

Short tenure of external hires driving turnover among Fortune 500 general counse



Russell Reynolds Associates' sixth annual analysis of Fortune 500 general counsel shows that:

01 Turnover remains elevated

In 2025, 65 Fortune 500 companies appointed a general counsel, slightly less than in 2024 but consistent with recent years. That shows an ongoing active legal talent market.

02 Appointments favor external hires and first-time GCs

Just over half of general counsel appointments last year were external hires, shifting back from a majority last year being internal hires. Of all appointments, 58% were first-timers in the role, likely owing to the limited pool of experienced general counsel considering new opportunities.

03 Early exits disproportionately involve external hires

Of the 67 general counsel departures in 2025, 31% occurred within three years of appointment, and more than 70% of those short-tenure exits involved external hires. Short tenures among externally hired GCs have become increasingly common over the past four years.

04 Cultural mismatch and tempting new roles are causing external hires to depart early

Of the external hires who left after a short tenure, more than one in three (35%) did so because of cultural mismatch. Another 29% left because they were offered bigger roles elsewhere.

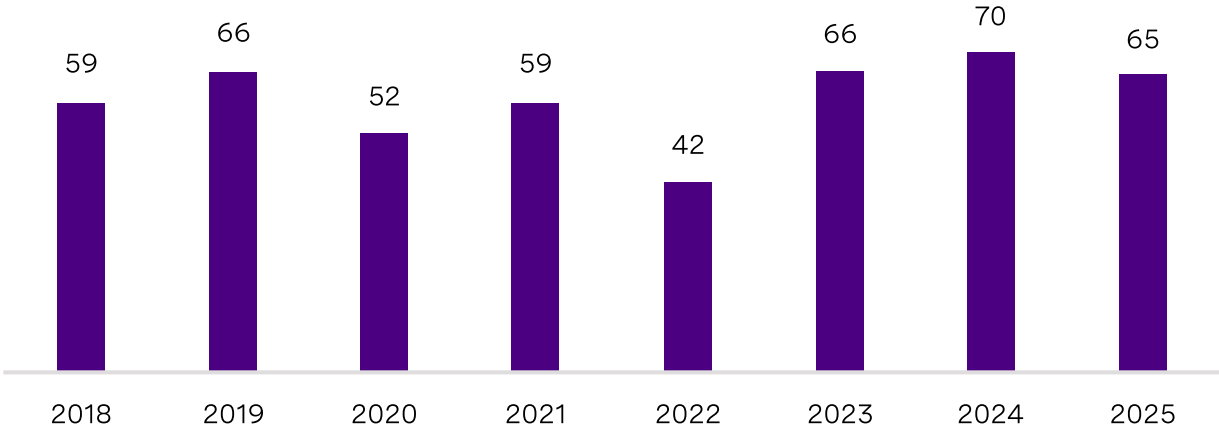
Methodology

- The analysis in this piece is based on 483 Fortune 500 GCs in the role as of December 31, 2025. We've also drawn on previous Fortune 500 studies for comparison. Primary sources for this analysis are BoardEx, LinkedIn, company websites, and direct contact with companies and executives.
- The latest cohort come from all sectors: consumer (22%), financial services (19%), healthcare (9%), industrial and natural resources (36%), and technology (13%).

Competition for experienced GCs remains fierce amid elevated turnover

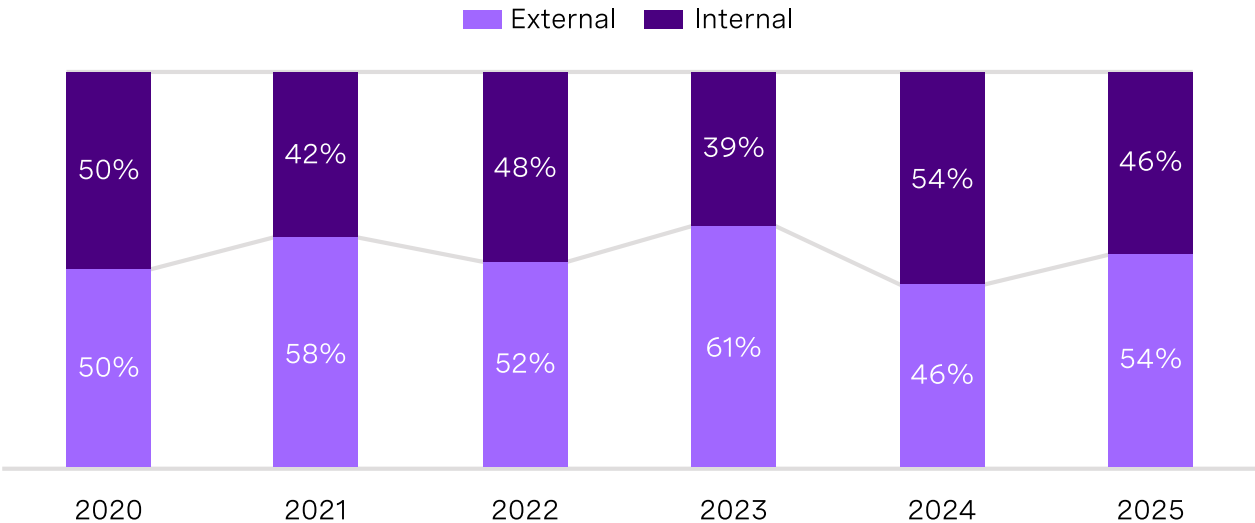
In 2025, 65 Fortune 500 companies appointed a general counsel, down modestly from 70 in 2024 but above the levels during and immediately after the pandemic, when annual appointments typically sat in the 40s and 50s (Figure 1). After a brief shift in 2024—when internal promotions outpaced external hires for the first time on record—2025 returned to a more familiar pattern, with 54% of appointments external and 46% internal (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Newly appointed general counsel in the Fortune 500 (2018-2025)



Source: RRA analysis of newly appointed Fortune 500 GCs, 2018-2025, n = detailed above.

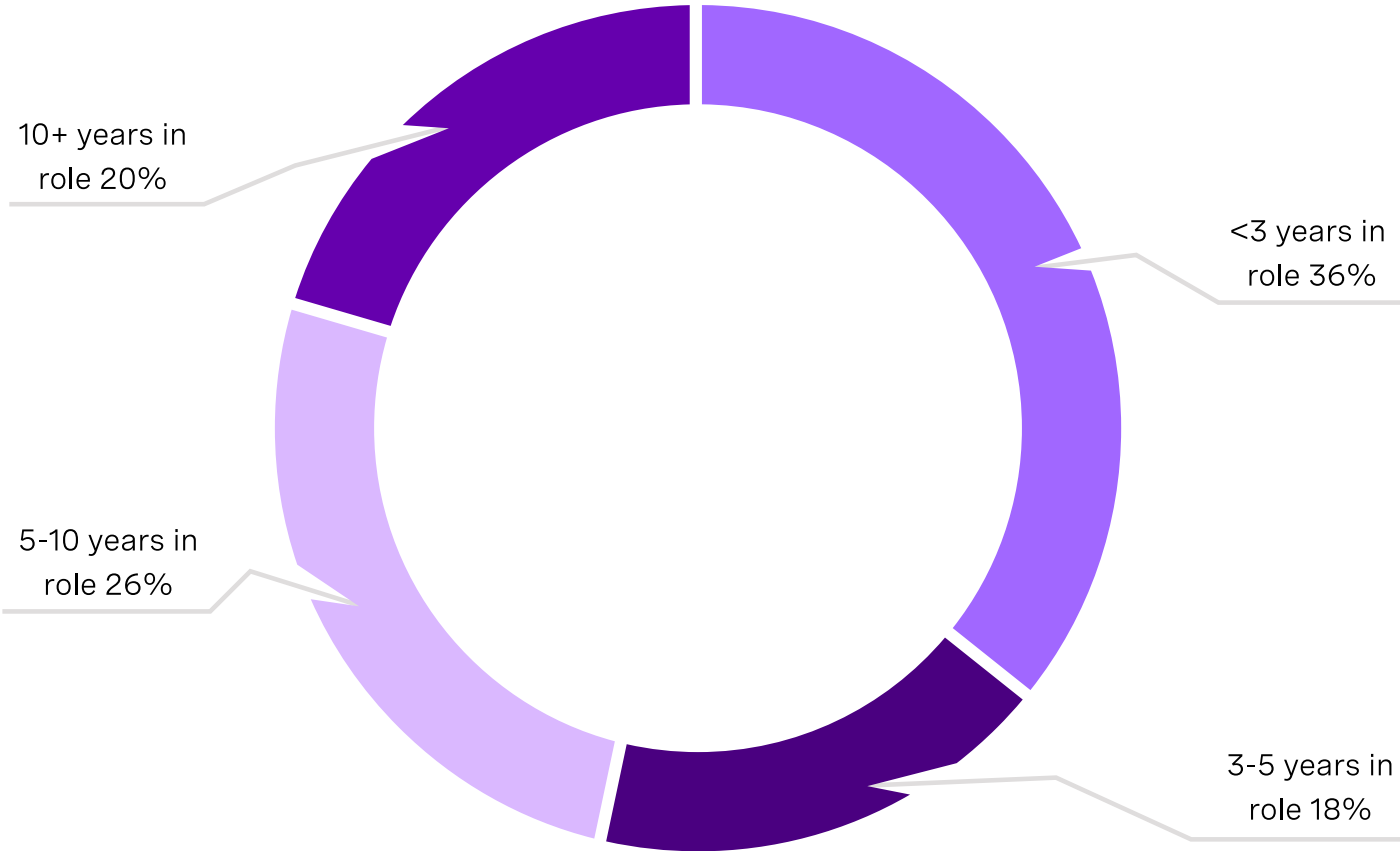
Figure 2: Proportion of internal and external GC appointments (2020-2025)



Source: RRA analysis of 2025 Fortune 500 GC appointments. N = 59 in 2018, n = 66 in 2019, n = 52 in 2020, n = 59 in 2021, n = 42 in 2022, n = 66 in 2023, n = 70 in 2024, n = 65 in 2025.

The cumulative effect of this turnover is reshaping the Fortune 500 general counsel population. Today, 54% were appointed in the past five years, and more than a third in the past three (Figure 3). At the other end, 20% have been in the role more than a decade and are deeply embedded in their organizations, leaving just 26% of Fortune 500 general counsel in the five- to 10-year tenure range. That's the cohort most often sought for experienced external appointments, intensifying competition for a relatively narrow pool of proven talent.

Figure 3: Tenure of sitting Fortune 500 GCs as of December 31, 2025



Source: RRA analysis of newly appointed Fortune 500 GCs, 2018-2025, n = 478.

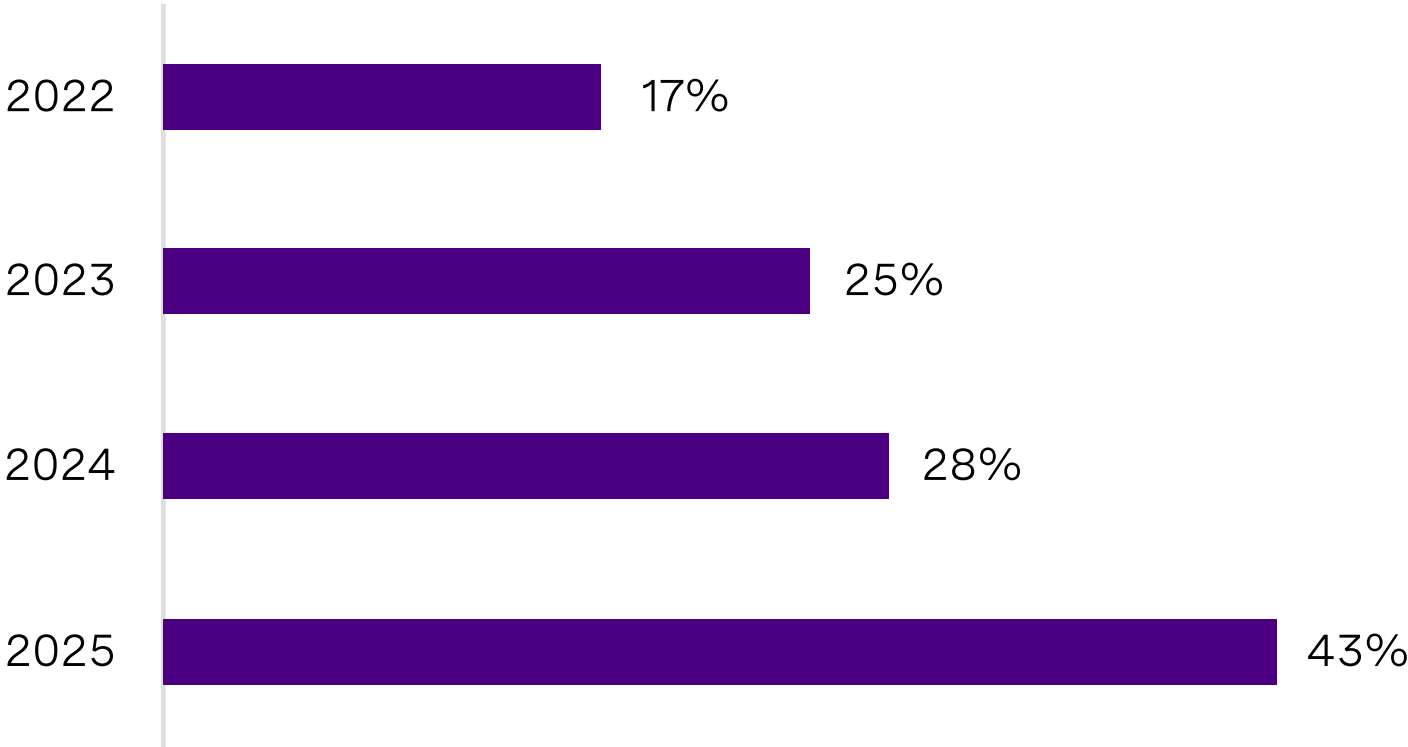
Most GCs who leave after short tenures are external appointments

Since 2022, the proportion of Fortune 500 general counsel leaving the role within five years of their appointment has increased markedly. Early-tenure departures rose from 17% in 2022 to 25% in 2023, 28% in 2024 and 43% in 2025 (Figure 4). What's more, the proportion who left after just three years in the post now stands at a third: 22 of the 67 departures in 2025. What was once relatively uncommon has become a defining feature of recent turnover.

1 in 3

General counsel departures in 2025 had been in role less than three years

Figure 4: Percentage of departing GCs who left with less than five years' tenure



Source: RRA analysis of departing Fortune 500 GCs, 2022-2025, N = 38 in 2022, N = 73 in 2023, N = 54 in 2024, N = 52 in 2025.



“What we’re seeing isn’t a failure of external hiring per se - the GCs who were selected are exceptionally capable - but a growing mismatch between the complexity of the role and how readiness and fit are assessed. The demands on the Fortune 500 GC have grown significantly. It is a very high profile role and thus cultural fit and alignment with the CEO and ELT are critical.”

Will McKinnon

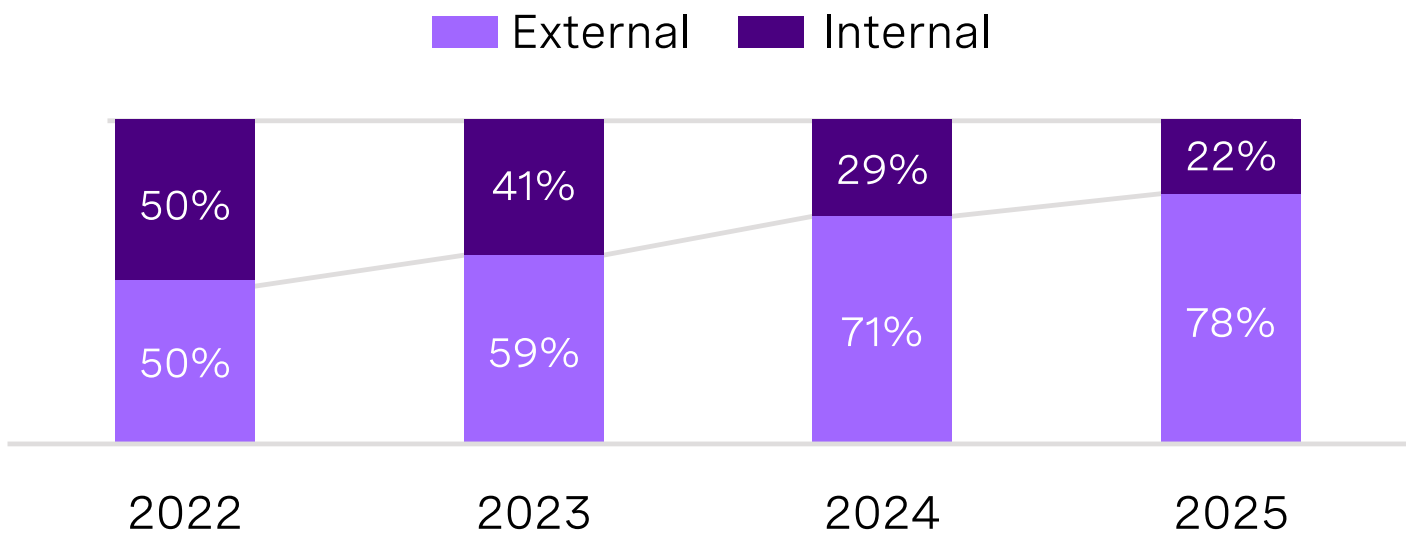
RRA Leader of Legal, Risk, & Compliance in the Americas

This shift is increasingly driven by externally appointed leaders (Figure 5). In 2022, general counsel leaving within five years were evenly split between internal promotions and external hires. By 2025, external hires accounted for 78% of early exits.

Given that the split between internal and external hires remains relatively stable from year to year, the higher rate of short tenures among external appointees is notable. The consistency of this trend raises important questions about the assessment of candidates for the demands, context and complexity of a Fortune 500 general counsel role. The trend also points to a rippling effect of the disruptions to companies and ways of working due to COVID, geopolitical changes and rapid technological change.

That is not to say external hires cannot succeed, but rather that companies need to be thoughtful about the dynamics to learn from the mistakes of others. Half of the sitting Fortune 500 general counsel were appointed from outside their organizations, and many are highly tenured and successful in their roles. The issue, therefore, is whether assessment, onboarding and expectation-setting practices are doing enough to identify, select and support those most likely to succeed in a specific organization.

Figure 5: GCs who left their roles within five years and whether they were internal or external appointments (2022-2025)



Source: RRA analysis of departing Fortune 500 GCs, 2022-2025, n = 178. Excludes interims.

Why external GCs leave after short tenures

Many assume general counsel turnover is linked directly to the high [CEO turnover](#) we've seen in the past year. While there is a connection, it reflects less the CEO change itself than the velocity of change and the intensity of pressure on boards and the C-suite. In analyzing the Fortune 500 GC departures in 2025, we found that a CEO change only primarily influenced 8% of them. The two dominant reasons were cultural mismatch between the new GC and the organization (35%), and the GC being lured away by roles at larger companies and commensurately higher compensation (29%). In the case of mismatch, companies are demonstrating far less patience and moving more quickly to make leadership changes – the same underlying dynamic driving the elevated level of CEO turnover highlighted in our recent report.

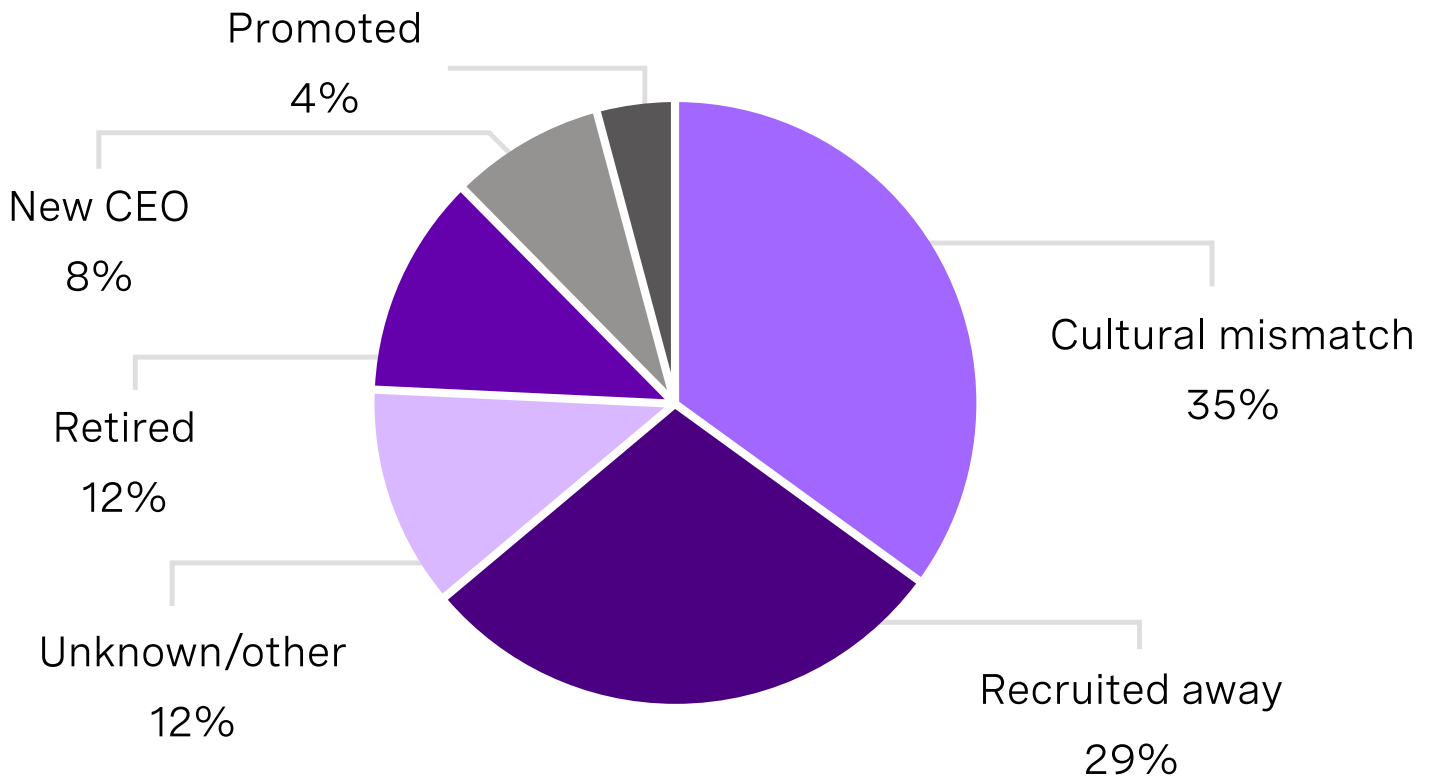


"In the current environment of high disruption, transformation and unrelenting change, if the CEO-GC alignment is not right, companies are moving quickly to make a change. It's about pace, risk appetite, rapid decision-making and trust in judgment."

Cynthia Dow

Senior Leader in RRA's Legal, Risk, & Compliance Practice

Figure 6: Primary reason why externally appointed GCs moved on from their roles in under five years



Source: RRA analysis of departing Fortune 500 GCs with less than five years' tenure, 2022-2025, n = 78. Excludes interims. This analysis counts the primary reason for departure; in many cases there are a combination of factors.

Our research suggests that cultural mismatch is rarely about capability or technical expertise. Our market intelligence points to the following underlying causes.

GC-CEO misalignment on leadership, presence, and trust. This challenge stems from a misalignment between how a general counsel leads, communicates and makes decisions compared with how the organization—and most critically the CEO—requires the GC to operate. These gaps, when they exist, have widened[TB1.1] in a post-COVID environment. Expectations around visibility and presence have shifted as CEOs assert a stronger return-to-office stance. More importantly, in-office mandates are a surface indication of the deeper requirement to build strong working relationships in the C-suite and across the organization, and to gain a nuanced understanding of the business in order to make quick decisions on a foundation of connection and trust.

Personality, pace, and the CEO-GC dynamic. Cultural mismatch most often shows up in the CEO-GC dynamic, particularly in differences in decision-making pace, communication style, and risk appetite. Personality plays a significant role: contrasts between a more reflective, introverted GC and a highly extroverted, fast-moving CEO (or vice versa) can be either a powerful complement or a source of friction, depending on whether those differences are understood and valued. Tension is amplified when expectations diverge around making hard calls with incomplete information or balancing speed and risk in uncertain conditions. In this context, the GC's ability to quickly build trust with the CEO and executive team—and the confidence those leaders place in the GC's judgment—becomes critical.

Divergent opinions about the GC's role and mandate: The role of the GC also is very different at different companies. Some CEOs want one who will lean in, help set enterprise strategy and act as a close partner at the center of decision-making; others see the role as more narrowly advisory, with less proximity to the inner circle. When these dynamics are not explicitly understood on both sides, friction is almost inevitable.

Change mandate and cultural risk: Cultural mismatch also plays out within the legal function itself. In our [previous research](#), we found that many GCs are appointed internally or externally with a mandate to lead significant change in modernizing the function —driving digital change, reshaping teams, and stabilizing organizations after periods of leadership turnover. This creates a delicate balancing act. A GC's leadership style will shape how change is received: move too slowly and momentum and credibility suffer; move too quickly and the organization may resist or reject the change, particularly in long-tenured or risk-averse environments. When this balance is misjudged, even highly capable GCs can falter. Cultural alignment, therefore, is not a soft consideration but a critical determinant of whether a GC can embed, influence, and deliver over time.



"Leading transformation in a long-tenured function requires careful attention to pace, relationships, and sequencing. Move too fast and you risk resistance; move too slowly and credibility can quickly erode."

Cynthia Dow

Senior Leader in RRA's Legal, Risk, & Compliance Practice

What this means for attracting or retaining top legal talent

Succession planning is more important than ever. With a limited pool of experienced general counsel willing to move, organizations that rely heavily on the external market are increasingly exposed. Nurturing, stretching and deliberately developing top legal talent is critical to securing a sustainable legal leadership pipeline. Effective development goes beyond technical excellence. It requires structured opportunities for high-potential leaders to rotate across roles and geographies, to own complex, high-stakes initiatives, and to operate in global environments where they can build strategic and commercial judgment. Crucially, it also demands exposure to the C-suite and board, enabling future GCs to develop credibility and influence at the most senior levels. These experiences are often years in the making. Companies that take a proactive, long-term approach to succession will be far better positioned to meet the growing demands on legal leadership.

Mitigate against the pull of the external market: Even when you do land a top general counsel, there's a powerful pull from the wider market to recruit them away. Our research shows that 29% of external hires who leave their roles early do so for larger opportunities elsewhere. This dynamic is intensified by the scarcity of experienced GCs in the market's sweet spot: those who have been in role long enough to fully understand its breadth and complexity but aren't so embedded that they're unlikely to move. As a result, companies are increasingly targeting GCs with just two to three years' tenure, accelerating consideration and appointment cycles and making even short-tenured leaders highly visible when new opportunities emerge. In this context, retention cannot be left to chance. Competitive compensation is necessary but insufficient; strong onboarding that fosters relationship-building, explicit expectation-setting and frequent check-ins during the early months and years are critical to identifying misalignment early and mitigating the risk of losing talent just as it begins to deliver impact.

Rigorous assessment and testing for cultural alignment is vital: With a high proportion of general counsel leaving after short tenures, it's more critical than ever to invest in deep assessment during the search process. A clear success profile tailored to the industry, context and existing leadership team and organizational culture is paramount. Structured approaches to assessment, such as RRA's [Leadership Portrait](#) model take significant investment, but surface potential issues before it is too late. These help organizations build a nuanced understanding of how a leader operates, both in terms of readiness to succeed today and the capacity to lead through ongoing change and complexity tomorrow.

The same discipline is equally valuable when evaluating internal candidates. Familiarity bias can lead stakeholders to assume they already understand an individual's track record, potentially overlooking their breadth of impact or future potential. A structured assessment process allows internal talent to clearly articulate their achievements and to be objectively benchmarked against the external market, supporting more confident and effective general counsel appointments.



"The clearest predictor of sustained success is mutual clarity up front: shared role definition, aligned risk appetite and an explicit plan for how the GC will win credibility. When fit is assumed, organizations typically pay in lost momentum, not just one failed hire."

Will McKinnon

RRA Leader of Legal, Risk, & Compliance in the Americas

Figure 7: Factors and considerations when assessing cultural alignment

Factor	Key considerations
CEO fit and role expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alignment on decision-making pace and communication style ▪ Shared understanding of the GC’s role (strategic partner vs. advisory) ▪ Ability to build trust and challenge constructively
Leadership style and influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fit between personal style (e.g., introverted/extroverted) and leadership culture ▪ Ability to influence without relying on hierarchy
Risk appetite and judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comfort making high-stakes decisions with incomplete information ▪ Balance between protecting the enterprise and enabling commercial outcomes
Business and industry acumen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding of the business model and regulatory context ▪ Ability to translate legal insight into pragmatic, commercial advice
Change and team leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experience leading transformation and modernization ▪ Ability to pace change and avoid organizational “tissue rejection”
Board and executive presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Credibility and confidence with the board and C-suite ▪ Clear, concise communication on complex issue

Market validation for external candidates is extremely valuable: Using networks to build a thorough picture of an external candidate is worth the time and effort. Leveraging personal relationships of the executive team and the board and the networks of executive search partners can be an effective way to understand more about a candidate.

Industry and organizational context is key: Both play a critical role in how quickly an externally appointed general counsel can assimilate and succeed. Differences in risk exposure, regulatory complexity, and operating culture can materially affect a GC’s ability to build trust and make confident decisions under pressure. This reinforces the need for rigorous assessment that goes beyond experience and track record to test leadership style, CEO-GC dynamics, and decision-making under sustained uncertainty. When these questions are examined openly, organizations are far better positioned to set their legal leaders up for sustained success at a time when effective legal leadership has never mattered more.

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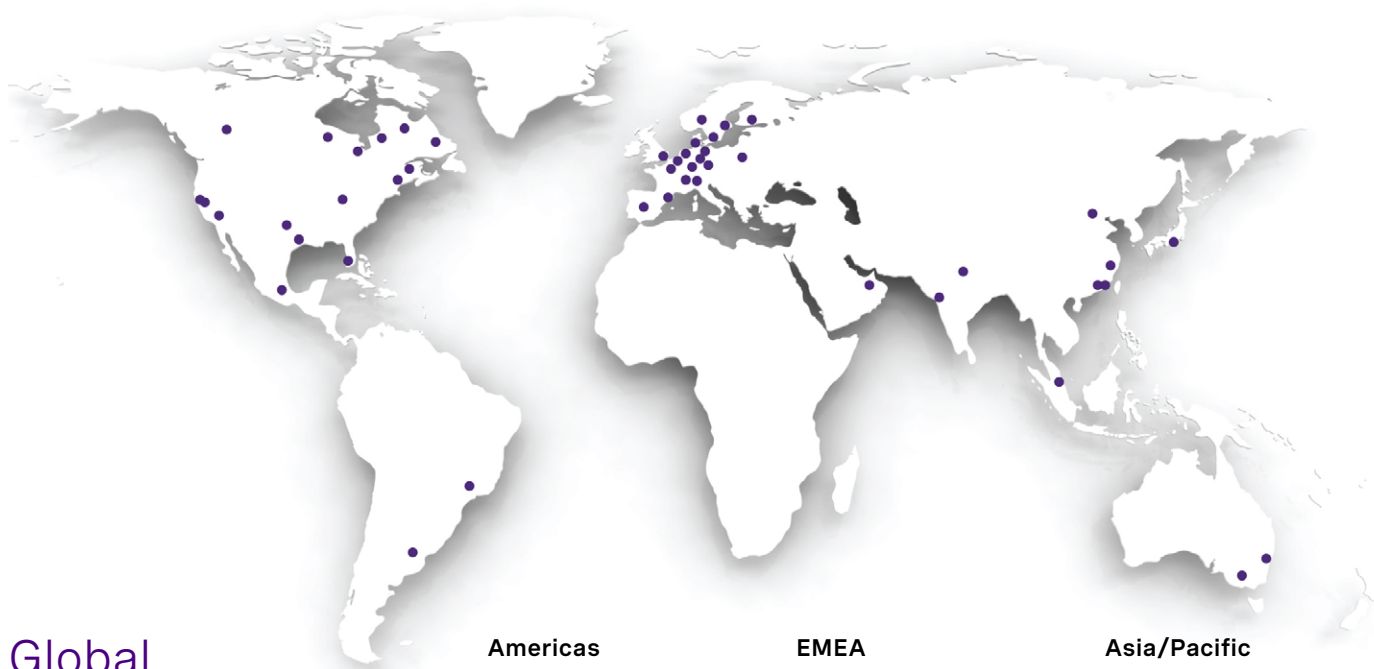
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