

Breaking Barriers: A Lawyer's Unlikely Path to General Counsel

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What You Need to Know

- Amy O'Connell has been general counsel of Roux Associates for 10 years.
- She joined Roux from Sleepy's where she spent eight years as associate GC.
- O'Connell skipped the traditional law firm route and went in-house straight out of law school.

When Amy O'Connell, Roux Associates' general counsel, was studying secondary education at Stony Brook University, she had no intention of becoming a lawyer. A follow-up call on a job application led her to reconnect with the mother of a former classmate, now a lawyer, and sparked her interest in law.

Despite initially viewing her classmate—a Princeton graduate—as better positioned for a legal career, she decided to pursue law, encouraged by her adviser who saw her potential due to her strong academic record.

Without any lawyers in her family and as the first person in her family to complete an undergraduate degree, O'Connell embraced law school wholeheartedly.

"I loved law school. It was the most empowering and amazing experience. It broadened my



Courtesy photo

Amy O'Connell, General Counsel of Roux Associates.

horizons to understand how a legal education could provide the foundation to understand business and how legal theory is employed practically. For me, it feels like I was meant to be an in-house attorney," she said.

O'Connell, who has worked since she was 13, took on a legal assistant role at Manchester Technologies during her second year of law school. Bypassing the traditional law firm path,

she was hired as corporate counsel after graduation. While not officially holding the general counsel title, she inherited the GC's responsibilities when he departed about 18 months after she joined the company. At 28 years old, she was also invited to join the executive board.

Recognizing the need for mentorship, she moved to mattress retail company Sleepy's as associate general counsel, where she received extensive training and exposure to a wide range of legal issues. After eight years as Sleepy's associate general counsel, she moved to environmental consulting and management firm Roux Associates, where she has served as legal chief for the past 10 years.

Corporate Counsel sat down with O'Connell to talk about her journey and the challenges she faces in her role as general counsel.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What are the main responsibilities and challenges that you face as GC?

My main responsibility is managing risk for this organization. Which simply means, I create and employ policies and procedures to minimize the exposure to the firm of harm that results in losing money, and/or losing money and/or having to pay money. The challenge is to get the buy-in from the principals here—the people that actually have the client relationships and do the work—to do what's in the best interest of the organization, while facilitating what their clients want and trying to do that in a way that's appropriate.

You're in your 10th year at Roux. What has kept you at the company for so long, and how has your role evolved over the past 10 years?

It's a very family-oriented company, and truly values its employees. The founder still comes

here every day, and he's the most down-to-earth, generous man. I am consistently challenged to explore new issues that arise in the business, so I learn something all the time. I had little exposure to environmental law before I came here. As an attorney for a business, you learn what that business does. As such, I have learned so much about environmental law, but have also been exposed to so many other types of law that impact our business.

When I reflect on my 10 years here, I see that my perception in the firm has evolved from just the "contracts person" into as a trusted business advisor. This has allowed me to contribute to the growth and the success of the organization. Because my predecessor didn't grow up as an in-house attorney, she limited her role to contract review and litigation management until she retired. I had such diverse and deep experience with in-house legal functions that I was able to provide value above and beyond typical legal work.

What are some of the major legal and regulatory challenges you have navigated while at Roux?

Since we operate throughout the United States and have offices in different states, there are numerous regulations related to employment and environmental laws. Now, I'm seeing it in privacy and cybersecurity. Keeping compliant with AI and understanding the changing landscape is challenging, especially as it varies across states where we work. As general counsel, I can't know everything that's going on in the legal space, no matter how hard I try to stay on top of everything. I'm not a technology person, so the privacy legislation and cybersecurity requirements keep me up at night, worry-

ing about our vulnerabilities and how to protect our growth.

What leadership principles do you prioritize in your role as general counsel?

I like to champion and teach others. I'm part of a mentoring program here where I meet with technical people—young geologists, engineers and scientists—and talk to them about managing risk. I explore with them how to identify the risks that may be present in their project work, and how to engage the legal department, even if it's not a contract issue. I believe in proactively managing projects to prevent legal disputes and actions instead of just responding and I try to empower the less experienced staff to take an active role. This is more efficient and is simply better business practice. I believe it's important to create a warm and supportive workplace, rather than a cold and competitive one. There's enough room for everyone to be their best. Instead of stepping over people, I believe in helping lift them up. If someone makes a mistake, I prefer to help fix the problem rather than point fingers. People often think that, because I'm an attorney, I like to fight or win. But really, I like to solve problems and achieve the goals of the organization and its people.

On its website, Roux emphasizes the importance of remaining privately held. How does this core value influence the company's strategic decisions and operations?

When we expand into new geographies or lines of business, we are very careful and thoughtful about the people we bring into the business

because we want them to buy in and be part of this. We have a comprehensive transition plan in place for the eventuality that the current founders will step back from the business. So, if the next generation doesn't want to continue with the business, those individuals that we have brought into the company as shareholders will have a deep and vested interest in the values and culture of the organization and will successfully continue its legacy. The business, which truly started from a garage, has maintained its nimbleness despite growing to at least nine offices nationwide. This allows us to operate without excessive bureaucracy, which can be both a benefit and a challenge. However, as we continue to grow, it becomes increasingly important to have uniform policies and procedures in place in certain key areas. This balance is how we manage to stay true to our core values while evolving.

What are your goals at Roux Associates in the next few years, particularly from a legal and compliance perspective?

My goal is to have a more robust compliance protocol. It might not be welcomed with open arms, but it's necessary. We have requirements like the California Contractors reporting and are moving into more government and municipal work, which brings additional requirements. This company values stability and likes to avoid bureaucracy, but I believe implementing clear and consistent guidelines can actually be more efficient. Changing the culture to see that such protocols are beneficial is something I'm working towards.