

Career Insights Session for In-House Counsel

This Practical Guide is based on a presentation that was held during AHLA Health Law Week on January 26, 2026. A panel of seasoned in-house counsel shared their career stories, the key decisions that shaped their paths, and the advice they wished they would have had along the way.

Panelists: Viren Doshi (Moderator), Corporate Counsel and Compliance Officer, Silver Cross Hospital; Catherine Bernard, Tax Director, Sanford Health; Shawn Gilman, VP, Senior Corporate Counsel, Providence St. Joseph Health; Daniel Peters, SVP & General Counsel, The University of Kansas Health System; Jennifer Willcox, SVP & General Counsel, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Getting Started in In-House Roles

Building Early Experience

- Consider law clerk positions at health systems during law school to gain exposure to in-house work
- Gain 3-5+ years of law firm experience first to develop technical skills before transitioning in-house
- Maintain relationships with in-house contacts even while working at a firm
- Serve on nonprofit boards to understand governance, the difference between governance and management, and how nonprofits operate

Making the Transition

- Transferable skills matter more than perfect industry match - diverse backgrounds can be an asset
- Organizations often prefer candidates who can learn their specific sector rather than vice versa
- The transition may be driven by economic factors, client relationships, or unexpected opportunities
- Be open to pivots that don't follow your original career plan

The Reality of In-House Work

Daily Life

- There is no typical day - expect constant change and interruptions
- Days start early to accommodate executive schedules (often 7am meetings)
- Expect back-to-back meetings from 8am-5pm with minimal breaks
- Deep work, drafting, and sustained attention happens nights and weekends
- Hours aren't necessarily fewer than law firm life, but they are more varied and often more meaningful
- You'll advise "on the fly" in meetings rather than through lengthy memos

Common Misconceptions

- In-house doesn't automatically mean better work-life balance
- Seeking "9-to-5" hours isn't a compelling reason to go in-house
- The role is about risk management, not just technical legal analysis
- Success isn't measured by producing the longest memo or exploring every legal option

Essential Skills for Success

Communication Skills

- Simplify complex legal issues for non-lawyer audiences
- Deliver outcome-oriented advice - clients want to know "can we do X?" not lengthy analysis
- Avoid lengthy legal memos; executives don't care about the "how" - they need clear guidance
- Master brevity and active communication (recommended resource: "Smart Brevity")
- Make judgments and provide advice that moves decisions forward

Soft Skills

- Persuasion is critical - you're still an advisor, but now you live with the consequences
- Emotional intelligence and being a calming influence during chaos
- Control strong personalities in the right settings
- Navigate "shades of gray" comfortably - most questions don't have black and white answers
- Adaptability and change management

Business Acumen

- Understand both the specific business you work for AND the broader industry
- Learn how the organization makes money, what workflows look like, business strategies, and market dynamics
- Connect dots between new legislation and organizational impact (harmful or opportunistic)
- Go beyond reading balance sheets - truly understand the complex business operations
- Take every opportunity to participate in cross-functional task forces and committees

Professional Development

Learning Quickly

- Understand industry controversies and how to defend your organization
- Develop efficient research skills across many areas - you can't always justify external counsel
- Create organized documentation systems (SharePoint sites, org charts, historical documents)
- Document your research and conclusions - issues recur every 2-3 years
- Know your industry inside and out - lack of this knowledge can lead to embarrassingly impractical advice

Career Growth Strategies

- Career ladders are much flatter than law firms - there may be only one title for years
- Growth often means taking on additional functional areas rather than promotions
- Seek leadership opportunities outside the legal department (task forces, committees, projects)
- Build relationships with leaders in other functions (finance, HR, IT, operations)
- Consider moving into business leadership roles outside legal
- Pursue professional association leadership and bar association involvement

- Take on new responsibilities continuously to increase your value and scope
- Find fulfillment beyond title and compensation

Leadership Development

- All in-house lawyers are leaders, whether managing people or not - you must influence organizational direction
- Pursue formal leadership development (seminars like Deloitte's Next-Gen CLO program)
- Work with executive coaches
- Take pride in others' successes more than your own
- Recommended books: "Crucial Conversations," "The Confident Mind" by Nate Zinsser, "Smart Brevity"

Job Search and Networking

Research and Preparation

- Know the organization thoroughly before interviews - use public resources:
 - Tax returns (Form 990) available on GuideStar, ProPublica, or IRS website
 - Bond financing documents (Appendix A to official statements on EMMA)
 - Use AI tools to research organizations quickly
- Don't ask questions in interviews that you could easily Google
- Understand whether the organization is an acquirer or potential acquiree (financial stability matters)
- Articulate why you want to work at that specific organization, not just anywhere
- Show you understand their mission and values

Building Your Network

- Cultivate relationships with peers who might become future leaders
- Join state and regional health law associations
- Maintain a large network of general counsel colleagues
- Most attorneys are willing to help when asked - reach out to connections and second-degree connections
- The worst response is someone being mean, which tells you not to work with them anyway
- Be willing to both give and receive help in your network
- Build relationships early with people in finance, HR, IT, and other functions

Making the Move

- Use LinkedIn to identify connections in your target city
- Connect with local health law bar associations
- Reach out to people for informational conversations
- Don't expect extensive training programs - organizations look to law firms for that
- Typically hired around 3rd-6th year of practice
- Be open-minded about what roles and experiences you bring - timing and fit matter greatly

Navigating Career Challenges

Feeling Stuck

- Look for opportunities within your organization first

- Ask to be involved in different areas to expand your awareness
- Volunteer for cross-functional projects
- Consider that your existing experiences might be exactly what another organization needs
- Stay open-minded about lateral moves - different skills matter to different organizations
- Listen to resources like "The Legal Department" podcast for career guidance

Mid-Career Transitions

- Transitions can happen within your organization or externally
- Your diverse experiences have value, even if they seem unrelated
- Right place, right time matters - be prepared when opportunities arise
- Moving from nonprofit to for-profit may require SEC filing experience or public company governance knowledge
- Consider moving into for-profit organizations at non-GC levels first, then growing that experience

Working Effectively In-House

Relationship Management

- Build strong relationships across all departments
- Understand everyone's priorities - legal is just one of many concerns for leadership
- Use RACI charts (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) to clarify roles between legal and compliance
- Set clear expectations with other departments
- Partner effectively with outside counsel
- Understand mission-driven decision-making if at a nonprofit

Being On-Call

- Most legal departments have on-call responsibilities
- You may feel like you're always on call
- May support executive teams and patient safety response teams
- Expect to be available for organizational disasters and urgent legal needs

Key Mindset Shifts

- From revenue generator to administrative expense
- From individual contributor to influential leader
- From technical expert to risk manager
- From lengthy analysis to actionable guidance
- From isolated work to constant collaboration
- From clear career ladder to flat organizational structure
- From external advisor to internal stakeholder living with decisions

Final Wisdom

The role of in-house counsel is fundamentally about influencing organizational direction, managing risk in ambiguous situations, and being a trusted business partner who happens to have legal expertise. Success requires combining legal knowledge with business acumen, emotional intelligence, strong relationships, and the ability to provide clear guidance that helps the organization move forward - all while remaining calm in chaos.