WHAT IT MEANS TO ADVANCE YOUR IN-HOUSE CAREER
A discussion with Deborah Ben-Canaan of Major, Lindsey & Africa

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Is your New Year’s resolution career related? Have you decided that 2016 is the year you become better at your job, advance in your career or change jobs? If so, then keep reading.

This month, I spoke with Deborah Ben-Canaan, partner and head of the Washington, DC in-house practice for Major, Lindsey & Africa, a leading global legal search firm. She provided great insight into determining career goals and what it means to advance your career in-house.

What does it mean to advance an in-house career? Is there one general formula for moving up and growing professionally?

It depends on what advancement means to you. For some people, this means a higher compensation; for others, it’s a different title or broader skill set or leadership role. You need to carefully think about what advancement means to you and how you want to grow professionally. Different answers will take you down different career paths.

How does one advance their career in a corporate legal department since they tend to be flat with fewer turnovers?

You need to start by asking yourself what it is you want. Depending on the answer, there are a variety of different paths available to you. For example, you might choose to broaden your practice by acquiring more skills and volunteering to take on more responsibilities. By taking on more things, you can become indispensable to the organisation. On the other hand, you might consider moving outside of legal and transitioning into compliance, government relations, or human resources. If your goal is to look for a better title, broaden the scope of responsibilities, or have more people reporting to you – and you aren’t getting that in your current organisation, you may need to consider looking elsewhere. And keep in mind that sometimes the next step is not a bigger company, but a bigger role in a smaller company.

Since we are talking about a title, how important is one?

Once again, this depends on your goal. A title is less important if you want to stay within your current organisation and continue your professional growth by acquiring new skills, expanding your practice, getting leadership opportunities, and being compensated fairly. However, if you are looking to switch jobs, you want to consider the title and the significance of the role within the new company. A vice president in one organisation means something completely different than that same title in another organisation. Since different companies have different title structures, how can someone find out where the new job they are interviewing for fits in?

The best approach would be to ask about the structure of the organisation during the interview. This will give you an idea of where this position fits into the department and organisation as a whole then you can determine if this job is a wise move for your career.

If the path someone wants to take is a leadership one, what type of skills do they need?

Being able to demonstrate that you have business and financial acumen and are able to think strategically – along with possessing actual leadership and management experience – will position you for success as a leader.

How does one obtain those skills while in their current position, especially if these are not in their current job description?

Volunteer to do more within your own organisation. For example, if you are a litigator but are looking for contract drafting experience, ask to shadow your transactional colleague and then ask to assist with a smaller transaction. Also, look for learning opportunities externally. If you are interested in board governance experience, volunteering for a not-for-profit board is an examples of something you can do. For financial acumen – and even business skills – take classes or find a mentor in your finance group that will answer
Is there anything our readers should consider before starting on the road to career advancement?

In thinking about your career advancement, you should always ask yourself why you want to advance and what your goal is. Is it because you think you have to move up? You might be assuming that everyone wants to be a general counsel, but not everyone wants to be or should be one. And, that’s OK! It is OK to excel as a corporate counsel, to work part time or even move into a non-legal position. You need to answer what advancing means to you personally, then the path will become clear.

I hope you enjoyed a peek into our conversation. As you begin on your path to career advancement, keep the following in mind:

1. Find ways to broaden you skill sets and volunteer to do more within your organisation to show your initiative and interest in advancing.
2. Keep your resume up-to-date and maintain a running list of your accomplishments, which will help when you need to demonstrate all the hard work you have done.
3. Always take a recruiter call because the conversation will either help you appreciate your current position or introduce you with a new, better opportunity.

This article is part of a blog series written by the author: www.inhouseaccess.com

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