

GCs: The first 100 days

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As a first time Head of Legal the weight of your own expectations, together with those of the people who chose you, can make for a heavy combination. The results of a survey DAC Beachcroft is running with "In House Lawyer" are intended to lighten the load and provide some advice for those new in post and indeed, those aspiring Heads of Legal or General Counsel. What follows is a deeper look at the motivation behind the survey and offers some early thoughts on creating a plan of action to arrive at a realistic strategy for the first 100 days.

We would like the survey to be a way for the more experienced to share some of their reflections and the wisdom of hindsight. The questions explore, for example, how to create the network you need to get your job done, additional training that might be useful, the greatest challenge and which single action made the greatest positive difference in those early days. While recognising that each appointment will be unique, we anticipate that some trends will emerge, providing useful guidance for new GCs. Certainly going into such challenging roles with your eyes open and with some tried and tested techniques to manage what are often human rather than legal issues, will be a positive start.

The Head of Legal is part of the senior management team, whether or not the post is a board position. The Head of Legal is a business leader and there are many similarities in preparing for any other senior appointment: the CFO, the CIO and the CMO for example. In assembling the survey we considered the views from all these areas. As a result, and in advance of the evidence, we have put together some early considerations, that fall into five broad groups.

First of all though take a deep breath. Those who made the selection have taken a lot of time over it and they want their candidate to succeed. So set aside the paranoia - they aren't out to get you; at least not yet. Bear this in mind as you think about the other considerations; each has equal importance as the first 100 days begin to unfold.

Finding a friend: There will be many new decisions you'll need to take and talking to yourself really isn't healthy! It doesn't need to be lonely at the top. It can take a while to feel able to confide in someone internally, so it might be worth thinking about getting an executive coach, especially for those first months; someone who can help you keep things in perspective and talk to you about early challenges. There may also be lawyers on your panel that you feel able to test your ideas with.

Getting up to speed: Consider what gaps there are in your knowledge. External lawyers really mean it when they say they want to understand the client's business, but deep internal knowledge is the value add of the in-house team. Make sure it is as current as possible. If you are new to the organisation get up to speed with the operational side of the business; visit manufacturing centres, shops, other offices - in the UK and around the world. If you have been promoted internally, what was it that the previous leader protected you from and why did they leave? Do you need to know more about financial management or team management? Ask if you can have an IT buddy so you get to know the particular systems from the start. Are you on top of the regulations specific to that sector? Making use of the training on offer by panel firms can be a useful support.

Mapping the risks: Advising the business about the risks it faces is obviously core to such a role. Do some stakeholder mapping to prioritise who you need to discuss issues with regularly. Walk through the risk register with the team and make sure Legal has a voice on the Risk Committee and Audit Committee if at all possible. Is there a Head of Risk to engage with, or Internal Audit. How often are you going to meet with the Chairman and CEO? If you attend board meetings, perhaps in your joint capacity as Company Secretary, you will have an immediate way to engage with the executive and non-executive team. If not you will need to find a way to get your voice heard. GDPR has created a whole new set of risk exposures and you are going to need strong relationships with the Head of IT and Head of Marketing. As always new regulations create opportunities to influence, but also challenges in terms of time and implementation within the business. It's important to help the business find a way to own the risk.

Talking to your team: If getting things done yourself has been the answer, it isn't now and it isn't sustainable. As a new leader there many different things to understand and you need the support of your team to keep things moving forward. It's an anxious time for the team too. A new leader will be unsettling for them and they don't know yet that the change will be for the best! If you have a team in a variety of locations go and see them in the first instance. It makes subsequent communication a lot easier. Respect the knowledge they have about the organisation, listen and appreciate them as individuals.

Taking the time to reflect: time is a rare commodity, but seize the opportunity of having at least a couple of weeks without a deadline to think about what you want your legacy to be. It might seem a little counter-intuitive to look to the end, but have a destination of sorts in mind. There will be things that have to be achieved and also things that you want to achieve beyond that. What sort of leader do you want to be? Are you clear about your principles and values and the manner

in which you want to operate? Time taken to confirm this will be time well spent, creating a filter to guide the many decisions that will be asked of you.


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