

4 Tips for a New General Counsel

Adjusting to a general counsel role can be especially difficult because you won't succeed by simply being an excellent lawyer, or having a thorough understanding of industry regulations, or knowing how to expertly mitigate and reduce risk. You have to excel at all of those things (and more), in combination with having a strong background in business strategy and an ability to manage others, all while successfully navigating organizational bureaucracy.

Having an idea of what to expect can help make for a smoother transition. Here are some things to expect in your new position.

For a more complete guide, download [Surviving and Conquering Your New Role as Corporate Counsel](#).

You're looked to for help with business strategy and C-level executives rely on you

The general counsel role is evolving, and is now much more than just the company's legal expert. You were hired to be a leader within your company and help strategically move the business forward, and C-level executives expect you to contribute to all stages of the business planning and growth process.

Sterling Miller, who has almost 25 years of experience as General Counsel, Corporate Secretary, and Chief Compliance Officer, writes, "...as many in-house lawyers are learning, it is not enough to be an excellent lawyer with deep legal skills and institutional knowledge. That just gets you to the table. The business wants more out of its in-house legal department, especially from the general counsel and other senior members of the legal team."

If you haven't already, start thinking about the company's goals and objectives from a strategic business angle in addition to the impacts they have on the legal team.

You must determine the acceptable level of risk to operate within while driving business growth

The goal for many legal professionals is to find ways to mitigate or eliminate risks as much as possible, without worrying about the impacts to revenue, growth, sales, etc. That's not the case for the modern GC.

According to a publication from Heidrick and Struggles on the tough questions CEOs are asking, "Instead of simply controlling every risk at the expense of the organization's mission, the business-savvy GC operates within a framework of acceptable risk, helping the CEO weigh the benefits and drawbacks of different courses of action and when obstacles arise, helping develop alternatives that advance business goals."

Finding this acceptable level of risk can be a challenge that takes time to master, and greatly depends on the organization's overall risk appetite, but part of your job is to help set that precedent. A good first step is to initiate a contract risk assessment to determine the health of your contract portfolio, which in turn can shed light on the overall level of risk within your organization.

Consider initiating a contract risk assessment by answering basic contract questions like:

- Where are all of our contracts located?
- Who owns each contract?
- When does each contract expire?
- What are the repercussions of any given contract expiring or auto-renewing without our knowledge?

As stated in ContractWorks' Introductory Guide to Contract Risk Assessment, "When you enter into a contractual agreement, you not only establish the legality of your actions, you also define how all parties will behave, what obligations and responsibilities each participant will undertake, and what risks, costs, and benefits will occur upon completion or violation of the contract."

You're now the go-to source for all things legal

For many companies, general counsel is the first place employees across the organization turn for any and all legal advice and guidance. And depending on the size and nature of your business, you may have a completely separate risk and compliance department, or it might all fall under your domain. But even if it is a completely separate function, not all employees fully understand the differences between the two, so you should expect to receive your fair share of requests for compliance-related issues in addition to your legal duties.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Does the current process for legal requests fit with your preferred style of working?
- Is there a better way to facilitate requests so you can do your job more efficiently?
- Would the rest of the company benefit from a better understanding of your role?

Adjusting to a new corporate structure and dealing with various departments

All companies are different and have distinct rules of engagement, in addition to the unwritten rules that can only be learned through experience. Whatever you were used to at your previous company may or may not translate to your new role. Maybe you used to report to the CEO who was easily accessible in the office next door, but now you report to the CFO who works in another part of the country and is rarely available. The faster you can learn how people like to work and interact, and what people expect from you, the better.

You will also need a crash course in how every relevant department gets their work done, and how that affects your work. If your sales team is more concerned with closing deals than following the proper contract procedures, and is sending contracts to customers before you've had a chance to review, then you'll have to determine how that impacts the business and whether that process needs to be addressed.

Here are some things you can do to give departments the freedom and flexibility to operate independently while remaining compliant and adhering to company policies:

- Provide departments with standard contract templates to create consistency
- Set up approval workflows to ensure processes are followed and contracts are routed appropriately
- Create and share reports with key stakeholders to provide transparency and accountability

For more tips to help you succeed in your new in-house position, [download **Surviving and Conquering Your New Corporate Counsel Role: Tips for a Successful Career Transition**](#).

Some of this content was previously published on the [ContractWorks blog](#).