



Journey to General Counsel

SEARCH

Reaching the General Counsel pinnacle means sitting atop the legal tree. But the role of a GC is about being so much more than a lawyer.

While the journey to reaching this career goal has always been unique to the individual, we wanted to see if there were any trends or themes that could be seen throughout the profession.

Between August and November 2023, the Search in-house legal recruitment team individually interviewed over 100 General Counsels from different industries and companies of all sizes across the UK. We asked them about their career journeys and listened to their insights about the role of a GC in the UK today, and what they think the future holds.

Our hope with this **Journey to General Counsel** report is to provide aspiring GCs with advice about how to reach and succeed in the role. We also wanted to give practising GCs the opportunity to exchange thoughts and opinions with one another.

The key topical issues

In this report, we delve into:

- GCs' career journeys
- Evolution of the role of the GC
- Key skills that GCs prioritise in their daily jobs
- What GCs enjoy (and don't enjoy) about the role
- The importance of having the right reporting lines to maximise influence
- Career possibilities post-GC
- Key advice for aspiring GCs

Acknowledgments

We are hugely thankful to the General Counsels who graciously gave their time to sit down with us and share their views. Their openness and willingness to support less experienced lawyers was brilliant to witness. Their thoughts and experiences have shaped this report into a valuable resource for aspiring and current GCs alike.

We would also like to give a special thank you to **Cooley LLP** for hosting the launch event for the report on Thursday 1st February 2024.

Meet the Search Legal team



James Franklin

James is a Director at Search and is responsible for the London office. Having practised as a lawyer, James made the move into legal recruitment more than 15 years ago. He spent the early part of his career with a FTSE 250 global recruitment company. James specialises in hiring General Counsels across the market.



Neel Mehta

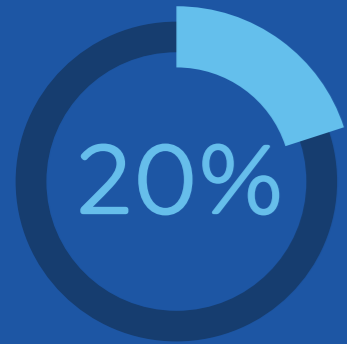
Neel leads our permanent in-house legal hiring across the UK, with a focus on the commerce and industry sectors. Using his legal background, Neel partners with clients to deliver a full spectrum of recruitment solutions from attracting General Counsels and Chief Legal Officers through to hiring Legal Counsel roles.



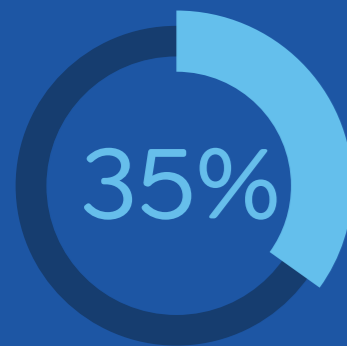
Clare Wilkinson

Clare manages our interim solutions. She specialises in providing our in-house legal clients with short-term and contractor solutions. Clare can provide support with any in-house requirements from Legal Counsel positions through to board level leadership roles.

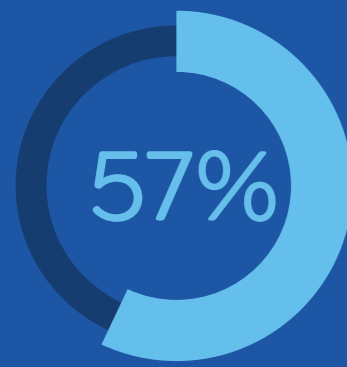
Key Insights



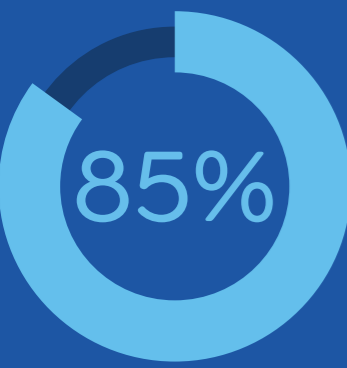
GC's say that only circa 20% of their current roles are actually 'legal' in nature



of GCs we spoke to qualified into a **corporate** discipline as an NQ



of GCs did **not** train at a Magic/Silver Circle firm



of GCs play a proactive role in developing their organisations' ESG programme

GCs ranked  **exercising sound judgement** as the most important skill when analysing their roles




of the GCs we spoke to would only want to report to the CEO of their business

 **75%** actively advised aspiring GCs to value and grow their people network

 **30%** of GCs see the COO role as a natural next step in their careers

2 in 5 became GC for the first time between 11-15 years' PQE



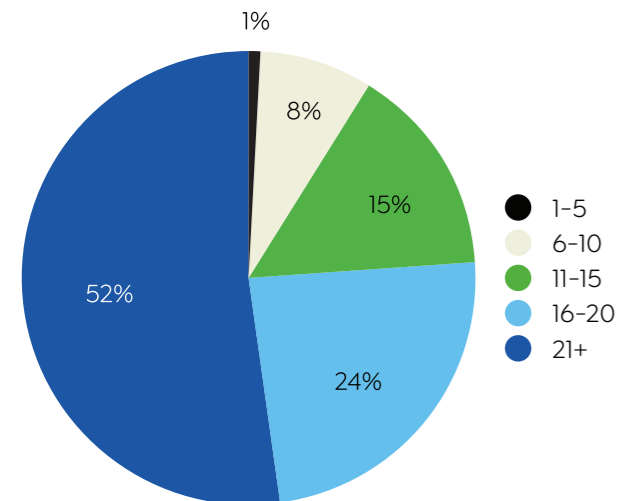
The **variety of work and problem solving** are the most enjoyable aspects of GCs' roles 

Who did we speak to?

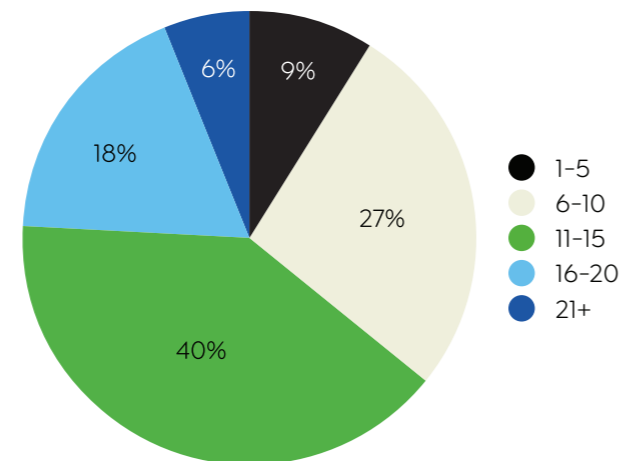
The team spoke with General Counsels from a range of industry sectors, business sizes and varied levels of experience. This provided an enriched data set, which helped develop this report.

As evidenced in the graphs below, over three quarters of the GCs interviewed had at least 16 years' PQE, which provided us with some very interesting responses from experienced lawyers. In addition, there was nearly an equal split of GCs from FTSE listed, PE / VC backed and private companies providing a window into the differing priorities required in the different size of organisations. Furthermore, we had a broad spectrum in team size which provided some subjective data relating to the GCs' management and skill needs.

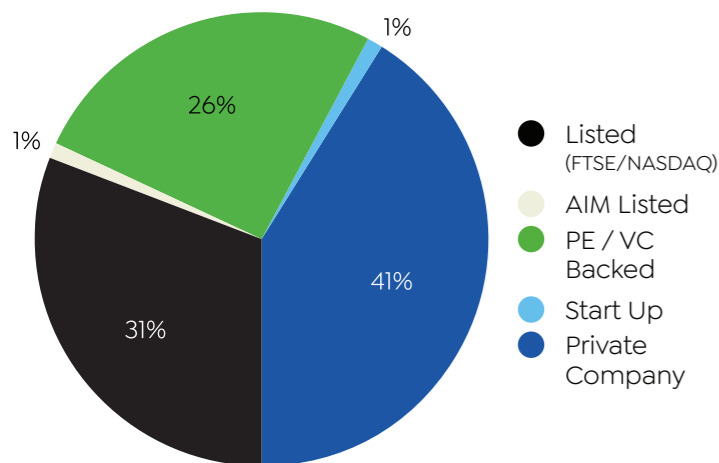
Your current PQE?



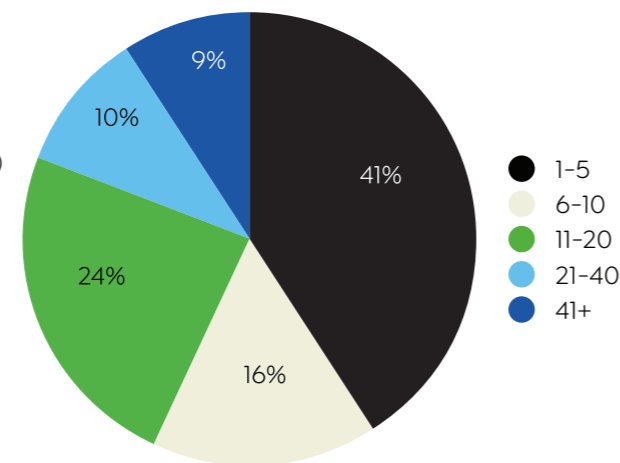
PQE at which you gained your first GC role?



Company type?



Current team size?



How do you become a General Counsel?

The career path of GCs is shifting

By Clare Wilkinson

The dominance of corporate-trained lawyers in GC roles

The dominance of corporate-trained lawyers taking up the role of General Counsel is well documented within the legal market. Armed with a wealth of experience in navigating the dynamics of corporate law, these professionals bring strategic acumen and an understanding of business complexities to the role of a GC.

Their journey reflects the evolving demands of the corporate landscape, where legal expertise is seamlessly integrated into a company's strategy. As General Counsel, they not only practise the law but also contribute significantly to the overall success and resilience of their organisations.

Unlocking new paths, beyond corporate and finance law

If you didn't initially find your path into the legal industry via corporate or finance law, remember that the in-house world is vast and diverse. There are numerous opportunities beyond the traditional routes.

Out of the more than 100 GCs we spoke to, 65% didn't take the corporate avenue. Their

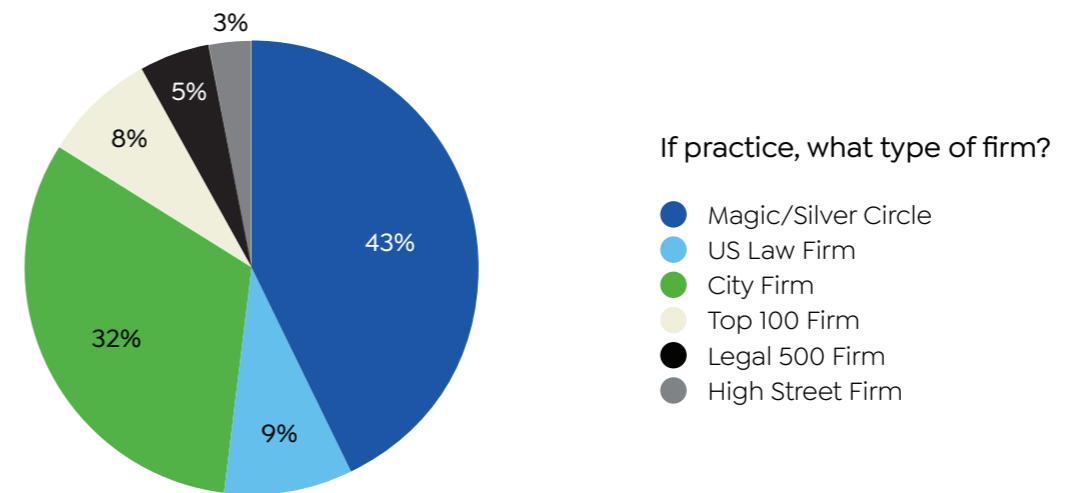
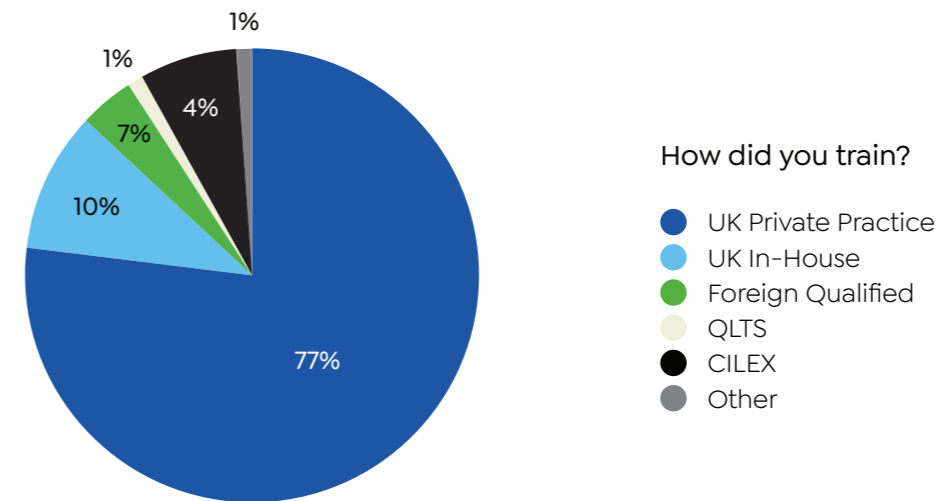
backgrounds, training and qualifications are varied, and they have enriched this report with their diverse experiences and opinions. Some of the disciplines GCs have qualified into include Commercial, Employment, Projects, and Litigation. Additionally, we interviewed a small number of GCs who qualified as Barristers.

If you're an aspiring GC, embrace the distinctive strengths you bring to the table. Cognitive diversity within a business's senior leadership is crucial to its adaptability and success.

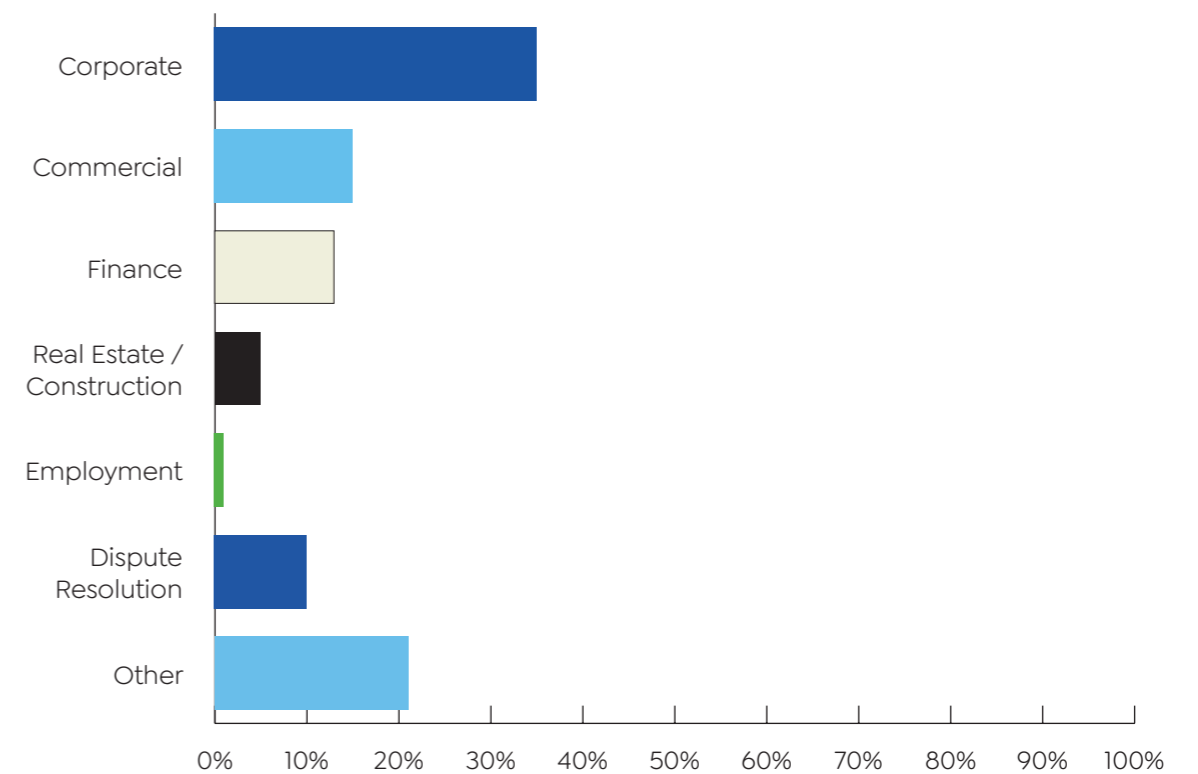
The Magic Circle is no longer the standard route

Historically, to become a General Counsel, you needed to train with one of the five law firms in the Magic/Silver Circle. However, we found that is not the case anymore. More than half (57%) of the General Counsels we interviewed are non-Magic/Silver Circle lawyers.

Their journeys are inspiring a shift in the legal landscape, emphasising the value of diverse perspectives and varied expertise. This serves as a beacon for aspiring legal minds. It reinforces the idea that merit and hard work pave the way for triumph, regardless of traditional big firm affiliations.



Legal specialism upon qualification



The evolution of the General Counsel

From risk adviser to trusted business partner, the role of a GC is expanding

By Neel Mehta

General Counsels have been integral to business operations for decades. The role of the GC is, first and foremost, to be the custodian of the legal function and primary risk adviser. However, the depth and variety of their interactions and influence within businesses have been tangibly growing.

We are increasingly seeing a more commercial nature to the role. A GC is, in fact, a multi-faceted, trusted business adviser and partner to many internal stakeholders. This includes but is not limited to working with the Board and other operational departments.

Mollie Stoker, Britvic echoed the views of most of her peers when she said, “GCs, as leaders, have some of the greatest access to and involvement with most, if not all, areas of the business, and are therefore well placed to influence on so much more than just legal matters.”

However, GCs cannot operate in a vacuum or from the legal ivory tower to succeed.

Search does not see in-house lawyers merely as lawyers, rather as business professionals with legal skills.

Joining the Board

The ability to identify and analyse an issue, extract the salient facts, simplify challenges for non-legal colleagues and find commercial solutions is key to the role. Well-run organisations appreciate the value that legal functions bring to the business. A key measure of this is the GC having a seat at the top table.

For GCs who are on the board, it is vital that their independence is preserved. Any influence on business outcomes needs to reflect the importance of this autonomy.

Taking leadership roles

Over the last decade, we have witnessed General Counsels taking on more and more responsibility across businesses. Many have been promoted to departmental lead roles. It is now common to see GCs managing not just the legal team, but also the Company Secretariat, compliance, sustainability, HR and other areas of business.

Spearheading ESG strategies

General Counsels are also well-positioned to manage projects, bringing professionals from different parts of a business together for a common cause. A prominent example of this cross-departmental leadership is the role GCs can play in developing their company’s ESG programmes. A minefield to navigate, ESG has moved up the to-do list of businesses and their stakeholders.

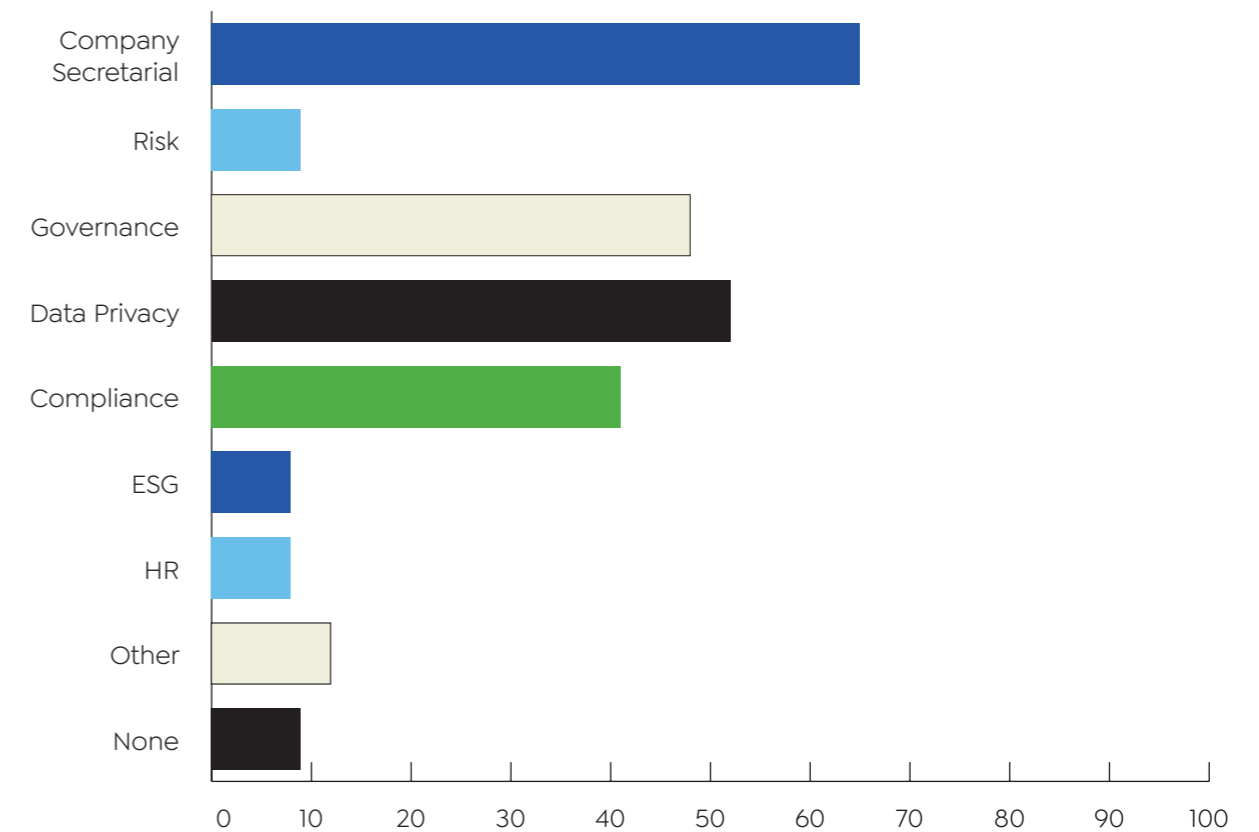
With so much to decamp within the realm of ESG, along with regulations coming in to measure it, GCs are well-placed to understand the challenges. They can identify the associated opportunities and risks and, ultimately, become executive sponsors of ESG.

As Samir Damle, HanETF encouraged GCs to ask, “Where does ESG live? Is it an investment issue, product, cultural, environmental or otherwise? Nobody is trying to greenwash, businesses are just trying to understand what the regulators want and act accordingly in the best interests of the business.”

Richard Taylor, euNetworks insightfully added, “Whilst ESG is important for us as a business, it is also important for our investors and customers. As well as delivering those things that everyone has to, we also seek to deliver initiatives that are disproportionately valuable to our investors and customers and double-down on those.”

If you aspire to become a GC, understanding the pervasiveness of the role will be essential. It can be a shock to the system if you haven’t anticipated the collaborative, proactive and non-transactional role GCs play in a business.

Additional management responsibility



“You don’t know what you don’t know. Be curious, be confident in your own ability and remain calm.”



What are the reporting lines for General Counsels?

Positioning is crucial to exerting influence as a GC

By Neel Mehta

During our interviews, General Counsels highlighted the importance of the role's positioning within their organisations. A business's legal team should be seen as a trusted partner, not a supportive or administrative function. Many GCs we spoke to would happily rename Legal to the "common sense department".

Who you report to is also a crucial consideration for current GCs and anyone looking to become one in the future. Traditionally, GCs have reported to the CEO of a company. Predominately, this is still the case; however, we are seeing some shifts in reporting lines.

Reporting to the CEO

Having a seat at the top table, i.e. a place on the executive committee and reporting to the CEO, means you can have a finger on the strategic pulse of a business.

Over 70% of the General Counsels we interviewed said they would only take a role if it reported to the CEO. However, we found that only 57% actually report to their CEO.

While the CEO reporting line is the generally preferred dynamic, GCs have shown they can thrive and remain influential even if they report elsewhere. The role of the GC can be said to be a critical strategic partner, bringing cognitive diversity to the senior leadership table and helping define business direction.

Reporting to the CFO

Out of the General Counsels we spoke to, 15% report to their CFO. One view is that while this can work alongside having an open-door policy with the CEO, the reality is that having such a reporting line risks

diluting the GC's messaging to the business and diminishes their influence.

As Amy Abbott, Dun & Bradstreet Europe stated,

"The conscience of the business should not report to its wallet."

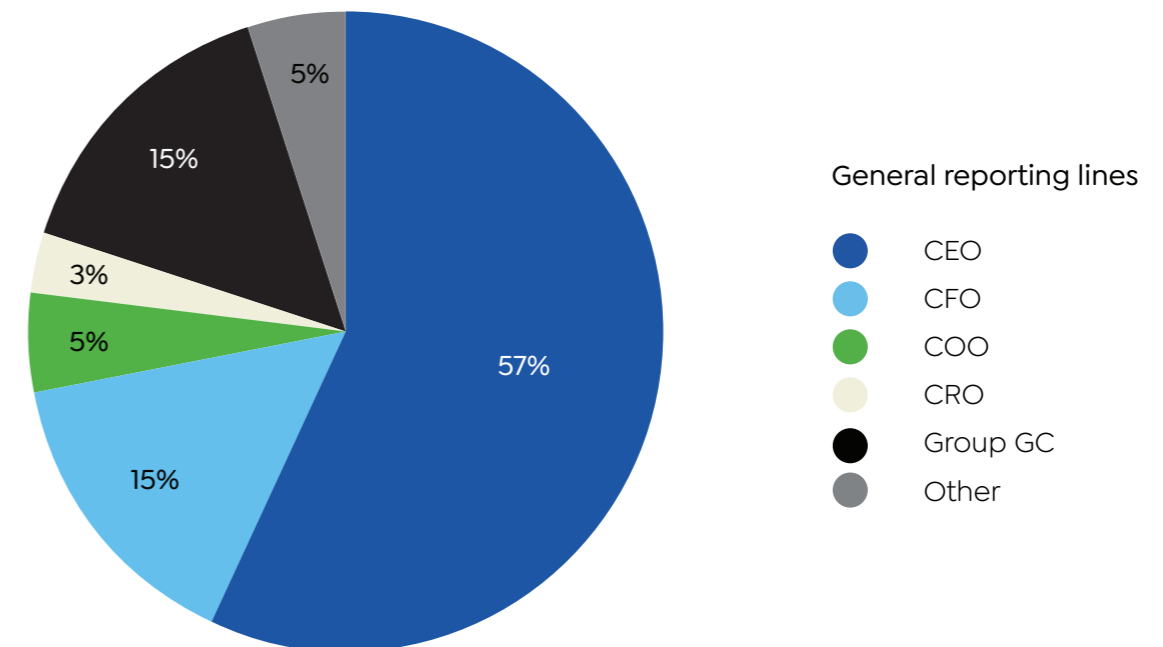
Interestingly, a large proportion of GCs who currently report to their CFO have made the best of the situation. As long as they have an open-door policy with their CEO and board, they feel the reporting line works. However, on the other hand, the rest of the GCs we spoke to would not want to report to a CFO again.

GCs in startups are much more likely to be heavily involved in setting up the company's legal function from scratch. Establishing the appropriate reporting lines in an environment where business leaders may not yet understand the broader value legal brings to the table, is a unique challenge. Commonly in the startup arena, GCs begin by reporting into the CFO and upon educating the business on their wide ranging influence eventually transition to reporting to the CEO.

Other reporting lines

General Counsels today are taking up more operational positions within businesses, with 5% of the professionals we interviewed telling us they report to their COO. Aside from being problem solvers, GCs are playing a bigger role in revenue generation for their businesses. Of the GCs we spoke to, 3% report to their CRO.

Regardless of where you report, being in a position to understand and help drive strategy is vital to minimise risks and help businesses achieve their goals.



As Joy van Cooten, ACI Worldwide commented,

"A GC can become irrelevant quickly if he or she is not fully aware about the strategy of the business."

Ultimately, as an aspiring GC, you should be aware of your unique value-add proposition to a company. This can help you steer your career where you want to take it in and guide the organisation in the right direction for the good of the business and its people. Reporting lines are subjective to each individual business, but it is something to consider when applying for or moving into a GC role. Think about how you get where you want to be within a company and who you want to report to.

What does job satisfaction mean to GCs?

Our interviewees shared what they enjoy (and don't enjoy) about the role

By James Franklin

Across all the General Counsels we interviewed, it was apparent that their enjoyment of the role was a leading reason why these lawyers moved in-house from a private practice. All the respondents had positive views on their roles.

It was a particular highlight of mine to see the smile that came from **John Francas at PGS** when I asked him if there was anything he disliked as he discussed their deep-sea operations. He responded,

“Hardly anything, James. I love my role.”

Overwhelmingly, our discussions with GCs suggest that the role is not only coveted but, once lawyers are in the role, it is a position that they relish. However, that does not mean it is not without its difficulties.

What do GCs enjoy about the role?

Problem solving

A common theme across many of our interviewees is enjoying managing and solving problems. Being a solution-orientated “enabler” to the business was another consistent concept across many of our contributors.

“It’s about having to balance risks and having to be a trusted adviser [...] you must be the person who can be balanced and take a step back and see it from a different approach. You are trying to give a different perspective, but still part of a team that rows in the same direction.” **Stephanie Dominy, Staffbase.**

“It’s a solution-driven role, working with all levels of the organisation to find solutions to improve the business. Not just legal solutions [...] I enjoy being an enabler and I converted Legal from a business blocker to an enabling function.” **Anonymous GC, PE Backed Multinational.**

These key elements of driving enablement are fundamental to the services a GC provides. **Mollie Stoker, Britvic** referred to the GC as the “*consigliere of the business*”.

Strategic involvement

It was noticeable that many of the General Counsels

we spoke to had stepped away from basic legal activity. One recurring theme we found was many GCs revel in advising at a strategic and logical level, rather than from a detailed legal perspective.

“I’m often seen as the panoramic view across the business. I enjoy being at the start of strategy decisions and being an adviser to the CEO.” **Alexandra Thrower, Reed & Mackay.**

However, the size of a business affects GCs’ ability to take a more strategic approach. We found that many GCs with larger teams have empowered their people to carry out the everyday tasks. This frees the GCs up to focus on the strategic work with their boards that they enjoy.

Conversely, within small legal teams, the GCs were still performing the day-to-day legal work. This more conventional approach would motivate the legal technician; however, it could frustrate the entrepreneurial lawyer.

“In a smaller business, there can be some “reaching down”, where your workload has a broad span and includes a lot less interesting work. Additionally, some stakeholders prefer the lawyers to be seen but not heard.” **Anonymous GC, Private SME.**

Leadership

For any team leader, nurturing and mentoring your staff is a rewarding and highly enjoyable part of people management. When asked what she enjoys most, **Helen Mason, Morgan Sindall** quite simply stated, “*The people, who are very talented!*”

Moreover, it is not just the management of your people, it is the opportunity to see them develop. **Chris Edwards, Interserve** said,

“It’s a privilege to develop less experienced talent.”

What do GCs not enjoy about the role?

But with all these positive comments, there are clearly times when being a General Counsel can be frustrating. Perhaps it’s not the dislike or lack of enjoyment of the role, but an element of irritation with a business and how legal is perceived. As we discussed, GCs see themselves as enablers, but

winning the hearts and minds of other stakeholders can be tricky.

“In some roles only, fighting for resources for Legal can be frustrating, compared to finance which has it easier.” **Solomon Osagie, Cashplus Bank.**

Kirsty Whitehead, Esure commented how challenging it can be when “*there will always be some stakeholders who see you as a “hurdle.”*”

David Foley, Centrica gave a balanced view on people management as both a pleasure and a challenge, “*I really enjoy the people side of the role – developing and assisting lawyers, as they progress in their career through my guidance and help is rewarding. The flip side and negatives of dealing with large people teams are often created where attitudes and values are not aligned.*”

As a GC, your enjoyment will depend on the circumstances and activities of the organisation, your role within the company and how it is seen.



“There are times when you are being leant on to give a decision that you don’t want to give.

In a listed business, your responsibility is to the entity and the shareholders, not the CEO.”



Abilities that General Counsels prioritise

General Counsels ranked their skills as follows

By James Franklin

All of the General Counsels we interviewed were asked about their priorities on a day-to-day basis. We tasked them with ranking 10 key skills according to their importance, and the exercise generated some interesting discussion points.

The standout skills that our interviewees felt were in their top two included:

Exercising sound judgement – 87%
Influencing stakeholders – 74%

Exercising sound judgement

You never have complete information, you have to make calls that positively impact the business, while accounting for risk.

Influencing stakeholders

This follows on from relationships, but the gravitas to convince people to your way of thinking is important.

Building relationships

Soft skills are hugely important; you can't influence if you don't have relationships.

Understanding the product or service the business provides

Without this understanding, you can't advise.

Simplifying legal challenges for non-legal colleagues

You're there to help everyone do their jobs well and to take the

legal pain out of the equation. If they understand the 'what' and 'why', they are empowered to succeed.

Building and managing a legal function

Getting the right set-up and infrastructure is key to managing the function well and becoming indispensable to the business. Finding people technically better than you in specialist areas is the perfect scenario.

Ensuring legal compliance

The buck stops with you but usually teams are equipped to manage this day-to-day.

Understanding finances and managing budgets

While your function's budgets are important, you need to understand balance sheets and profit and loss statements. You

can't strategically advise if you can't rationalise these concepts.

Technical BAU work

The degree of day-to-day involvement is usually dictated by team size.

Adapting to new technology

Creating efficiencies is, of course, good, but you can't substitute for internal knowledge within the business. AI cannot account for risk position, so you can't rely on it solely. Many GCs are sitting on the fence and waiting for market leading providers to emerge. However, digital transformation is key to long-term success.

Some surprising results

As technology and AI are ever-growing, it was interesting to see that GCs rank **adapting to new technology** as one of the least important parts of their roles. Overwhelmingly, nearly 80% of GCs put the adoption of new technology into their teams in the bottom quartile of importance. One of the common responses for this was the large cost of adopting new technology into the legal budget.

Similarly, 64% of GCs felt that instructing and managing external counsel was a low priority. Only 6% felt this was of medium importance in the day-to-day.

Unsurprisingly, **understanding finances and managing budgets** was seen as less crucial. Over 70% agreed this was one of the least important aspects of the role. Perhaps this demonstrates the clear break between lawyers and finance professionals in their careers.

We were surprised to see that only 23% of GCs put the need to **understand your product or service that the company provides** in their top three priorities, though they all acknowledged its importance in credibly advising their businesses.

Legal advice at this level is more generic, as seen with the recruitment of GCs from outside of the business industry. But it was evident that those GCs that work in financial services and other highly regulated industries, have to have a full understanding of the services of their organisation.

Consequently, those same GCs also ranked **ensuring legal compliance** for their organisation as a high priority. This was even seen as the number one skill for nearly 10% of interviewees, all of whom work within financial services.

Building and managing a legal function had mixed responses. Surprisingly, only 2% of GCs saw managing their team as their most important skill. The majority (over 70%) of GCs ranked management in the middle of their list of priorities. We found responses directly correlated to the size of the team. The GC with the largest team managed in excess of 75 lawyers. Whilst at the other end of the scale, we also interviewed a stand-alone GC. The average team size was 10 to 20 lawyers.

Exercise sound judgement

Influence stakeholders

Build relationships

Understand the product

Simplify challenges

Manage a team

Ensure compliance

Manage financials

BAU work

Adapt to tech

What could be next for General Counsels?

The journey to C-suite

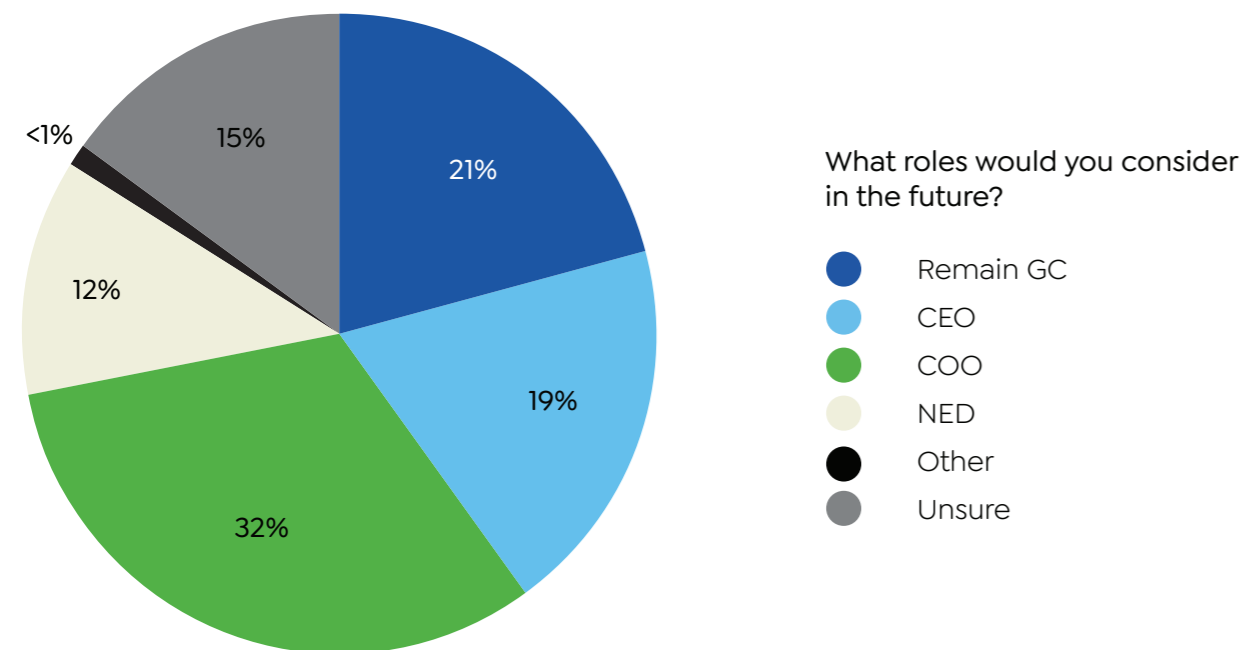
By Neel Mehta

The road to General Counsel includes constant learning, opportunities waiting to be taken, and of course, some occasional luck. The most successful GCs hone their ability to lead and influence as true business protagonists, cultivating skillsets that transcend the legal function. The significant salary a GC commands reflects the value to any business.

A frequent talking point in many of the interviews we conducted was the fact that we rarely see GCs in the UK moving into non-legal ex-co roles, such as CEO or COO. Some GCs believe these positions are often earmarked for professionals from other backgrounds, such as finance or business. This is in stark contrast with the US, where GCs are culturally championed into such roles on a regular basis.

Solomon Osagie, Cashplus Bank said,

“GCs in the UK deserve more recognition than they get and are often less visible in decision-making than they should be.”



Happily, it feels like the status quo is slowly but steadily changing. Businesses are increasingly becoming aware of the leading role GCs play in their success. The overwhelming view is that the GC role is a board-level role and should sit with the Exec.

The expansion of the GC role over the last 20 years is leading to a greater desire for many to become future COOs and CEOs. These GCs increasingly believe they have the transferrable skills to eventually make the move. Indeed, 30% now see the COO role as a natural step.

Simon Coles, Monument suggested,

“I tend to see a GC to COO move as lateral and not necessarily an elevation. I believe broadly that COOs are (or at least should be) direct peers of GCs.”

25% of the interviewees opined that if the CEO of a mid-sized company was lost at short notice, the GC would be well-equipped for the interim role given their knowledge of the business and the relationships built within it. However, this is not always the case. Many of the GCs we spoke to said they enjoyed being a lawyer too much to consider the CEO or COO role.

Regardless of whether they would consider such roles in the future, all the GCs we interviewed were keen to continue learning and push themselves out of their comfort zones. Many have invested their time into taking business courses and Non-Executive Directorships to augment their business knowledge. Completing an MBA, taking NED roles and enrolling on skills-enhancing courses were all among the common aspirations GCs expressed.

Advice for future General Counsels?

Uplifting and inspiring words
from GCs across the UK

By Clare Wilkinson

We asked the 100+ lawyers we interviewed what advice they would give to anyone aspiring to become a GC. We've pulled together the key themes and hope this inspires you on your journey to GC.

Don't chase the title, chase the right role.

Keep expanding your network of people you can use as a sounding board – this can be your superpower.

Pick an industry sector you're passionate about.

Don't pigeonhole yourself into specific areas of law – the best GCs can turn their hand to almost anything.

Hire people technically better than you into your team.

Upskill yourself on financial and business matters by taking courses independent from your own organisation to avoid institutionalisation.

Focus on the softer skills – influencing and building relationships with stakeholders, networking and emotional intelligence.

Push yourself to do things that do not come naturally – public speaking, new technical legal disciplines and people management.

Be comfortable in the uncomfortable and grey area.

If you're still in practice, try to go out on in-house secondments.

Have the right mentors, and not necessarily just those in the legal profession.

Don't play favourites.

Respond quickly and make sure you can simplify legalese for non-legal colleagues.

Listen to your colleagues and don't assume lawyers are the smartest people in the room.

Get a full understanding of how your business operates, **don't just be a lawyer.**



About Search

The next step is always a step up

We're Search; a leading multi-discipline recruitment agency, covering over 15 areas of recruitment across the UK.

With over 35 years of recruitment experience and 15 offices nationwide, Search is one of the UK's leading private equity-backed recruitment businesses.

Our dedicated Professional Services team specialises in placing legal professionals within private practice and in-house roles. They bring a wealth of knowledge, spanning across different sectors of the legal industry. We have qualified lawyers, ex-legal professionals and experienced legal recruitment consultants in the team. They're on hand to support you if you're ready to take the next step, whether you're a practising GC or it's your goal to become one.

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