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The GC Insider 2025

UNCOVERING THE KEY DRIVERS OF LAW FIRM ENGAGEMENT

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Introduction

In its third year, the LawWiser GC Insider Report 2025 delves deeper into the shifting dynamics that shape how General Counsel (GCs) engage with external legal advisors. As the legal and business landscape evolves, the report offers timely and relevant insights for in-house legal teams and law firms.

With a steadily growing pool of respondents over the last three years, this edition benefits from a broader and more representative base—allowing for a clearer picture of evolving general counsel expectations, preferences, and decision-making patterns.

This edition introduces a more structured two-stage lens—shortlisting versus final selection—offering a clearer view into the decision-making process of general counsel as they balance growing regulatory complexity, technological disruption, and commercial pressures.

The findings underscore a significant shift in expectations. While legal expertise remains fundamental, general counsel are increasingly prioritising industry-specific knowledge, responsiveness, and the strength of the overall legal team—beyond just the lead partner. The majority of respondents highlighted the critical role of senior and principal associates and emphasised institutionalising the process in ensuring consistent, high-quality service. Pricing remains a key focus

area, with fixed and capped fee models gaining prominence as general counsel seek greater cost predictability and commercially viable solutions.

As legal departments evolve into strategic business partners, the 2025 3rd GC Insider Report provides actionable insights to strengthen collaboration and drive mutual success across the legal ecosystem. For law firms, this is a call to realign offerings with client priorities—deepening industry insight, integrating legal tech, and fostering collaborative teams that deliver consistent value. For in-house teams, the report offers a benchmark of peer perspectives and evolving engagement strategies.

The message is clear: alignment with business objectives, clear communication, and practical solutions are now non-negotiable.

Evaluating Legal Expertise: Selection Priorities

The **report** builds upon previous years' insights, offering a deeper analysis of how general counsel select external law firms. Unlike previous surveys, which focused on broad selection criteria, the 2025 report introduces a **two-stage assessment**, distinguishing between factors influencing **shortlisting** and those driving the **final selection**. While the survey does not reflect the exact selection process followed by general counsel, it aims to provide critical insights into the criteria that most influence their decision-making. In comparison to the findings of the 2023 and 2024 GC Insider reports, this edition provides valuable insights into shifting general counsel priorities and evolving law firm selection strategies. The options shared for ascertaining whether a law firm has the legal expertise that a general counsel is looking for were:

- Peer referrals
- Existing body of work (highlighted in the firm profile, website, RFP, experience statements, etc.)
- Thought leadership of the firm – articles, reports, conferences, knowledge sessions, etc.
- Rankings in legal directories/awards.

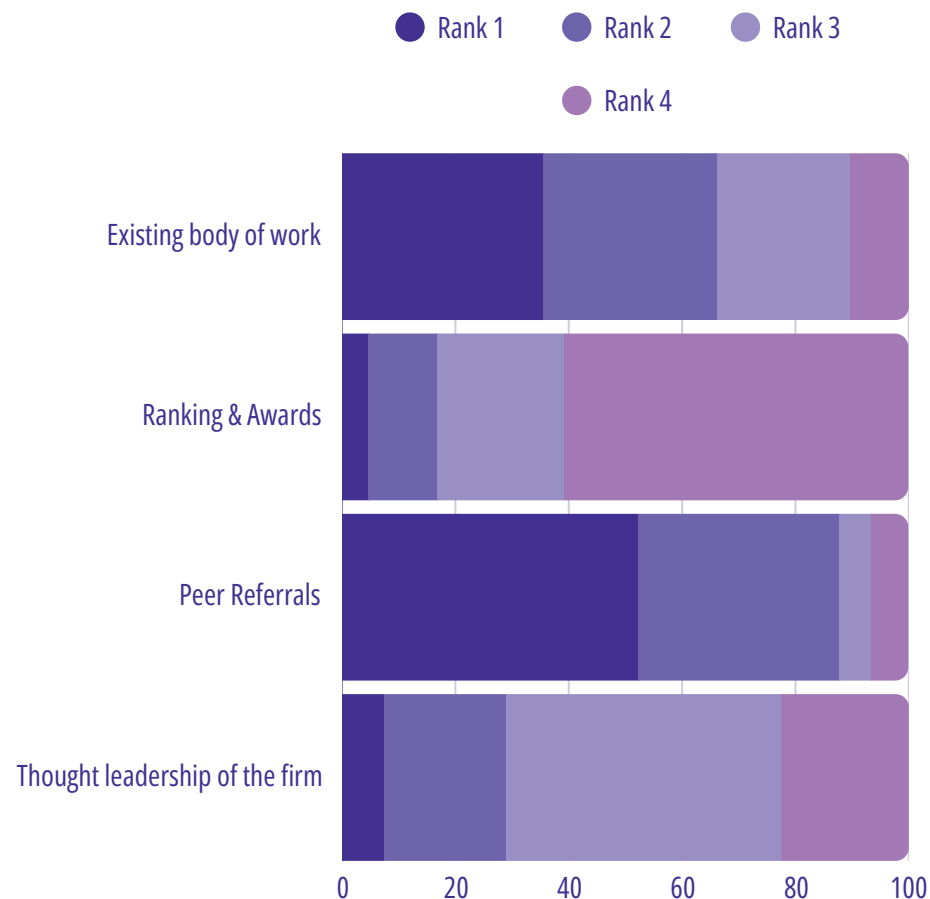


“Filtering of law firms happens through peer review,” as asserted by 3M India Limited Executive Director and General Counsel, Priya Menon. She added that, “peer feedback is provided through an accessible, wide general counsel community, which is honest, sincere and backed with experience and expertise.”



Priya Menon
Executive Director & General Counsel
3M India Limited

What sources do GCs use to ascertain whether a law firm has the legal expertise you are looking for?



In a surprising shift, peer referrals have emerged as the top-ranking factor in evaluating legal capability by 52.2% of general counsel. After peer referrals (52.2% ranked as #1), the existing body of work was most preferred (35.4% ranked as #1), followed by thought leadership (8% ranked as #1) and rankings in legal directories (4.4% ranked as #1).

However, there has been a significant shift in overall preference from the existing body of work (firm profiles, websites, RFPs, and experience statements) or as the term used in earlier 2023 and 2024 reports – proven expertise to peer referrals or referrals. We asked a few of our respondents if, in a given circumstance, there is a law firm that has been referred by peers and another one with an impressive existing body of work, how do they factor which is more critical to make their decision. Although the existing body of work is still a vital factor, our conversations with in-housers suggest that they are focusing on a case-by-case basis.



John Thaliath
General Counsel
Zetwerk

Zetwerk's General Counsel, John Thaliath, shares, "How do I choose them? It's a combination of factors. One is their expertise. One is where I am positioned in the scheme of things, and hence, who is best positioned to address all critical areas

required within a particular practice area. Now, peer references would be one of the ways to know whether the choice I make is equipped to deal with these different areas within a practice area."

He further adds that "I would also speak to them. I'm a general counsel, also a generalist. I have some understanding of these areas. I would chat with them and understand how deep they know the sector, because I know enough about their practice area to be able to make a judgment there. So yes, peer reviews, interviews, where I'm positioned, a combination of factors go into deciding who is the best. We make objective decisions based on objective criteria."

Our interviewees relied on one-on-one conversations with the concerned partner of the law firm they intended to select for making the final decision. Sameer Chugh, General Counsel & Chief Legal Officer, Games24x7 Pvt. Ltd., affirmed the same, sharing that,

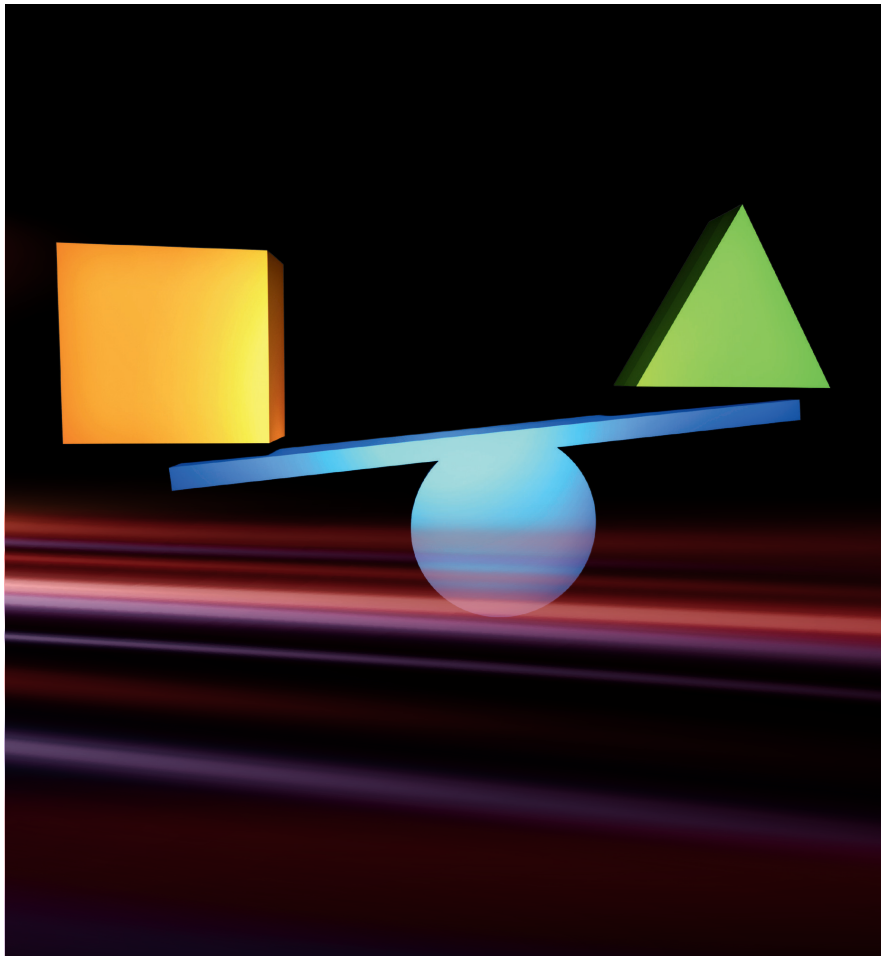


"We prefer to get peer references and also support it with our own past experiences. Then it will be followed by a conversation with the person concerned. The one thing I will never do is to go back and hire somebody, just because the person's name is either known in the market or is being referred. If we see somebody who's been referred highly, followed by a conversation, I believe that the person has the ability, even though they may not have done work in the sector, I would still probably go with that person. It'll give me a lot more comfort in the fact that yes, the person has delivered in the past, and our conversation and assessment also shows that the person is capable, because what is wanted is somebody smart, intelligent, and able to understand the nuances to help us."



Sameer Chugh
General Counsel & Chief Legal Officer
Games24x7 Pvt. Ltd.

Final Selection: Balancing Commercial Acumen With A Relationship-Driven Market



Once general counsel have assimilated information from different sources and shortlisted law firms to engage, several factors come into play for final selection. The general counsel were asked to rank key factors that influence final selection. We shared the following options as other important factors that come into play for the final selection of a firm:

- Cost-effectiveness
- Prior working relationships
- Specific industry experience
- Networks in smaller cities/local courts
- Top-tier position

While deciding on the final selection of a firm, **specific industry experience** was ranked the most important factor by **46.9%** of respondents, by far the strongest consensus among all variables. This marks a continued upward trend from previous years, reaffirming that in-housers are placing a heightened emphasis on contextual familiarity, preferring law firms who are not only legal experts but also understand specific sector nuances in which they operate.

“

Dev Bajpai, Advisor, Hindustan Unilever Limited, shared that, “I have always believed that law firms who are assisting clients, either in an M&A deal or on any other project, are extensions of their client & should function with a sense of ownership. For them to discharge their role effectively, they need to understand the client’s business and the levers that drive the business. What is it that the business is trying to achieve? And where can they contribute? A knowledge of all this is important. Expectation from law firms is to have great subject matter expertise, an understanding of the business & the industry which they are supporting. The law firms, while advising, should not just look at the issue at hand but also advise basis the long term so that the solution suggested is sustainable.”

Dev Bajpai

Advisor
Hindustan Unilever Limited



“

Vineet Vij, Group General Counsel of Tech Mahindra, suggests that, “Law firms must invest time to understand the industry and practices, client’s goals and the ecosystem in which they operate, along with other nuances involved, to be able to holistically appreciate the legal risks & regulatory challenges (data privacy, AI regulations, cybersecurity) involved. This allows legal advice to be commercially relevant & feasible.”



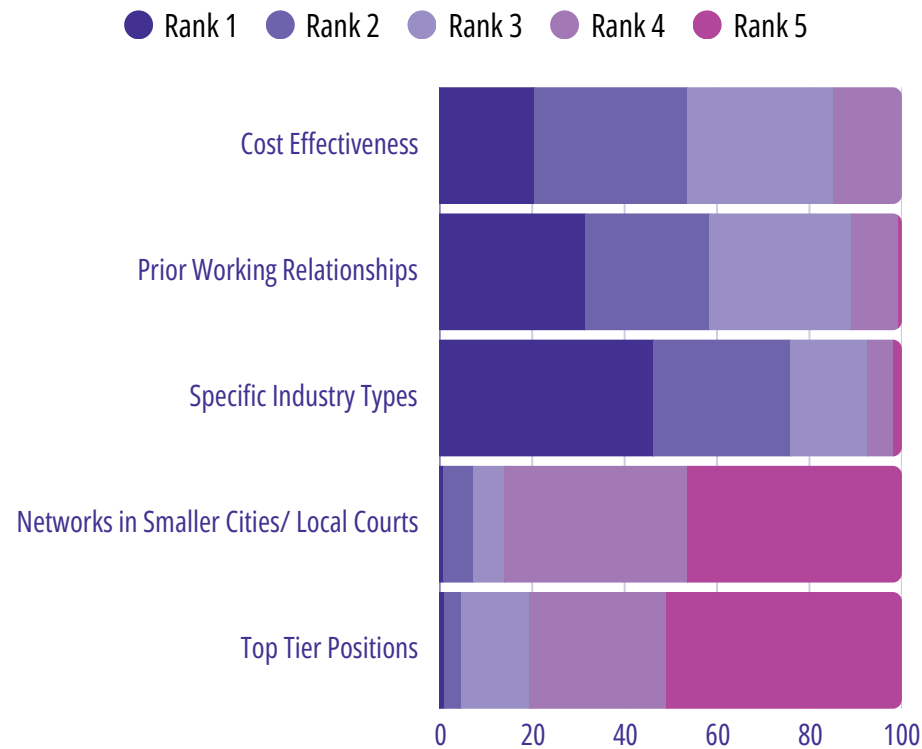
Vineet Vij

Group General Counsel
Tech Mahindra

Prior working relationships remain highly valued, with 31% ranking it as their top consideration. This reflects a consistent trust in established rapport and familiarity, underscoring the importance of reliable, proven partnerships in an increasingly complex legal landscape.

Cost-effectiveness held steady in relevance, ranked #1 by 19.5% of respondents. While it continues to be a practical consideration, its position behind industry expertise and relationships suggests that general counsel are increasingly willing to invest in firms that bring tailored insights and proven collaborations over purely budget-driven decisions.

What are the factors that come into play for the final selection?



“

While cost is the primary driver, one cannot compromise on quality”, says General Counsel of Akasa Air, Bharat Vansh Bahadur. He adds that, “cost must make sense for the law firm, as much as it has to make sense for the client. So, attention from a law firm or attention from the team or the partner specifically, and their expertise, sometimes tips over the cost issue. In-house teams are willing to make this compromise if the service delivered by a law firm is much more effective as compared to a firm that may be more cost-efficient but will not deliver as effectively.”



Bharat Vansh Bahadur
General Counsel
Akasa Air

This year, we also added a new factor in ascertaining the criteria for final selection, which is networks in smaller cities/local courts, keeping in mind that legal networks in tier 2 and tier 3 cities are of concern for industries and companies as per their business needs. Conversely, networks in smaller cities/local courts and a firm's top-tier position garnered minimal influence in final decision-making, with just 1.8% and 0.9%, respectively, rating them as top priorities.

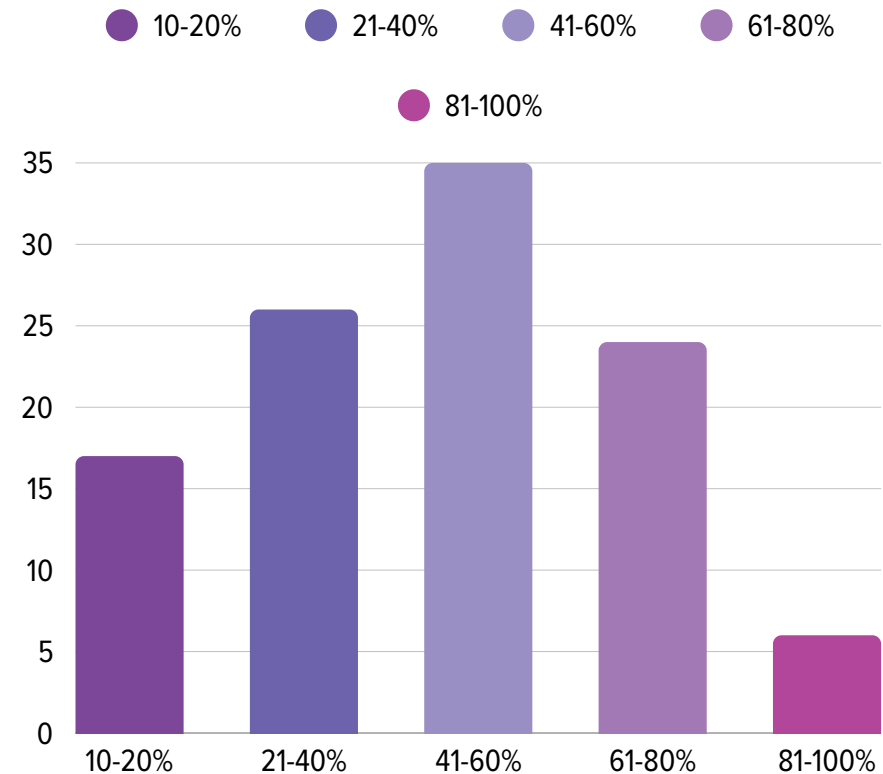
Peer referrals have overtaken traditional metrics like firm profiles and rankings, reflecting a deeper reliance on community-driven trust and shared experiences. While proven expertise and cost remain important, the weight of specific industry experience and prior working relationships has grown considerably, revealing that general counsel now prioritize firms that demonstrate not only legal acumen but also deep sectoral understanding and alignment with business goals. As the legal landscape becomes more nuanced and interconnected, law firms must go beyond showcasing credentials—they must demonstrate genuine client understanding, adaptability, and a collaborative mindset to remain relevant and trusted partners.

Thought Leadership and External Rankings

The combined data for 2023, 2024 and 2025 reveals that reliance on external validation tools such as rankings and awards is not a critical determining factor. Instead, there is a clear pivot toward relationship-driven and experience-based decision-making. We also asked in-house lawyers what approximate percentage of outsourced legal work is given to law firms that are not Tier 1. The majority answered that 41 to 60% of work outsourced is given to non-tier 1 law firms. This reflects a growing shift away from prestige and geographic reach as differentiators in the selection process, particularly in light of the heightened emphasis on contextual relevance and strategic alignment.

The reliance on legal directories and awards has continued to rank lower. On the other hand, there is a growing appreciation for firms that engage in thought leadership. Contributions in the form of articles, reports, conference participation, and knowledge-sharing initiatives have shown steady growth from 4.9% in 2023 to 6.9% in 2024 and 8% in 2025, indicating a preference for firms that demonstrate subject matter expertise and stay engaged with broader industry discussions.

What percentage of the organisation's outsourced legal work is given to law firms that are not Tier 1?



John shares that, “If I’m going into a market where I have no clue, rankings matter because I have no deep expertise in the market, but in a market where I have deep expertise, like India, which is our home base, it plays a lesser role. I may use it as a 5th factor.”

The drop in importance of legal directories and awards reinforces the broader move away from passive credentialing. In contrast, firms that invest in thought leadership and share relevant insights are seeing increased recognition among general counsel. This shift also supports the rise of a more informed, engaged, and networked in-house legal community that values authenticity and industry-specific dialogue.

However, a top-tier position is, per se, not the determining factor, but for global players, it is still an easy choice in terms of the expertise, networking capabilities and ease of compliance with global standards.



Executive Director – Head of Legal India and APAC Legal Lead for UBS Optimus Foundation, Sapna Bhawnani, shares that, “We are tempted to appoint boutique or smaller non-tier 1 firms. But sometimes we are restricted by internal process, unless it’s a specialised practice, such as the IP work. The approval process for non-tier 1 firms can be time-consuming, as many factors need to be considered before onboarding externals.”



Sapna Bhawnani
Executive Director – Head of Legal India
and APAC Legal Lead
UBS Optimus

Moreover, the growing preference for firms with whom there is an existing working relationship further reflects the need for consistent engagement and service quality across all levels of a law firm’s team—not just the lead partner.

Insight to Impact: How firms can deliver commercially aligned advice

A consistent expectation of general counsel from law firms is to understand business objectives and not just commercial transactions. We asked general counsel to share top tips for law firms to gain a better understanding of their industry and provide commercially viable solutions.

The overall demand is to have an understanding of the company's goals, operations, and pain points that will help the law firm tailor their legal strategies to align with clients' commercial objectives and provide solutions that are both legally sound and commercially viable. One respondent shares that, "law firms should immerse themselves in the client's industry by attending relevant conferences, seminars, and trade shows. This will help them stay updated on the latest trends, challenges, and regulatory changes, enabling them to offer more informed and practical advice. There is a need to focus on fostering a collaborative relationship with the business teams. An in-depth understanding of the client's sector will ensure that firms can anticipate issues and offer proactive, strategic advice."



Senior President & Chief Law Officer, Hindalco Industries Limited, Vallur Ranganathan Shankar affirmed the common demands of the community. He shares that, "there needs to be a balance in demand and supply; a demand, or the need, is to get a quality and objective opinion at the right cost. That's the kind of bridge you are trying to cover."

Vallur Ranganathan Shankar
Senior President & Chief Law Officer
Hindalco Industries Limited





General Counsel, KKR Gurugram, Ravi Rajiv Upadhyay, shares that, “the best practices that are essential for any law firm are:

- Sticking to your annual rate chart,*
- Having a pair of eyes at a partner level before a product goes to someone,*
- Asking for more time if they feel something that is to be delivered is half-baked or not fully as per expectations, so if that can be avoided, and importance is given to quality rather than speed, because it's advisory at the end of the day. That's very important.*
- Trying to be more business-oriented in their submissions of legal memos rather than more lawyerly. That makes a lot of difference.*

At the end of the day, general counsel exist because there's a business front. Legal queries arise because of there being a business situation. So, who is essentially the end consumer of the memos that we receive? It is provided in some shape or form to the business.

So if something comes in such a shape and form that it can be directly shared with the business, that's a desirable state for any general counsel.”

Ravi Rajiv Upadhyay
General Counsel
KKR Gurugram



Hence, it is vital to understand that law firms which fail to align legal advice with business objectives, or lack clear communication and responsiveness, are at high risk of losing clients.



As Parvesh Kheterpal, general counsel, Ampyr Energy, aptly summarises, “the role of the general counsel has transformed significantly, positioning them firmly within the C-suite as strategic business partners, not just legal advisors. As key executives, general counsel are expected to navigate complex legal landscapes while driving business objectives, managing enterprise risk, and contributing to overall corporate strategy. This evolution has redefined their relationship with law firms. Today’s outside counsel must act as an extension of the in-house team, delivering not only legal expertise but also commercial insight, innovation, and efficiency. Collaboration, transparency, and a deep understanding of the company’s business goals are essential. Law firms must appreciate the broader pressures facing general counsel — from regulatory scrutiny to shareholder expectations — and offer proactive, tailored solutions. In this dynamic environment, successful general counsel-law firm relationships are built on trust, shared values, and a mutual commitment to advancing the client’s business, not just addressing legal challenges.”



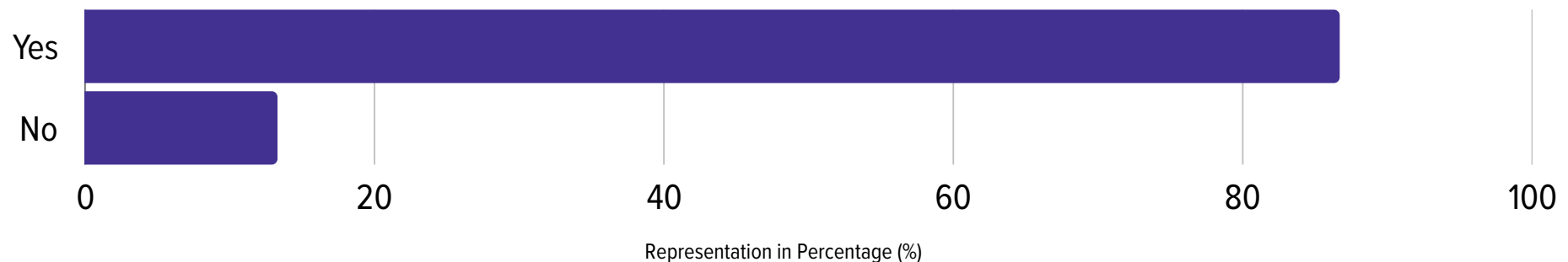
Parvesh Kheterpal
General Counsel
Ampyr Energy

Changing Advisors- Is the exit of the primary partner a game changer?

The survey responses reveal notable patterns in the hiring and switching behaviour of a general counsel when it comes to their law firm partnerships, as well as the key drivers of such decisions.

A significant 86.7% of respondents confirmed having hired new law firms in the past two years, indicating an active openness to exploring new legal partners.

Have GCs hired new law firms in the last two years?



However, when it comes to switching their primary or go-to law firms, the responses are close to evenly split—49.6% for those who have made a change and 50.4% for the other half, who have retained their existing firms. This distinction underscores a strategic approach: while general counsel frequently diversify their panel of legal advisors, they exercise caution and deliberate consideration before altering long-standing core relationships.



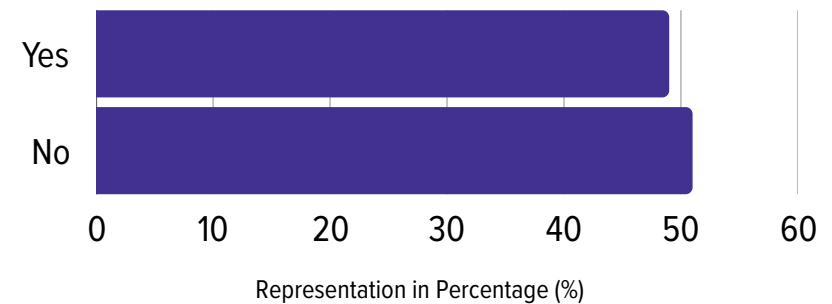
Meenakshi Gupta, GM – Legal and Company Secretary at Nissan Motor India Pvt. Ltd., shares her perspective on what drives the decision to change external legal advisors. She notes that, “such decisions are rarely based on isolated incidents. A one-off lapse doesn't typically warrant a change in law firms. However, consistent issues—such as repeated non-responsiveness or failure to meet critical timelines—can become significant concerns.

Even in such cases, the approach is to provide constructive feedback and allow space for course correction. It's only when these challenges persist despite clear communication that a change becomes necessary.”

Meenakshi Gupta
GM- Legal & Company Secretary
Nissan Motor India Pvt. Ltd



Have GCs changed their go-to law firms in past two years?

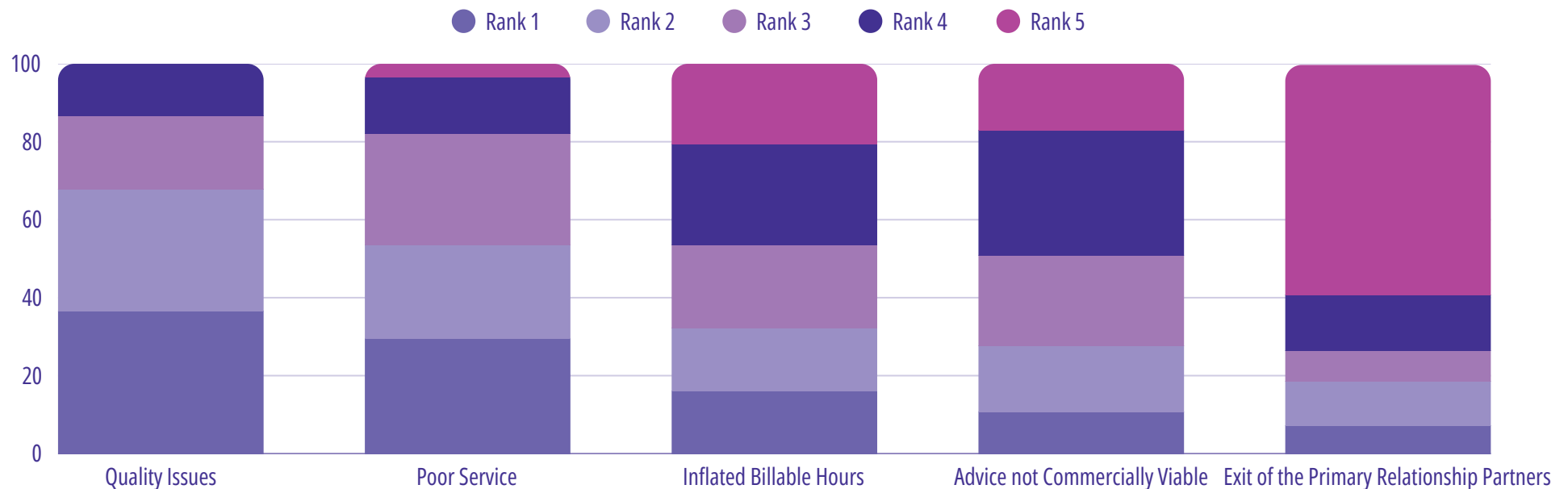


However, among those who did switch firms, the most common reason cited was quality **issues with legal advice and technical knowledge**, with 36.3% ranking it as their primary reason. Close behind was **poor service**, which includes lapses in responsiveness and administrative efficiency—29.2% rated it as the top factor. **Inflated billable hours** and **commercially unviable advice** were both mid-tier concerns, with the former showing a steady spread across ranks and the latter most commonly marked as a fourth-level concern (31.9%).

The concern of commercially unviable advice arises when legal advice remains overly academic or disconnected from real-world business operations. “In-house legal teams are already well-versed in the law. What we seek from our external counsel is practical, business-aligned application of legal principles,” adds Meenakshi. A rigid, one-size-fits-all interpretation of the law—especially one that overlooks customer-centric or operational nuances—can hinder business decision-making. When that disconnect persists, it often signals a misalignment, prompting reconsideration of the law firm relationship.

Hindalco’s Shankar says, “How you create efficiency is the key. If I need to create efficiency in using an external law firm, then I’ll have to prepare myself so that the inputs are appropriate, my questions are more sharply articulated, and I’m able to get the opinion at the right speed and cost. This approach has changed over the years. I have been developing my teams to optimise the entire resource and cost management. Focusing on teams being more cross-functional experts rather than just having a very specialised approach.”

Reasons due to which GCs switch law firms





General Counsel and Associate Vice President Legal, Honasa Consumer Limited, Ankita Sharma shares that, “We believe in the quality of work, agility, and, of course, the commercials. Everything competitive in this would make an inclination towards changing a law firm or working with a new partner. Agility becomes critical if the expectation is set right for an issue from the very beginning. New age companies have a very different approach to the business, they're not conventional. And if the law firm is not taking ample time to understand the business, then there's a problem.”



Ankita Sharma

General Counsel & Associate Vice President Legal
Honasa Consumer Limited

Thus, it is vital to understand that law firms which fail to align legal advice with business objectives or lack clear communication and responsiveness are at high risk of losing clients.

Interestingly, the exit of a primary partner, a factor often assumed to be pivotal, ranked lowest. Only 7.1% cited it as the primary driver for switching, and 59.3% marked it as the least important. The data suggests that continuity of delivery and knowledge retention matter more than individual relationships. In-housers are focused on outcome, not optics.

Ravi notes that, “as a human, change management is always a challenge. So when such things happen, obviously, you don't like it. But firms try to the best of their abilities to cushion the blow. If a transition happens where we are given due attention, where the person leaving and the person transitioning both are in the same room, same call, same meeting, that gives a lot of comfort.”

Importance of Second-in-line:

To ensure smooth transitions when key personnel exit, general counsel cited the importance of practices such as team familiarity with ongoing matters, transparent communication about leadership changes, and strong second-in-line expertise. Vineet notes that, “if the firm has invested in building a strong team that is equally aware of our business, and ongoing matters, I would feel confident that the quality of service will not drop with a change in partner. Proper knowledge management and seamless handovers reflect an institutional approach rather than dependency on one individual.”

As one general counsel said: “As long as the deliverables continue to get the same attention and quality, we’re not overly concerned if the lead partner moves.”

Shankar shares what most of the general counsel would agree with: “the biggest challenge in any organisation, particularly large organisations, is the continuity of knowledge. I may not continue to be here; somebody else may come, but the institution and knowledge is constant. I don't want my successor to think that I carried everything in my head. It is not an institutionalised process. It is very me-dependent. It is essential, particularly for in-house counsels and law firms, to institutionalise a process and not have a person-dependent approach.”

Ultimately, historical familiarity with the business, rather than the individual, is what in-housers value. If law firms can demonstrate institutional continuity and maintain service levels, the departure of even a long-time partner doesn’t necessarily jeopardise the relationship. When a firm takes the effort to engage beyond the lead partner—through regular connects with other partners, senior associates, and subject matter experts—it builds comfort that the relationship is valued institutionally. It assures that the firm is capable of maintaining continuity, understanding our business needs of an organisation, and delivering consistently, irrespective of individual movements.

These insights highlight that while pricing models and firm prestige remain considerations, the decisive factors influencing law firm retention or replacement in 2025 are performance-based, rooted in the substance and service delivery of legal advice rather than legacy relationships or reputational weight. The findings suggest that law firms seeking to sustain or grow their mandates must continually meet evolving expectations on technical expertise, responsiveness, and practical value. Further, a smooth transition ensures that the exit of a partner is not a concern.

Below are a few vital steps shared by our respondents to ensure that there is continuity in business in cases of exit of the primary partner:

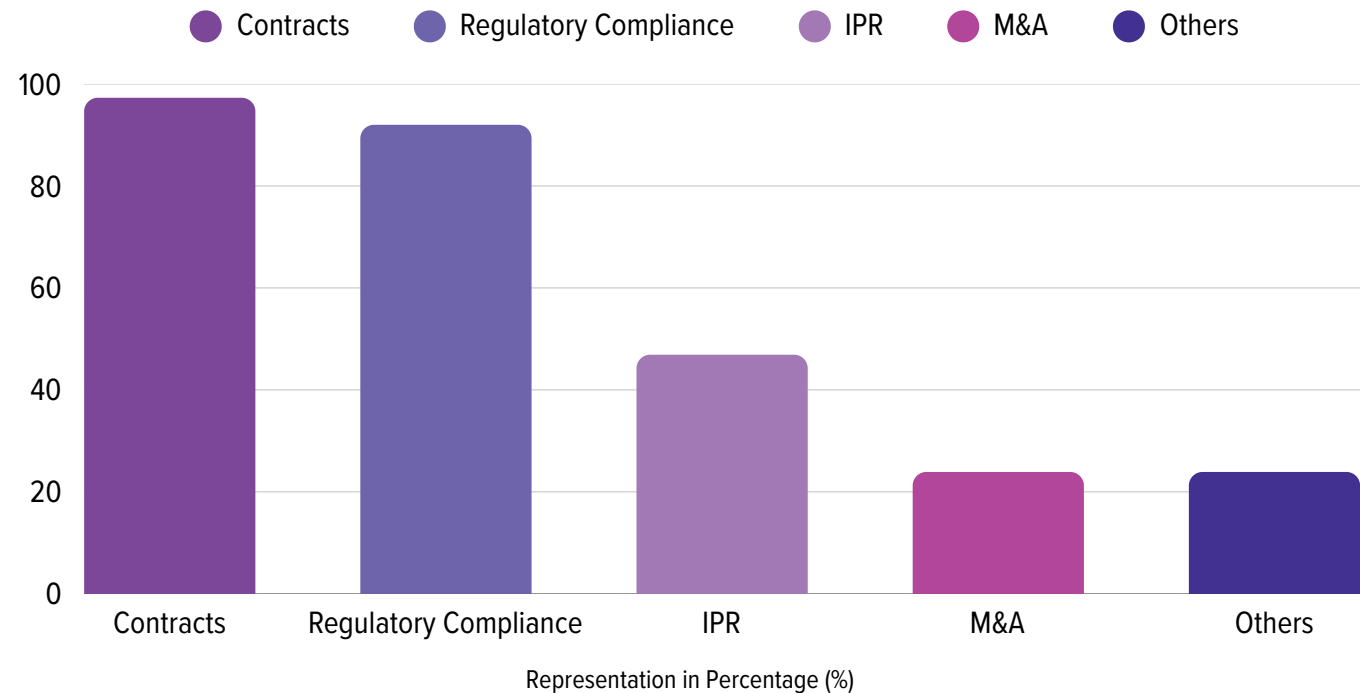
1. Ensuring that multiple team members are familiar with the case and can seamlessly take over if needed. This approach not only provides continuity but also showcases a firm's collective expertise and commitment to the needs of in-house counsel.
2. Regular updates and open lines of communication about any changes within the firm, including the departure of key personnel. This transparency helps in managing expectations and reassures clients that their interests remain a priority.
3. As long as a firm can demonstrate that deliverables will be serviced in the same manner as before, and necessary attention and quality responses will continue, general counsel will be happy to continue with the firm even if the primary partner exits the firm.
4. Good expertise at the next-in-line after partner level.

We observed that the primary reason for moving with a partner is that they have a historical background in the work done. If law firms can ensure the retention of historical knowledge and ensure a smooth transition, then the exit of such a partner is not a concern.

Legal Spend & In-House Shifts

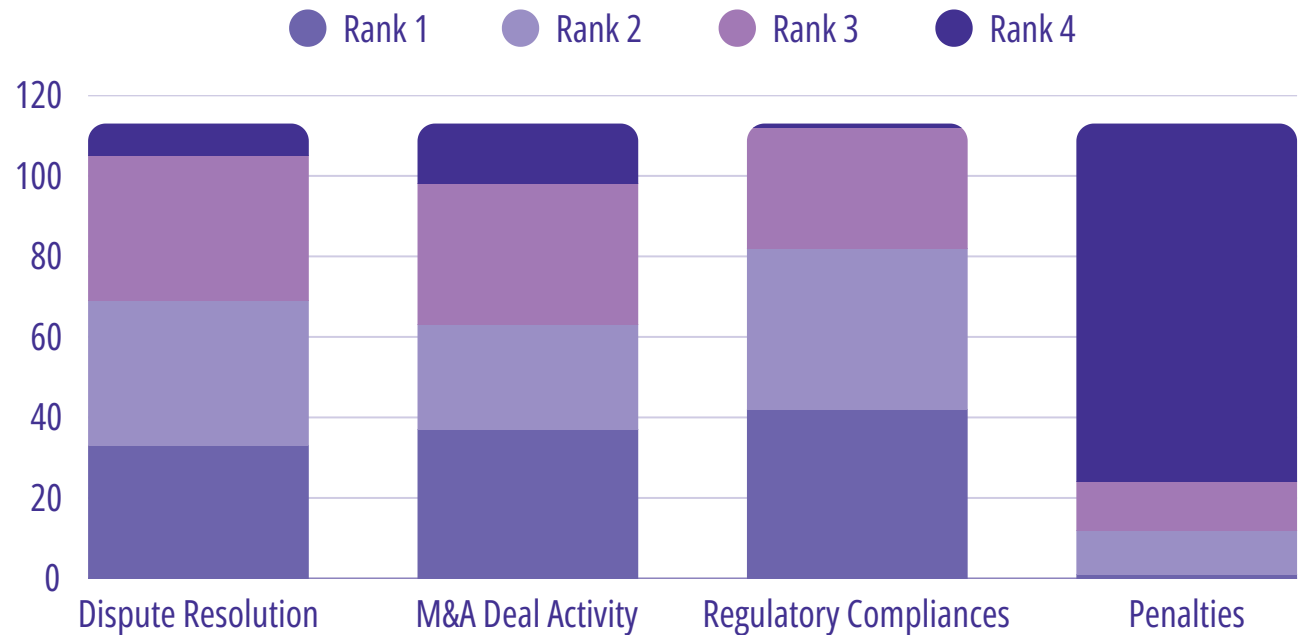
The survey reveals that the primary legal cost driver, the regulatory compliances (by 37.2% of general counsel), has been the same since the 2023 report. However, this year M&A activity (32.7%) has tipped over Dispute Resolution (29.2%). Penalties remain negligible at 0.9%, a proactive focus on compliance rather than post-facto risk management. This is a slight departure from 2023 and 2024, when M&A was behind litigation and disputes in the expense category. This reallocation is mirrored in how legal departments are structured. Functions once commonly outsourced are now increasingly handled in-house, reflecting growing confidence and capability. Contracts (97.3%) and Regulatory Compliance (92%) are now overwhelmingly managed internally, followed by Intellectual Property Rights (46.9%). M&A and other functions trail at 23.9%.

What kind of work is currently being managed in-house?



According to a September 2024 industry report, legal expenses for India's top 500 companies grew by 17% in the last fiscal year.

What according to GCs are the reasons behind this increase?



The move towards internalisation isn't just about cost—it's about control. With the right tools and teams in place, general counsel are keeping complex, high-value work closer. The data confirms what previous reports hinted at: In-house legal teams are no longer just a gatekeeper; they are a strategic core.

This has impacted the kind of support general counsel now look for externally. Law firms are expected to complement in-house strengths, not replicate them. As a result, firms are being chosen not just for their brand or reach, but for how well they integrate with evolving in-house expectations.

Billing Models: Clarity Over Custom

Fixed or Flat Fees are now the dominant billing model, preferred by 82.3% of respondents. These offer cost predictability and ease of budget allocation—both high priorities for modern legal departments. Capped Fees (59.3%) follow close behind, especially useful for variable or extended matters.

Blended Hourly Rates (49.6%) retain utility but continue to slide in preference, while retainer models have dropped further to 32.7%—viewed as inflexible and outdated for today's dynamic needs. In short, billing clarity is now non-negotiable. Firms that fail to offer transparent, outcome-oriented pricing risk falling out of favour. The sequence of preference has remained similar since the 2023 report. Priya notes that, “it is important to recognise that cost management is a significant concern for all companies, regardless of their size. Even larger organisations operate within budget constraints and must justify every legal expense. Our primary need is for clear and effective legal advice, and we believe that the value of this advice should be the main factor in determining fees. Law firms should consider reassessing their fee structures to better align with client expectations and budgetary realities. Additionally, when providing proposals, it is helpful to ensure that estimated hours are as accurate as possible to avoid any unexpected costs.”



Head Regulatory & Deputy General Counsel, HT Media Ltd, Sachin Kalra shared that, “One key area of improvement would be the clarity and consistency of billing practices. Simplifying and making fees more predictable would allow us to manage our legal budgets better. Additionally, a clearer understanding of how an external counsel allocates resources would help manage planning and expectations. If these aspects were improved, it would reduce administrative overhead and allow our team to focus more on strategic matters rather than micromanaging costs and hours.”

Sachin Kalra

Head Regulatory & Deputy General Counsel
HT Media Ltd

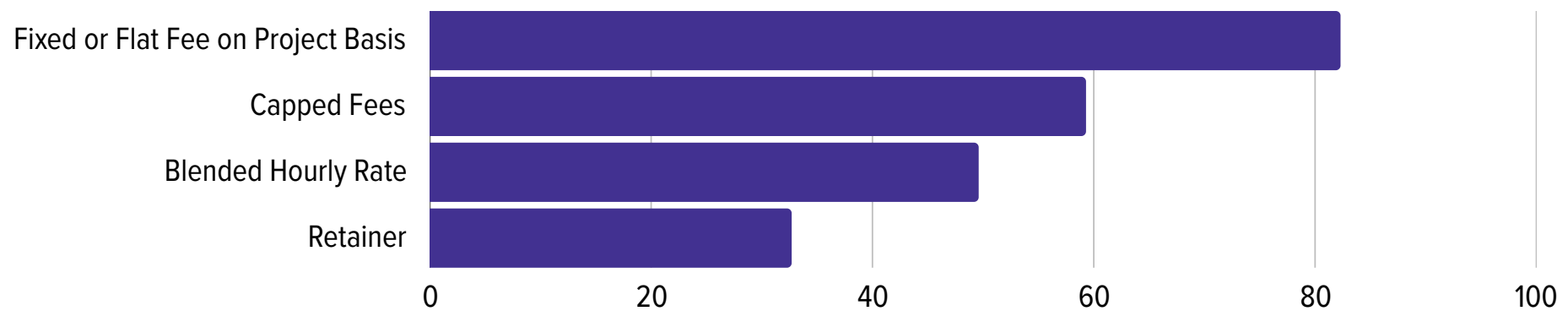


In our discussions, while there was a preference for value-based billing, most in-house counsel felt that India's legal market is not yet ready for this model, unlike in the USA. Value-based billing ties fees to the value of services and results achieved, rather than fixed fees or billable hours. It focuses on delivering tailored, outcome-driven legal solutions, such as a percentage of settlement amounts or a fixed fee for specific deliverables. Some top-tier firms offer this model selectively, as this model is known for open communication, transparency and clear pricing.

In-housers seek partners who align with their business goals, not just legal needs. This means firms must be flexible, practical, and able to show real-world impact. Law firms are being challenged to move beyond legacy billing structures and offer pricing models that align with the evolving priorities of corporate legal teams—namely, value, clarity, and accountability. Billing transparency is no longer a differentiator—it is a baseline expectation.

Legal tech and AI integration, although currently underutilised, is expected to become a key differentiator for law firms moving forward. Law firms that successfully integrate these tools will likely gain a competitive edge by offering efficiency and risk management solutions that align with general counsel expectations.

Which billing method do GCs mostly opt for?



For general counsel, this data reinforces the importance of building strong in-house teams to manage core legal functions while ensuring that external partners provide value in areas where their expertise is truly needed. The overall trend indicates a desire for strategic partnerships with law firms that not only provide legal expertise but also align with the business goals and operational needs of in-house teams.

AI & Legal Technology: Data Protection Laws: Rising Adoption, LingerinG Gaps

The present survey shows clear acceleration in the adoption of AI technologies by in-house legal departments. **62.8% of general counsel confirmed that their teams are currently using AI tools—including Generative AI—in some form**, a sharp rise compared to 2024, where adoption was closer to 48%.

This growth reflects a shift from experimentation to active integration. While much of the usage remains focused on **document automation, legal research, and risk analytics**, several respondents noted use cases tied to **contract lifecycle management and internal compliance systems**.

However, while in-house AI adoption rises, expectations from external counsel appear to be increasing more slowly. Just **51.3% of general counsel say that they currently check whether their law firms utilise AI tools to improve efficiency**. This number is up marginally from 2024 but indicates that **AI-readiness is still not a universal selection criterion for external legal partners**.

When asked whether technology adoption by law firms has translated into tangible cost savings, general counsel remain unconvinced:

- **66.4% said they “can’t say”**
- **23.9% said “no”**
- **Only 9.7% confirmed that they had seen cost reduction as a result**

This reflects a persistent **credibility gap** between **the narrative of tech-enabled legal services** and the **actual value perceived by clients**. Without clear key performance indicators (KPIs) or demonstrable return on income (ROI), even progressive law firms may struggle to win buy-in on their tech strategies.

As AI adoption deepens, so do the concerns. Respondents identified a consistent set of top legal risks associated with AI:

- Data Privacy Concerns – 77%
- Navigating Misinformation & Deepfakes – 77%
- Ethical challenges such as fairness and bias – 72.6%
- Determination of Liability & Accountability – 59.3%
- Intellectual Property Disputes – 49.6%

These numbers mirror previous year's trends, reinforcing that regulatory uncertainty and ethical challenges remain front of mind, particularly in sectors such as tech, and auto industry, where data management is a concern.

With the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, (DPDPA) now in effect and compliance timelines tightening, several general counsel indicated that they seek more proactive, cross-functional support from law firms, including data mapping advisory, vendor risk assessments, and employee training. In-housers shared that many businesses still struggle to map and manage personal data across their operations, making it difficult to ensure compliance with data flow tracking and governance requirements.

"Clients, as Data Controllers, are looking for practical, implementation-focused advice that would plug the gap in the existing practices & policies and seamlessly align with the law of the land, shares Vineet."

This data reinforces the importance of building strong in-house teams to manage core legal functions while ensuring that external partners provide value in areas where their expertise is truly needed.



"General counsels would like the law firms to focus on practical challenges and provide solutions in compliance with the Law," shares Head Legal, VBL, Sampadaa Narrang. She added that, "Law firms should make efforts to understand the practical challenges faced by a sector/industry and provide solutions that meet the compliance requirements within the four corners of law. Compliance is paramount, and meeting the requirements of law is a must."

Sampadaa Narrang

Head Legal
VBL



In-house Priorities and Resourcing

In-house legal functions continue to mature, with teams increasingly internalising core responsibilities—a trend observed since 2023 and now more entrenched in 2025. Contracts (97.3%) and regulatory compliance (92%) remain the most common in-house mandates, while functions like IPR (46.9%) and M&A (23.9%) are still selectively retained. The appetite to build internal capability is reflected in market feedback.



Regional Director, Michael Page, Ritambara Vasudeva shares that, “A lot of companies are setting up legal functions to reduce reliance on external law firms.”

Ritambara Vasudeva
Regional Director
Michael Page



Hiring momentum remains steady, with 62.8% of teams planning to expand headcount over the next 6–12 months—reaffirming the direction seen in 2024. However, organisations are becoming more targeted in their approach, prioritising versatile, mid-level talent:

- Key industries are looking at expanding head count—like auto, new energies, semiconductor—leading to increased demand in the 8–12 years of experience candidates.
- Niche skill sets continue to command premium—like M&A, data privacy, projects, digitisation, etc.

The respondents who see their legal team expanding focus on new locations, business lines, digital offerings and new regulatory frameworks—especially around data protection, technology laws, and ESG— that are emerging. They share that it will require specialized legal capabilities and increased capacity to support the business at scale.

Yet, talent acquisition isn't without its friction points. Respondents point to the need for long-term career visibility and stronger alignment with business expectations. Ritambara added that, “articulation of a clear growth path for legal talent in-house is essential to attract talent with a long-term view. There's a growing challenge around finding talent that fits culturally and brings strong business acumen—especially when hiring from private practice.”

Secondments are increasingly used as a stopgap and strategic lever—especially when navigating hiring freezes or short-term project requirements. Ritambara notes that, “Secondment is not a substitute for hiring for a permanent position... but in periods of short-term gaps or specific project needs, it’s a viable option. It allows access to talent that may not be available for full-time roles, or offers niche skills needed for shorter durations.”

This also offers a practical way to bridge the perception gap between in-house and private practice: Secondment can help assess candidates on the ground, especially at the 3–5 years' experience level—reducing hiring risk and improving mutual fit.

Finally, upskilling remains a continued focus—with **communication, leadership, and project management** emerging as the most sought-after areas for development. The overall trend indicates a desire for strategic partnerships with law firms that not only provide legal expertise but also align with the business goals and operational needs of in-house teams.



ESG in Indian Law Firms: 2025 Insights

In 2025, Indian law firms show a more unified recognition of ESG as a comprehensive priority. When asked which ESG pillar their organisations need to improve, 47.8% of respondents said “All of them”, followed by Environmental (24.8%), Governance (14.2%), and Social (13.3%). This is a sharp shift from 2023, when fewer than 20% saw the need to act across all three areas, indicating growing internal alignment towards integrated ESG strategies.

Looking ahead, 49.6% of respondents believe that Indian law firms will be evaluated on ESG parameters within the next five years, especially for long-term mandates, up from 32% in 2024. While 37.2% still responded “Can’t say”, the increase in confidence reflects rising client expectations and greater ESG awareness across the legal industry.

Our respondents share that global organisations value ESG and they have separate sustainability targets. So, while onboarding vendors or law firms, or any supplier, it is always a part of the diligence process. A general information is sought on law firms’ ESG targets and what actions they are taking, as it helps to understand their value system. So this is a basic expectation from any law firm in terms of ESG. However, ESG is not a determining factor while selecting a law firm. Other factors as mentioned in the report earlier are first considered for final selection.

These responses indicate that law firms that embed ESG across operations are better positioned to meet global client standards and drive long-term value.



The 2025 Outlook

As we reflect on the key insights from this year's findings in comparison to the 2023 and 2024 GC Insider reports, the 2025 outlook offers a perspective on evolving priorities with an increase in the role of in-house legal teams and their engagement with law firms.

As general counsel become increasingly embedded in business decision-making, they look to external law firms to seamlessly align legal advice with commercial objectives. In this context, it is imperative for law firms to cultivate a deep understanding of their client's industry, operations, and strategic goals, ensuring that their counsel is both pragmatic and commercially sustainable.

Reputation management has become critical for law firms, particularly for boutique and non-tier 1 firms, to gain prominence through peer referrals within the in-house counsel community. This shift presents a strong opportunity for such firms to secure mandates in their areas of expertise and demonstrate a focused, results-driven approach.

As general counsel and their teams grow more comfortable engaging directly with law firm associates, beyond partners, there is a clear opportunity for second- and third-in-line team members to gain deeper exposure and valuable business insights. It is essential for these rising

lawyers to actively engage with their in-house counterparts, fostering stronger relationships and contributing to the growth of a collaborative legal community.

While general counsel show a clear openness to exploring new legal partners, switching core firms remains a measured decision, typically triggered by sustained quality or service issues rather than isolated incidents. The data highlights that consistent delivery, responsiveness, and commercially viable advice matter far more than individual partner exits, with continuity, not personalities, driving long-term loyalty. Law firms that actively course-correct based on feedback, align advice to business realities, and maintain agility in service are better positioned to retain trust.

Further, in-house legal teams are increasingly handling high-value work for greater control and efficiency, shifting the focus of external law firms to specialized, complementary support. The emphasis now lies on integration with in-house functions and delivering practical, business-driven solutions.

Billing preferences remain consistent over the years. As noted in the 2023 and 2024 GC Insider reports, Law firms need to continue aligning their pricing with client expectations, focusing on value and practical outcomes. Billing transparency remains essential for firms seeking to maintain strong, strategic client relationships.

With a notable increase in AI adoption by in-house legal teams, the key concerns in adoption of tech continue to include data privacy, misinformation, and ethical risks, particularly in sectors handling sensitive data. As compliance with data protection laws tightens, general counsel seek more practical, industry-specific support from law firms, emphasizing the need for tailored, results-driven legal advice aligned with current regulations.

In-house legal teams are increasingly handling core functions like contracts and regulatory compliance internally, reducing reliance on external firms. Challenges include finding culturally fit talent and offering long-term career growth. Secondments are used strategically for short-term gaps, while upskilling target communication, leadership, and project management.

The path forward is clear: those who align closely with client priorities, focus on agility and efficiency, focus on institutional strength, and demonstrate practical results will shape the future of legal partnerships.



The Law Firm Perspective

Law firms agree that lawyers now, more than ever, need to understand the business and business needs of the client to give them practical legal advice. This has become critical to maintain and nurture client relationships



“Understanding the client's business is paramount,” says Siddharth Mahajan, Partner at Athena Legal. He emphasises, that “legal advice must be aligned with the client’s broader business objectives. As lawyers, we must recognize that clients are not in the business of managing disputes; therefore, minimising legal conflicts and avoiding prolonged negotiations is crucial to serving their interests. In every legal solution we propose, we carefully consider not only compliance and risk mitigation but also the potential impact on the client’s business.”



Siddharth Mahajan
Partner
Athena Legal



“Staying closely engaged with the client—even in areas not directly tied to your role—gives you the chance to see the bigger picture through their lens. While it may appear unnecessary, immersing yourself in the entire process offers a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how clients think, operate, and make decisions,” notes Trust Law Senior Partner, Vivek Tewary.



Vivek Tewary
Senior Partner
Trust Law



“The expectation is absolutely right. Without understanding the business and its objectives, one cannot represent successfully. So, how do we cater to those needs? We have industry-specific teams, for example, renewable energy, automotive, pharma and healthcare, manufacturing, M&A and so on. They are vastly experienced and understand the specific businesses very well,” says Induslaw’s Founding Partner, Gaurav Dani. “Once you understand the business well and commercial construct of a deal, you can find quick resolution to issues in the deal making process. The approach should always remain on problem-solving,” adds Gaurav.



Gaurav Dani
Founding Partner
IndusLaw

One of the survey respondents has rightly shared that when law firms understand the business context in-depth, they are better equipped to offer practical and cost-effective solutions, which in turn leads to establishing long-term, strong and collaborative relationships with in-house legal teams. For a new client, a vital practice is to have consistent interactions with the client, and their business teams to first understand not just their business but the finer details of their operations and goals. This helps in gaining clarity on issues and having wider engagement with the client concerned.

“Maintaining accessibility and keeping clients informed about their matters is central to our approach to relationship management,” notes Siddharth, he further states that, “with advancements in technology, staying connected and available to clients has become both essential and more seamless. Moreover, seeking regular feedback is also a key part of our process, reinforcing the principle that the client’s interest remains our highest priority.”

Gaurav highlights that, “the most important measure is to ensure that across matters, the quality remains consistent. As firms grow, there are multiple people involved with the client. So, it is essential to ensure that every single engagement with the client is delivered with the same consistent quality. If the quality remains consistent, then the client will not have any reason to move away. Where quality dips, even in a small matter, that gives them a reason to lose confidence in the firm.”

Law firms aim to have consistency in quality. For any law firm with partners, practices and offices, consistency in quality output remains a key factor to nurture and strengthen their collaborative relationships with in-house teams.

This also shifts focus on the importance of second-in-line, as raised by general counsel. Although partner attention is vital and it impacts the ability to understand commercials, it is pertinent not just to ensure partner involvement at every stage but also to have a team with the right industry expertise on board.

Gaurav shares that, “the process starts with bringing in the right people and supporting them with the necessary training and induction to help them align with the firm's workflow. Also, introducing them early on with the clients, to eventually handle matters independently. This not only helps them grow but also plays a part in providing consistency in quality to the client. ”

“Developing future leaders requires more than delegation—it demands intentional exposure, shared ownership, and space to think. By involving junior colleagues directly with clients, giving them a share in revenue, and encouraging them to explore multiple scenarios in decision making - not only can we widen their commercial thinking but also build decision-making confidence. Often, they cover the full range, I simply have to fine-tune. That sense of contribution instills ownership, and with it, the foundation of true deal-making,” adds Vivek.

In fact, the general counsel we have spoken to, by and large, are comfortable working with second-in-line team members like the principal associates or the senior associates. They feel that the understanding of business has improved over time. Although there is a necessity for partner involvement, it can be minimised to vital

aspects of a transaction or matter, while day-to-day is seamlessly handled by the next-in-line team members. As consistent with earlier reports, law firms are increasingly focusing on upgrading and using the latest technology to improve their deliverables.

Gaurav agrees that interaction with more team members and partners helps in seamless transition in case of the exit of a partner. Once a client has frequent interaction with more teams and partners, they are more comfortable with the institution.

Law firms agree with the ask of general counsel on transparency in billing. The type of billing is usually selected on the basis of the type of transaction/matter, or project at hand. The flexible approach, along with the use of technology to assess billings, assists in-house counsel in focusing on the issue at hand first.

Siddharth shares that they rely on valuing relationships with clients, with a consistent approach in delivering high-quality work. This helps them gain bigger mandates and referrals even from smaller clients and their in-house counsel. While larger firms utilise the expertise of wider teams and are able to provide multiple teams on to single client basis the needs.

By embracing these approaches, law firms aim to cultivate enduring trust, assuring clients of unwavering support regardless of personnel changes and with their in-depth knowledge and expertise to provide commercially viable legal solutions. Thus striking a balance between the demands of in-house community and the businesses.

Top Tips for Law Firms to Find and Retain Clients

- Be proactive in identifying how your legal expertise can drive business success, not just compliance. Offer forward thinking risk-mitigation strategies aligned with the client's business while avoiding overly risk-averse approaches.
- Develop strong ties with both legal and business teams, to demonstrate long-term commitment to client success. Engage with clients beyond transactions with regular check-ins to timely address any of their concerns.
- Leverage in-house community peer referrals. Cultivate relationships with the in-house legal community by building trust and engaging through thought-leadership events. Build credibility to ensure the law firm's reputation is synonymous to quality and reliability.
- Manage expectations transparently. Share clear communication about transitions and ensure a clear roadmap for smooth transitions. Establish institutional trust through structured processes, fostering multi-layered client engagement, continuity in quality of work to reduce uncertainty.
- Clients are more likely to stay with a firm that demonstrates succession planning and a strong second line of leadership.
- Be agile and prioritise quality legal solutions. Respond swiftly to urgent needs without compromising quality. On a need basis the in-house community is willing to extend timelines for practical, commercially viable solutions that address core issues effectively.
- Avoid surprises in billing by offering clear cost structures with predictabilities and alternative fee arrangements that align with client expectations to deliver high quality advice.
- Leverage tech and AI to streamline workflows, enhance efficiency, and deliver smarter, data-driven and cost-effective legal solutions that drive business value. Be co-strategists and not just compliance advisors.
- For newer laws like DPDPA, many in-house teams are already GDPR compliant and are not seeking basic guidance. Instead, they expect law firms to be proactive, to analyse their needs, and to help bridge specific business gaps with tailored solutions.

Methodology & Disclaimer

Between February 2025 and March 2025, LawWiser contacted general counsel and heads of legal by email and WhatsApp, asking them to complete a short survey exploring the evolving dynamics between buyers (general Counsel) and providers (law firms) of legal services.

The survey was followed up by one-on-one interviews with a sample of respondents to gain further insight into the topics. This report is based on inputs from 114 respondents. We have covered global MNCs, large Indian corporations and Unicorns from a diverse set of sectors such as aviation, auto, renewable energy, IT, metals & mining, online gaming, edtech, logistics, banking, FMCG, agriculture and infrastructure.

All views expressed in this report are personal and not representative of the respondents' organisations.

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UNCOVERING THE KEY DRIVERS OF LAW FIRM ENGAGEMENT

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