

# Young lawyers "in da house"

An informal survey

*So, what exactly does it mean when someone says they work "In House" or as a "Corporate Lawyer"? What do they do? How does it differ from private practice? Why are Young Lawyers doing it? How did they get there? And do they like it?*

Jacinta Cullum was determined to find out the answers to these questions and more...<sup>1</sup>

**I**n-house practitioners are everywhere – members of the legal profession scattered seemingly randomly throughout the business world and helping to improve the particular businesses for which they work. I contacted young lawyers working in corporate practice in varied industries: from publishing to events, from media to IT. The titles they go by (such as Contracts Manager or Adviser, Legal Liaison, Corporate Solicitor and General Counsel) seem to vary as much as their careers paths, the sort of work they do, the hours they work, and the pay they receive. This is what I found....

## Where do they come from?

Some come straight out of the Leo Cussen course into in-house practice, others come from private practice wanting to work in a particular industry. Some move on from big law firms for a change of focus or culture and, others, come from smaller practices to utilise the more general skills they have obtained there. Some come from within the company, sometimes studying for their law degree while working within the industry and moving into a legal role upon completion. While others are working on secondment from some of the larger legal firms and, at some point in their secondment, decide to stay on.

## What sort of hours do they work?

This seems to vary just as much as it does across private practice. Some corporate practitioners reported working 40 – 50 hours per week, some others clock up to 75 – 80 hours per week during peak periods. Presumably, there is even more variation than in private practice, in that the same variants exist as in private practice (e.g., workload, preparation for litigation and Court schedules), but also industry variations and catering for needs of particular businesses that work around certain events or particular times of the year. It appears, however, that work hours in corporate practice can be more flexible, depending upon the needs of the business.

## What work do they do?

As a Jack (or Jill) of all trades, an in-house lawyer needs to provide for their company's legal needs, this includes drafting and negotiating contracts, employment law and workplace relations advice, precedent work, debt recovery, compliance advice depending upon their industry, enforcement of intellectual property rights, and litigation management. Whether all of these tasks are taken on by one individual or a team depends upon the organisation.

## Who do they work with?

Rather than working in a firm environment, with other practitioners and support staff, in-house lawyers work within the organisation itself. Their colleagues are the employees of that organisation: business people of all types, from the dog's body to the CEO. In one particular instance, although there is a team of corporate lawyers employed by the organisation there are also other legal practitioners in the workplace working in non-legal roles. Most respondents surveyed reported either working as the sole corporate lawyer (at least at their office), or one of only a few.

## Why do they do it?

Of those surveyed, most quoted their reasons for seeking work in corporate practice as autonomy, client proximity, practical experience, and variety of work. Also important appears to be the different culture of working within a corporation as opposed to a firm, working within an interest area, a better work/life balance, and not having to fill out time sheets! Other benefits of working in corporate practice noted by those surveyed include gaining an understanding of a particular industry and diverse career opportunities.

## What do they get paid?

There was a stark difference of opinion as to whether the pay differs from that in private practice, some claiming to receive much higher remuneration, and others stating that they receive less. Some, of course, carefully qualified their response, declaring better overall remuneration, considering rate of pay and hours worked per week.

## How is it different from private practice?

Apart from the different culture and work environment already mentioned, in-house lawyers see their work as more practical. Those surveyed cited having more independence and less supervision as a critical difference. Other points of difference included having more flexible hours, learning business skills as well as legal skills, and an overall corporate focus.

Some drawbacks listed were lack of resources, such as legal secretaries, library services and publications, limited access to CPD, and, of course, missing other practitioners' brains to pick (for those practising alone). Some felt that the supervision and mentoring that young lawyers in particular need, can be lacking in in-house practice. Those surveyed also reported feelings of isolation from the rest of the profession. There are also concerns over ethical considerations particularly with regard to conflicts of interest, given that as an in-house lawyer your "client" is also your employer.

## Conclusion

Overall, the young lawyers surveyed really seemed very passionate about, and love, their jobs. This survey, hopefully, provides some insight into the professional lives of those who practice in-house. ■

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the answers supplied to an informal survey distributed to a small sample of Victorian Young Lawyers currently working in-house. A big thank you to all of those who did respond.



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