

Two lawyers walked into a bar:

A brief guide to choosing a side of the legal profession

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Each year, newly admitted legal practitioners find themselves at a crossroads where *two roads [diverge] in a yellow wood* (with apologies to Robert Frost) and they are not ready to choose. To the left, a law firm - long hours, natty suits, and the intoxicating promise of partnership. To the right, a corporate legal department - business casual, fixed salary, and a parking bay that does not need 200 billed hours a month to justify its existence. Both roads lead to a life in the law. But pick the one that fits you poorly and a few years in you will experience a particular kind of existential dread. This article is an attempt to help you avoid that moment - or, if this guide comes too late, to confirm that you are not alone.

The most obvious difference is the relationship with time. In a law firm, time is the product. Every six minutes is one unit, tracked obsessively. Time spent not working isn't rest; it is lost income. A quiet Tuesday afternoon isn't a blessing; it's a crisis.

In-house counsel are salaried, which immediately distinguishes them from their private practice counterparts - and occasionally makes those counterparts uneasy. There are no six minute units and no billable targets, but that doesn't mean time is meaningless. It's just measured differently. Value shows up in problems that never materialise, deals that survive scrutiny, and situations that quietly improve after legal gets involved. Nobody applauds a crisis that never happened, but the business often runs more smoothly because someone in house spotted the issue early.

Not having to glance nervously at the clock during coffee may sound liberating, and I suppose it might be, but if your time is not generating revenue, you are an overhead. And every CFO will tell you enthusiastically, that overheads exist only to

be reduced. You cannot invoice the board for *"to preventing the company from doing something catastrophically stupid"*. There's no time recording code for that.

The Greek poet Archilochus wrote that *"the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing"*. Private practice lawyers are hedgehogs. They burrow deep into a single area - competition, tax, M&A, environmental - and they know it in detail that borders on the obsessive. Ask a competition lawyer about vertical restraints and your afternoon is toast. Ask that same lawyer to look at a suretyship and you may see genuine panic.

In-house counsel are foxes. They settle employment contracts before lunch, negotiate supplier agreements after it, and sit in board meetings commenting on everything from regulatory risk to IP strategy. The breadth is astonishing. The depth, by necessity, a bit more modest. They are generalists with enough knowledge about each subject to know when they struggling and to know when to call the hedgehog.

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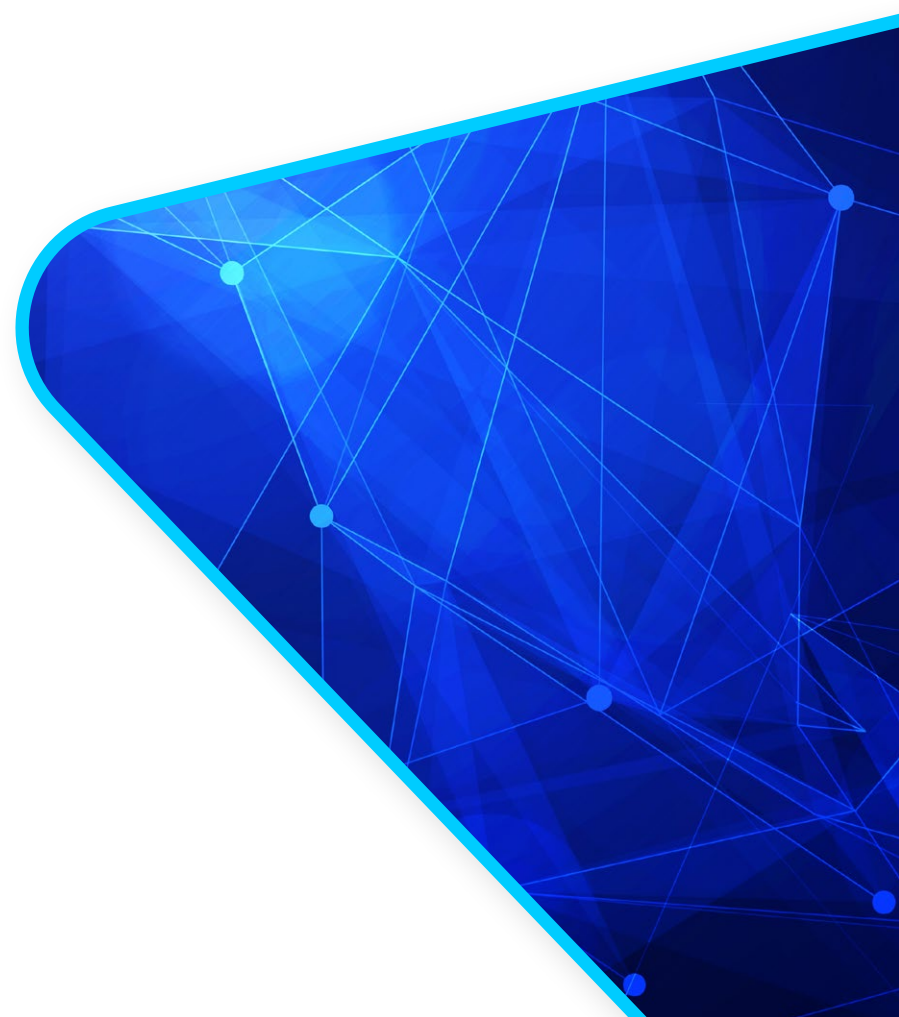


A lawyer in private practice, presented with a legally dodgy proposal, is allowed, in fact expected, to say “no.” The advice is delivered, the risks are explained. The invoice is sent. The file closed. Duty discharged. They may sleep soundly. The in-house lawyer has no such luxury. The commercial team is not interested in “no.” Nor is the CEO. Nor is the board. They are only interested in “how”. The in-house lawyer cannot only be an adviser but must also be a problem-solver, a risk architect, a filter of the language of law into the language of commerce - finding a path through the legal jungle without leading the company into regulatory quicksand. This needs creativity and a tolerance for imperfection that would make many law firm partners really uncomfortable.

In a law firm, transaction risk is parcelled out to specialist teams, each producing its own opinion, each billing its own time. Whether those answers come together as a workable strategy is the client’s concern. In-house, the lawyer personally owns the risk. When the regulator calls, there is no external firm to blame, no opinion letter to hide behind. The in-house lawyer is embedded in the business, and when the business makes a mistake, the in-house lawyer is in the blast radius.

If you derive satisfaction from knowing your speciality so thoroughly you can anticipate every objection, private practice is your gig. You will need intellectual rigour, attention to detail, and resilience under pressure. The technical work is only half the job. The other half is persuading your clients to follow advice they may not like. You will need the temperament of a marathon runner: disciplined, focused, willing to defer gratification for years. But if you are energised by variety - solving fifteen problems in a day rather than spending fifteen days on one - you should be in-house. You should have the temperament of a decathlete: versatile,

adaptable, willing to be pretty good at many things rather than brilliant at one. You will need commercial acumen, EQ in spades, and above all judgment; you will often be the only legally trained person in the room, making calls without partner support down the passage. You must be comfortable being wrong occasionally because the deal timetable will rarely wait for certainty.



Neither is better. Just different. Choosing without regard to fit is like buying a Ferrari to do the school run, or a Vito to race at Kyalami. In private practice, integrity means giving honest advice even if it costs you the client. In-house, it means giving honest advice even if it costs you a promotion, or people quietly doubting your judgment.

Private practice offers the deep and genuine satisfaction of the craftsman. You are called when the problem is genuinely difficult. The financial rewards are substantial, the prestige real. But the hours are long, the pressure relentless, and the billable hour will haunt you.

In-house offers the satisfaction of the architect: broad, collaborative, connected to the final product. Your advice translates into business decisions. The lifestyle is usually more predictable, the salary independent of fee performance. But your advice will sometimes be ignored. And you will, from time to time, find yourself in a four-hour "strategy workshop" that could have been an email.

Ultimately the legal profession is large enough for hedgehogs and foxes, marathon runners and decathletes. The tragedy is that too many lawyers end up in roles that do not suit them because nobody told them, early enough, of the choices available. Don't choose on vibes alone. Stop romanticising whichever one you haven't tried yet but if you have the opportunity, get a taste of both.

Think about what floats your boat. And what drains you. Whether you want to be the person who writes the opinion or the person who decides what to do with it. And then choose deliberately - a career in a role that doesn't fit you is just billable hours. Or meetings.

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