I handle the legal affairs for the Airline IT division in APAC.

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People say that being in-house is vastly different. It must be noted that for technology commercial contract work, a lot of it is very similar - you are still drafting contracts and reviewing clauses. The big difference is that you have to change your approach when you are in-house, your advice needs to be technically sound, succinct and take into consideration, not just legal risk but also commercial risk; you become part of the commercial decision-making process.

As in-house counsel, you inevitably become a gatekeeper. In some organisations, there is an element of project management, where the business needs legal clearance. While the commercial decision at the end of the day has to be respected, it is far better to help the business understand processes and consequences so that they can own the decision.

You are also able to become responsible for your work/life balance; expectations on office hours do differ as you are seen as a colleague and not as a service provider.

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However, as a professional, you still want to deliver the same quality of work, so I find myself checking emails on weekends and end up working late when it's required. The focus is to deliver close support to the business, similar to how you would in private practice when push comes to shove.

People management moves from just managing the relationships between your boss and clients to a wider range of stakeholders with whom you need to be involved.

I have found you need to be smart about this; helping the business to understand how legal decisions are made allows them to manage risks. It is about putting the tools in their hands so they can weigh up the pros and cons.

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A key point to note as well if you are thinking about moving in-house – consider the company culture and try to do a secondment.

If you are prepared to keep learning on the commercial and technical fronts then you can definitely benefit from a vibrant in-house career in technology companies.

I read to keep up with legal updates and attend private practice knowledge sessions; I have also continued to study particularly around data protection and have done several data protection and information security courses. These, in tandem with my on-the-job learning, have benefitted me immensely as a technology professional, not just as a legal professional. ”

Gerald Tan, Regional Legal Counsel, APAC at Amadeus



Interview with an in-house Legal Counsel APAC working for a US Multinational Corporation




I transitioned to an in-house role in June 2021, about five years post-qualification. I found the transition relatively smooth, owing mainly to two factors: a great manager at my in-house role who coached me well through the transition and having been on an in-house secondment before making the move. This was good practice for managing the transition and learning an entirely new scope of work.

From a personal perspective, I found two main differences in moving from a corporate associate role in a local law firm to a corporate in-house role. The first, as you would expect, was that the range of work is wider. Not only will you be required to advise on a greater variety of issues and areas of law, but you may also be involved in non-legal types of work such as planning projects, creating and implementing policies or setting up new service lines etc.

Second, relationships with stakeholders feature and matter much more and are an integral part of day-to-day work. It is also likely that you will be responsible for making most decisions when it comes to your work and owning those decisions, which can be quite different from the approach as a law firm associate where bigger decisions are handled by a partner.

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If you are thinking about moving to in-house then try to go on an in-house secondment first. I found this extremely helpful in determining if in-house work and life were what I wanted. It gave me a taste of working independently and managing stakeholders. It also gave me confidence and certainty in my move.

If you can't go on secondment, then definitely take time to hear from those who have moved in-house, to understand the key changes and what life is like as in-house counsel.

Finally, consider your goals; are you looking to have more autonomy, room to grow in independence or to gain a breadth of experience? Assess if the move brings you closer to those goals.

"If you are thinking about moving to in-house then try to go on an in-house secondment first."

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There are definitely benefits to working in-house. The hours are better (but do your due diligence on the role)! While work is hectic during the day, there usually isn't an expectation for you to work past office hours, plus you are more likely to have greater control over your time. Pay and benefits can be better, but this depends greatly on which law firm you are coming from and what organisation you join. I personally value the ability to engage in types of work beyond legal review and advice, and the fulfilment that comes with seeing your work make a tangible difference to your organisation and its growth.


From a perspective of career advancement (and I use this term to refer to an upward progression of your career positionally), transitioning in-house can help if you move smartly. Moving to an organisation that is in a growth stage, where senior roles are not over-saturated and where the legal function has high visibility may help in this regard. That said, the onus would fall on you to chart and drive your own path when in-house, especially compared to being in a law firm where the road to partnership is clearly defined. ”

Legal Counsel APAC, US MNC

Deciding when to move from private practice to in-house is down to individual circumstances, however, most in-house lawyers will have completed temporary assignments with corporate clients and have several years' experience. This means you have the commercial law experience and business expertise to be able to support the business.



We spoke to Eng Chang, Director of Chief Operating Officer & Governance at Space Executive to get a view on the current market movements from private practice to in-house, and what clients are typically looking for when appointing an in-house legal counsel.



“ We specialise in placing mid to senior level lawyers into in-house roles and we continue to see a strong level of interest from clients in getting candidates that are “plug and play” for them.

This typically means that roles are most frequently available for candidates in the 5 to 10 PQE range. Specific domain areas and industry experience are also increasingly important.

We are seeing specialisation happening earlier and it is something that junior lawyers should start thinking about.

For Head of Legal and General Counsel type positions, it remains few and far between, but we have observed an uptick in well-backed startups looking to hire their first counsel.

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These are great opportunities for ambitious lawyers to break into a General Counsel role earlier in their career as opposed to climbing the usual corporate route which may not always pan out due to fewer movements and intense competition.

Being in a promising startup and taking the company through critical milestones, including IPO or other capital events, are also highly fulfilling and hard to come by experiences.

Our clients are increasingly open to hiring junior lawyers in the 2-3 PQE range. Largely because a lot of their in-house legal functions are more mature than before and they feel confident to be able to take in talents earlier and provide the training themselves. It makes business sense from a budgetary and loyalty point of view.

This means that junior lawyers who are pretty sure that practice is not for them have real optionality earlier than before.

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Eng Chang

Director - COO & Governance, Space Executive





Eng Chang, Director – Chief Operating Officer & Governance

Leading Legal & Compliance recruitment practice for Commerce and Legal recruitment for FinTech, focusing on mid, senior and executive level hires across Asia.



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Placing mid-level to executive Legal & Compliance recruitment across all industries and in multiple geographic areas



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