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Legal Ops Corner: The Modern Law Department

Law Department Management



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Expertise in a practice area is table stakes for an in-house role. However, law departments do not practice law for its own sake; they do so to facilitate the business activity and outcomes that drive company success. That makes a law department part of a company's business operations, and it means that a law department must run well. Corporate counsel must practice law. However, they must also focus on how their law department enables the organization to design, build, and sell its products and services.

I may be biased – my entire career in law has combined practicing in-house with identifying and operationalizing opportunities to improve a law department's activities in ways that translate into greater business value. Time and again, I have seen changes to how a law department handles legal work significantly boost a business's bottom line. These experiences convinced me that proficiency in legal operations is as critical as legal acumen for modern general counsel and their law department colleagues.

Historically, the legal profession has not shared this view. Law schools have only recently started to offer courses in legal operations. Consequently, many – perhaps most – corporate counsel do not have the depth of knowledge necessary to ensure that their law department operates so proactively. This knowledge gap leaves in-house especially vulnerable, given that business leaders are increasingly judging the performance of law departments (and corporate counsel) with operational metrics previously applied only to other parts of the business.

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Critical components of legal ops

This column seeks to narrow that gap. My goal is to examine and explain the critical components of legal operations – the issues involved, how to think about them, ways to solve them, the tradeoffs of different approaches, the pitfalls to avoid, and the metrics of success.

Just as in law school, the column will take a case-study-based approach. Rather than dry theoretical discussions, columns will tell real stories of how and what actual law department leaders do to achieve meaningful results. They will detail the changes they implemented, the business impact of those changes, and the lessons learned (in some instances, the hard way). The case studies will cover core law department activities such as:

- Contracts – accelerating, monetizing, and maximizing the value of contracts, implementing CLM systems and driving user adoption.
- Compliance – monitoring, responding, remediation, automation, and staying up to date with new regulations.
- Resource Planning – work allocation across in-house, interim, and law firm lawyers while employing and advancing diverse talent.
- Litigation – outside counsel management, panel selection, eDiscovery, and document review.

Throughout, I will focus on key topics and concepts at the heart of successful legal operations, including:

- First Principles – Treating Legal Operations as a discipline, thinking strategically, and setting and communicating a vision.
- The Crux of Legal Ops – Managing the service delivery and operating model and managing the cost of delivery.
- Defining Success – Prioritizing the value of work (“what matters? And what matters most?”), selecting metrics, and benchmarking performance.
- Getting Started – Establishing a plan, understanding the current team and the workload allocation.
- How Change Occurs – the importance of change management, understanding and building relationships with your internal clients, and the value of quick wins.
- Working Smarter (and Simpler), Not Harder – Optimizing processes and using technology.

Embracing legal ops

Listen to this audio excerpt of Steve Harmon and Elevate’s CEO, Liam Brown. Steve describes the law department improvement goals he implemented at CISCO, his desire to bring cost-effective efficiency to the corporate legal community, and what it means to simplify and improve the law department’s support of the business they serve.

Audio file

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Legal operations has emerged as a critical strategic differentiator for businesses. Whether they know it or not, corporate counsel are now (to borrow the phrase of legal and business leader Marla Persky) “businesspeople who happen to be lawyers.” Success – for you, your law department, and the business you serve – requires understanding how to run a law department well. I hope this column will give you the knowledge and judgment to embrace legal operations as a critical part of how a law department practices today.

Disclaimer: The information in any resource in this website should not be construed as legal advice or as a legal opinion on specific facts, and should not be considered representing the views of its authors, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

[Steve Harmon](#)



General Counsel / Chief Operating Officer

Elevate

[Elevate General Counsel and Chief Operating Officer Steve Harmon is an internationally recognized leader in the genesis of and continuing evolution of legal operations and the professionalization of the field. He co-founded CLOC \(the Corporate Legal Operations Consortium\) and his 20-plus years of experience includes business development and in-house legal organizations. He was vice president and deputy general counsel at Cisco. His responsibilities included technology licensing, oversight for the legal development of product lines, Global Export Compliance, Trademarks, and Cisco's award-winning legal operations function.](#)

[Harmon received his JD and BS in Management Information Systems and Services from Brigham Young University.](#)

[Liam Brown](#)



CEO

Elevate

Liam Brown has spent over 20 years providing consulting, technology, and services to law firms and Global 1000 corporate legal departments. As an advisor and consultant, Brown has guided general counsel and law firm leaders through a variety of strategic decisions focused on improving effectiveness and efficiency.

In 2011 he founded Elevate, a next generation legal service provider with the mission to help law firms and corporate legal departments operate more effectively. Previously, he was the founder, president, and CEO of Integreon, a global LPO, which he led from a startup in 2001 to annual sales of US\$150 million by 2011, before he sold to private equity investors.

Prior to Integreon, he was the founder, president, and COO of a pioneering VC-backed Web 1.0 virtual data room legal tech company, which he sold to a public company in 2001. Brown is a frequent

speaker at legal conferences and regularly publishes articles about trends in the legal sector. He is also an active investor in emerging legal technologies and an executive coach for founders of startups.