The New GC Toolkit

A Practical Guide to Thriving in the General Counsel Role

paragon
20 YEARS

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The Seat You're Now Sitting In

Dear new (or newly-appointed) GCs,

Congratulations! Also: welcome to a completely different job.

Most people walk into the GC role expecting a bigger version of the job they already had. Deeper legal problems, more matters, larger team. That's part of it. But the real surprise, and nearly every GC we've worked with will tell you this, is how little of the job is actually law.

You're about to spend more time on budgets, board dynamics, and organizational design than you ever did as a senior counsel or AGC. You'll get questions no one trained you to answer, from people who assume you already know. Your first board meeting. That internal investigation that lands at 9 p.m. on a Friday. The CEO asking for an opinion and not wanting a memo, because what they actually want is a decision.

We built this toolkit because the GCs we talk to kept describing the same gap. Law school teaches you how to analyze. Big Law teaches you how to execute. The in-house track teaches you how to provide advice. Almost nothing teaches you how to run a cross-functional business function, steward a budget, hire a team, figure out where work should live, or translate legal risk into language the board understands.

What follows draws on data gathered directly from new or veteran GCs who have been in your shoes.

You can handle the legal work. The harder question is whether you can drop the instinct to lead with analysis and start leading with judgment instead.

We hope this guide helps.

The Paragon Legal Team

What Every New GC Needs to Know

THE PROBLEM

Most new GCs get the role the same way. A promotion. A recruiter call. A founder saying, “We need someone like you.” The offer comes fast. The training does not.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The GC role has changed more in the last five years than in the 20 before it. Per **FTI Consulting and Relativity’s seventh-annual General Counsel Report**, 97% of GCs reported increases in work volume over the past year, attributed to over 20 distinct categories driving the rise (i.e., new regulations, tariffs, contract management, etc.). 87% said the rate of risk and demand is still accelerating. **Thomson Reuters** reports that GCs are three times more concerned about delivering measurable value than they were the year before.

New GCs inherit that expanded job description on day one. The learning curve isn’t optional. The grace period is shrinking.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The patterns are knowable, and that’s the good news. The GCs we’ve interviewed all did a handful of specific things in their first year. They built trust before they needed it, got intimate with how the business actually made money, and stopped just providing legal advice and then walking away. They no longer consider decision-making a business call they don’t have to make.

We’ve assembled this toolkit to help you find success as a GC, whether it’s day one or day 100.

HOW THIS GUIDE WAS INFORMED

This guide draws on conversations with legal leaders across industries, including GCs, CLOs, deputy and associate general counsel, senior in-house lawyers, legal operations professionals, and outside advisors. Insights are supplemented with survey data from over 150 legal professionals, as well as benchmark research from ACC, Thomson Reuters, Gartner, and CLOC.



How to Use This Toolkit

This guide is organized around the work itself, not around legal theory. Read it front to back or skip to what you need.

IF YOU'RE BEFORE DAY 1

Go straight to **Section 2: The GC Launch Checklist**. It covers what to do before you start, in your first two weeks, and throughout your first quarter.

IF YOU'RE 30-60 DAYS IN

You've met everyone, learned the landscape, and are about to make your first real decisions about team and process. Start with **Section 3 (Leading and Building Your Team)** and **Section 4 (Cross-Functional Relationships and Influence)**. Those are the sections that compound the fastest.

IF YOU'RE FACING BUDGET SEASON

Go to **Section 6 (Budget Mastery)** and **Section 5 (Rightsourcing)**. Together, they give you the frame for the CFO conversation and the levers you can actually pull.

IF YOU'RE AN EXPERIENCED GC

Skip to **Section 7: The New GC Playbook.** Fifteen rules from working GCs, in under 500 words.

The GC Role Has Fundamentally Changed

YOU'RE NOT JUST A LAWYER ANYMORE

The GC role looks nothing like it did a decade ago. You sit where business strategy, regulatory complexity, technology risk, and leadership all collide, often in the same meeting.

Working CLOs confirm it: 70% now manage at least two functions beyond legal, and 58% are heavily involved in M&A and other corporate transactions. The job that used to sit under "legal advisor" now sits under "executive responsible for telling us what we can and can't do, how fast, and at what cost."

That's why this toolkit starts here. The rest of the guide is organized around three competencies you'll build in parallel:

- **Legal expertise** is the core you already have.
- **Business acumen** is the middle ring you'll develop fast.
- **Leadership and influence** make up the outer ring that decides whether you get invited back to the strategy room.

"So many of us think of ourselves as partners to the business, or we run our functions in silos. But when you get to the top legal seat, you are actually a business leader."

— Delida Costin, Four-time GC/CLO



The Macro Forces Reshaping the Role

Three forces are hitting the GC role at the same time. Any one of them would reshape the job on its own. When combined, they've made the old playbook obsolete.

1 BUDGET SCRUTINY IS NOW BASELINE

The "approve what you need" era is over. Per a 2026 Legal Budgeting Report, 78% of legal departments are being asked to implement AI without dedicated funding, forcing 56% to cannibalize existing tech budgets. The same survey found only 32% of legal leaders believe they control their own budget, while half of CFOs say they do.

2 AI IS AFFECTING THE WORK

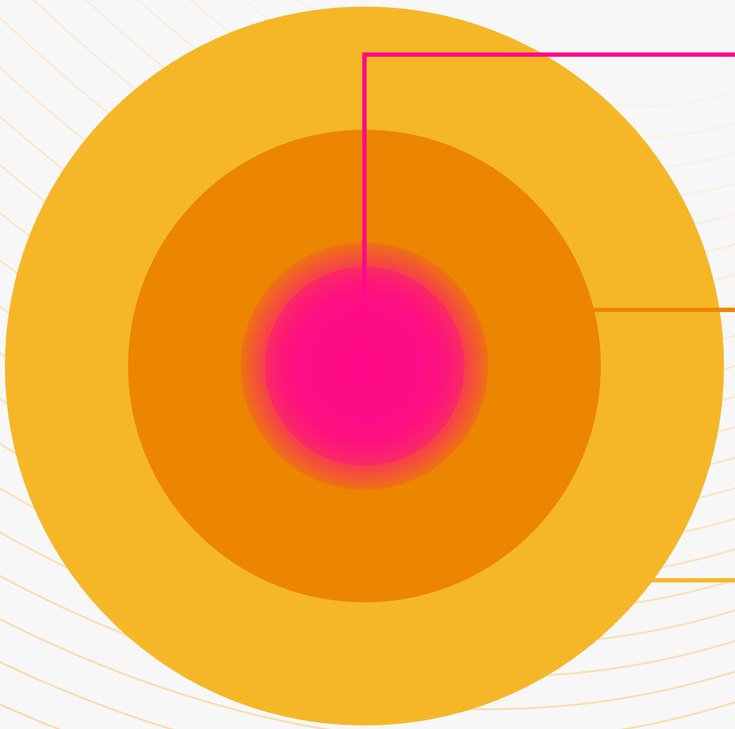
AI adoption is outpacing governance across the profession. CLOC's 2026 State of the Industry Report shows that 85% of legal departments now have dedicated AI oversight, and ACC data indicates that 44% of CLOs plan to adopt new legal technology in the coming year. The question isn't whether to adopt. It's whether you have the policies, resources, and organizational structure to deploy it effectively.

3 REGULATORY COMPLEXITY KEEPS EXPANDING

CLOC's 2026 report found 63% of legal departments cite regulatory compliance and 58% cite cybersecurity as the areas of fastest-growing workload. ACC data shows 44% of CLOs report rising litigation volume. The macro environment asks GCs to decide fast, govern what they can't personally master, and absorb risk across a surface that keeps getting bigger.

THE GC COMPETENCY MODEL

Three rings. **Legal expert** is the core.
The outer rings decide whether you keep the seat.



CORE

Legal Expertise

Substantive law, judgment, ethics

MIDDLE

Business Acumen

Finance, strategy, industry knowledge

OUTER

Leadership & Influence

Team building, executive presence, cross-functional influence, change management, technology fluency

←

Each ring of the model corresponds to a section of this toolkit. Sections 3 and 4 focus on the outer ring (leadership and influence); Section 6 focuses on the middle ring (business acumen); all sections assume you already have the core.

Your First 90 Days: The GC Launch Checklist

BEFORE DAY 1:
PRE-START PREPARATION

- **Study the business from the outside.** Summarize recent SEC filings, earnings calls, and analyst reports. AI tools can cut this from two weeks to two days.
- **Learn the product and customer experience.** Watch a sales demo. Sit in on an onboarding call. If possible, buy and use the product.
- **Research the company's public legal footprint.** PACER for pending litigation, recent regulatory filings, and press coverage of legal issues.
- **Map the board and investor base.** Know who you'll be working with before you walk in the door.

WEEK 1-2:
LISTEN, LEARN, ASSESS

- **Meet every C-suite member 1:1.** Ask about priorities, pain points, and what they need from legal.
- **Meet your direct reports 1:1.** Understand their medium and long-term career goals, their biggest challenges, and why they stay.
- **Review all pending litigation and regulatory matters.** Know your risk landscape inside a week.
- **Review the current legal budget.** Allocations, burn rate, upcoming renewals.
- **Get on the board calendar.** Understand cadence, expectations, and your role in meetings.
- **Establish operating rhythms.** Recurring team meetings, stakeholder check-ins, board prep.
- **Triage legacy risks and open issues.** Every company has inherited matters; find them before they find you.

WEEK 3-4:
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

- **Build your CEO relationship.** Understand their communication style, their vision, and what they expect from the legal function.
- **Align with the CFO.** Partner on budget, metrics, and how legal will demonstrate value. This is not a one-meeting conversation.
- **Partner with business unit leaders.** Go beyond introductions. Understand their goals; show how legal helps them reach those goals.

“Building trust with your internal team, and particularly leadership, is your number one priority. If you don’t have their trust, your excellent legal advice is going to go ignored.”

— Heather Stevenson, GC, Red Cell Partners

MONTH 2:
ASSESS AND PLAN

- **Conduct a legal department SWOT.** Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, documented, not just in your head.
- **Audit legal process and technology stack.** What tools exist? Is the team using them? If not, find out why.
- **Review all standard contract templates.** Are they current? Do they reflect current risk posture?
- **Assess your outside counsel panel.** Right-size, renegotiate, or consolidate.
- **Map regulatory requirements by jurisdiction.** Especially important if the company operates globally.
- **Evaluate insurance coverage.** D&O, E&O, cyber, EPL. Are limits adequate?
- **Identify quick wins.** What can you fix in the next 30 days that will be visible and appreciated?

MONTH 3:
SET DIRECTION

- **Present your 12-month legal department roadmap** to the CEO and executive team.
- **Define your department metrics.** What will you measure? What will you report quarterly?
- **Set your legal technology strategy.** What to adopt, what to sunset, what to evaluate.
- **Build your rightsourcing framework.** What stays in-house, what goes to firms, what goes to alternative legal service providers (ALSPs).
- **Create a communication plan.** How legal will proactively engage the business instead of just reacting to inbound requests.

Your First 90 Days: The GC Launch Checklist

In your first 6–12 months as GC, what were the 2–3 most helpful things as you stepped into the role?

Onboarding and learning the business, developing strong working relationships to build trust, and assessing available resources so I could streamline processes right away.

When I started at Credo AI, the CEO's chief of staff and prior counsel gave me an orientation that was invaluable. They walked me through what resources existed and the company culture for technology use. This helped me see where the gaps were. From there, I focused on understanding my team members' and customers' needs and priorities to build trust with them. An offsite leadership meeting, smaller team meetings, and a company summit early on gave me a chance to do that in person, which accelerated everything.

Before I could give meaningful advice at Credo AI, I needed to understand the AI governance world and the business at a level that went beyond surface familiarity. The orientation provided a baseline, but the real learning came from actually doing the work and being interested in learning and streamlining processes as fast as possible.

--Nina Senn, GC, Credo AI

TIP TO GET STARTED

You won’t finish this checklist in 90 days. No one does. The point isn’t completion, it’s coverage. If you’ve touched every row by the end of your first quarter, you know where the work is. That’s the difference between informed and reactive.

COMMON FIRST-YEAR SURPRISES

- **How much of the role is politics.** More than one respondent named office politics as their biggest adjustment.
- **How much of what you decide is business judgment, not legal analysis.** The C-suite often expects guidance on problems that don’t have purely legal answers.
- **How much of the role is operational.** The real adjustment is shifting from doing great legal work to running the department that delivers it.



Leading and Building Your Team

FROM DOING TO LEADING

Taking the top legal seat is a role change, not a title change. Every GC we interviewed said the same thing in different words: the skills that got you here are not the skills that will make you successful. Individual contributor excellence earns you the role. Leadership excellence keeps you in it.

That shift is why this section sits where it does. Before you think about who to hire or what to restructure, get clear on how you plan to lead. Hiring, culture, and team composition all flow downstream from that.

"Don't confuse control with leadership, and don't confuse leadership with authority. They're all different. The best leaders don't cling to having to be the one to decide everything. They empower, they delegate, they hire people, they coach."

— Ron Bell, Chief Legal & Administrative Officer, Collective Health

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

- **Be the steady hand.** Calm under pressure, even when the storm is raging.
- **Build trust before you need it.** It's the foundation for everything.
- **Be a conductor, not a soloist.** Empower. Delegate. Coach.
- **Learn from failure.** Setbacks only become failures when you don't internalize the lesson.
- **Know the business intimately.** You can't advise on what you don't understand.

CREATING A HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE

Culture is downstream of what you tolerate. Tolerate missed deadlines, and you have a culture that misses deadlines. Tolerate passive-aggressive disagreement in Slack, and you have a culture where the real issues never surface.

The GCs who build teams that stick follow a similar pattern:

- They set clear expectations and communication rhythms so people know when to expect feedback and how to ask for it.
- They invest in professional development and defend that budget when it's the first thing on the chopping block.
- They make space for career growth inside the team, not just promotion out of it.
- They make room for actual fun. One of the most durable pieces of advice we collected was, literally, "have fun at work." Culture isn't a nice-to-have. It's what keeps the good people from leaving.

"Who stayed at the organization because of you? Because of your kindness and because of your mentorship, because you see them and want to promote them and develop them."

— Jaci Lee, VP & GC, Flynn Group

TEAM COMPOSITION FOR THE MODERN LEGAL DEPARTMENT

Team composition matters as much as team size. The most effective legal departments today include lawyers, legal ops professionals, contract managers, technologists, and a deliberate mix of flexible talent. That's a real shift from even five years ago.

The benchmarks are useful reference points. The **ACC's 2024 Law Department Management Benchmarking Survey** puts median legal headcount at four staff for companies under $1B in revenue, rising to 158 for companies above $20B. **CLOC's 2025 State of the Industry Report**, drawing on Harbor's Law Department Survey, shows a median of nine attorneys in companies under $3B and 29 in companies between $3B–$15B.

Legal ops has moved from curiosity to core: 77% of the departments surveyed by CLOC plan to increase or prioritize legal ops hiring. In smaller departments without the budget for a dedicated legal ops hire, the role usually gets absorbed by senior paralegals and contract managers, or filled fractionally.

“By far, my greatest pride and joy is my legal team… a team of diverse, brilliant lawyers who each bring different skill sets to the table and work incredibly well together.”

— Eunice Buehler, GC, G2

HIRING FOR AGILITY, NOT JUST EXPERTISE

Hiring is rarely the first thing a new GC does, and for good reason. Before you restructure the team, you need to understand how the business operates and how you want to lead. But when the time comes, the shape of the hires matters as much as the count.

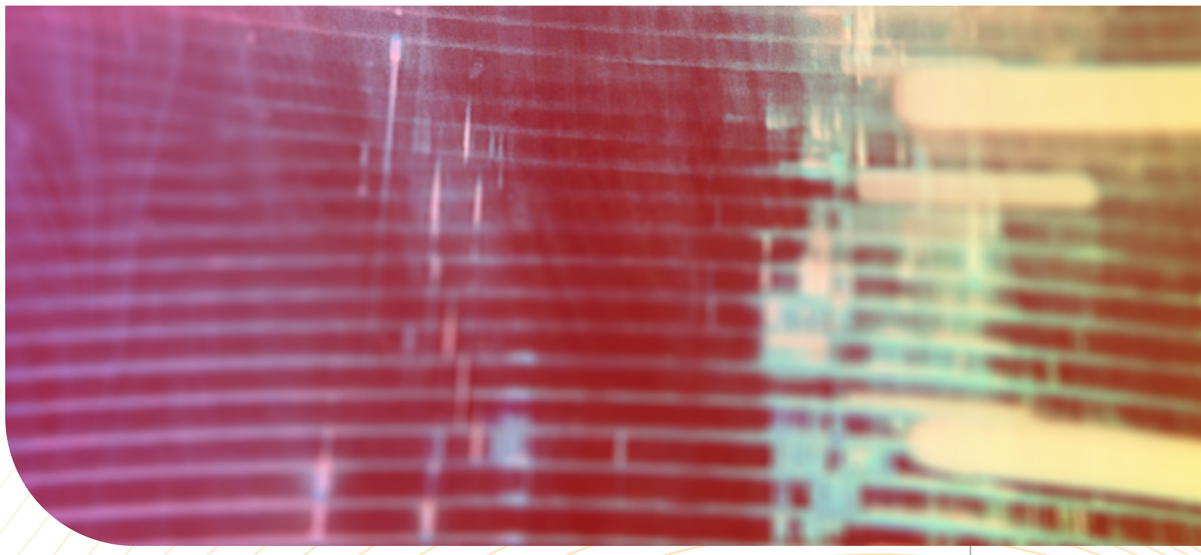
The GCs we’ve interviewed are consistent on this. The lawyers who succeed on lean in-house teams are generalists with one deep specialty (the “T-shaped” profile). They can cover enough ground to be useful on day one, and go deep on the one thing the company most needs.

Some practical moves when hiring:

- → **Assess for business acumen, not just legal acumen.** Ask candidates to walk through a business decision, not just a legal analysis.
- → **Consider lawyers with non-traditional backgrounds.** Former operators, product managers, and consultants bring a different vocabulary to legal work.
- → **Build a team that brings different perspectives.** Diverse lived experiences produce better risk calibration, especially when the business moves into new markets or products.
- → **Hire for adaptability first, credentials second.** The regulatory environment you hire into is not the one your team will be operating in three years from now.

“It’s critical to hire agile attorneys who are able to pivot and advise on various areas of the changing law.”

— Sarah Wilson, GC, Circle



Cross-Functional Relationships and Influence

THE GC AS DOT CONNECTOR

Legal is one of the only genuinely cross-functional departments. You see across the whole business: sales, product, engineering, HR, finance, compliance. That vantage point is your superpower, but only if you use it proactively.

The best GCs align early as partners with business leaders, helping facilitate the work rather than being seen as a blocker. That early framing sets the tone for every later conversation. When leaders treat you as a peer who shapes strategy, they bring you in early. When they treat you as a blocker, they bring you in late, if at all.

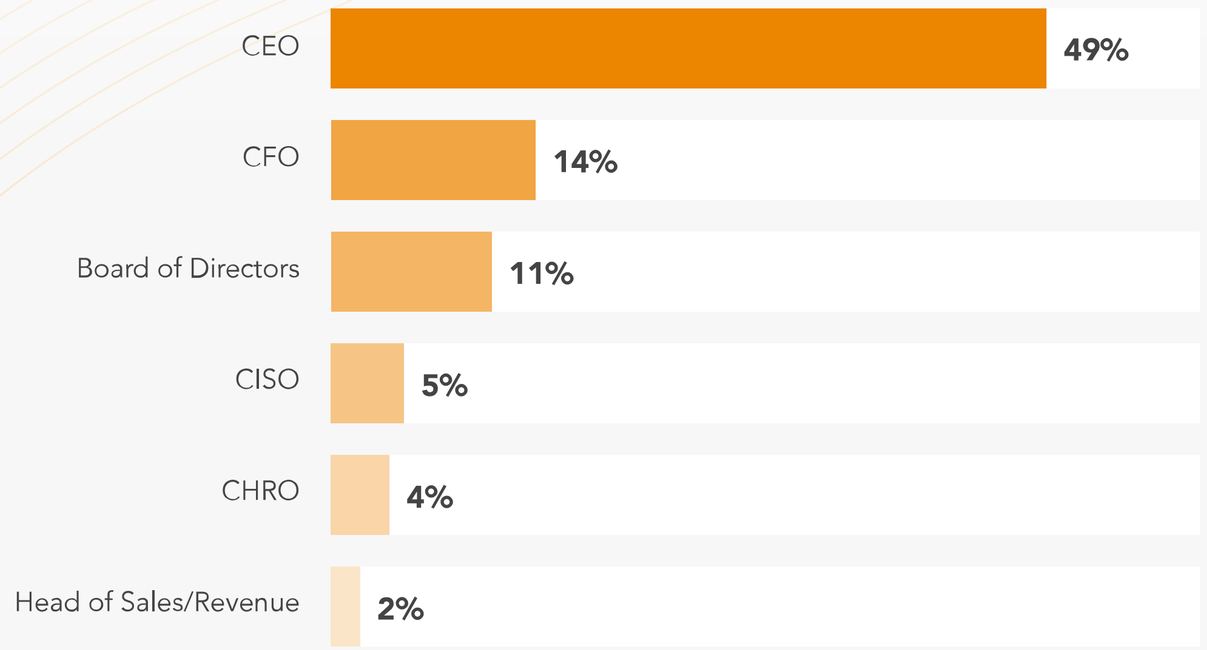
"General counsels are the dot connectors at companies. They know what all the functions are trying to achieve."

— Sarah Wilson, GC, Circle

Our survey data shows how central certain relationships are. When we asked which executive relationship had been most critical to their effectiveness, 49% of GCs said the CEO, which is more than the CFO (14%) and Board (11%) combined.

That's both an opportunity and a warning. CEOs tend to treat their GC as a strategic partner once trust is established. But if you don't invest in the relationship, someone else will fill that advisory seat, and taking it back is much harder than claiming it from the start.

WHICH C-SUITE OR EXECUTIVE RELATIONSHIP PROVED MOST CRITICAL TO YOUR EARLY SUCCESS AS GC?



THE KEY RELATIONSHIPS TO CULTIVATE

- **The CEO.** Your most important relationship. Understand their vision, communication style, and risk tolerance. Become a trusted sounding board, not a gatekeeper.

- **The CFO.** Your partner on budget, metrics, and proving legal's value. Learn to speak in ROI, risk quantification, and capital efficiency.

- **The Board.** Be the steady hand. Prepare meticulously. Know when to flag issues and when to handle them without involving the board.

- **The CISO/CTO.** Your partner on AI governance, data privacy, and technology strategy. Increasingly, you co-own critical risk areas.

- **The CHRO.** Your partner on employment matters, culture, investigations, and organizational change.

- **Business unit leaders.** Be proactive. Understand their goals before they come to you with problems. The moment they start forwarding you problems rather than asking for help shaping strategy, you've lost ground.

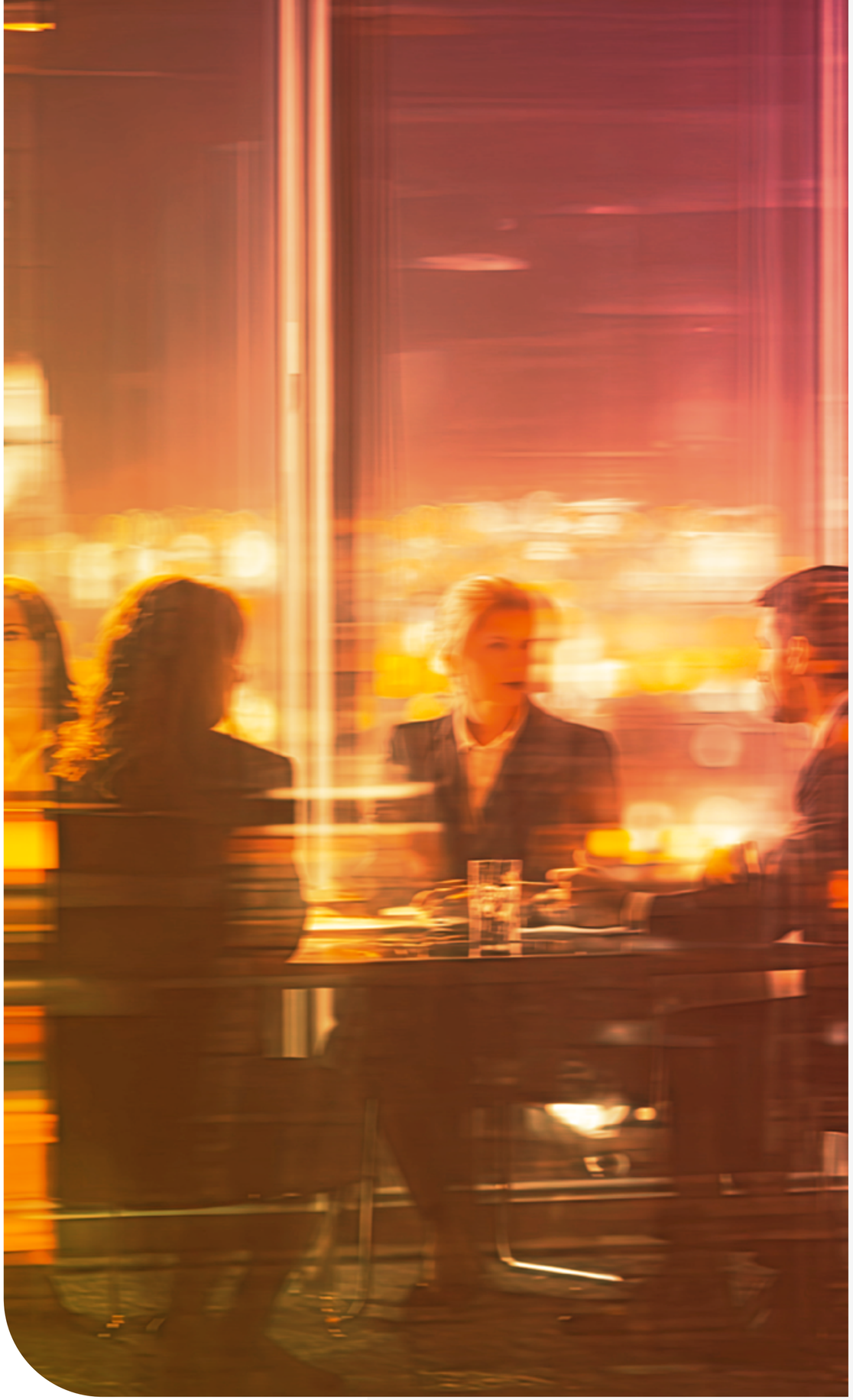
General Counsel, Paragon Legal Client when answering "Looking back, what's one thing you wish you had (or had done) when you first became GC?"

"I would like to have been able to spend more time at the outset working with the CEO to align on big picture items like strategy, budget, and expectations. We figured it out, but looking back, I could have done more to tee up my thoughts and prompt the conversation, and that would have saved us a bit of time later."

— General Counsel, Paragon Legal Client

"Think about who all the stakeholders are in this situation, the Board, the CEO, the executive team, the investors, the regulators, and relate the decisions to an understanding of what each of them would prioritize."

— Shanti Ariker, CLO, JFrog



BEYOND THE “OFFICE OF NO”

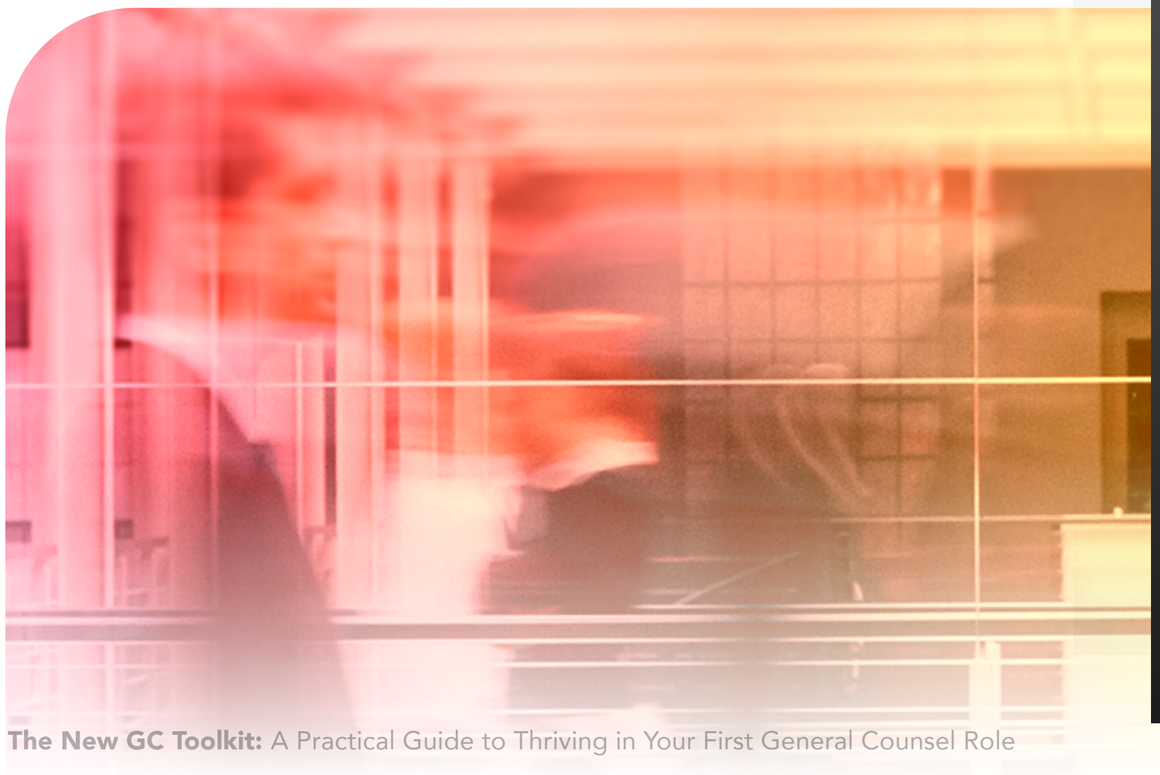
The most common perception lawyers face is being a roadblock. The best GCs reframe legal as a business enabler, and they do it early, before the perception calcifies.

Understanding what business leaders actually want from legal counsel is worth studying. Paragon Legal President Jessica Markowitz breaks down the most common frustrations in “**The 7 Deadly Sins of Bad Legal Counsel.**” Business leaders want counsel who understands their business and makes informed recommendations, not gatekeepers.

"Unless you know what the business objective is of any given task at hand, it's really hard to give an answer that feels rooted in forward direction as opposed to risk."

— Jasmine Singh, GC, Ironclad

The reframe is simple in theory and harder in practice. In practice, it means understanding the business goal behind a legal question before you answer it, and offering a path forward instead of an objection.



PRACTICAL MOVES

- Lead with "here's how we can do this" instead of "here's why we can't."
- Offer risk-ranked options (green, yellow, red) instead of binary yes/no answers.
- Embed legal team members with business units. Partner on work proactively, rather than just handling escalations.
- Create self-service tools and playbooks so the business can move faster on routine matters without always needing a lawyer.

THE GREEN / YELLOW / RED FRAMEWORK

- **Green.** "This is low-risk. Move forward. Here's how."
- **Yellow.** "This has meaningful risk. Here's how to mitigate it, and here's what happens if we don't."
- **Red.** "This is a bet-the-company risk. Here's what I recommend, and why."

Green/yellow/red answers give the business a structured way to make trade-offs. Binary answers force a choice between compliance and working around you. One builds partnership. The other builds resentment.

THE MIDDLE MANAGER GAP

One pattern worth watching. CEOs tend to view legal strategically. Middle managers, the people who'll become the next generation of executives, often view legal as a service function. That gap determines whether you get invited to strategic conversations in five years.

Target the middle. Share wins in business terms. Make sure middle managers hear what legal enabled, not just what legal did. Every deal accelerated, every compliance question resolved fast, and every crisis averted is a story worth telling in their language.

TIP TO GET STARTED

Pick one business unit. Schedule a monthly 30-minute check-in with the leader. Middle managers are best suited to help you learn the business and its pain points. Spend time listening to what they're working on and then offer suggestions for how legal can help. Do this for six months and watch how the inbound requests change.



Rightsourcing: Where Work Should Actually Live

The old model, hire internally or send it to a law firm, is done. Today's GCs have a wider spectrum of options. In-house lawyers. Legal ops. Contract managers. Flexible legal talent. Alternative legal service providers (ALSPs). Outside counsel at Am Law firms. Boutique specialists. AI-assisted workflows. The most effective GCs are deliberate about which type of work goes where.

"The GC's toolbox today has more options than ever before—flexible resources, outside counsel, technology, in-house team. Sometimes, there's a reluctance to pull them out, but the time and energy will be expended anyway. If you can invest that time and energy to your highest and best use, it will certainly help issues like burnout, engagement, and overload."

— Alisha Cieslak, Former GC, Gordon Food Services

THE SHIFT IS HAPPENING, SLOWLY, THEN ALL AT ONCE

Our survey shows 39% of legal leaders have shifted work away from traditional law firms in the last two years. But 46% plan to in the next two. Forward intent is running ahead of past actions, a clear signal that rightsourcing has moved from experiment to strategy.

The broader market says the same thing. **CLOC's 2026 State of the Industry Report** shows only 37% of legal departments expect to increase outside counsel spend this year, down sharply from 58% the year before.

Outside counsel is no longer the default release valve when workload rises. **Paragon Legal's 2025 Flexible Legal Talent Report** shows the same shift from the provider side: a 36% year-over-year jump in companies engaging flex talent as an alternative to firms.

YEAR-OVER-YEAR GROWTH

36% Increase in new client partnerships

A record high, surpassing our previous record

More organizations than ever turned to Paragon to solve complex resourcing challenges for the first time.



THE INSIGHT

Future intent (46%) is outpacing past action (39%). GCs are planning to do more rightsourcing than they've done so far. The inertia is real, but it's breaking.

BREAKING THE LAW FIRM INERTIA

The most cited barriers to shifting work away from firms are internal resistance to change, risk concerns about untested providers, procurement hurdles, and legacy technology. None of those are unsolvable. All of them take deliberate effort.

THE RIGHTSOURCING DECISION MATRIX

WORK TYPE	IN-HOUSE	FLEX TALENT/ALSP	LAW FIRM	TECH/AI
Bet-the-company litigation	Run point internally, liaison to outside counsel, board communications	Support litigation team or pick up slack for internal team running point	Primary	Research and document review, draft first draft of pleadings and filings
M&A transactions	Project manage among internal stakeholders and outside counsel	Diligence support, picking up for internal team running point on deal closing and integration	Lead counsel negotiates and drafts agreement and schedules; data room support (paralegal)	Data room management, diligence support, summarize agreement and schedules
Day-to-day commercial contracts	Primary	Overflow, specialized work (e.g., SaaS, procurement, channel partner)	Complex, high-risk negotiations	AI-assisted review and redlining, drafting, workflow automations
Regulatory compliance	Strategy and oversight, project management	Program setup and maintenance	Specialized advice (e.g., SEC enforcement, antitrust)	Monitoring and tracking, research and draft policies
Employment matters	Routine matters, investigations and audits at larger orgs.	Investigations and audits (smaller teams or capacity gaps)	Complex litigation, sensitive executive matters	Policy drafting management, research
IP portfolio management	Strategy	Prosecution, maintenance	Litigation, prosecution, maintenance	Docketing, analytics
Privacy & data protection	Policy, governance, and risk ownership	Program implementation, ongoing operational support	Regulatory response	Data mapping and assessments, research, policy drafting
Board governance & securities	Primary	Public filings, support governance work	Filing support	Board portal and compliance tools, first draft of minutes
Routine or recurring work	When FTE capacity exists	Embedded flexible support, recurring overflow, long-leave coverage	Associate or temporary secondments for additional capacity	Automation, self-service

WHEN TO USE FLEXIBLE LEGAL TALENT

The Paragon 2025 report highlights where flex talent adds the most value: project-based overflow, specialized expertise for finite engagements (privacy, employment, trade), interim GC during transitions, and leave coverage. Nine in 10 engagements are remote, and 36% are part-time, reflecting deliberate capacity-matching, not cost arbitrage.

Unlike law firm secondments, flex talent integrates directly into your in-house team and operates under your culture, rather than staying tied to the firm's workflows and conflicts.

TIP TO GET STARTED

Before you build your matrix, run a one-week audit. For every legal matter touched, note who handled it, how long it took, and what it cost. The patterns will tell you where the leverage is.



Budget Mastery

Budget management is no longer a back-office function. It's how you earn your seat at the table. Every GC we've interviewed who made the jump from respected lawyer to trusted business partner points to the same moment: when they started talking about legal work in dollars, risk-adjusted outcomes, and business impact, instead of matter counts and hours.

"Demonstrate that you are not inhibiting, that you're not a cost center, that you actually are a strategic organization that is facilitating growth of the company."

— Mark Kahn, GC, Oakland Ballers

THE NUMBERS TO KNOW

- Median legal spend is 0.50% of company revenue. Outside counsel typically accounts for 50–60% of total legal spend at large enterprises. (ACC 2024 Benchmarking Survey)
- Only 20% of legal matters sent to outside counsel stay within budget. The average legal department wastes roughly $162,000 per year paying for work that exceeds the expected scope. (Gartner 2024)
- Only 20% of Paragon survey respondents regularly report business-enablement metrics to the C-suite. Litigation outcomes (56%), external spend (40%), and cycle time (35%) dominate. All backward-looking.

WHICH METRICS DO YOU REGULARLY REPORT TO THE C-SUITE OR BOARD?



GCs are telling the **story of legal risk**, not legal value.

THE BUDGET FRAMEWORK FOR NEW GCS

- **Understand the company's finances first.** Before you manage your budget, understand how the CFO thinks about cost centers vs. revenue enablers. Sit in on an earnings prep or an FP&A review.

- **Know your legal numbers.** Total legal spend. Inside vs. outside ratio. Cost per matter type. Cost per business unit. Legal spend as a percentage of revenue. Legal headcount relative to total employee headcount.

- **Know the business numbers, too.** Understanding how the company measures financial health will make conversations with the CFO more productive. If financial literacy isn't already a strength, this is the moment to build it.

- **Benchmark yourself.** ACC, Gartner, and Thomson Reuters all publish industry benchmarks. Use them. CFOs respect numbers with provenance.

- **Identify your optimization levers.** People (right-sizing, rightsourcing), process (templates, cycle times, eliminating unnecessary legal review), technology (automation, self-service).

- **Build the business case.** Frame legal spend in ROI, risk reduction, and revenue enablement, not matter counts.

- **Report and communicate.** Create a one-page dashboard for the C-suite. Update it quarterly. Tell a value story rather than an activity story.

THE METRICS SHIFT

When you only report cost metrics, legal looks like a line item to be managed. When you report outcome metrics (revenue accelerated, risk avoided, compliance costs prevented), legal becomes an investment to expand.



The New GC Playbook

15 RULES COLLECTED FROM WORKING GCS AND CLOS.

01 You are a business leader first, a lawyer second.
"When you get to the top legal seat, you are actually a business leader."
— Delida Costin, Four-time GC/CLO

02 Build trust before you need it.
"If you don't have their trust, your excellent legal advice is going to go ignored."
— Heather Stevenson, GC, Red Cell Partners

03 Be the steady hand.
"Pause, take a second, reassess what is going on, and think long-term. You do not need to be reactive in your decision-making."
— Bita Goldman, Global General Counsel, UNiDAYS

04 Know the business intimately, not just the law.
"Unless you know what the business objective is, it's really hard to give an answer that feels rooted in forward direction."
— Jasmine Singh, GC, Ironclad

05 Embrace technology purposefully, not performatively.
"I want us to be thinking about AI-enabled solutions and combining our human ingenuity with AI precision."
— Rishi Varma, CLO, Cargill

06 Build teams that scale judgment, not just capacity.
"Training junior lawyers is one of the most important things we do because that's how you scale judgment across the team."
— Jenn Wall, GC, Intrinsic

07 Rightsource strategically. Don't default to law firms out of habit.
"The biggest challenge is the age-old challenge of being able to deliver exceptional service in the most cost-effective and efficient way."
— Jaci Lee, VP & GC, Flynn Group

08 Demonstrate value with metrics, not activity.

"Success as an in-house lawyer sometimes just looks like nothing happening at all. You have to stop waiting to be thanked, and start measuring your impact by the problems that you prevent."

— Lisa Gorman, Former CLO, Eventbrite

09 Be the dot connector. Use your cross-functional vantage point.

"General counsels are the dot connectors at companies."

— Sarah Wilson, GC, Circle

10 Make space for fun and human connection.

"Not only is it very people-focused, but it's very personally focused… you build relationships and, ideally, real trust."

— Luis Machado, GC, TopBuild

11 Pick your battles wisely.

"You don't have to win every battle. You just have to know which battles matter."

— Ron Bell, Chief Legal & Administrative Officer, Collective Health

12 Be a conductor, not a soloist.

"Bring it together like a conductor with an orchestra."

— Ron Bell, Chief Legal & Administrative Officer, Collective Health

13 Lead with the conclusion, not the analysis.

"In law school, we learn IRAC. The opposite is true in-house. People want to know the conclusion."

— Rich Foehr, GC Electrification Software, GE Vernova

14 Think in seasons. Give yourself grace.

"Sometimes success means stepping away, not pushing harder. If something's not working, don't force it. Go where you fit."

— Jasmine Singh, GC, Ironclad

15 Embrace crisis. It's your proving ground.

"I worked at a cybersecurity company that experienced a data breach, and that was really the crisis that made me realize I was ready to be a general counsel."

— Shu White, CLO & Head of People, Motive

Looking Ahead

The GC role is no longer about managing risk in isolation. It's about helping the business take smart risks at speed. The forces shaping what comes next are already visible. Legal budgets are tightening while workloads are growing.

CLOC's 2026 data shows that 63% of departments report rising regulatory workloads amid flattening budgets. AI is moving from pilot to policy, with 85% of legal departments now having some form of dedicated AI oversight, though industry data suggests governance maturity still lags adoption. Rightsourcing is shifting from experimental to mainstream.

The GCs who'll do best over the next five years are the ones who get deliberate about where work lives, how it's measured, and who it serves.

THREE COMMITMENTS FOR YEAR ONE

1. **Build your network of GC peers.** When something unprecedented lands on your desk, the first call should be to another GC who's seen something similar. Build that network before you need it. Communities like In-House Connect, ReadySetGC, and Women's GC Network are good places to find peers.

2. **Measure what matters, not what's easy.** When the only thing you tell the C-suite is what legal did, the C-suite only remembers what legal cost. Move even one metric to what legal enabled. Use our Proving Legal's Value ebook to find your "power metric."

3. **Take care of yourself.** Every seasoned GC we interviewed talked about the toll the role takes. Build rhythms that protect your judgment, because your judgment is the product.

"You don't have to know everything. It's not about knowing everything, it's about knowing how to process the uncertainty around you."

— Rishi Varma, CLO, Cargill

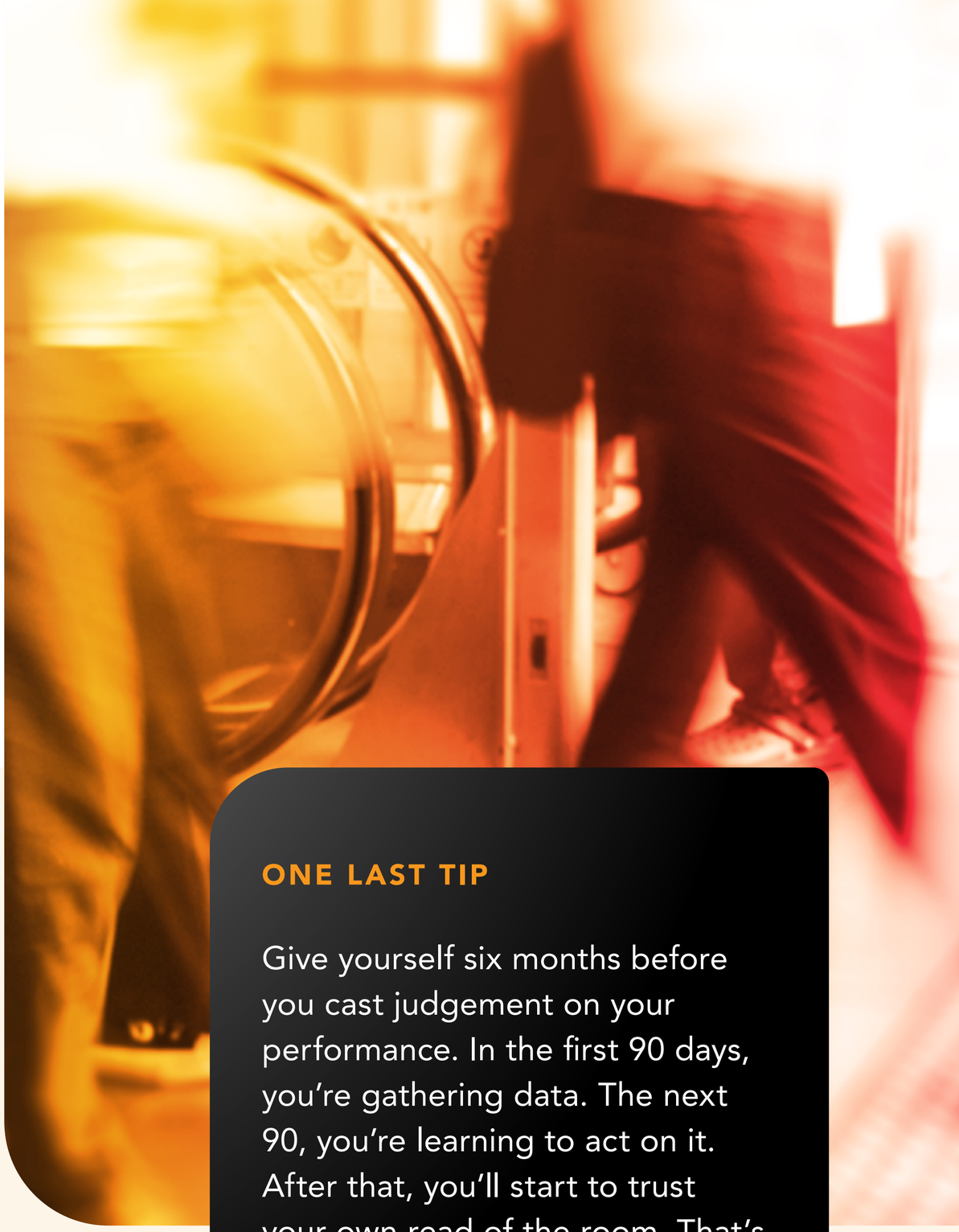
A FINAL WORD

Most of the GCs we've interviewed described their first year as the hardest of their careers. Every single one said they'd do it again.

The path is demanding. But you don't walk it alone. Build the network. Invest in your own resilience. Remember that every experienced GC started exactly where you are now, with more questions than answers and more inbound than time.

The seat you're sitting in matters. So does the way you fill it.

What's next for this series: Of the three macro forces reshaping the role, AI is the one where GCs are moving fastest, and governance is lagging hardest. Our next ebook goes deep on what it takes to lead legal in an AI-native organization. We'll cover building governance that keeps pace with adoption, picking the work AI actually handles well, and making sure the humans stay in the loop where judgment still has to live. Look for it in the coming months.



ONE LAST TIP

Give yourself six months before you cast judgement on your performance. In the first 90 days, you're gathering data. The next 90, you're learning to act on it. After that, you'll start to trust your own read of the room. That's when the role really starts.

Contact Us
When You're Ready to Build Your Team

Workloads fluctuate, roles change, and expertise needs shift—sometimes unexpectedly. Paragon Legal helps your legal department stay nimble. Whether you're looking to bolster your team during crunch time, fill a temporary gap, or add specialized expertise, we'll find a highly qualified attorney that's right for your needs, get them up and running fast, and provide ongoing support to ensure the engagement is a success.

Reach out and let us know what you need.

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20 YEARS