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The benefits of big law firms

Here's another installment of Inside Out with law firm partner Christina Martini and in-house counsel David Susler. They are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married. Watch them talk more about this topic with Andy Shaw at ChicagoLawyerMagazine.com.

What is the biggest benefit that large law firms provide in-house counsel?

Susler: Large law firms can provide a multitude of benefits. Those benefits which stand out may vary depending on my focus with any given engagement. A large firm can serve as a one-stop shop capable of handling many or all of a client's needs across disciplines and geographies, which in turn creates tremendous efficiencies in terms of consistency, quality, speed and overall value. This is a tremendous benefit because it eliminates the need to train new counsel about my company every time an issue arises in a different location. It also means fewer outside firms to manage and fewer bills to review, which means a lot to in-house lawyers. Large firms generally have strong depth and sophistication in various practice areas that make them the ideal type of firm to retain for a given matter or portfolio of work within those specialties. They also have a large bench of talent, which can be particularly valuable in certain situations. For example, say Company A is acquiring Company B and the deal requires due diligence and closing to be completed within a very tight window. A large firm would be ideal in that situation because it has the substantive expertise, enough lawyers available and the support staff and facilities necessary to meet its client's needs.

Does working at a large law firm give you an advantage in getting hired by an in-house counsel?

Martini: There are a number of advantages which a large firm provides in this context. For

example, large firms are generally known for the great training they provide their lawyers. They are also known for their ability to provide a significant depth and breadth of talent across many different practice areas and geographies. Moreover, given the sheer number of attorneys that work at large firms, clients appreciate being able to access several attorneys with similar skill sets, particularly if their lead lawyer is out of the office for whatever reason. As a result, there are certain types of matters (e.g., "bet the company" litigation) that will often go to big firms. There are also certain practice areas that may only make sense within a large firm, because of the nature of its client base, its geographic footprint and the synergies that those areas provide with the firm's other service offerings. Over the past several years, our profession has undergone a transformative metamorphosis, particularly with respect to globalization, consolidation and convergence. It is directly driven by changes which many clients are experiencing, particularly with respect to where, how and with whom they are doing business. For such companies, a large law firm and, in particular, a global firm is often best positioned to service their legal needs.

When in-house counsel seek legal representation, are they hiring the lawyers or the law firm?

Martini: That is a great question. The short answer is that they are hiring both and their relative importance is highly dependent on the specific circumstances. In my experience, clients must feel a certain affinity for their relationship partner and trust them in order for the engagement to be truly successful. That partner is often the first person whom a client meets from the firm and will often be the one to introduce that client to the firm's capabilities and to those attorneys whose subject-

matter capabilities align with the client's legal needs. It is very important for the client to both like and respect the partner who serves in this role, since they will give the client the comfort needed to invest more time and resources into the relationship with both the lead attorney as well as with the firm as a whole. A client's experience is shaped so much by the relationship partner and their lawyering skills, demeanor, responsiveness and ability to create effective teams across whatever disciplines the client's legal needs may dictate. While in many ways relationship partners are only as good as the team with whom they work, if they are truly effective, they will serve not only as the lead lawyer on the account, but will also be the client's trusted adviser and confidante.

Susler: I agree that, ultimately, they are hiring both. When I need outside counsel, the first consideration is always going to be subject-matter knowledge matching my needs. There are times when I have a relationship with a lawyer or I have received a referral to a particular lawyer because of his/her skill set. The particular firm for whom that lawyer works may not matter so much initially. However, a strong relationship partner, as Tina said, will expand the relationship beyond the initial engagement so that, going forward, I will begin working with the firm for multiple matters, in multiple practice areas, while still maintaining strong ties with the relationship partner. There are other times when I specifically want a big firm, such as in the M&A scenario I described earlier, or because of the nature of the matter or the firm's reputation in a given area, and I want the goodwill associated with that firm for a particular reason. In those cases, I am hiring the firm first, rather than a particular lawyer. ■

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