



SELLING YOUR WAY  
INTO **A COVETED**  
**IN-HOUSE LEGAL**  
**POSITION**

**By Pamela S. DiCarlantonio**  
PARTNER, MAJOR, LINDSEY & AFRICA



# SETTING EXPECTATIONS WHEN PURSUING AN IN-HOUSE ROLE

---

Although my focus as a recruiter at Major, Lindsey & Africa is on representing law firm partners and groups in making a lateral move from one law firm to another, I frequently find myself educating partners and senior associates on how to navigate the in-house search process. Many law firm partners are frustrated that they receive several calls each week from recruiters presenting law firm opportunities, but as soon as those partners decide they want to move in house, they often feel they can't get a return phone call, much less a meeting with a recruiter or an actual job interview. These same lawyers are often unprepared for the challenges they face in trying to land a coveted in-house position and, more importantly, are not sure how to overcome those challenges.

Following is advice for any law firm lawyer who is eager to launch an in-house search.

# IN-HOUSE HIRING IS ALMOST ALWAYS NEED-BASED, NOT OPPORTUNISTIC

While the law firm partner market is almost entirely opportunistic (firms only hire when the “right” partner is before them based on economic and other factors), in-house hiring is almost never done opportunistically. Typically, there is an available position at a discrete point in time, with specific parameters and requirements, and the company is looking for the “perfect” candidate to fit the bill. This means that no matter how strong a candidate you think you are, a company that does not have an open position is not likely to hire you. It also means that for every open position that fits your background perfectly, there may be several other candidates out there who fit it “more perfectly.” It’s a competitive endeavor and one you must prepare for carefully.

## GET IN THE RIGHT MINDSET

Before you take a single step toward finding an in-house position, it is critical that you understand how law firm lawyers who take that plunge are perceived on the in-house side. Throughout your process, you will need to be clear and sincere on why you want to move in house. My colleague Deborah Ben-Canaan, a partner in our In-House Counsel Practice, shares several of these motivations and expectations nicely in her article “Going In-House: What Law Firm Partners Need to Understand.” (<https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/knowledge-library/articles/going-inhouse-what-law-firm-partners-need-to-understand>)

You will also need to be ready to overcome the potential obstacles, including those outlined in this excellent article by Major, Lindsey & Africa’s founding partner, Robert Major: “Advice to Law Firm Partners Considering Going In House.” (<https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/knowledge-library/articles/advice-to-law-firm-partners-considering-going-in-house?byconsultantauthor=robert-major>)

## GET YOUR DUCKS IN A ROW EARLY

Having your resume and supporting materials ready at the outset will free up more time for other time-consuming aspects of the process. Throughout your career, always keep your resume or CV up to date and continually refine it. The same applies to a litigator’s list of representative matters or a transactional lawyer’s “deal sheet.” Whether you have been disciplined about updating these materials along the way or not, the minute you start thinking about moving in house, you’ll want to get these items together and make sure they are buttoned up and fine-tuned at all times. Often candidates who end

*Continued >*

up on the short list for a search are asked to complete a written candidate questionnaire responding to questions from the prospective employer. This questionnaire typically seeks information about the candidate's career path, experience and skills, prior exposure to one or more specific industries, work style, strengths, weaknesses, fit for the particular position, willingness to relocate and current/expected compensation. It is wise to have a boilerplate questionnaire response ready to be tailored for a specific position, particularly if you are pursuing an opportunity that is on a tight track.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Give yourself ample lead time before embarking on an in-house search. It can take many months and even years for the right opportunity to come along, so it's usually best to start networking (and reaching out to search firms) six months or more before you are ready to make an actual move. Once you have started down that path, be disciplined in your process of identifying opportunities and responding to them quickly. If or when an opportunity arises where you might be a good fit, do everything asked of you immediately — and do it well. If you miss your opportunity to get on the first slate for a position, that window may close for good. (This always reminds me of the line in "When Harry Met Sally," where Sally's friend admonishes her that if she is not ready to re-enter the dating scene soon, she risks having to live the rest of her life "knowing that someone else is married to your husband.")

## BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF ABOUT FIT

Sell yourself from day one, but when working with an in-house recruiter, respect her expertise when she tells you you're not a fit. She knows what her clients want, and if she honestly believes you're a fit, then it's in her interest to tell you and keep you in the mix. You may think you are "perfect" for every job but — get ready for this — YOU ARE NOT. We see many law firm attorneys who are eager to move in house and simply don't understand the in-house search model and how competitive these searches are. For a search that is likely to attract a large pool of qualified candidates, satisfying even 80–90 percent of the stated requirements is probably not enough.

Early in my recruiting career, I encountered one of the more extreme examples of this lack of understanding of the process. A litigation partner with a healthy ego stated that he was "a perfect fit" for a GC position at one of our client companies. When I pointed out that the position description clearly stated that the ideal candidate would have a corporate transactional background, he responded, "Well, I have that background because I represent corporations." I laughed out loud. He lost so much credibility in that one silly sentence that I could no longer advocate for him internally.

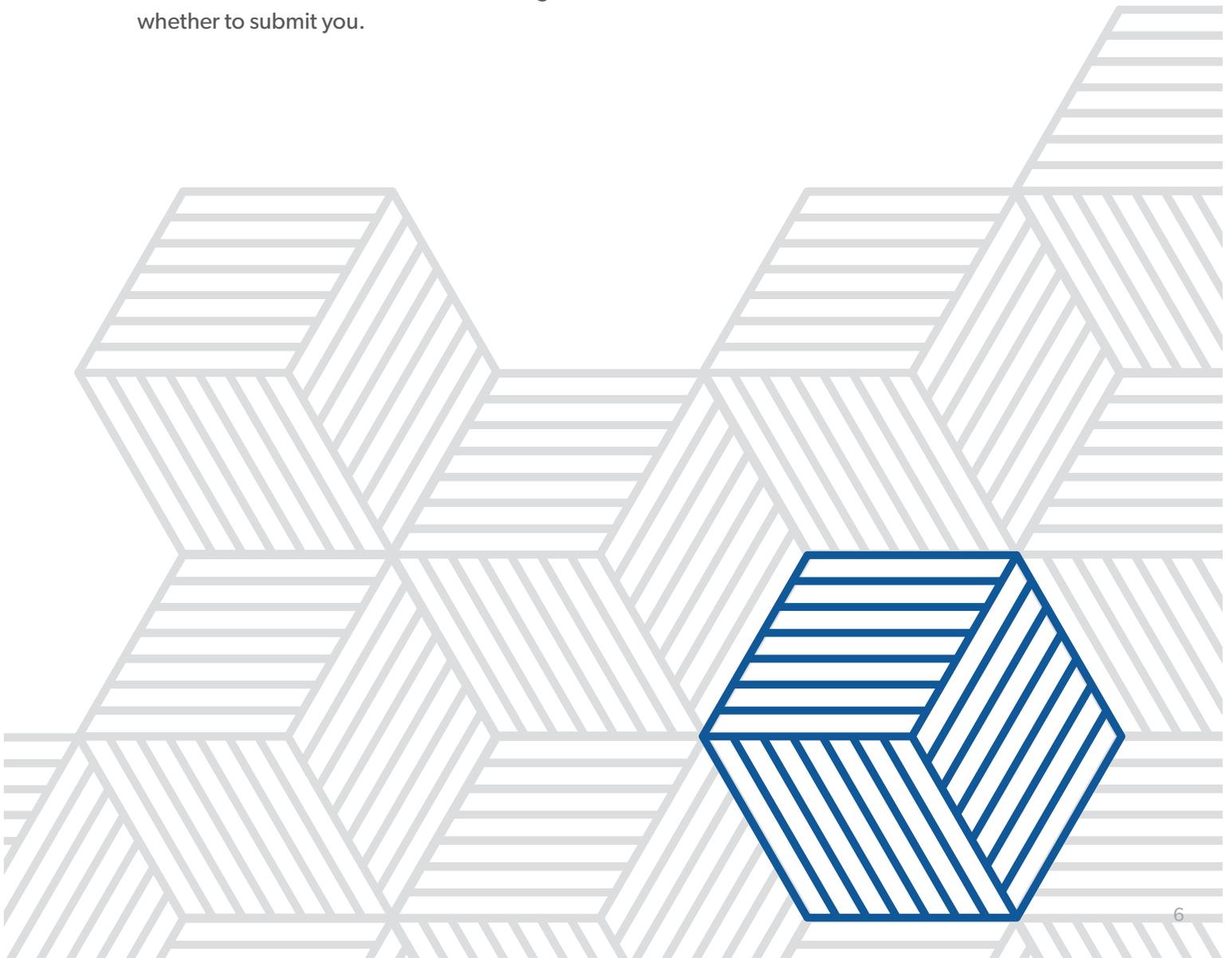
# WHAT DOES “FIT” MEAN?

It depends. For most in-house job opportunities, the search firm will collaborate with the client company in preparing a comprehensive position description that outlines background information about the position and what an ideal candidate looks like from the client’s perspective. Such a description might include:

- **Background on the company:** This includes its history, management, reporting structure, financial overview and culture (and sometimes background on why the position is available, whether it’s a newly created or replacement position, etc.)
- **Practice area/skill set/hands-on experience desired:** They may want someone focused on a narrow niche or more of a utility player or “best athlete.”
- **Whether prior in-house experience is required or preferred:** There is a heavy bias in the in-house market in favor of lawyers with prior in-house experience. Arguments that you have operated “like an in-house attorney” or “act as a General Counsel” to your clients usually fall on deaf ears. Although secondments are not the same as in-house experience, they can count for something, particularly if a secondment lasted for a substantial period of time and the attorney was actually integrated into the legal function of the company or organization.
- **Geography and whether the company will look at a candidate who would need to relocate for the position:** Often a client restricts the search pool to local candidates, and sometimes the client wants to conduct a national or global search or actually prefers a candidate from outside the local market. As a candidate, the more flexible you are on geography, the better, simply because you will have more “bites at the apple.” You should be aware, however, that a client who only wants to meet locals may have reasons for that requirement that go far beyond willingness to bear the cost of relocation. (<https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/knowledge-library/articles/five-reasons-employers-only-want-locals?byconsultantauthor=joanna-herman>)
- **Industry experience:** This is becoming increasingly important in a fluid marketplace, with increasingly sophisticated and specialized business considerations and needs.
- **Level:** This is not an age thing; it’s about skill set and slotting someone into a position at the right point in his or her career. It is very possible to be over-qualified or under-qualified for a particular position.



- **Compensation range/expectations:** This is also tied to level; even if a candidate insists that the stated comp range is acceptable, a company will not be keen on hiring an attorney who is likely to end up unhappy or always have one foot out the door (e.g., if she feels underpaid and a higher-paying position comes along).
- **Personality and cultural fit:** Does the company want more of a behind-the-scenes technician or a charismatic leader with gravitas? Is the environment more laid back or formal? In today's in-house world, it is crucial that a candidate fit the company culture, and the recruiter, if one is involved, will make this assessment before deciding whether to submit you.
- **Pedigree:** Some companies are "school/grade/firm snobs;" others are more focused on work experience and don't care about your pedigree.
- **Other:** The position description might also delineate expectations regarding a candidate's work ethic, ability to travel and other factors important to the client company.



# BE FLEXIBLE IF POSSIBLE ON TITLE, COMPENSATION AND GEOGRAPHY

Because so many companies prefer to hire attorneys with prior in-house experience, landing that first in-house position is often the toughest. Once you have worked your way into that “club” and gained some meaningful experience, however, the universe of in-house opportunities tends to open up and you will be considered for many more opportunities down the line. At that point, in addition to meeting the threshold requirement of having in-house experience, you are now part of the in-house network, so you will likely learn of positions much earlier in the process.

For all of these reasons, if you have any flexibility as to title, compensation and/or geography, try not to allow these factors to be deal-breakers and keep your focus on the long-term picture.

With respect to current compensation and expectations, you do have to give up this information at some point in the process. “Compensation negotiable” is no longer a satisfactory answer in a candidate questionnaire or interview. Most companies have an allocated budget range for each in-house legal position (sometimes, but not always, with some wiggle room for a candidate with more experience or a distinguishing characteristic that might warrant a bump). Pay attention to long-term incentives as well. These can often be very generous because in-house attorneys are expected to have skin in the game and a vested interest in the company’s success. On the flip side, a genuine willingness to take a substantial pay cut does not always make you more marketable; the company may view you as a flight risk and – assuming two candidates are similar – opt for the one whose current compensation is more in line with the position.

# CHANCE FAVORS THE PREPARED

Be actively engaged in your search and laser-focused. Do your best to get on (and stay on) the radar of as many in-house search firms as possible and feel free to nudge them occasionally so they don't forget about you. If a particular search firm does not have an active search (or one in the near-term pipeline) that fits your background, it can be very tough, if not impossible, to get an audience with them. The top in-house recruiters are not able to meet with every single lawyer who wants to move in house; otherwise, they would have no time to bring in new searches or actually execute on them.

If you feel ignored or rejected, try not to take it personally. Instead, focus on affirmative activities, such as reviewing job postings on corporation and search firm websites and, of course, network like crazy. It can be delicate and even risky to (wink wink, nod nod) hint to a client that you are interested in moving in house, but that is often the best way to open a door to the in-house world. Finally, I am often told that career-related websites feel like a "black hole," but they may serve a useful purpose in educating you as to the types of opportunities in a specific market, which practice areas are hot, what companies are looking for in their in-house attorneys and the like. Use your time wisely, be realistic and honest with yourself about whether you fit the stated requirements and always remember that moving in house is usually a marathon and not a sprint. Chasing after opportunities you are never going to land is not a productive use of your time.

# STAY THE COURSE

Landing a coveted in-house position is becoming increasingly difficult, which many partners are surprised to learn once they are finally able to lift their heads out of their briefs and term sheets. I often receive calls from experienced partners from great firms who say, "I'm ready to move in house now; please send me all of the available positions you have." If only it were that easy. However, if you plan ahead, invest time and energy in the process and approach your search in a thoughtful, strategic way, the odds of you landing the in-house position of your dreams will be greatly enhanced.

# WORKING WITH A SEARCH FIRM

When contemplating a move in house, be prepared to work multiple angles to identify potential opportunities, whether through existing clients, networking, company websites, career search websites, the Association of Corporate Counsel, etc. In this article, I touch on all of these but focus primarily on working with a legal search firm like Major, Lindsey & Africa.

If you are working with a search firm with respect to a particular position, you should follow their advice to the letter and always treat any in-house recruiter with whom you are dealing like a prospective employer. They will be your toughest critic — and possibly your most supportive ally — so every interaction counts.



# WHY COMPANIES USE AN OUTSIDE SEARCH FIRM

Major, Lindsey & Africa has earned its reputation as the best legal search firm in the world, but it still has to work hard for each and every search it closes. Clients come to us for many reasons: They may have worked with us before (indeed, often the person who retains us was a Major, Lindsey & Africa placement). They may want access to our vast and up-to-date database and respect our proven track record for successfully closing difficult searches. They may have a particularly complicated “needle in a haystack” type search and want to know that we will leave no stone unturned in identifying and helping to recruit the best candidate out there. The client may lack the bandwidth to conduct a streamlined search and want our expertise in vetting candidates upfront. Sometimes they want our help in evaluating an internal candidate. By the time they hire a search firm like Major, Lindsey & Africa and agree to pay a fee for our services, they want exactly what they want and it’s our job to find that for them.

## THE ROLE OF THE SEARCH FIRM FROM THE CANDIDATE’S PERSPECTIVE

A law firm partner, in making a lateral move to another firm, should select one recruiter to help him navigate the market and make the best possible decision for his practice and personal needs. For an in-house move, on the other hand, it is not only acceptable to work with multiple recruiters, it is advisable. It is important to get on the radar of as many in-house search firms as possible because in the retained/exclusive (executive search) world, there is very little overlap. If one firm is handling a particular search, it’s likely no one else is working on that same position.

As a candidate, you should be prepared to feel like a commodity at times because in some ways you are. The search firm represents the client company; they are not your agent. (At best, they are a dual agent, once you have been submitted and have the attention of the client company.)

If you are lucky enough to end up on the short list for a particular search, you will start to feel more love — but only then. I suggest reading the advice of my colleagues, who describe the nuanced distinctions between a law firm search and an in-house counsel search. (<https://www.mlaglobal.com/en/knowledge-library/articles/mofo-interview-understanding-how-to-work-with-recruiters>)



# YOU ARE NOT THE IN-HOUSE RECRUITER'S "CLIENT"

Major, Lindsey & Africa has been the premier player in legal search for more than 30 years, and many consider us the gold standard. For this reason, in-house lawyers and law firm partners frequently come to us looking to be placed in house. We have repeat clients (the employers) who retain us exclusively to fill their in-house counsel needs.

By the time a client company hires a search firm like Major, Lindsey & Africa, it usually has already exhausted its own network in trying to identify a lawyer for the position, having considered and evaluated internal candidates, other in-house attorneys they know, law firm lawyers who are serving as the company's outside counsel and lawyers they have met through networking efforts. They may have posted or advertised the position through a variety of avenues.

In the early stages of a search, they may have more wiggle room in terms of their required parameters and may even be willing to consider a "good enough" candidate who is either a known quantity or can learn the job, rather than take the necessary steps to find the best candidate for the position. Unfortunately, many clients find that these approaches often turn into a time-consuming fishing expedition (when you cast that line you have little control over which fish in the vast ocean is going to bite). At that point, they opt for a more targeted approach with the help of an expert with a proven track record for successfully completing very complex, nuanced searches.

By the time we enter the picture, these companies want what they want — exactly — which is why when they say they want a candidate who strictly meets "ABCDEFGH" requirements, they usually want all of ABCDEFGH. As they should, and we have an exceptional track record for finding clients exactly what they want. Major, Lindsey & Africa is not retained to passively accept resumes; we are hired to actively and affirmatively utilize all of our resources and expertise to find the absolute best candidate for the job. Unfortunately for the vast majority of candidates, they will be edged out by a "better, stronger, faster" candidate who is a closer fit for the particular position they are pursuing. And when we're looking at just one job with multiple (sometimes hundreds) of interested candidates, the chance of any one individual candidate landing that job is extremely slim.

# THE STREAMLINED IN-HOUSE SEARCH PROCESS

From the candidate's perspective, the entire process can feel like you are searching for a needle in a haystack. To determine how to navigate your relationship with a search firm, it is important to understand, at a 30,000-foot level, what the typical retained/exclusive in-house search process looks like:

- The search firm nurtures its relationship with its client/prospective client, spends time learning about the business/industry/company, etc.
- The client has a hiring need (either for a new position or replacement of an existing in-house attorney).
- The search firm is retained.
- The search firm collaborates with the client and obtains relevant details about the company, position, compensation range and benefits, characteristics of an ideal candidate, logistics of the search and timeline, sensitive issues, if any, etc.
- A written position description is prepared in collaboration with the client.
- The search is launched, whereby the search firm uses all available resources to target and reach qualified candidates. At Major, Lindsey & Africa, this might include internal communications with its 200+ recruiters around the globe; direct outreach to potential candidates with whom we already have a relationship; searches within our vast, state-of-the-art database; utilizing our website (where all of our active in-house searches are posted); advertising, if appropriate; networking; targeted emails and calls; and more.
- At this point, qualified attorneys who are interested in the position provide their resume and other pertinent materials to the search firm (including, if applicable, a completed candidate questionnaire).
- The search firm evaluates all qualified candidates and meets with the "best of the best" as part of its vetting process.
- The search firm prepares and submits a slate of the top candidates to the client for review and consideration. This often includes a resume or CV, completed questionnaire and personal observations as to fit. They may also discuss other candidates with the client for calibration purposes and to determine if there is any interest.
- Based on those discussions and the slate submitted, the client decides which candidates it would like to interview. Rolling submissions are sometimes accepted, but it is not uncommon for the client company to focus on the first slate before considering any other candidates.

*Continued >*

- The interview process varies among companies and can range from streamlined to cumbersome and protracted. The search firm works with the client and candidates to schedule interviews (usually multiple rounds). This process can last from a week or two to several months. In addition, some companies employ psychological/ personality and/or skills assessments and behavioral interviewing to assist in determining fit.
- Ultimately, the client decides which candidate it would like to hire, leading — in most cases — to an offer and acceptance.

As a first step to inserting yourself into this process, it is very important to prepare a resume specifically tailored to the position description. The search firm’s objective is to whittle down the universe of candidates for each position and select a limited number for submission to the client for consideration. In other words, the recruiter is looking for reasons to eliminate you from the pool, not include you. Post-rejection “motions for reconsideration” are rarely granted. Also, because additional submissions are not always accepted after the initial slate goes to a client, you will want to make your overall presentation as compelling as possible from the very start.

## PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD FROM START TO FINISH

Always remember that the recruiter does not work for you. The recruiter works for the client (i.e., the company or organization whose in-house position they are looking to fill). The recruiter is your first stop. If you don’t make a positive impression on the recruiter handling the search, or if you disrespect him or her (or his/her administrative staff), you may be dead in the water. Treat every meeting with the recruiter like an interview. Wear a suit, even if the company you are applying with has a casual, informal culture. Show up on time. Don’t be flaky when it comes to scheduling. Respect their time. Demonstrate that you understand the process and their important role in it. In short, make it easy for them to like you and be your advocate.

A few years back, I had a mid-level in-house attorney referred to me. She wanted to meet to discuss the in-house market, but proceeded to make it extremely difficult to get a meeting scheduled (ultimately insisting on a very inconvenient time and location). When we did finally meet, she showed up in sloppy attire and was arrogant throughout the meeting. As an example, she announced that she would not dress up for any in-house interviews because any company that expected her to dress up was not the right cultural fit for her. She also “threatened” to reach out to other in-house recruiters so that she could choose the one worthy of representing her even after we educated her on the retained search model and encouraged her to contact other recruiters to maximize her opportunities. She simply didn’t get it and potentially shot herself in the foot with respect to future opportunities that require a more agreeable personality.

# YOU'RE NOT THE BUYER UNTIL YOU'RE THE BUYER

How marketable you are for an in-house role depends on your background and basic supply-and-demand principles. A sitting GC at a Fortune 100 or large private company, for example, is likely to get a lot more traction with in-house recruiters (and more job interviews) than a junior litigation partner at a mid-tier law firm. Know your place on the buyer-seller spectrum, be aware of your specific limitations and challenges and then conduct your search accordingly.

On my first day at Major, Lindsey & Africa nearly a decade ago, one of our long-standing in-house recruiters stopped by my office to chat. When she made a comment that “lawyers always want to talk to me because they want what I’m selling,” I wondered for a moment whether I had joined the wrong group. That sounded too good to be true, particularly to someone who had yet to learn the art and science behind effective cold calling.

I happen to love working with law firm partners and I believe in the value I bring to the process of helping a partner or group make a lateral move. But my colleague’s comment underscores the client- and need-driven nature of in-house recruiting, which requires a very different search process and approach. In-house “wannabes” must appreciate how critical it is to be one step ahead of the competition and understand the buyer-seller dynamic. (Hint: Until you’re the last person standing, the client is usually the buyer and each candidate is a seller.)

In the in-house world, you’re at the mercy of the market at that discrete point in time. You have zero chance of landing a job that closed last week or one that does not yet exist. It is very much a matter of being in the right place at the right time, but when you have the opportunity to work with a recruiting firm and are willing to follow their expert advice, your odds of landing that coveted in-house position increase considerably.



MAJOR,  
LINDSEY  
& AFRICA