

A happy accident

An interview with Sam Cookman

By Catherine McGregor

"I have learned to stop seeking the perfect state to anything; instead, it is about continuously making improvements. Head towards it, but don't be disappointed if you don't reach it, as long as you're aiming in the right direction."



Sam Cookman became an in-house lawyer by accident, not design, but a rich and varied career with a strong focus on team development has developed her business acumen and leadership skills beyond just legal expertise.

Over her 15 years at radiation therapy solutions company Elekta, Sam Cookman, Business Line General Counsel, has been part of some monumental shifts. "I never thought I'd be with a company this long - and the changes through that period have been immense," she says. Employee numbers nearly doubled overall while the legal team grew from five to 16, and Elekta invested in a new compliance department, a new data privacy department, and a legal operations role. In all of these, Sam has played a part.

As this is her first heavily-regulated role, Sam has had to learn all about Elekta's highly complex medical device products, corresponding regulations, "How legal works with our regulatory team, and any crossover between the two teams, making sure we have all the different views and come to decisions together." Product development knowledge continues to be crucial, while her role has expanded to include software, portfolio, data, AI, and moving services to the cloud.

Her role is multi-faceted, "I am continuously having to learn these new areas and getting the business to move along with us," and she is clear her goal is not about reaching the perfect state. "I don't know if that's purely an in-house thing, but I have learned to stop seeking the perfect state to anything; instead, it is about continuously making improvements. Head towards it, but don't be disappointed if you don't reach it, as long as you're aiming in the right direction."

A Global Perspective

Sam's experience before Elekta had been very much UK-based, and she credits the global nature and size of the company as being, "Brilliant, because it means you can get involved in everything everywhere. You can be working with the global CEO, through different functions and you get to know everything that's going on in the company." A key area for Sam over her time at the company has been dealing with issues on a global basis, "working out how to communicate with people in different countries, from different cultures, and how to encourage them to use the legal function and make the right decisions. I've learned that really does vary across the globe." She also notes her learning curve extends to working with contracts in different jurisdictions. "Initially, your lawyer head just kicks in and says, 'well, I can't advise on this. I'll have to get external advice', but our General Counsel at that time quickly explained to me that I really didn't have the budget to be doing that - I'd have to take decisions based on risk and work out when I really did need some external advice as opposed to when I could just go ahead with it."

Pulling Together

The growth of her team is something Sam reflects on as being iterative over time. "It was quite clear someone needed to take the role of pulling the team together in the same direction, not just doing our own separate things". She was eventually given the management role after an employee survey suggested that team satisfaction wasn't at its best. "The team had been managed remotely from one of our other entities, and the conclusion was that a local manager might be able to improve the satisfaction of the team, because you could then see more directly what was happening with the team and react quickly."

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Her focus is on building a team that really wants to help the others on it. "We're all keen to know the whole team is doing okay, and I'm pleased to say that's where we are now. We needed to build trust between individuals and between different teams, but there is no quick fix to do that. It took time and effort."

She feels getting the team to know each other is key, and says she looks for "any excuse" for members of the team to get together on a one-to-one basis. "That may be doing project work together, or team up over lunch to watch a learning video together and talk about it." Sam encourages people to pick someone they wouldn't normally work with. "We focused our team building events on 'getting to know you', creating fun things that were based around this. As I'm an open person I'm happy to go first and share, and then all the team follows." The team also have regular catch-ups where shop-talk is forbidden. "So that we can really get to know each other on that level as well."

Another innovation has been the introduction of a monthly survey to assess the legal team. "We've always had annual employee surveys driven by the company, but now the General Counsel has introduced monthly surveys for the legal team. We get together for half an hour with our teams to talk through them and to catch any issues before they become a bigger problem."

Sam says an important part of this process is the following up of issues. "Previously, we might have had one big meeting to talk about problems and then – nothing. I've tried hard to make sure everything is followed up with actions that come out of the survey. We'll have at least two follow-ups through the year to check on things that we have put in place as a result, and will ask: are these measures working? Do we need to change them? Keep coming back to them. If people think you've sat them down for two hours to talk things through and come up with ideas, and yet see it never goes anywhere, then that's a way to really disincentivize a team."

Talent Development – Not a One Size Fits All
Professional development is central to a happy team, and this is something Sam sees as very much an individual thing – not a one-size-fits-all approach. "Professional development needs to be structured on an individual basis," she says, and when you find something that works, use that as a starting point for the next team member. "I say 'well, we've been doing this with person X', and sometimes we'll follow something really similar, while other times you quickly pick up that you need to adjust things."

Another successful introduction has been Forums, "where we pull together the same types of lawyers from across the globe. We have one group of lawyers who support the commercial side of the business, and another who support the business line, and each group come together once a month and talk." This is useful to help ensure people aren't duplicating efforts or going off in different directions. "It is time to take a breath and say, 'how can we be proactive, rather than reactive?'" This approach to Development, Sam says, is about small, manageable, consistent wins, "rather than people getting focused on some massive initiative, which then runs out of steam because everyone's too busy. It's about finding those things that you can do constantly to make a difference; readjusting the ship rather than letting it swing off course and then having to undergo the massive job to pull it back."

Sam asserts it is important to look back at what your team have achieved. "Often, in a busy world, you think there's no time for development, but if you look back and assess projects, or note the increases of your litigation experience or your global experience, that creates an enthusiasm and a buzz. You naturally get a lot of development through the year that shouldn't be underrated."

The Accidental In-House Lawyer

Sam's in-house career was accidental; her first ambition was to become a barrister but when she missed out on one of the few pupillage spots available after completing the Bar Training Course, she applied for paralegal work. A media company replied, and she became the sole in-house lawyer, which was, she says, "a massive learning curve." She went on to Siemens PLC as a junior on the team and credits two lawyers in particular "Who really took me under their wing and mentored me." That role gave her exposure, "Across the whole range of the Siemens businesses and into M&A work", and she then moved on to SAP, "Which was excellent for improving my software and licencing knowledge."

Being thrown into the deep end this way shaped her as a lawyer. "I don't tend to panic when I am faced with things I don't know. I am used to that feeling of having no idea, and I have built up resources to work out how to find out things, and I don't mind admitting to it." She observes that, when people have come from private practice, they can be reluctant to be too heavy-handed with the business. "I've never had that concern - I've always just been part of the business, there to deliver the legal advice, there to do what's best for the company."

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