

In-House Departments Aren't Necessarily Fishing in Post-COVID Legal Talent Pool

Post-COVID-19, the legal ecosystem contains job candidates who might not otherwise be looking for a corporate legal gig, but departments may be favoring caution over a hiring binge.

By Frank Ready

The layoffs visited upon the legal industry have disrupted staffs at law firms and corporate entities alike, but a redistribution of attorney talent between outside counsel and in-house departments isn't necessarily in the cards. While experienced attorneys may be somewhat easier to come by these days, legal departments aren't itching to add more names to their roster.

But of course there will always be some people looking to seize an opportunity. Zach Abramowitz, a consultant in the legal technology space, told *Corporate Counsel* that some law departments he has spoken with are looking to spend their remaining 2020 budgets on new talent.

"They are saying, 'Listen, there's never been talent available like this. There's never been people that we could probably get to come over because they are looking at their current department and their current department is firing [people]. There really are great hiring capabilities right now,'" Abramowitz said.



Courtesy photo

However, there's a chance that those legal departments may be more an exception than the rule. Brett Burney of Burney Consultants believes that legal departments do have a window to hire talent that may have been inaccessible in the past. However, that's no guarantee that job offers will start flying around fast and furious. Given the uncertainty surrounding how the COVID-19 situation will continue to evolve in the U.S.,

many organizations could opt to proceed cautiously.

"I still get the impression that legal departments are 'waiting to see what happens' or the company has implemented some kind of hiring lockdown that prohibits them from acquiring new employees," Burney said.

It's also possible that the legal talent pool isn't as full right now as one might think. Lee Udelsman, a leader in Major, Lindsey & Africa's in-house counsel recruiting service,

argued that legal departments tend to be selective in their hiring practices, generally favoring attorneys with junior or midlevel associate experience at law firms.

But despite the layoffs, furloughs and salary cuts happening at some law firms, chances are that those lower-level associates weren't the most heavily impacted. According to Udelsman, the reasoning is twofold: Junior or midlevel employees aren't as expensive as more senior attorneys and since the 2007-09 recession, firms have been careful about hiring more workers that fall into that category than they need.

"Whereas, for example, there used to be eight people in M&A at a major firm in New York, after the downturn they only hired four, so what's happened is the pool has shrunk. And because the pool has shrunk the firms have done a really good job at retaining that talent," Udelsman said.

Meanwhile, more senior positions inside corporate legal departments typically go to candidates with prior in-house experience, which may also be difficult to come by even in a post-COVID-19 economy. According to Udelsman, many of the corporate legal departments he's spoken to are busy helping companies adapt to the fallout of the pandemic, which includes the potential legal issues raised by returning employees to the office.

In other words, rival legal departments may not be ready to shed talent just yet.

"I've heard of very isolated incidents where there are any layoffs or furloughs," Udelsman said.

When corporate legal departments do opt to bring some additional talent into the fold, it may be unfolding on a more limited basis. Ellie Kelly, attorney search

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director at Parker + Lynch Legal/Special Counsel, indicated that some departments are engaging with contract or interim attorneys to handle any spillover work.

"A lot of those are long-term positions but on a contract basis. Many of them do a 40-hour work-week and can work remotely, so it even opens up more talent versus being specific to a geographical area. It's much more encompassing when you don't need someone to come into a specific geographical location," Kelly said.

However, that doesn't mean there won't still be full-time roles that need filling as legal departments and their organizations continue adapting to the aftermath of the pandemic. Domingo Vazquez, vice president and head of corporations for Wolters Kluwer CT Corp., believes that many departments will be focused on implementing automated processes moving forward, leading to the growth of additional legal operation roles and other jobs focused on driving efficiency.

Still, the search for efficiency isn't always a job-driver inside corporate legal departments and could wind up pushing more work out the door. "Corporate legal departments will continue to make risk-adjusted decisions about whether to continue handling work in-house or simply outsource the task or capability completely to a qualified third party," Vazquez said. "We've seen tremendous growth in our legal managed service offerings as a result of the pandemic."

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