3 Common Misconceptions about Going In-House

By: Anita Abedian

Liz Brown thought she was mapping out the perfect legal career. After graduating from Harvard Law School, she spent a total of 12 years at two big firms and eventually became a partner. But it wasn’t what she expected. “Making partner didn’t make anything better, it made it worse—like winning a pie-eating contest where the prize was more pie,” she says. So Brown considered a move that many law firm attorneys do at some point: going in-house. But before she made that transition, Brown abandoned the legal profession altogether.

What happened? “I was increasingly unhappy,” she says. “It was only after I left my firm and started looking at going in-house that I discovered the grass isn’t greener—it’s not so much better in terms of schedule, and there are all these additional downsides.” Brown, 45, now a business law professor and author of “Life After Law: Finding Work You Love with the J.D. You Have” (BiblioIan, 2013) also serves as a career coach for dissatisfied lawyers. And many of those lawyers have told her how miserable they’ve been after making the transition to in-house counsel.

Here are what Brown says are the three most common misconceptions about going in-house:

1. Moving away from billable hours will mean working fewer hours: Not true, says Brown. “Most people assume going in-house will be easier, that it’s less demanding time-wise,” she says. “The reality is you still have a client—you’re just not billing the client directly.” She also added that in-house attorneys often have to prove themselves more as an asset to the company, which requires putting in extra time at the office, not less, especially if things slow down within a company.

2. There’s more job stability: In-house counsel is not a core function of most businesses, Brown says. And most companies will outsource. “If the company goes through financial problems, and if they can get outside counsel or as long as they have one GC, the rest of that in-house counsel staff very often gets let go,” she says.
3. You’ll be a part of a team: Quite the opposite. “I didn’t want to go in-house because I didn’t want to be seen as a gadfly, the one who has to come in and deliver the bad news,” says Brown. She says the in-house attorneys she’s talked to were unhappy because they were seen as outsiders and disliked for the same reason they were there in the first place—to bring the legal realities that businesspeople often didn’t want to hear. “If a company comes up with an invention, you’re the one who says, ‘Excuse me, but you have to patent that’ or ‘Someone has already done it, so you can’t—even if you’ve already done your sales projections.’ For the most part, you don’t make any best friends in the company,” says Brown. Along with those three points, Brown has a trio of suggestions for lawyers considering career transitions:

1. Think less about what you want to get away from and think more about what you want to move toward: Instead of trying to move from one firm to the next, or thinking an in-house transition will be the best escape plan, Brown suggests taking time to figure out what parts of your job gives the greatest sense of satisfaction. “Think about what skills you like using, what have been the most rewarding parts of your life and then think about what you can professionally do that will allow for you to have more of those experiences,” she says.

2. Carve out a position for yourself: A common mistake lawyers make is underestimating their potential career flexibility. “There aren’t only one or two paths you can take if you want to leave a law firm,” Brown says. She says taking a strategic approach to assessing individual skill sets helps attorneys redesign their resumes to discover what they’re best at doing. “Then, when you’re interviewing for a new job, you are going to have stories about accomplishments and specific talents that will be interesting and attractive to another employer,” Brown says.

3. Have coffee with people who do the job you think you want: When Brown first considered going in-house, she decided to meet up with someone already working in-house. “That informational interview saved me from making a career mistake,” says Brown. “I always recommend that lawyers sit down with someone who is in the position they want and get a sense of what a day in their life is like, to see if that’d be a good fit.” Based on the feedback she’s received, Brown says many lawyers find that what they thought they wanted isn’t really the case. “After you kick the tires, you might realize this isn’t the ride you want to take,” says Brown. “It can be very eye-opening.”