

Unconventional Counsel: Attorneys Climb Diverse Ladders to Reach Top Corporate Legal Positions

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Chanté Bowser-Neal

It's a career path most attorneys take: law school, several years at a law firm, and then the crossroads—stay and become partner, or move into a corporate legal department? Some become partners, then take the leap to business; others stay in the firm and enjoy years of partnership. Lawyers may even decide to leave firm life and spend years coveting the fruits of corporate labor. Whatever career route they take, it works.

But there are attorneys who defy the “traditional” legal career path. Though they may spend years at law firms, these attorneys do so on a temporary or project basis. They work for contract firms that hire attorneys out to law firms and corporate legal departments alike. Others work in government, or take a variety of legal positions outside firm and corporate life. Though these attorneys' backgrounds are different, they gain as much experience and work as hard as their peers, occasionally securing coveted leadership positions in the general counsel's office at major corporations.

“Some people say, ‘If you were a contract attorney, you obviously don't know where you want to be.’ But for a lot of people I met [doing contract work], that's not what it was,” says Chanté Bowser-Neal, a former contract attorney and current associate general counsel at Freddie Mac, adding that attorneys register with contract houses for many reasons, including a desire for flexible hours or time with family.

Working as a contractor gave her an open mind to new ways of working up the legal ladder, she notes. “You realize there are other opportunities out there, where with a traditional [legal career] path, you sometimes get caught in that box—you have to be at a law firm or in a

corporate law environment,” Bowser-Neal explains. And her outside-the-box career has paid off. “Some of my classmates are wondering how I managed to get a corporate job while they’re still looking—and they have a law firm background.”

From Clerk to Counsel

After law school at Howard University and a year clerking for the Maryland government, Bowser-Neal was looking for balance. “My focus was a little different from my classmates,” she recalls, adding that she was a single mom. “I wanted a job that had great pay and benefits, and still would not cause me to sacrifice time with my son.”

Bowser-Neal signed with several Washington, D.C.-based legal contracting firms. Because her resume was strong, and included excellent law school grades and law journal work, she often was hired to work for the largest law firms, she says. It was the best of both worlds: “I didn’t have to worry about billable hours. If I needed to leave to get to my son, I could do that and not have to worry about answering to someone,” she says. “It was substantive work, but I didn’t have to be there longer than I wanted to.”

In 2006, a contractor saw her resume online and contacted her about a position at Freddie Mac working on matters involving the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Immediately, Bowser-Neal knew she’d found what she calls her dream job, which included a flexible schedule and meaningful work. “Their mission is to help people get into homes, and that was something that touched me.”

During her contracted job, Bowser-Neal met Wendell Chamblis, a vice president in Freddie Mac’s legal department, who says he noticed her energy, attention to detail, and analytical skills. Though he was aware of her unique background, Chamblis says it did not play into his decision to hire her: “I was mindful of fact that her background was different from most of the lawyers with whom she’d work. From that perspective, I thought it could be a help to the legal division to have a freshness of approach in the way we look at potential candidates,” he explains. “Had I not been comfortable with the potential I saw in her, I wouldn’t have made the consideration to hire her. Her background was less important. What was more important was the work she performed while here.”

Bowser-Neal views her first several months on the job as a six-month interview. “I had to do the work, in a sense, to prove to them that I could do the work,” she says, adding that typical requirements for the associate general counsel position include years of law firm experience, which she did not have. “But because of my work ethic, I was able to prove my ability to pick up on what Freddie Mac does, and understand the laws and regulations that affect us.”

That ability comes from her background as a project attorney, Bowser-Neal explains. “When you’re a contract attorney, most of the time you don’t know the subject matter you’re going into. You have to learn quickly,” she says. Working as a contractor “teaches you to learn on

your feet. Because that skill had been honed and sharpened from going to different law firms, I was able to come here and apply it.”

Each job Bowser-Neal had before landing at Freddie Mac taught her something that has helped her to be successful at the company, she says, whether it was reading and editing articles, adapting to work styles of different bosses, or learning new areas of business and finance. “The learning curve is steep, but it’s not something you can’t grasp—you just have to have the commitment to learn it,” she explains. Her previous experiences have increased her commitment, Bowser-Neal adds. “Having the ability to learn quickly and move on my feet quickly ties into what I needed to do to get here.”

Lawyer Overseas

“A lot of people think all you can do with a law degree is practice law,” says Murphy Peterson, general counsel of Communication Technologies Inc. His first job out of law school? A landman for the Atlantic Richfield Co. (ARCO), handling negotiations, acquisitions, and other business deals for the company. Law firms were laying off attorneys, he recalls, so at a minority job fair, Peterson was recruited by ARCO.

After a layoff a year and a half into the position, Peterson volunteered with the public defender’s office in Dallas. While later working for Legal Services of North Texas, he saw his billable rate. “I realized I would’ve made more in private practice in one week than I would have in an entire month,” he says. “So I said, ‘That’s what I’m doing.’”



Murphy Peterson

Peterson’s private practice focused on business transactions. Since he is bilingual, he incorporated community service into his practice by volunteering for Hispanic juvenile defense. But after about five years of intensive work, he realized he was missing out on family time. Peterson put his resume on a legal employment Web site and received offers from all over the world, including the Federated States of Micronesia, where he moved his family. “It was broad experience,” he reflects, adding that he served as legislative council working on matters involving several countries. “It was a great learning experience—you’re helping develop the infrastructure of a Third World country.”

A subsequent move to Saipan expanded Peterson's already diverse skill through his work as assistant attorney general focusing on government contracts and environmental law; as the utility firm's general counsel, leading international contractual negotiations; and finally as counsel for the House of Representatives, drafting banking and public utility laws surrounding highly political matters. Peterson and his family then moved to the Washington, D.C., area, where he realized he had few legal contacts. A friend suggested doing contract work. "I had no idea there was such an industry here," Peterson recalls, adding that contracting for too long can become a negative mark on a lawyer's resume. "People assume contract attorneys don't have the skill set to succeed in the executive levels of legal practice."

But, as these and other contract attorneys illustrate, that's not the case, Peterson posits: Contract law and other nontraditional legal careers allow attorneys to develop unique skills. "Having a diverse [career], I developed and amassed organizational and other skills working with different parties, peoples, and cultures across a broad range of legal specialties that, in a law firm, I wouldn't have been able to have done," he explains. "You're not going to run across all these different competing businesses and interests through a more traditional approach to a legal career."

That skill set has proven crucial to his work at Communication Technologies, where he became the 17-year-old company's first general counsel last year. "I've had the opportunity to see the myriad facets of law from different perspectives, from the drafting and the interpretation to the application and enforcement," Peterson says. "With that background, I have a feel for how an issue may be approached and how the enforcement agencies may seek to implement policy, which is advantageous in a general counsel position."

Peterson also draws on his law firm experience at Baker Botts, where he worked for six months as a contractor. "There's a very thorough approach to everything you do, which is excellent. When you're doing general counsel work, you have to maintain the thoroughness, but very quickly, while simultaneously considering the business implications," he explains. The variety in Peterson's past legal career has taught him to manage the diverse types of people and business matters that come with being a general counsel, he adds. "The law is the easy, or less challenging, part. Working with people, structures, and changing business environments, and understanding how they all relate, is the difficult part. My nontraditional background allows me to address matters creatively, collaboratively, and with successful outcomes, even when at first an issue may seem a little overwhelming."

Challenging the "Myth of Meritocracy"

As this article illustrates, many qualified and talented attorneys ultimately do not follow the traditionally accepted career steps that some continue to view as prerequisites for successful legal careers. MCCA, through its 10x10x10 Campaign, is committed to providing research

and other evidence to disprove this narrow perspective. Advocating for the consideration of a broader pool of fully qualified candidates for positions at all levels of practice establishes a “win-win” scenario for legal employers and lawyers alike.

Politics and Law

Working for prestigious firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in New York for two years was a formative experience for Jason Keene when he was fresh out of New York University law school in 1999. “I loved working there—I had a great network of friends,” recalls Keene, now associate counsel for ICMA Retirement Corp. (ICMA-RC). “There was a critical mass of minorities there, mostly in the bottom to mid-range of attorneys. It was a nice community.”

When his wife got a job at the U.S. Department of Justice, Keene moved to Washington, D.C., and worked for a firm doing more litigation and counseling than the business deals he’d previously experienced. Though his six years in law firms were helpful experience, Keene says, “I always thought about what it is I really wanted to do. It wasn’t ever really the law firm.”

He made a list of what he wanted in a position. “I wanted to feel like it mattered what I do,” Keene says. “I wanted a social aspect, in the sense of being directly connected to my clients and intimately vested in the problems that I help to solve. Certain work environments are more conducive to this than others. I like solving problems, but I also like to be able to manage problems from beginning to end, and I wanted a certain amount of autonomy with as little bureaucracy as possible.”

Keene also liked the idea of serving one client rather than the juggling inherent in a law firm. “The client becomes more alive and I’m more connected to it,” he explains. “Having that connection to the client is crucial and I did not feel that as much working in a law firm.”

He started to find a connection working as special counsel for a member of the Council of the District of Columbia for almost two years. “My job was essentially one big network of people who worked for all types of businesses, and that network helped me figure out what I wanted to do,” Keene explains. “For someone who didn’t have a concrete plan, that was very helpful.”

The skills he attained in politics also assisted him in his next position as a contract attorney. “I was exposed to people in a totally different environment, even though I was also doing a lot of schmoozing,” Keene says. “I was using legal skills to help people analyze problems other than legal problems, which is what I do now all the time.”

A few months into contracting in 2007, Keene walked into ICMA-RC, which had just begun a search for his position. With his background in employment and employment benefits law in addition to politics, as well as his ability to get along with staff, Keene knew it was a fit.

Though he had just accepted a full-time government position, “it was truly serendipitous,” he says, adding that he withdrew from the government agency and began work at ICMA-RC full-time last summer. Though the learning curve is steep, Keene says, “that has been a pleasant challenge.”

Like Bowser-Neal and Peterson, Keene says he has appreciated the unconventional approach he’s taken to his career. “Any problem I face in life, I try to put not just the analytical side of my brain to work, but the creative side,” Keene says. “A lot of creative analytical types end up in law school, but there’s not necessarily anything in a legal education that prepares those types for approaching their career.”

Luckily, he adds, there are enough opportunities out there—whether an attorney climbs the traditional law firm/corporate ladder or takes a more circuitous journey—to offer a fulfilling legal career. “If you want to try something else—and there are a million things to try,” Keene says, “get yourself into the mind-set to explore different options.” **DB**

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