

In a recent interview, Sigurdson talked to *CCCA magazine* about what new in-house counsel should know about moving from private practice to the corporate executive suite. Here are some of his observations about the challenges, the joys, and how to ease the transition:

Learn to manage people

“The practice of law in a law firm is one of the very few careers where you can rise virtually to the top of the profession without ever having to manage other people. In-house practice is, of course, very different. In an in-house environment you... would generally be expected, at some point, to take on responsibility for training, for developing, for assessing and for promoting other personnel. In fact, much of your success will be driven by how successful you are as a people manager...”

“A law firm environment doesn’t always provide a platform or an opportunity to learn and develop skills as a people manager. So, for many people making the transition, that is one of the biggest challenges, but also one of the biggest opportunities to learn new skills... and a lot of organizations have development training to help with your people management skills.”

Become a strategic player

“One of the biggest changes is that, when you make the move from outside counsel to in-house counsel, you will find yourself getting involved in a matter at a much earlier stage than what

you might have been used to.

“Transactions, for example, can have a very long gestation period within a company, and can involve multiple players and multiple layers within the organization. It’s often the case that the company engages outside counsel for that transaction only after it is at a highly developed stage whereas, as in-house counsel, you might have been involved virtually from inception and you will see the transaction evolve through various stages of development that you won’t have the opportunity to see generally as outside counsel...”

“Because of that early involvement you have the opportunity as in-house counsel to often play a more strategic role in the matter’s development, and to make a real difference.”

Hone your decision-making skills

“In most cases as in-house counsel, you are very much expected to be able to take a position on an issue and not just offer competing views. By that I mean that, as outside counsel, I think there can be a temptation sometimes to say to a client something like, ‘You know, on the one hand, there are these arguments, on the other hand, there are those arguments. So, client, you decide.’”

“In an in-house environment, that kind of approach — that is, offering two sides of an issue without coming down on either side — will generally not be well-received. You can certainly put forward arguments for and against each side of an issue, but at the end of the day there is an expectation that you will come forward with

Un monde différent

Un ancien associé directeur torontois explique comment faciliter la transition du cabinet à l’entreprise.

C’est en mars 2010 que Stephen Sigurdson a fait le grand saut en quittant Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP en mars 2010, où il avait mené une brillante carrière, pour devenir vice-président principal chez Financière Manuvie.

Embauché par le cabinet en 1989, M^c Sigurdson a passé quatre ans dans le bureau de New York de 2000 à 2004, puis a été nommé associé directeur à Toronto de 2005 à 2009. Sa dernière fonction chez Osler : chef du département de droit corporatif. Il confie à l’ACCJE les joies et les

défis inhérents à la transition de la pratique privée au département juridique et les manières de la faciliter.

Apprenez à gérer le personnel

La pratique du droit dans un cabinet est l’un des rares métiers permettant de parvenir aux sommets sans avoir à gérer de personnel. À l’inverse, dans un environnement corporatif, vous devrez former, développer, évaluer des membres du personnel et leur offrir une promotion. Il s’agit d’un des plus grands défis pour l’avocat en

transition vers l’entreprise. Plusieurs organisations donnent accès à une formation pour favoriser le développement d’habiletés de gestion.

Devenez un acteur stratégique

L’un des plus grands changements pour l’avocat en transition vers l’entreprise est son implication dans les projets plus tôt qu’à l’accoutumée, notamment durant les transactions, lesquelles requièrent la collaboration de multiples acteurs à l’interne. Pour l’avocat d’entreprise, l’avantage est de

a recommended course of action.

“Now, in many cases, outside counsel do [that] as well. I am not saying that in all cases outside counsel simply present both sides of an issue without a decision, but in the in-house counsel role, I would say there is more of an expectation. You are in an advisory role, but also in a decision-making role.”

Learn the business

“If you are new to an organization, I think it’s important that you try to learn as much about your company’s operations as you can, and as quickly as you can, because it’s that knowledge and that context that help you provide more effective and practical advice...”

“If you want to become valuable to an organization, it’s important that you understand what the business of the organization is about. Obviously, that can’t happen on the first day you arrive, but you should make a concerted effort as new in-house counsel to learn and develop that expertise...”

“In an in-house role, you have one client, in effect, but the breadth of that client’s business means that the scope of issues you can be involved in day to day remains very broad.”

Build relationships inside the company

“I think that successful outside counsel realize early on in their careers that the practice of law is as much relationship-driven as it is knowledge-driven. And the practice of law in an in-house environment is no different: in order for in-house lawyers to be successful they should think about not just developing their legal expertise, but also developing relationships.

“This includes getting to know others in their legal team as well as others across the organization, at all levels.”

“For many people making the transition, [managing people] is one of the biggest challenges, but also one of the biggest opportunities to learn new skills.”

Reap the rewards of new challenges

“It’s energizing, it provides new challenges but, having said that, I very much enjoyed private practice...”

“I think it is the opportunity to really understand a single client and work shoulder-to-shoulder with a client’s management team that’s really, to me, exciting and refreshing.

“And the ability to be involved in matters from inception... You can watch them grow and be part of it.” ■

Virginia Galt is a freelance writer based in Toronto.

gagner de l’expérience en s’impliquant dans les différentes phases du développement transactionnel et en jouant un rôle stratégique proactif.

Perfectionnez vos aptitudes décisionnelles

En tant qu’avocat d’entreprise, vous serez appelés à prendre position sur un sujet plus fréquemment que l’avocat externe. Votre double rôle : conseiller et prendre des décisions. Ne vous limitez donc pas à faire part au client des différentes perspectives entourant une question.

Familiarisez-vous avec l’entreprise

Si vous êtes un avocat fraîchement arrivé

dans une entreprise, il importe que vous appreniez rapidement le maximum d’éléments sur ses opérations. Ces connaissances et votre familiarisation avec le contexte organisationnel vous aideront à proposer des conseils pratiques et accroîtront votre efficacité. Même si vous avez un seul client comme tel, l’éventail des sujets qui exigeront votre participation au quotidien restera étendu.

Établissez des relations

Les avocats externes savent que la pratique juridique dépend autant de leurs connaissances que de leurs relations. Il en est de même pour la pratique du droit en entreprise. Faites donc connaissance avec vos

collègues du département juridique et des autres services, et ce, à tous les échelons de l’organisation.

Récoltez les récompenses résultant des nouveaux défis

À titre d’avocat d’entreprise, vous serez amené à bien comprendre un client unique et à collaborer étroitement avec l’équipe de la direction. Être impliqué dès le début des mandats et les voir évoluer vous procureront le sentiment d’en faire partie intégrante. Les nouveaux défis de la pratique juridique en entreprise sont certainement revitalisants. ■

~Yasmina El Jamaï