

HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO MOVE IN-HOUSE?

Insights from Simon Villanueva of Volvo Group UK



VOLVO

We sat down with Simon to talk all things in-house. It takes more than you think.

Simon is the Legal Director at Volvo Group UK, Ireland, and Benelux. He is responsible for delivering compliance and managing legal risk. This is what we learned.

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What first made you decide to move in-house?

I trained as a corporate lawyer and at 2 years post qualification I thought that I knew it all. I was acting as lead lawyer on small sales and purchases, but also spending a lot of my time as the junior lawyer assisting others with due diligence, board minutes and the other less glamorous elements of being a corporate lawyer.

I thought that moving in-house would give me more control of my daily workload and more scope to select and lead the work I would undertake. It certainly did give me more control and access to some more exciting work, but I also quickly learnt that I did not know it all, and most likely I never would!



"I got more control and access to some more exciting work by moving in-house!"

-Simon Villanueva

Do you think there's an optimum time in a lawyer's career to make the move in-house?

I have a personal view that there is a great deal to learn as a junior lawyer and that takes time. By that I do not just mean technical knowledge, but the more important skills of dealing with difficult clients, knowing when to use bargaining position or gravitas rather than logic, and when not to take advantage of a strong bargaining position in recognition of the likelihood that the tables may one day be turned.

I look for candidates who have trained at a leading commercial firm, stayed where they trained on qualification, and completed at least another two, but preferably three or four more years. I believe candidates at this level have the ability to work well independently but are also open to new ideas and training. That's my view of the optimum, but looking at the three highly successful people I have recruited, only one of them actually did that, so there is clearly plenty of scope for other approaches.

How has the legal team at Volvo developed since you joined?

The legal team has not grown, but we have been through three recruitment cycles in my time here. The Volvo Group has a legal team of three in the UK and whilst we work hard to maximise every opportunity, with such a small team, there is inevitably a very flat structure which limits development and scope for progression. As an international group there are many opportunities overseas but these do not suit everyone.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

I love negotiating, it can be difficult and often frustrating along the way, but there is a great satisfaction to be had from achieving the best possible deal.

How would you define an in-house lawyer?

We are the reading, writing, and common sense department.



What characteristics make for a good in-house lawyer?

You need to be able to work with everyone. More specifically you need to be able to extract the information you need to do your job from the most nervous, overzealous or even belligerent of colleagues. An open, friendly and above all persistent personality is key.

It is also important to be passionate about your business and its products/services. It not only makes the days go faster but also makes it easier for the business to accept you as one of their own, rather than being seen as a hurdle that needs to be cleared.

What advice would you give to lawyers currently in private practice who might be interested in a move in-house?

In-house recruiters like to see prior in-house experience, it is therefore really important to grab any in house exposure you can, typically a secondment.

Once you have been successful in securing your first in- house role you need to think about your career. In private practice you have a well-defined career path moving through the various ranks to partnership. In in-house, on the other hand, the career path is far less obvious and requires more active management. It is important to have at least a rudimentary career plan that seeks to ensure you avoid stagnating or finding yourself with niche skills or in a niche sector too early.

What have been the highlights of your career to date?

To be honest, I've met so many fascinating people and worked on so many exciting projects that it is hard to pick.

One of my favourite projects was tracing and subsequently recovering a seven figure sum that an erroneous computer program had drip fed to one of our suppliers over a period of 7 years. It took detective skills, some strong negotiation skills and above all perseverance to recover all of the funds, some of which were technically time barred.

What's your favourite sandwich?

Sadly I have joined the legions of people that are trying to eat less bread so I don't eat sandwiches anymore. Greek salads are the future.



For more information on current opportunities for in-house legal roles please contact David Cartwright.

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