

Lately, there is a lot of talk within ACC about the Value Challenge: Specifically, how can attorneys add the most value to a company? I think it's important to address the practical reality, especially for the small law department. Although it may be difficult for some to realize, one area where value is at a premium is the single lawyer in a department or the first lawyer at your company. If you are in a department of less than five attorneys, how can you add the most value to your company?

especially the person you report to. Take a page from tried-and-true practices: Investigate and determine the priorities, business considerations and paths to success that each executive envisions. Be prepared to demonstrate that your value is intertwined with their objectives and goals.

In the mid-1990s, Intuit hired their first in-house lawyer when the company was turning 10 and acquired by Microsoft. The internal workload quickly mushroomed to the point where an additional four lawyers were

and service as a valuable addition to their team, and they develop business decisions that can benefit from advice or counsel. Alone in your office with your nose to the grindstone, you cannot be part of their decision-making process. Consider yourself a person who brings expertise and perspective to any business deal or situation. Listen to your business team's goals and objectives, and understand the potential roadblocks and situations they struggle with. Through this process, you can provide guidance and insight, and develop their appreciation and value for your skills.

Adding Value as a Small Law Department

BY SONYA L. SIGLER

I have been lucky enough to have had a career that has been completely in-house. During that time, I realized there are three things that establish your value to your business team, and these three things should be done immediately and quickly: Establish relationships with the business team based on trust; set expectations, then meet and exceed them; and implement repeatable processes to drive success.

Establish trust

The question I hear most often is: How do I become a trusted advisor to executives, senior management and business teams? This trust is especially difficult to form if you are the first in-house lawyer in your company, because these constituents have not previously relied on an attorney and may not know how to use you effectively. Establish a working relationship with each constituent member,

hired. One of the business unit executives said, "We haven't had lawyers for 10 years. Why do we need you?"

The answer isn't supplied as easily as the question is asked. The legal workload had escalated significantly because of the number of acquisitions and deals at Intuit. Both were aspects of law, which required their own lawyer. As Intuit transitioned from a desktop software company to a financial services company, legal compliance and risk issues became important. We addressed this particular executive's concern through a presentation called, "What Legal Can Do for You." At that stage, we had been at the company long enough to know the factors and path to success for the various business units — whether completing acquisitions or meeting revenue targets.

Scheduling time to meet with members of the executive team on a regular basis elevates your value

Set expectations and meet or exceed them

Setting expectations and meeting or exceeding them can be one of the hardest areas to manage as in-house counsel. Everyone, and I mean everyone, has demands on your time. You must manage that limited resource to set expectations on workload priorities, turnaround time and the level of advice that you will give. In-house counsel's advice can run the full spectrum: litigation support, risk management, privacy, compliance and even business advice.

Be clear about what type of advice you are giving to build a trusted relationship. Some lawyers give everything as if it is all legal advice, and they attempt to force the business team to agree to all of their advice, regardless of type. Legal advice is a give-and-take process, where business advice is listened to only after trust has been established. Otherwise, everything but legal advice can fall on deaf ears.

Expectations about turnaround time are also very important to manage. Sales people have one expectation on turnaround time, and you will have



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another. Making sure those two expectations match will lead you to a more trusted and appreciated relationship.

Often, executives and other business people don't know how to use lawyers, or misunderstand how to use lawyers and have unrealistic expectations. It is crucial to address these issues up front, and to really flush out true deadlines and priorities. Once they understand that you want to help them meet their goals, they will start to see the value that you bring to their decisions and transactions.


Process as the pathway to success

For agreements or situations that happen repeatedly, such as sales contracts, NDAs or independent contractor agreements, consider how a properly implemented process around those decisions will minimize the demands on your time. (A good

resource for processes is the book "Checklist Manifesto" by Atul Gawande). For example, NDA requests can be managed via internal share site or a wiki where anyone in the company who needs to send out an NDA can download it. This type of self-service system can range from a PDF of the company's preferred agreement, which anyone in the company can use, to an online contract generation system that can generate a specific NDA for a specific situation. You only need to review those NDAs that are exceptions to your form document. The business side gets what they need in a timely fashion, and you minimize the demands on your time.

Systematizing repeatedly requested agreements, provisions or advice adds value to your business constituency, as it will increase the pace at which they can accomplish their goals. Systems that minimize inefficiencies or that

can empower your business people to make non-legal decisions remove you as a roadblock. One thing that prevents a business team from approaching an attorney is they anticipate and don't want to hear "no" or "you can't do that." A system that creates an easy-to-use process with minimal business interruptions enhances your value and creates a perception that you are a valuable addition to the business.

Implementing any of these three suggestions will demonstrate your value to the executives and business people in your company. 

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