

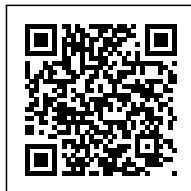
BUSINESS PARTNERS

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María Echeverría-Torres, Legal and Compliance director at Nokia, is a believer that in-house lawyers should be recognized as true partners and be part of the decision-making inside the company. Echeverría-Torres also reflects on the changes in the job over the last 25 years and what qualities a good in-house lawyer must work on



With a large experience as an in-house legal advisor in global companies in the ICT sector with responsibility for legal and compliance matters, Echeverría-Torres began her career at Uría Menéndez and worked as an in-house lawyer in the legal departments of General Motors, EDS (now HP), and Nortel Networks.

Currently, she is the head of the legal and compliance department at Nokia Solutions and Networks for Western Europe and the Nordic countries.

CAREER EVOLUTION

Over the past 25 years, Echeverría-Torres has seen some important changes in her profession, but three things can be recognized as the key factors for this evolution: globalization, the emergence of new technologies and the widespread incorporation of women into company legal departments, many of whom, she says, are in management or highly influential positions. On this last point, she assures that, although "there is still a long way to go to achieve that there are many more women in managerial positions within companies", the incorporation of female lawyers to in-house professional areas has favored a deep and positive transformation in legal departments at an operational and cultural level. "Women understand and practice talent development, integration, diversity, and the power of the collective mind over individualism like no other," she says.

For the head of the legal and compliance department at Nokia, the in-house lawyer must be recognized in the company as a true "business partner". To this end, it is important to consider that "it is vital for the success of in-house lawyers that they understand the company's strategy and business objectives in the short, medium and long term, and can work coherently with them".

They also must be trained to "identify and manage legal risks properly", and to propose balanced solutions that allow the company to avoid or mitigate the risks and their possible consequences. Echeverría-Torres believes that the role of in-house lawyers has both an operational and a strategic dimension, which is differentiated.

In its operational aspect, "the in-house lawyer operates in a way comparable to that of the general practitioner since he must be available to advise any part of the business organization that requires his legal services" Echeverría-Torres says. But it is stressful and requires qualities such as "active and participatory listening, effective communication, analytical skills, empathy, teamwork. It is also important to believe in the power of the collective mind and to avoid individualism. In their strategic dimension, in-house lawyers must know how to combine technical knowledge with precise internal knowledge of the company and its sector to assist in decision-making and provide comfort to management teams regarding the legal viability of decisions. "To do this, the lawyer must have a

high level of vision, and must be part of the decisionmaking process within the company", she says.

She believes that several elements differentiate an in-house lawyer from an external lawyer, such as proximity, knowledge of the business, belonging to the organization and the lower cost of his services, which means that "the in-house lawyer has positioned himself as a quality legal service at a highly competitive cost and normally lower than the services provided by external firms".

Echeverría-Torres does not agree with the general belief that, because they belong to an organization, the in-house lawyers are subject to its hierarchy and therefore lose the capacity to act impartially. However, "it is necessary to agree that both functions (internal and external lawyer) are necessary and complementary", she clarifies, and adds that "the internal lawyer must know in which situations he must use the services of an external firm, and must be able to establish the appropriate symbiosis between both functions".

Just as many companies today require high standards of conduct when working with outside counsel, Nokia's Head of Legal and Compliance believes that the inhouse counsel should be an ambassador for the code of ethics and conduct and the primary responsibility for the company's compliance program. "Today, responsibility for ethics and compliance is almost exclusively attributed to in-house counsel because no one else knows the company in all its dimensions and also because of the close connection between ethics and compliance and the legal profession".

DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Looking to the future, Echeverría-Torres stresses that of all the challenges facing the in-house staff, the great challenge is "to ensure that our profession continues to be highly valued by companies and society". To this end, "we must continue to strive to adapt to companies, and to technological changes, which are relentless". The new technologies, big data, and the digital economy offer very interesting development opportunities for the in-house staff today. The new technologies are accompanied by important regulations, such as the General European Data Protection Law, that came into force in May 2018, which affect all companies operating in the European Union, and which in many cases have implemented solid adaptation programs.

These programs, as Echeverría-Torres points out, need legal design and ongoing legal support, "one aspect that is gaining importance is systems and information security, and it is a professional challenge for many in-house due to its highly technical content". On the other hand, "big data is generating a different way of understanding information management in companies, and we still do not have complete visibility of the evolution of many critical legal aspects that apply to them".

Concerning the digital economy, it is assured that the in-house lawyers are witnesses of exception, and are in a very good position to understand the legal aspects that have to be part of the great regulatory frameworks applicable to it.

Beyond its taxation, Echeverría-Torres insists that the digital economy is a great challenge for the EU and its member states, "perhaps it is not too risky to say that we are moving towards the creation of a new branch of law: the law of the digital economy".

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