
 BUSINESS & CAREERS

In-house interviews: what firms look for

As a recruiter in the legal market specializing in in-house placements, I observe and participate in countless candidate interviews. Part of the process is a post-interview review of each candidate with



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his or her potential employer. By definition, candidates have made it to the “first round” of interviews because they possess, at a minimum, the right technical skill set. However, there are a number of additional factors in the decision process that will determine whether a candidate is successful. As these factors are relatively consistent, it is worth being aware of them (and, more importantly, cultivating and demonstrating them) if you want to move in-house in a fiercely competitive job market.

Moving for the right reason?

Whereas private practice is relatively quantifiable as a market, “in-house” is a loose term covering an array of options, including type of organization, compensation structure, opportunity for progression, work-life balance, and focus on technical or commercial work.

Employers always want to know why a candidate wants to move in-house, and

inevitably will ask that question at interview. They want to see that the candidate has a thorough grasp of general in-house practice, how the employer's organization fits into the market, and how a lawyer fits into the organization.

The least successful candidates tend to focus on the negative aspects of private practice, and can often leave the impression that they are looking at in-house as an escape rather than a career choice. This is particularly evident when a candidate asks few (or no) questions about the structure of the legal department they are joining, the day-to-day nature of the work, the reporting lines and opportunities for career progression.

Moving to the right place?

Although they do not always articulate it clearly in an interview, potential employers are usually looking for signs that the

candidate's level of independence and risk tolerance matches the organization's. This crosses a number of different areas, all of which contribute to the success (or failure) of in-house counsel.

The most common example relates to mentorship. Relatively few in-house employers have the resources (and other lawyers) available to provide high levels of mentorship. As a result, successful candidates tend to be those who seem comfortable working with relatively little guidance, but who seek help when they are operating outside of their area of expertise.

Another example relates to risk tolerance. A process-oriented lawyer who always errs on the side of caution when advising on areas of law that are open to interpretation will be more effective in an organization that matches this point of view. However, the same lawyer will struggle in an organization that takes a more aggressive

approach to the same issues. Similarly, start-ups are the place for lawyers willing to take the risk (and potentially high rewards) associated with an uncertain, but potentially very successful future. Lawyers who

want a more stable and predictable career path are likely to be a better fit in a larger, well established organization.

Translation of technical skills

As mentioned at the outset, technical skills tend to get candidates to interview: generally, a broad corporate/commercial solicitor skill set is the most widely marketable for industry roles, unless the role is specialized. The additional factor is whether the candidate has demonstrated an ability to translate technical knowledge into commercially focused, useful advice. For example, I have several clients who ask their candidates to complete a written assignment, such as mark-

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Interpersonal skills rank highly

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ing up a commercial contract, as part of the interview process. They then review it with the candidate, who has the opportunity to explain the thinking behind each amendment.

The candidates who shine in this exercise tend to do two things: They are proactive about asking questions regarding the assignment generally and the commercial context of the contract they have been asked to review; second, they have the confidence to make relatively few changes, concentrating only on high-risk issues, as opposed to producing a “technically perfect” (but commercially unworkable) document.

Non-legal contribution

Employers also look for the less tangible “softer” skill set

(such as teamwork, leadership, and management), or at least a demonstrated ability to acquire and develop these skills. The reason is that in-house lawyers are often members of multidisciplinary teams, and may find themselves involved in project management, training, and strategic planning.

The other aspects that score highly in interviews are creative problem-solving abilities and the confidence to “own” a decision. This is a reflection of the shift in practice style from private practice (advise on the risks, but ultimately the client is the decision maker) to in-house, where the lawyer may be expected to take an active part in, and share responsibility for, making and implementing decisions.

It seems obvious that good interpersonal skills are a must. However, the majority of

employers I have dealt with for in-house recruitment have placed a much higher weight on this factor than their private practice peers (I know several employers who take their preferred candidates out for lunch, to test how polite they are to the serving staff). This is largely because of the inherent tension between an in-house counsel's role in minimizing legal risk and the business function's need to generate revenue.

To be effective, in-house counsel must be viewed as a sensitive, responsive and valued team member, not just a technician. „

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