

THE INSIGHT INTERVIEW



Christopher Reynolds

The Insight Interview features interviews with leading jurists, lawyers and business executives. The series focuses specifically on practical, real-world advice for lawyers in their first 10 years of practice.

This installment features Christopher Reynolds, Managing Officer, General Counsel and Chief Legal Officer for Toyota Motor Corporation. Mr. Reynolds was interviewed by Steven Feldman, a senior associate with Hueston Hennigan LLP in Los Angeles, CA.



Steven Feldman

When you were a student at Harvard Law School, what kind of career did you envision?

I came into law school thinking I would get a degree and then become an urban real estate developer who worked on rebuilding my hometown of Detroit. But then I took a federal litigation and trial practice course, which – along with some summer work experiences – changed my orientation.

After law school, you clerked for a federal appellate judge and then went to work as an associate at Hughes Hubbard in New York City. Tell me about your experience there.

After starting at the firm in 1987 on “Black Monday,” which you may recall was one of the largest one-day stock crashes in Wall Street history, I had a great experience, focusing on antitrust, product liability and class action defense work.

I was lucky that I got into court quite a bit as a junior associate. One of my first clients was the national airline of the Dominican Republic, and my work for the airline involved regularly going to Bronx civil and small claims courts to litigate claims brought against the airline for things like lost cargo-loads of furniture.

After spending a few years as an associate, you became an Assistant United States Attorney in the Southern District of New York. How did you decide to make that move?

My father, who was a retired New York City police officer, knew a former AUSA who told me that to advance in my career, I needed to leave the firm, take a financial hit, and go learn how to trust my own judgment and try my own cases at the U.S. Attorney’s Office. He said that if I prepared my application, he would recommend me. I ended up serving as an AUSA

for five years, handling a large number of trials and investigations.

Are there particular lessons you learned from being a prosecutor that you can share?

First, you have to trust your own judgment before you rely on anyone else’s. You need to trust you have enough skills to make important decisions, even if that decision is “I need someone else to help me make this decision.” Second, nothing beats face-to-face communication for talking over tough issues. And third, if you are confident enough in your own judgment, it is very difficult to get intimidated. There are many situations that occur, particularly in trial practice, where people purposely try to intimidate you, and you need to develop a level of resilience in response to adversity and crisis.

Given your preference for face-to-face communication, do you prefer that your outside counsel, including junior lawyers, avoid sending you emails?

For young lawyers who are trying to communicate with me, I would say, if you cannot have a face-to-face discussion, then do a phone call. It can simply be, “Hey, I know that you’ve asked me about this issue, here are my initial thoughts. I am going to give you more detail in an email, but I don’t want you to be surprised and I want to make sure I’m covering what you want me to cover.” In the context of that conversation, the outside lawyer will always learn something and I will feel that he or she is actually communicating with me rather than coming down from on high with tablets in hand. An email tends to have a distancing effect.

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I think if you look at any successful lawyer, he or she will tell you that a key part of his or her success is the ability personally to relate to the client or others with whom the attorney is working.

When you left the U.S. Attorney's Office, you joined Morgan Lewis in New York as a labor and employment partner. Based on your experience as a law firm partner, what are some things you recommend associates do to stand out?

Express your interest in the work – by, for example, raising your hand to step forward on projects or by asking if there is a pleading or brief on which you can work. While it's easy to be a bit cynical about big firm work, the people who are successful partners are successful because they actually like what they do. Associates who demonstrate that they share this enthusiasm are folks with whom partners want to work.

What led you to leave Morgan Lewis in 2007 and join Toyota as deputy general counsel?

As an initial matter, Toyota was a client of mine, and I had loved working with the company. But I also looked ahead to what I thought would be my career as a law firm partner focused on labor and employment litigation, and thought going in-house at a company like Toyota would allow me to work on a wider variety of legal issues.

Still, I had tremendous hesitation about taking the position. I knew my compensation would be lower, that I had to move to Los Angeles, and it was not clear to me how a lawyer's performance would be evaluated at a company because in-house lawyers do not have revenue-generating roles.

Is there any "right time" for someone to leave a firm to go in-house?

You should leave when you decide being at a firm is not what you want to do any more. There's no reason – other than financial – why anybody should prolong a stay doing something they don't like, particularly at a law firm where the pressures increase as you become more senior.

Also, I don't see much of a link between how senior

you have to be when you leave a law firm, and whether you ultimately attain a senior in-house position. When you look at folks who are general counsels, many went in-house as mid-level associates and progressed through the company for 5-10 years before becoming general counsel. Most often, you get to become general counsel because you are viewed as comfortable and familiar with the business, as well as able to give the right kind of advice at the right time.

What do you know now, having served as a GC, that you wish you'd known while at a law firm?

It would have been helpful to understand how precious a client's time is. I always knew my time as outside counsel was precious – because I was billing it by the tenths of the hour – but I didn't quite realize the same thing about in-house attorneys. In many ways, the in-house counsel job is as tough, or tougher, than working as outside counsel, so you have to be ruthlessly efficient with their time.

The other thing I wish I knew is that clients are focused on solutions. We don't need long explanations of the underlying law. We expect you to work through that, and to keep our business objectives in mind while coming up with solutions.

Are there things you would tell young lawyers at law firms NOT to do?

Never think that emails and marketing strategies are substitutes for personal contact and relationships. Build relationships. You don't do that by sending a periodic email or putting someone on a marketing list. What you really want is the kind of relationship where you can pick up the phone and call someone in-house and say, "Hey, I know this issue is of interest to you because you and I have talked about this before, and if you have five minutes, I can quickly run it down for you."

Steven Feldman is a senior associate with Hueston Hennigan LLP in Los Angeles.