



# WHAT DOES A LEGAL OPERATIONS DIRECTOR DO?

BY JOE DAVIS



Ben Weinberger is enjoying his new role at Nextlaw In-House Solutions, which he says is 'a heck of a great mashup of my experience, my background and my knowledge'.

efficiency and on how to evolve and mature their operational models,' says Ben Weinberger, recently appointed as the firm's Legal Operations Director.

It's a division of Nextlaw Enterprise, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of Dentons. 'Dentons has more than 60 former General Counsels (GCs) who are part of this team that provides advice on all aspects of legal operations. I do not think any of our competitors can say the same,' he says.

Weinberger himself has a wide variety of experience. 'I've been everywhere, man,' he says, invoking the spirit of Johnny Cash. He started his career as a practicing

attorney but has also been a consultant and law firm CIO. He has also spent time in the legaltech vendor space, with stints at Phoenix and Prosperoware. He calls this new role 'a heck of a great mashup of my experience, my background and my knowledge'.

Dentons boasts over 170 locations in over 80 countries and over 10,000 lawyers, making it the world's largest law firm. Dentons is part of a growing trend whereby law firms are expanding their offerings outside the traditional practice of law. 'I think it is a fantastic move from the standpoint of being competitive with all that is going on in the crazy world that is legal,' Weinberger says.

**N**extlaw In-House Solutions is a consulting group that helps in-house legal departments with a variety of legal operations challenges. 'That means we advise law departments on how to improve

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### **The in-house landscape**

On the surface, it would seem that the only significant difference between being a lawyer at a law firm and being an in-house lawyer is whether their time is billable.

Weinberger understands that many in-house lawyers are 'getting themselves up to speed on how to run their own business unit that looks like a law firm. They have not necessarily operated in the same manner as other business units. Lawyers were not necessarily trained as businesspeople when they went to law school. As a GC, you do not know how to market yourself internally and best express what it is you do to your peers, and get the attention of the C-suites, and brand yourself, and develop KPIs to share out to the business that explain the value that you're contributing. It can be very lonely for someone who has been at a law

firm for a while as part of the machine generating the revenue. To suddenly go in-house somewhere—it is a very unfamiliar place where you have to learn very quickly how to convey what it is you do, or you get treated as a cost center.'

How sophisticated are Weinberger's clients when it comes to legal operations and technology? 'There is such a range,' he says. 'In my mind, coming into this, I thought I would be working primarily with medium- to small-size law departments, and that the big ones would have all the resources they need. And I am finding that in reality, that is not necessarily accurate.'

He adds: 'We have clients who will come to say, "I've been asked to look at outsourcing" or "I've been asked to see what I can do to take advantage of these ALSPs (Alternative Legal Service Providers)". Because everyone, unless

you are hiding under a rock somewhere, is very familiar with the fact that you have got these ALSPs out there eating into some of the legal work. Law firms are competing with their clients, because the in-house legal departments are all growing. We have legal departments that come to us with some very clear ideas sometimes, but sometimes we have a client that one of the Dentons partners has introduced us to, telling them that if they are facing challenges, they might want to talk to some Nextlaw people.'

Weinberger provides a recent example of the type of work he does. 'We have done what is called a diagnostic workshop—in essence a deep listening exercise. I sit down along with one of my GCs who has experience in that specific industry, and we have a chat. It starts out by talking to the GC, talking to some of the assistant GCs and talking to the rest of the team in some targeted conversations. We talk to their constituents, their customers around the business, the ones they interact with, and understand what exactly it is that goes on there. By virtue of doing that, we tend to uncover all sorts of information, all sorts of opportunities where we can help them improve.'

While some of the team's work is around strategy, sometimes it focuses on technology. 'Legaltech is super-popular,' Weinberger says. 'And if you are a GC and you are not a techno geek, you just do not know what exists. I went to one of our clients recently to do an hour-long educational workshop about AI. Everyone wants to talk about AI. Everyone is hearing about AI. So, I helped to demystify some of the jargon. I talked about it in very real terms—this is what the terminology is, these are the products that are out there, this is what they can do, and this is where they tend to lump into different categories. You are not buying AI for the sake of buying AI. You are understanding what your problem is, and you are looking at a tool that will fix that problem. If it has AI, all the better, because ideally that means it is going to be more efficient, and perhaps more effective than just the lawyer on his or her own.'

### **Typical engagements**

One example of a problem Weinberger and the In-House Solutions group see regularly involves managing the matters



Ben Weinberger - Legal Operations Director, Nextlaw

the legal department is working on. 'Basic intake in a law department is very different to a law firm,' he says. 'At a law firm, a lawyer comes in and says, "Oh, I just had lunch with so-and-so, and this is the matter we are doing". Well, in the context of a law department, these matters or projects pop up because someone sent you an email or someone mentioned something in the hallway. You passed a guy at lunch, who said "Hey, this division over here is growing and they've got a problem with their legal aspects of HR stuff". There is not always a clear mechanism for handling intake, and how you create and track these projects. And then you need to be able to measure all the resources you are putting toward them, to project manage them, which is a key element of ensuring efficiency in any organization. Law firms are starting to recognize that, finally, but certainly law departments are no different. The only way you can track and measure this stuff is if you have a formal system to actually record it.'

Another area that legal departments struggle with is talent development. Weinberger says he hears from many of his clients that 'finding people, keeping people, developing people and retaining people is a huge problem'. Many lawyers claim that they are happy to take a pay cut to trade the hectic pace of law firm life for what they perceive to be a less demanding in-house job, but salary is a key component in the war for talent. 'Even though people will say, "Oh, it is not the money," a lot of times it is the money,' he says. 'The starting salaries of associates, shockingly, keep going up. And when that is your competition for in-house talent, it is going to be tough.'

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The salaries at legal start-up companies present another challenge to in-house staff, but Weinberger believes that in-house departments can do more to manage their image. 'If you have not been able to position your department as a value generator, it will just be seen as a cost center,' he says. 'Culturally, that will impact how people are perceived, how they are treated, and how they interact. It will absolutely impact how people perceive the value of being in an in-house role. It really depends on how you, as a GC, run your department. How are you able to position your team to the rest of the business? How are you able to remunerate your team? And how are you able to give them the flexibility that a lot of people come to the in-house function for?'

### **The 'light bulb' moment**

'The thing that GCs do not always know they need, but every time we mention it, I swear I almost see a light bulb go off over their head, is around branding themselves,' says Weinberger. 'It's trying to demonstrate their value to the business. And that does not surprise me one bit, because again, as I mentioned previously, these are people who used to be the machine that generated the revenue. Now they are one of the cost areas of the business. They are really in the position where they are not

truly appreciated for the value they are bringing, and they have to learn very quickly how to convey that value, lest they be seen as an expendable resource. And this is something that GCs are all feeling, especially as they are being asked to do more with less.'

Nextlaw In-House Solutions has '60 plus people who have "been there, done that" and run these departments in and amongst our ranks,' says Weinberger. 'And on top of that, again, the resources of the world's largest law firm behind it. We have some fairly deep pockets to dig into with regard to talent. And we can really help our clients improve how they are operating and make them more successful as general counsel.'

It's not just the advice he can give, Weinberger points out. 'It's not just the advice one of my GCs can give. It's our advice together where sometimes we offer a very different perspective on the same problem that can really be a benefit. Everything we do is a team sport.'

Weinberger is clearly happy to be part of this team. 'I think the gig itself fits me and I have been busy,' he says. 'And I expect to keep being busy. To end this on one of my favorite quotes, I am going to go back to Bull Durham and say I am just happy to be here and hope I can help out the ball club.'

*Joe Davis has spent over 20 years in legal technology at large law firms, in the corporate legal space, and most recently at a technology vendor. He is a frequent speaker and author on a variety of legaltech topics, including artificial intelligence and enterprise content management. Joe also hosts ILTA's 'Bleeding Edge' podcast. Prior to his IT career, Joe was a teacher, an entrepreneur and a DJ in a flea market. Follow him on Twitter at @josephpdavis or email him at joe@josephpdavis.com.*

