

## **A GUIDE TO NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION FROM PRIVATE PRACTICE TO IN-HOUSE COUNSEL**

**In this handy guide, we have asked our resident legal industry recruitment experts their 10 most frequently asked questions from Lawyers who want to make the transition from private practice to the role of In-house Counsel.**

### **Read this guide to discover how to:**

- Set yourself up for the best possible chance of making the leap
- The areas of law that lend themselves to this career move
- The work experience to aim for to position yourself favourably
- The opportunities that exist in the market for lawyers with private practice experience to transition to In-house Counsel, Special Counsel, Deputy General Counsel and General Counsel
- The challenges you are likely to face
- How Legal People can help you make this highly desired move, and more!



## Meet Our Experts



### SHARON HENDERSON

Sharon is the owner of Legal People, a leading specialist legal recruitment agency based in Melbourne. Sharon is a hands-on legal recruiter with over 22 years legal recruitment experience in matching lawyers to their dream in-house roles. Sharon's client base includes acting for corporates across a number of different industry sectors, government and not for profit.

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### ROSIE MAMIC

Rosie is a Legal Recruiter with over 25 years' experience in legal services on a local and national level. She is recognised as a trusted advisor and partner to provide recruitment solutions for Legal People's clients, including law firms and corporates across Australia. Rosie recruits Lawyers, Legal Support and HR roles.

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# 1. How can lawyers go about transitioning from private practice to in-house?

## What practical steps can they take, and when should they take them?

The team at Legal People suggest taking the following steps to make yourself attractive to a corporate employer. These steps can help to give you a competitive edge amongst the crowd of lawyers wanting to move in-house.

### Be in the Right Area and at the Right Firm!

There are two main areas of legal specialisation that lend themselves more towards making the transition to in-house counsel, being commercial law and property law. However, lawyers working in Insurance Law and litigation can also make the transition to in-house.

Having a minimum of 3 years PAE working in a mid to top tier law firm environment is highly sought after by larger corporate employers.

### Secondments

During your private practice career, take the opportunity (if available) to be seconded to clients, particularly in the industry sectors that interest you. This might involve project work at a client site or a direct secondment to a client. Working very closely with a client in this manner gives you more exposure to their business and the commercial, strategic, legal and governance related issues that pop up on a daily basis.

### Build Your Network

Consider establishing a mentor/ mentee relationship with an In-house Counsel who can give you some guidance, advice and potential networking opportunities.

Build up your network through LinkedIn, relevant industry associations and legal industry social networks. This can be done online, but also through attending networking events. Rosie and Sharon suggest making sure your LinkedIn profile is very strong and provides examples of current and relevant work. This means ensuring your area of specialisation is clearly spelled out and the types of matters that you have been exposed to within private practice should be included as bullet points. They also suggest turning on LinkedIn “open to work” – which is only visible to those with a LinkedIn recruiter license. (Not your current employer!)

## 2. What opportunities exist for lawyers making the move to an in-house environment?

### There are so many opportunities!

The market for In-house Lawyers has been particularly buoyant during 2021-2023. The recent demand has been strong within corporate, government and the not-for-profit sectors. This is as a direct result of business growth and natural attrition.

Sharon Henderson has found that lawyers wanting to make the transition to in-house tend to do so to be more actively involved in all areas of a business. Moving in-house can give a lawyer a chance to build on their commercial, management, strategic and even financial skills. They also tend to have a solid chance of career progression from Legal Counsel to Senior Legal Counsel, to Deputy General Counsel and then General Counsel. A high performing experienced lawyer can go onto more senior opportunities such as Company Secretary, board appointments or even CEO.

### Diversity & Variety

In-house lawyers often work in a diverse work environment and on a variety of legal matters such as contract negotiation, intellectual property, employment law and regulatory governance. The varied environment, dealing with something different every day can be rewarding, challenging and engaging.

Moving in house also affords a lawyer with the opportunity to become an industry expert, gaining specialised industry knowledge and experience that can be invaluable in their longer-term careers.

## 3. How has Legal People helped lawyers make this move successfully?

The team at Legal People have been kept very busy over the last several years recruiting for in-house roles at all levels. They also have experience recruiting across a wide range of industry sectors including biotechnology, health, renewable energy, financial services, government, automotive, not for profit, construction, education, and member associations.

When assisting a Lawyer to make their transition to in-house, the team often start with a career counselling conversation. This may involve advising how to position themselves as ready and prepared for an In-house role. This might be suggesting secondments or even moving to a different sized firm to get the right experience. Sharon and Rosie would talk to a potential candidate looking to move in-house through how to tweak their CV to highlight the most relevant experience to a particular industry or client. They always suggest tailoring a CV for each specific role. They can help a candidate understand their relevant transferable skills and how to articulate those skills that are most appealing to a corporate.

In Legal People's experience, corporates are very open to someone coming from private practice, but these roles are competitive, and corporates do value those with secondment experience or previous in-house experience.

## 4. What are the main challenges lawyers may face when transitioning from private practice to an in-house role and what strategies can they employ to overcome these challenges?

There are a number of challenges lawyers may face. These include:

### Skills Gap

A Lawyer coming directly from private practice is likely to have some gaps in their commercial knowledge and industry specific knowledge. It is important to upskill and to learn all that you can about the business and the industry before you start to hit the ground running.

### Single Client Focus

An in-house lawyer has one single client but may have multiple stakeholders. This is different to private practice where they may be juggling several clients.

### Smaller Legal Team

They may face the challenges of a much smaller legal team or even a solo role. They are surrounded by less legal expertise to be able to bounce problems off. If you are going to attempt a solo In-house role, the team recommend that you really do need to have significant experience behind you to do this. If it is a new role, you may be responsible with setting up the right processes and technology to streamline the legal function.

### Support for the Legal Function

It can take time to build up trust and support in an internal legal business unit. Some businesses have a track record of seeing this role as a blocker of progress. Sharon suggests that doing your due diligence and taking time to really get to know the business and what they need in a legal function can reduce the chances of experiencing this.

Sharon shared that they recently helped a candidate move from private practice to General Counsel. He was meticulous with his company research, including the challenges that were coming down the pipeline and he took the time to get to know and understand the background of the Directors with whom he was interviewing. This helped him stand out and demonstrate his proactivity, commercial acumen and research skills.

The team at Legal People suggest going into any In-house role with an open mind and ensuring you proactively develop your network to be able to call on them for assistance and support.

## **5. What key legal skills acquired in private practice are most transferable to an in-house role, and how can lawyers effectively leverage these skills in their new environment?**

Skills gained in commercial and property law are the most transferable and desired by corporates. Having said that, soft skills such as time management, problem solving, commercial acumen, relationship management, strategic thinking and stakeholder and relationship management are all valuable.

A confident Lawyer who is proactive, self-motivated with good attention to detail and excellent written and verbal communication skills will make a good impression.

Rosie recommends that they should be able to demonstrate they understand any skills gap and how they aim to resolve it – by reading information, understanding structure and can pre-empt problems before they arise.

## **6. How does the dynamic between legal professionals differ in an in-house setting compared to private practice, and what adjustments are necessary for Lawyers transitioning between the two?**

An In-house legal team has a less hierarchical structure and are unlikely to have juniors to assist or administrative support. Whilst in principle you only have one client, it can be a very dynamic environment, as a business can have such a wide range of legal needs.

One day you might be dealing with employment law and the next you could be negotiating a major contract. You may need to bring in external counsel to assist and manage that relationship. A Lawyer who has moved In-house becomes more of a generalist based on whatever the business needs on an ongoing basis and you can need to upskill based on the issues that land on your desk!

Rosie says that her candidates who have moved In-house often tell her that “no two days are ever the same and that it is a dynamic, ever changing, fluid environment.”

You may also be responsible for a legal budget but will not have a billable hour’s individual target to meet.

## **7. When, if any, is a good time in a legal career to make this move? Are there different challenges and opportunities at different stages in one's career?**

Sharon Henderson says that "The best time to consider your first move from private practice to In-house is between 3-8 years' experience. Once you get past 10 years PAE you are becoming too expensive for a Legal Counsel role without any relevant practical experience. The more senior level roles of Deputy General Counsel and General Counsel tend to be hotly contested amongst existing In-house Legal Counsels."

## **8. Who are Legal People and how do you operate?**

Legal People are proudly one of Melbourne's leading legal recruitment agencies. We have an extensive network of corporate, not for profit and government clients, many who list In-house roles with us exclusively. Our network has been developed by our dedicated and loyal team over the last 50 years! Many candidates come to us via word-of-mouth referral or come back again and again at different stages of their career. We offer our candidates the best legal career opportunities and we source premium legal talent for our client base.

## **9. What can Legal People help with?**

The team of legal recruitment experts at Legal People often help candidates wishing to transfer from private practice with any of the following:

- Career counselling
- Resume structure to target in house roles,
- LinkedIn profile tips,
- Interview advice and preparation,
- Suggestions for due diligence
- Evaluation and comparison of competing offers.

## **10. How extensive is Legal People's network?**

Legal People's network of legal industry contacts is vast. It ranges from boutique to top tier firms, and corporates across a varied range of industries. Our long-serving and loyal team of Consultants have excellent individual networks having recruited specifically in the legal industry for more than 20 years.

## 11. Why is it important for Lawyers and firms to reach out to Legal People now?

You cannot underestimate the value of having a specialist industry recruiter on your side. For many of our corporate clients we help them manage their recruitment processes including communications. We also help them canvas the market more broadly to ensure that we have not left any stone unturned.

For Lawyers, investing the time to develop a relationship with specialist industry recruiter who understands your goals and values can help accelerate your career progression as they will be on the lookout for the perfect next role for you.

We hope you enjoyed our handy guide as to how to make this career transition from private practice into an In-house Counsel within a large corporation. This role effectively provides legal services exclusively for their employer, effectively acting as an internal legal department.

At Legal People we have helped hundreds of lawyers make this career transition.

If you would like a confidential career discussion about how you might make this move, then get in touch at [info@legalpeople.com.au](mailto:info@legalpeople.com.au).

We are specialists in the Legal Industry. We recruit Lawyers, Support staff and HR professionals in Melbourne, Australia.

### The benefits of pursuing this career pathway include:

- **Diverse Work Environment:**  
A lawyer in this role often handles a wide range of legal matters, including contract negotiation, employment law, regulatory compliance, and more. This diversity can be intellectually stimulating and professionally rewarding.
- **Work-Life Balance:**  
In-house positions can sometimes offer a better work-life balance, allowing lawyers to maintain a fulfilling personal life alongside their careers. They also don't require time sheets or billable hours!
- **Industry Specialisation:**  
Working in-house allows lawyers to become industry experts, gaining specialised knowledge that can be invaluable in their longer-term careers.
- **A Direct Impact on Business:**  
In-house lawyers are integral to the decision-making process within their organisation, allowing them to have a direct impact on business strategies and outcomes and they often make up part of the leadership structure of an organisation. This allows you to build on your strategic, commercial and management skills.