Beyond Law Firms: Working In-house

An increasing number of would-be solicitors are finding that there is life beyond the law firm training contract. Hundreds of companies and organisations across a range of sectors offer graduate positions in their legal departments, an ideal way to combine legal training with genuine hands-on industry insight. Whether you’re pursuing an in-house training contract or just looking to build your legal experience and commercial awareness before applying for training contracts at a later date, you may find that the in-house route is the perfect move for you.

Defining in-house

In-house law simply means working for the client directly rather than for a third-party law firm. From broadcasting and media to retail and manufacturing, many large companies employ their own legal teams for a number of reasons. Certainly it can be a very cost-effective way of receiving legal counsel: although hourly rates have held steady in City law firms over the last few years, the costs involved in even the most straightforward of legal work are very high -- staggeringly so if a company is involved in complex multi-jurisdictional or contentious work. So the bottom line is often the Bottom Line -- your own staff can be cheaper than outsourcing lawyers. Of course your own lawyers are likely to be more committed to your cases than externals; the complete focus and dedication that comes with in-house is a big draw. The other main advantage for the firm is that the in-house lawyer is fully imbedded in the company, acclimatised to its culture and way of doing things. An IBM lawyer is an IBM employee first and foremost.

So what’s it for me?

It’s easy enough to understand the appeal of in-house for the corporation, but what benefits does it offer you? Primarily, it means that you will be fully immersed in the company culture from Day One; close to the action, rather than taking a more aloof stance from an external firm. You’ll see the whole business process and understand the context of the work that you are doing beyond the bounds of the purely legal; you’ll get to see the mechanics of the company and be at the heart of its strategy. The commercial acumen that it will give you is second to none. Another big bonus for the in-house solicitor can be a rather more reasonable work/life balance (i.e., some actual life between the work), though this is very dependent on the individual company.

What’s the catch?

As with anything, there are drawbacks as well as advantages to in-house. For those doing an in-house training contract, the tight corporate focus may be good for gaining an insight into the company you are working for, but it won’t give you much exposure to a variety of clients and types of work. To some extent this is tempered by many organisations working with partner firms. You may spend one or more of your seats with a law firm gaining experience in areas which your company may not deal with. The pay may not match the stellar salaries of the big US law firms, but you’ll not be struggling either.

What if I want to go into private practice later?

Taking an in-house position won’t limit you to that company or even necessarily to in-house work. If you’re in a non-training contract position, you will likely find that City firms greatly value the commercial awareness that in-house work will have given you; you might be a more attractive training contract candidate after a year or so as an in-house paralegal or in another legal role. Those who have completed training contracts in-house can also move to commercial firms, though the ease of doing this depends on the quality and range of exposure you have had.

Likewise, it is possible to go in-house after a private practice training contract. So don’t think of either path as being a one-way street.

Who are they looking for?

Successful in-house applicants are as mixed a bunch as those going into commercial law firms. You’ll still need a good degree, and extra-curricular activities (pro bono, advocacy, volunteering) are also important. The main difference may be commercial experience: if you have a background in the business area that the company works in, you are likely to be an attractive proposition. Consequently in-house is more often chosen by post-experience candidates who have had earlier careers in the relevant sector. That’s not to say that a previous career is essential; business acumen and a genuine understanding of the organisation may compensate for lack of experience.

Furthermore, it’s not just big corporations that employ their own legal counsel. Charities, government agencies and political organisations often take on in-house trainees, so if your interests lie beyond commercial law, this may be an avenue for you.

How to apply

One drawback of the unconventional nature of in-house positions is the lack of centralised application. In-house is still a niche area, so you’ll not find a one-stop shop with all the firms and deadlines (www.lawcareers.net does this for law firms). Instead, you’ll need to do a lot of homework. Organisations may promote their vacancies on their own sites or via recruitment sites like www.totallylegal.co.uk, but there is no central site for organisations to post their in-house vacancies. The speculative letter will be your friend here. Obviously you’ll want to target organisations that work in areas you have knowledge of or experience in. Think about the areas that interest you and write a brief email to the recruitment team; former employers, their clients (and competitors) may all be possibilities.

Additional Resources

Solicitors-to-be should visit the Commerce and Industry group of the Law Society at www.cigroup.org.uk to learn more about working in-house. Aspiring in-house barristers should visit www.bacfi.org for the Bar Association for Commerce, Finance and Industry.
In-House Lawyer Magazine www.inhouselawyer.co.uk are both good sources of industry news and job listings. In-House Lawyer also has information organized by practice area.

To read an informative profile of a junior lawyer who completed his training contract in-house, visit http://juniorlawyers.lawsociety.org.uk/node/528

Good luck with your search!

King’s CareerConnect
www.kcl.ac.uk/careerconnect

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Updated: November 2018