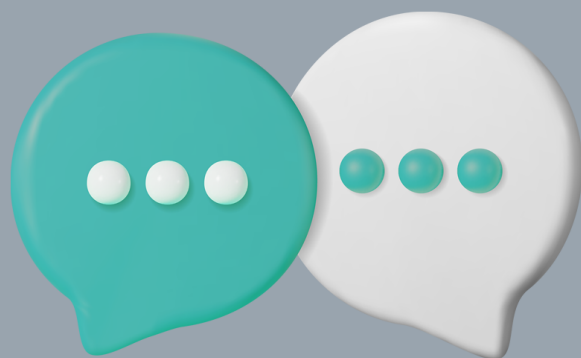




ACC InConversation: Katja Roth Pellanda of Zurich Insurance

Interviews and Profiles

Law Department Management



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Katja Roth Pellanda
Group General Counsel
Zurich Insurance

“Lawyers at times can feel overwhelmed beneath a huge mountain of challenges that need to be addressed. But through analysis and resilience, they can be critical strategic advisors to their organizations.”

This was one of many insights shared by Katja Roth Pellanda, Group General Counsel of Zurich Insurance, who joined ACC’s VP and Chief Content Officer Amy Hawkes Repke for a wide-ranging conversation about leadership skills and the future of legal work in the latest ACC InConversation.

“First and foremost, I’m a lawyer, and I’m still very interested in answering legal questions, analyzing legal questions together with my team,” Roth Pellanda said. But second, and most enjoyable, is when the CEO and the Board of Directors ask the legal team to support their strategic initiatives, she added.

“These are situations where we can go beyond the pure legal assessment and legal advice, but really need to dig in deep on the strategy of the company and try to figure out how we can support best,” Roth Pellanda shared.

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Making the move in-house

Roth Pellanda knew she wanted to be a lawyer from a young age. “I was always fascinated because I have a deep sense of fairness and equity,” she shared. Roth Pellanda spent more than 10 years at Swiss law firm Bär & Karrer, focusing among others on M&A and corporate governance, before moving in-house at Novartis, a global pharmaceutical company also based in Switzerland.

When she joined Zurich Insurance Group, she began to realize the important role insurance plays in society. “It’s about protecting society from risk and supporting them to grow,” Roth Pellanda said.

The legal function at Zurich has different responsibilities beyond providing advice on legal matters, such as interactions with financial regulators, investigations and litigation, and corporate governance. “I think it’s that diversity which I really enjoy the most, and also the need to react very quickly on different developments,” she shared.

One of the biggest challenges for lawyers going in-house is the tendency to only focus on your own organization, Roth Pellanda said. In-house, “you often work with the same people. You only see what your company is doing. And that’s a big difference to working in a law firm, where you have different clients, you get different inspirations, you see different solutions,” she explained.

“If you’re working in-house, I think it’s really important that you don’t lose your external lens,” Roth Pellanda said. “Go to conferences, have speaking engagements, start your own networking. ... I think that can really open your eyes and also helps your daily work.”

ACC can help you broaden your horizon with a global network of members. “It’s very interesting and important to see what’s going on in the world,” Roth Pellanda said. “The legal questions are often the same; the answers may be a little bit different depending on the legal environment you are in.” Learning from each other and remaining curious is therefore very important.

Legal leadership and innovation

Shortly after becoming the Group General Counsel, Roth Pellanda launched global, voluntary focus groups on four topics within the legal function: ESG, technology and innovation, personal development and smart risk taking. These focus groups and those that followed played a very important role in making the legal function truly global and breaking up potential silos. After a few years, the team decided to try something new. “You need to reinvent yourself and the legal function, also, with time. You cannot do all the time the same things; you need to transform,” she shared.

With that in mind, the legal team started in 2024 the “Global Legal Innovation Awards” providing a platform for the legal function to spotlight projects that the legal teams are spearheading, mirroring a similar initiative that Zurich does as a company to bring together innovators, start-ups, and experts. Winners of the Legal Award have been among others:

- In Spain, the Legal team developed a solution that offers 24/7 access to expert legal advice for self-employed clients and business owners with Zurich company policies via a partner's app, enhancing customer experience and accessibility.
- In Italy, the Legal team developed a new digital solution enabling clients to sign contracts through a video selfie.

All the initiatives presented are scalable globally, customer-focused, and designed to address business challenges effectively. There is also a fantastic opportunity for teams across the globe to connect, exchange innovative ideas, and share valuable knowledge.

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Katja Roth Pellanda

More recently, Roth Pellanda was discussing with her leadership team on what else the legal team could take the lead on. “For me personally, and also for the company, the culture is very important,” she said. “So we started to create our own legal cultural principles.” These principles fall into three main categories:

- **Inspire.** “We are customer-focused. We seek diverse perspectives. We stay curious and collaborative. We think strategically and benchmark against the best.”
- **Transform.** “It’s about innovation, simplification, learning, changing, growing, and creating clarity.” The legal team brings an analytical mindset to business decisions that can be very helpful, she added. Also taking calculated risk is important — watch out for opportunities.

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- **Achieve.** “It’s really about owning our topic. It’s about having backbone. Resilience is really important.” The legal team often has to deal with serious issues, she added. “We are not floating on the surface; we really need to go into the deep. And of course we want to deliver success, raise the bar, and focus on long-term impact.”

At Zurich, the Legal AI strategy is developed around three main initiatives: Zurich Chat, the corporate generative AI tool, Zurich Lex IQ Contract Automation and Zurich Lex IQ Chatbots to help answer basic legal questions, Roth Pellanda shared.

“For me, artificial intelligence is another tool which should simplify and make our lives easier and more effective,” she said. While Zurich Legal strongly believes in the transformative power of AI, Roth Pellanda also stated that they “don’t want to get overly excited because it is still early times and the tools need to be tested to ensure best solutions are found to enhance the operations of legal departments.” At Zurich, the legal AI strategy is developed around four main initiatives. By embracing AI, we’re not only meeting the evolving needs of the business, but also building a more agile, innovative, and attractive legal function for the future, she added.

[Visit the ACC AI Center of Excellence for In-house Lawyers for practical guidance and use cases, tailored to in-house counsel](#)

A seat at the table

When Roth Pellanda took her first in-house role, she realized quickly that many people throughout the organization were not seeking legal advice when they should. So she began to champion the legal function and [legal expertise](#) in her organization.

“You need to be courageous; take whatever is there, and try to provide legal advice,” she shared. But legal leaders also need to “market” themselves, internally and externally, to showcase how their legal advice has helped the business.

Now, at Zurich, Roth Pellanda reports directly to the CEO and attends all executive committee and also board of directors meetings (along with CEO and CFO). This seat at the table has created an awareness throughout the company that legal is in-the-know about the business strategy, which helps frame what questions are brought to the legal team.

“It’s our legal function and each lawyer’s own responsibility to be really proactive and then also pragmatic in the advice” they provide to their business colleagues, she said. “It can be challenging, but it’s very rewarding. You need to be on the forefront.”

[A direct reporting line to the CEO is just the beginning. Learn more about ACC’s Seat at the Table® Initiative.](#)

“Most of the time, we have a seat at the table, but then we also need to speak up,” Roth Pellanda said.

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