

FROM TIE TO TEAM WEAR –

# LEAVING THE FIRM TO BECOME A MANUFACTURING CORPORATE COUNSEL

By Reed Williams



**“To move the world, we must first move ourselves.”**

**T**his quote, from the ancient philosopher Socrates, headlines a page of my new company calendar, sitting on my desk at my new office. I find it quite appropriate at this moment, as only nine months ago, I decided to “move myself” from my employment with a civil defense litigation firm to become in-house counsel for a large vehicle manufacturing facility. In the eight years since passing the bar, I have practiced in various and wide-ranging areas of the law — insurance defense, construction litigation, real estate, condominium and homeowner association, personal injury litigation, Medicare compliance, collections, and the defense of government entities, among others. However, since the beginning of my career, I found the idea of working as in-house counsel very intriguing, but I knew my options were limited in my hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, as the area has only a few companies that require in-house legal work. However, in September 2013, I was given the opportunity to join Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama, LLC (HMMA) as corporate counsel.

**CHEAT SHEET**

- *Be visible.* Attend company and departmental meetings. Make a point to be noticed so that team members view you as a knowledgeable resource.
- *Find common ground.* Common ground is everywhere — whether it’s sports, food or television shows. Making a personal connection always engenders a more productive business relationship.
- *Become an expert.* Check out different ACC resources to increase your breadth of knowledge, especially in legal areas important to your client.
- *Inspire confidence.* The best way to inspire confidence in the company client is to make meaningful efforts to quickly assimilate into the new environment.

HMMA is located approximately seven miles south of downtown Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, and is Hyundai's first automotive assembly plant in the United States. In 2002, Hyundai Motor Company, Korea's largest automotive manufacturer, announced it would construct a \$1 billion automotive assembly and manufacturing plant in Montgomery. Construction of the plant was completed in June 2004, with the official start of production beginning in May 2005. HMMA currently employs over 3,000 workers and added a third shift of production in September 2012, due to increased production needs. It's a widely held belief that the company has changed the lives of team members and community members alike with its positive economic and social impact. Currently, HMMA produces the Hyundai Sonata and Elantra models and, at full capacity, is capable of producing up to 399,500 vehicles per year.

The HMMA legal department consists of the general counsel, a senior counsel and three corporate counsel (I became the third), with support staff. My primary role, in its current capacity, relates to counseling and assistance within the company, litigation and outside counsel management, legal compliance and legal training. My "big picture" focus for 2014 involves risk management issues and the implementation of appropriate risk management processes, procedures and advisory bodies within the company. One long-term goal is to become the risk management expert within the company, helping to guide and enhance the HMMA risk management system to provide the company with the most comprehensive risk protections possible.

Not surprisingly, there are numerous differences in the medium-sized law firm where I was previously employed and the international manufacturing company where I now work. In the law firm setting, I frequently wore a suit to work in order to appear in various courts around the state of Alabama.

With my new employer, I very rarely wear a suit to work. Instead, I now don team wear: a pair of khakis. During my first week at HMMA, I visited the team wear store to pick out my employee gear. Basically, team wear consists of golf-style and business shirts with the team member's name on the right breast of the shirt and the Hyundai name and logo on the left. Jackets, hats, belts and other gear are also provided. Conceptually, team wear supports the spirit of teamwork, builds open communication, ensures proper security and is an essential safety measure. Team wear is also very practical. On a work day, I no longer have to walk in my closet and scramble to match up my suit, shirt, tie and shoes. I simply grab my team wear and I am ready for work.

With my prior law firm, I spent a good bit of time in my office, often with the door shut to close off distractions and to focus on dictating numerous letters to clients, or drafting and revising briefs. HMMA encourages an "open door policy" so that team members have the ability to personally address any and all issues as they arise. As part of that culture, my office is now an open workspace. Granted, HMMA's three corporate counsel are sequestered in a separate "attorney room," primarily for privilege and confidentiality concerns, but our three respective desks are open and the door to the attorney room is very rarely closed. The "open door policy" has required some adjustment, but it has given me the opportunity to more freely interact with other team members, address their legal concerns and, most importantly, quickly show value to the company. Additionally, the open workspace aligns with HMMA's philosophy of collectivism over individualism. At

HMMA, most decisions, especially significant decisions, are collaborative efforts. To that end, team members from other departments often walk up to my desk and discuss legal issues that may relate to the company and its operation. It's reminiscent of Lucy from the popular comic strip Peanuts: I am at my desk, and the attorney is in; however, I don't charge 5 cents (a la Lucy) or any amount for my advice. Team members approach me with questions concerning plant security, insurance, leases, employment and labor concerns, and other various legal issues. I do my best to address each concern, and if I cannot address the concern immediately, I respond to the concern as soon as research time allows. Through collaboration, an informed and practical decision is made in the best interests of the company.

Early on, team members would simply bypass my desk and head to the more experienced corporate counsel for advice. But, within weeks of my start date, team members began approaching me with concerns. I believe this shift was partly due to my willingness to take on any and all projects and my eagerness to be a valuable part of HMMA. Additionally, this shift occurred as I began to attend more company and departmental meetings. I made a point to be noticed at such meetings, through mere presence or through one or two (hopefully) insightful comments or suggestions. I believe team members began to view me as a knowledgeable resource who would eagerly work with others to find a reasonable solution to any issue and who would work for a resolution through meaningful discussion and compromise and not imposition of will. And this shift was very significant



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**Common ground is everywhere — it just has to be found. Whether it's golf, food or “Game of Thrones,” the common ground allows you to relate and work through any differences efficiently and effectively, cultural and business differences alike.**

to my early development as corporate counsel, as the most important part of my job is to serve my one client: the company and its team members.

All of the changes have been welcomed, albeit a bit drastic. Perhaps the most interesting, dynamic and obvious change concerns the cultural differences within the company. My previous law firm had 15 attorneys, all working in defense litigation, all American, most born and raised in Alabama, with similar experiences and backgrounds as myself. I rarely had the opportunity to work and interact with a diverse or international group of people. HMMA is a company with an extremely diverse and international workforce of over 3,000 employees. American-born employees come from across the United States, as many worked for other automobile manufacturers prior to joining HMMA. Cultural differences certainly exist between an Alabamian and a Michigander (especially when it comes to college football), but such differences pale in comparison to international cultural differences. There is a large group of Korean executives and managers employed at HMMA, most of whom previously worked for the Hyundai Motor Corporation in Korea. Working in a diverse and international workforce allows me to become a more developed leader, manager and counselor, as I am regularly faced with broad, unusual challenges.

For example, during my first month at HMMA, I was tasked with reviewing and completing insurance renewal applications for the company. The job involved meeting with different departments and various team members to collect and compile necessary information. At first, the task seemed quite daunting, especially for a brand new team member with little practical knowledge of the internal mechanisms of the company. But as I met with different team members, American and Korean, I was able to quickly find common ground, on a personal and business level, that allowed me to gain their respective confidence and work through any apparent difficulties. Common ground is everywhere — it just has to be found. Whether it's golf, food or “Game of Thrones,” the common ground allows you to relate and work through any differences efficiently and effectively, cultural and business differences alike. Especially in a rather large corporate setting, making a personal connection always engenders a more productive business relationship.

My own department has one attorney who was born in Korea. I met him during the interview process, but we did not get much of a chance to interact at that time. As I started my new job, I honestly did not know what to expect regarding our business relationship and how it would develop. I have always gotten along well with my co-workers and have always found pride in my ability to work well with others. During my first week of employment, in October 2013, by chance, we discovered that we are both fans of the St. Louis Cardinals. He attended law school in St. Louis, and I attended two Cardinals games every summer between the age of 8 and 18, during visits to my grandparents' home in northwest Tennessee. We were able to discuss the strengths and shortcomings of the team leading up to their World Series loss to the Boston Red Sox. Deliberating on the greatness of Adam Wainwright and Yadier Molina

helped build a personal relationship, which helped cultivate the business relationship much more quickly and easily. I can honestly say that I had no reason for apprehension, as all of my intercultural experiences have been very positive (although I still haven't grown accustomed to the taste of kimchi, which is served in the company cafeteria). However, I still must remain fully aware of the national and international sensitivities to navigate within the company. In-house counsel must be aware of such differences within any company, but the challenge is obviously a bit more unique at HMMA. But again, if common ground can be found, the navigation can be made with few tempests. People are always much more willing to help and even compromise their position if a personal connection has previously been established.

The most significant changes related to my legal practice do not involve my change in work clothes or office space, or even the intercultural relationships, but actually the navigation of day-to-day tasks and the focus on a singular client. In my law firm practice, my day was filled with motion writing, discovery issues, depositions, court hearings, client meetings, billing (!) and other matters related to my 60 or so active cases. My day is now quite different, and I have had to change my work habits and focus to adjust to my new objectives. Don't get me wrong: I have fully embraced the benefits of moving in-house — a broader law practice, the intriguing elements of business and corporate structure, more regular hours, no more external client development, no more competition over clients, no more suits and ties and, of course, the death of the billable hour. But early on, I realized to succeed in this position, I had to welcome the benefits, and, more importantly, I had to fully embrace the challenges as well. And embrace is not emphatic enough. In order to succeed, I needed to immerse myself completely in every challenge and opportunity

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presented. I have quickly learned that in-house work is no place for the timid. I have found that the best way to inspire confidence in the company client when new to an in-house role is to make meaningful efforts to quickly assimilate into the new environment. And I have been given many opportunities to do just that as my new employer, and especially the legal department, has been great at “throwing me into the fire” and presenting meaningful learning opportunities. My legal background in labor and employment law was fairly limited; however, during the first month of my employment, I was reporting to executive management on important labor law developments and attending internal employment review meetings. I worked on EPA issues and researched the intricacies of an “FTZ” (i.e., foreign trade zone). I drafted scripts for internal video training (although I have not had the pleasure of “acting” in such training yet). I even worked on a fairly significant project involving Canadian law. Thus, I have committed myself to becoming an expert in varied legal fields and company needs faced so far and will focus on other fields that may be important to my position and my singular client. One way I have been able to do this is through my

ACC membership. When I receive my electronic copy of the ACC Newsstand, I quickly glimpse at it and make a note of articles that interest me, especially in legal areas where I lack expertise. When I find some free time, I return to the Newsstand articles to bone up on those legal areas. Additionally, after reading the short articles, I often follow up with more in-depth research on the legal developments or emerging case law discussed. This is just one way I am trying to increase my knowledge in various legal fields, especially areas important to my client.

So, based on my experience, what can I impart to new in-house counsel? The superficial benefits of such a move are great, but the deeper, significant challenges and opportunities inherent to the position are what make such a move worthwhile. In the first eight years of my law career, my practice focused primarily on civil defense litigation. I now work on employment matters, labor matters, compliance matters, environmental matters and foreign trade matters, among other various areas of the law. The scope of expertise necessary for in-house counsel provides so many opportunities. If I had stayed with civil defense litigation, my practice would have been

admittedly limited and my development as a lawyer would have been rather stagnant. I now have the opportunity to really grow as an attorney and explore my full capabilities. To that end, I must fully engage myself in the work and challenges presented.

I don't think Socrates was talking about a career move when he proffered the aforementioned quote over 2,000 years ago. I believe he was talking more about a fundamental shift in a personal philosophy, a personal worldview, and how such a shift can affect the world around us. But I think such a personal shift is very appropriate in discussing a move to an in-house counsel position. To excel in my new position, I need to embrace a new philosophy — a new approach.

Socrates also said, “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.” I would like to give myself a little more credit than that, but I must accept my shortcomings to succeed and realize my full potential. There are certainly areas of the law where I need to be more knowledgeable. There are characteristics of my company — how it functions, the politics, the hierarchy, the relationship within the corporate family — I need to learn more about. I need to identify the gaps in my work experience, my legal and company knowledge, and, to some extent, my personal life in order to truly grow and excel in my new position. So, despite what Socrates said, I think I know something else. My move in-house has presented opportunities and challenges that were not provided in my previous practice, and these opportunities and challenges, especially the way I approach them, will be the greatest benefit to my in-house move and my legal career overall. **ACC**

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**ACC Docket**

Seven Ways for New In-house Counsel to Start Off on the Right Foot (Nov. 2013). [www.acc.com/docket/right-foot\\_nov13](http://www.acc.com/docket/right-foot_nov13)

The First 100 Days as a New In-house Counsel: What to Expect and Tips for Success (July 2008). [www.acc.com/docket/first100\\_jul08](http://www.acc.com/docket/first100_jul08)

**Top Ten**

Top Ten Tips Out of the Gates for New In-house Counsel (July 2013). [www.acc.com/topten/newih\\_jul13](http://www.acc.com/topten/newih_jul13)

**Article**

Ensuring the Grass Will Be Greener: Effectively Transitioning from a Private Law Firm to a Corporate Legal Department (Oct. 2010). [www.acc.com/firm-to-inhouse\\_oct10](http://www.acc.com/firm-to-inhouse_oct10)

**Presentations**

Starting Off on the Right Foot as New In-house Counsel (Oct. 2008). [www.acc.com/rightfoot\\_newih\\_oct08](http://www.acc.com/rightfoot_newih_oct08)

Your First Year In-house (Oct. 2013). [www.acc.com/first-inhouse\\_oct13](http://www.acc.com/first-inhouse_oct13)

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Becoming In-house Counsel: A Guide for Law Students and Recent Graduates (Dec. 2013). [www.acc.com/infopak/law-students\\_dec13](http://www.acc.com/infopak/law-students_dec13)

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