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Levin bridges gap between lawyers

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By Amanda Robert — arobert@lbpc.com
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Jennifer Sara Levin opened Nate and Dot Recruiting and Consulting five years ago to promote the careers of private practice attorneys.

As she helped these attorneys develop their books of business, she saw an additional need to support attorneys on the in-house side.

"I thought, 'There's gotta be a way to put in-house counsel in a room with private practice attorneys and make it valuable for everybody,'" Levin said.

In 2010, Levin launched First Chair, an organization that encourages private practice attorneys to network with in-house attorneys and recognize them for contributions to the legal community.

She also created the First Chair Awards, an annual program that asks private practice attorneys to nominate their in-house peers for a variety of honors such as top general counsel and top assistant general counsel as well as top litigation counsel, top real estate counsel and top compliance counsel.

"It's an opportunity for people to call their colleagues and their clients, and say, 'I'm nominating you for an award,'" Levin said. "Instead of, 'Hey, I want more business,' or 'Hey, can you pay my bill?'"

"It also gives [in-house counsel] a chance to say that their peers think they're doing a good job, which gives them internal capital."

Levin practiced at large law firms Sidley, Austin LLP; Katten, Muchin, Rosenman LLP and Jenner & Block LLP before she started consulting with individual firm partners and groups of partners.

After many of them expressed frustration over their inability to reach in-house counsel, she started calling her in-house friends to find out how they were building their own careers, she said.

"I learned that corporate America downsized and there is a real fear of that continual downsize," Levin said. "There are lots of people doing two in-house counsel jobs and they have mandates to reduce their legal budget and diversify legal teams."

Levin also learned that while private practice attorneys "justify their existence" by proving how much they sell in annual legal services, in-house attorneys have to say, "I cleaned up the mess when this happened and made sure we were compliant with this," she said.

"It's a much harder value proposition, particularly for people who in a low economy are saying, 'Gosh, you're awfully expensive,'" she said. "A lot of these people are viewed as line-item cost centers."

At the same time, [Bryan P. Sugar](#), counsel at Ungaretti & Harris LLP, shared with Levin conversations that he had with his own in-house friends.

"I received something about Super Lawyers or Leading Lawyers and I asked them if they do something comparable," he said. "They said, 'We don't, but we should.'"

Sugar suggested that Levin call on her business acumen and connections to create First Chair. Because of his close connections in the in-house community, he stepped in as chairman of the organization's host committee.

They set up First Chair in a way that benefits both private practice attorneys and in-house attorneys, he said.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for everyone in private practice to be able to recognize their clients' achievements," he said. "In-house counsel are working toe-to-toe with their outside counsel counterparts. This is no longer a 9-to-5 job and to have an ability to recognize that is very important."

While there are a number of organizations that bring together in-house lawyers, they typically avoid mixing in outside counsel for "fear they will be bombarded with solicitation," Sugar said.

"It was surprising to me, but a lot of in-house counsel are saying, 'I never have the opportunity to meet these people, but I have demands that come up all the time and to know people who have expertise in these fields is a great benefit to me,'" he said.

Additionally, since First Chair operates on a national level, in-house counsel benefit by networking with other in-house counsel from around the country, he said.

[Sam Banayan](#), corporate counsel at Redbox Automated Retail LLC, became involved in First Chair when Sugar, a friend he has known since high school, asked him to join the host committee.

He agreed that the primary mission of the organization is to create a forum where in-house counsel are recognized by peers and outside attorneys in a way that has never been available.

"Where outside counsel have PR machines behind them, in-house counsel are generally behind the scenes," he said. "They don't have the glamour and recognition that outside counsel generally do."

Banayan added that First Chair differs slightly from the Association of Corporate Counsel, since the organization supports in-house counsel in the same way that Super Lawyers supports private practice attorneys.

First Chair plans to host its inaugural First Chair Awards gala on Aug. 31. The organization will continue accepting nominations until July 1.

"I am getting calls from all over the country, from people I have never met who are saying they want to be involved," Levin said. "One gentleman is a partner at a firm in New York who found me on LinkedIn. He has partners in Chicago and he is coming in to set up a meeting so his firm can talk about how to participate.

"Another woman, who is an associate general counsel, called and said she has been looking for an appropriate way to recognize her general counsel."

By late May, Levin had already received more than 150 nominations.

To nominate an in-house attorney for a First Chair Award, visit firstchairawards.com/nominate.

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