

RESHAPING EXPECTATIONS: HOW GCs WIN SEATS AT THE TOP TABLE

To demonstrate value in a constantly evolving sector, general counsel have to be prepared to lead the debate on how to drive transformation and shape strategy

One of the most interesting discussion topics to emerge from *The Lawyer's* recent General Counsel Strategy Summit was the role of GCs in leading conversations within a company and their influence on the board. This topic took up a large part of the debate between sessions, as well as being a central element of the programme agenda.

It started with the report, *Building GC Influence in the Boardroom – Strategies for Success*. It was presented at the event by Shoosmiths, in collaboration with *The Lawyer* Research Service.

The report included some eye-opening statistics: Only 29 per cent of respondents in its survey of general counsel and heads of legal considered their roles to be predominately strategic, while 53 per cent felt they should not hold a board position.

This was in stark contrast to the thoughts of board members in the survey, who explained they were keen for a GC who could actively propose and help shape long-term board-level strategies for the firm. There was a clear disconnect evident in the figures between how GCs saw their role and how other board members viewed it.

Top-table agenda

Beyond the talking point of the figures, the theme continued to dominate the event programme, as speakers and audience members alike contemplated what GCs actually need to do to have a meaningful seat at the top table.

Unquestionably, to increase your sphere and scope of influence, you need to reshape expectations as to what the legal department can deliver.

A common, but outdated, assumption is that the legal team is there primarily to manage risk and respond to issues when raised – to be the firm's safety net and legal resource pool. However, it can offer considerable greater strategic and operational value.

The issues in question go far beyond the law that's done within the four walls of the legal department. GCs have an opportunity to advise on the business's entire legal ecosystem – for example how the purchasing and supply department is responding to the need to improve customer onboarding speed in an increasingly digital commercial environment; or how research and development may be better commercialised and integrated with inter-company strategy. These and other elements can generate more business and make a

significant positive contribution to turnover. A lot of new thinking needs to be carried out by businesses to keep up with the pace of change and get ahead of competitors.

Progressive GCs are recognising the opportunity to act on the front foot and take the lead on these conversations within their firms.

At UnitedLex, we help in-house GCs analyse and improve the scope and 'strata' of legal activity running throughout the company's entire legal ecosystem.

The best-run departments will increasingly separate out these strata to reassess how each layer is optimised – whether by humans or machines, and whether they still need to be housed within the legal department, or are better situated in a different structure.

New resources

This doesn't mean GCs have to give up treasured relationships they have built up with senior partners in private practice firms, as these are still part of the picture. One of these areas is likely to be work that benefits from 'high alpha' or sage advice that can only be provided by a senior partner who knows a client's business inside out.

But this work stream will sit alongside others that might perhaps be best resourced in new ways, or benefit from the introduction of artificial intelligence.

If that's the type of conversation you can take to the board and lead on, you will gain influence and be rewarded with a stronger seat at the table. And if you don't have a digital agenda, you risk being on the wrong side of Darwin.



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