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General counsel pushes associates to be proactive with clients

While in law school, John T. Gribbin found himself consistently drawn toward opportunities that would foster his entrepreneurial streak. After working as a real estate associate at an AmLaw 100 firm, Gribbin felt the pull of building a business and became president and general counsel of Corvus Janitorial Systems.

Corvus, a client of Gribbin's at the firm, was looking to expand from its regional roots and become a national company. Three years later, Gribbin continues to tap into his entrepreneurial drive while managing a dynamic business with offices across the country. Gribbin has a simple yet important piece of advice for associates: "Take an interest in my business, get to know it inside and out and figure out how your work fits into the big picture."

Gribbin's advice is echoed in national surveys of in-house counsel. In a 2011 ALM Legal Intelligence survey of in-house counsel, 65 percent of respondents said their law department priorities are "completely integrated" with overall company strategy. In-house lawyers are constantly challenged to advance the goals of the company and be mindful of the impact of legal work on those goals. Naturally, they expect the same from their outside counsel.

"From Day One, I want the associates to start learning about the business, take the initiative to research the industry and keep in mind the financial implications of their project, no matter how small," Gribbin said. "When associates demonstrate they are proactive and invested in the client's business, they are forming the building blocks for success at an early stage in their careers."

Gribbin took his own advice to heart while working as an associate. Corvus was previously his client and because of his intimate knowledge of the company, Gribbin was able to jump right into the business when he joined in 2009. Since then, the company has grown from 15 employees in

three offices to about 60 employees in 17 offices and has hundreds of customers and franchisees around the country.

With this growing list of stakeholders, Gribbin said he was appreciative when outside counsel provide a frank assessment of the risks and rewards of a potential opportunity.

"We weigh the interests of many different constituents when exploring opportunities or potential transactions," he said. "I rely on my outside counsel to be proactive risk managers while understanding the business considerations at play."

Being a lawyer at a growing company also means addressing a constantly evolving array of legal matters. Like many other companies, Corvus performs a portion of its general corporate work, such as lease negotiation, in-house. Gribbin credited the strong legal foundation he built at his former firm for giving him the tools to handle a wide variety of corporate transactions for Corvus. Driven by his own interest in sustainability, Gribbin also helped Corvus supplement its product offerings by building Corvus360°, a green cleaning program supported by LEED-Accredited Professionals. However, Gribbin said he was cognizant of the limitations on his time in light of his many responsibilities and focus on Corvus' strategic growth.

"I have high expectations for the quality of legal work and I know how well something should be done," Gribbin said. "If I know I cannot complete the project or transaction at that level, I call on outside counsel." For example, Gribbin worked closely with Corvus' outside corporate counsel while "quarterbacking two major acquisitions" and he frequently calls on experts when faced with a specialized area of law.

Gribbin's inside perspective on hiring outside counsel highlights another reality facing today's associates — building a niche area of expertise is a major plus in landing clients. More and more, specialization is encouraged early on in an associate's career, which

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can increase an associate's marketability. As the 2011 ALM Legal Intelligence survey revealed, the most important factor to in-house lawyers when choosing outside counsel is firm specialization. Two areas where Corvus relies on outside specialists are franchising and labor and employment.

Corvus has hundreds of franchisees and relies on its outside franchise experts to maneuver the regulatory framework specific to each jurisdiction. Using outside counsel for labor and employment and dispute resolution also frees Gribbin up to refocus his energy

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on other endeavors, such as streamlining internal processes.

Like in-house counsel around the country, Gribbin is keenly aware of the value a competent, self-starting associate brings to a matter. A 2011 Association of Corporate Counsel survey of chief legal officers found efficient staffing of matters was a significant theme among suggestions of how outside counsel can improve the value of their services. Once an associate demonstrates initiative on a matter, Gribbin said he prefers “to reach out to the associate directly on day-to-day matters. Requiring that a partner act as gatekeeper for all communications can frustrate the process.” This increased client contact provides associates an excellent opportunity to cultivate client relationships while learning valuable lessons in client service.

With Corvus' geographically diverse offices, Gribbin said he also must stay on top of changes in law across a range of jurisdictions. Gribbin said: “I appreciate when outside counsel take the initiative to inform me of recent changes in the law that could affect my business. This illustrates they are paying attention to the industry and are cognizant of my business needs.” These alerts may take the form of straightforward bullet point e-mails or in-depth continuing legal education seminars on a specialized topic or developments in the law. Although in-house lawyers face the same Continuing Legal Education requirements, they do not have a bevy of CLE courses at their fingertips like firm associates. “I encourage outside counsel and associates to keep me in mind when CLEs are being offered by their firm, especially CLEs that relate to my business,” Gribbin said.

CLEs provide an opportunity for associates to strengthen relationships with clients while helping the client meet their CLE requirements. Even taking small steps, such as forwarding a CLE invitation to a client, will allow associates to demonstrate that they are attuned to their client's needs.