Going Native: Incentive, Identity, and the Inherent Ethical Problem of In-House Counsel

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Going native" is the perhaps politically-incorrect term used in international circles to describe the situation in which a diplomat, having spent too much time in a foreign country, begins to identify more with the local culture than with his own state. This provides a fitting analogy to the attorney who works as in-house counsel for a company for many years, operating in the cor-

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porate environment, surrounded by co-workers who are all part of the organization.

This “cultural immersion” has serious implications for the attorney’s ability to fulfill his ethical obligations. The hallmark of the legal profession is independence—the duty to render advice and to meet the requirements placed upon attorneys with respect to clients, adversaries, tribunals, and society-at-large without interference from external or personal concerns.\(^2\) However, as with the diplomat stationed abroad, an attorney who works within a particular organization for an extended period of time may begin to identify more closely with the host entity and its constituents than his own professional organization.

The conundrum of corporate counsel’s independence is further exacerbated by a second problem not present in the diplomatic analogy: incentive. The current structure of the corporate legal department, is one under which the in-house attorney is financially dependent upon a lone client, and is assessed, compensated, and rewarded based on his ability to satisfy that client’s business objectives. This creates an inducement for the attorney to provide advice that is amenable to the company’s goals, regardless of whether that is the most legally salient advice.

These pressures on in-house counsel are pervasive and unrelenting, and result in a lack of autonomy and in ethical conflicts that are impossible to resolve under the current model of the corporate legal department. Moreover, the Model Rules of Professional Conduct, which purport to provide ethical guidance for all attorneys, make no meaningful attempt to address these conflicts or to address the tensions which are unique to or more problematic for in-house counsel.

Previous scholarship on the independence dilemma of in-house counsel has generally focused upon either incentive or that of identity, attempting to attribute one or the other as the sole cause and proposing modest reforms. This Article seeks to add to the discussion by examining the complex interplay between incentive and identity and offering a more comprehensive solution to holistically address the problem. Part II examines the historical role of in-house counsel and ways in which this has changed in the past several decades to create a position of unprecedented scope and influence. Part III investigates the fundamental dilemma of in-house counsel—independence. Part IV considers the dual sources of the conflict, incentive and identity, the intersection between the two, and the ways in which these combined factors manifest themselves in counsel’s work.

Finally, Part V sets forth a new framework, given the intractable conflict of corporate counsel, for the provision of legal services to corporations. Recognizing that the tensions faced by in-house attorneys cannot be resolved under the existing structure, the proposal draws upon various foreign legal and

non-legal models to propose reforms whereby: a) legal advice would be provided by firm attorneys seconded to corporations for a finite period of time; and b) any legal advisors who were permanently employed by the company would be designated by a status distinct from outside firm attorneys, with different rules of professional conduct and privilege.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Evolution of In-House Counsel

The fortunes of in-house counsel over the last hundred years have been something of a rollercoaster ride. During the first third of the twentieth century, in-house attorneys were highly-respected and compensated players in the corporate world. However, from the 1940s onward, the role of corporate counsel was greatly diminished, principally as a result of two developments. First, law firms grew significantly in power and prestige during this period and attaining partnership became the ultimate goal, and those who chose to go in-house were often viewed as inferior attorneys who failed to make partner at firms. Second, the Masters in Business Administration (“MBA”) became the more valued business credential, and those who held it generally advanced more readily through the company ranks than those with law degrees. Thus, corporate counsel acted principally as intermediaries during this period, handling only the most mundane of transactions and relaying more significant work to law firms.

However, there has been a fundamental shift in the past three decades whereby corporate counsel have returned to prominence, increasing in their number and influence, as well as the scope and complexity of their duties. The growing importance of corporate counsel can be attributed to a number of factors. First, businesses operate in an increasingly demanding environment, one in which regulatory requirements are more onerous, transactions more complex,
and litigation more frequent.\(^9\) As a result, companies need the continuous legal advice and support that in-house counsel can readily provide.\(^10\)

Companies have also found a number of advantages to utilizing in-house counsel instead of law firms for many matters. As an initial matter, in-house legal departments can provide legal services at lower cost levels than outside counsel.\(^11\) While in-house legal departments carry many of the expenses associated with employees, such as salary, benefits, office equipment, etc., they are still relatively inexpensive compared to the billable hourly rate charged by law firms.\(^12\)

Additionally, an attorney who works for a particular company for an extended period of time comes to know that company’s business practices and objectives.\(^13\) This specialization eliminates or greatly reduces the time and expense that an outside attorney would require to familiarize himself upon being brought onto a matter.\(^14\) In-house counsel may also achieve savings in terms of economies of scale by repeatedly performing routine transactions and tasks in large numbers.\(^15\)

In addition to these cost savings, companies have found a qualitative advantage to utilizing in-house counsel. First, in-house attorneys are uniquely situated to gain information by virtue of their on-going presence in the organization.\(^16\) Professor Geoffrey Hazard has analogized the nexus of information available to in-house counsel to the “water cooler”:

| the places and occasions for informal information interchange that occur in all employment settings: the company cafeteria, the car pool, the informal exchanges preceding company committee meetings, the evening get-togethers during out of town trips, and even the company picnics. These are opportunities for exchange of back-channel information, office gossip, rumors |

\(^9\) Liggio, supra note 3, at 1203–04.

\(^10\) DeMott, supra note 3, at 960; Geoffrey C. Hazard, Jr., Ethical Dilemmas of Corporate Counsel, 46 EMORY L.J. 1011, 1012 (1997); Liggio, supra note 3, at 1203.

\(^11\) Liggio, supra note 3, at 1203–04.

\(^12\) Daly, supra note 6, at 1060; DeMott, supra note 3, at 960; Steven L. Schwarcz, To Make or to Buy: In-House Lawyering and Value Creation, 33 J. CORP. L. 497, 508 (2008).


\(^14\) Schwarcz, supra note 12, at 508.

\(^15\) Id. at 506.

\(^16\) Id. at 504; see also Sally R. Weaver, Ethical Dilemmas of Corporate Counsel: A Structural and Contextual Analysis, 46 EMORY L.J. 1023, 1027 (1997).
and portents of future corporate undertakings that have not yet been announced officially.\textsuperscript{17}

The in-house attorney’s continuous presence, access to information, and familiarity with business operations also enables him to engage in a more proactive rather than reactive model of lawyering by becoming involved in matters at an earlier stage and anticipating and detecting potential issues and disputes before they fully manifest themselves as problems.\textsuperscript{18}

The growth in the prominence of in-house counsel is evident in a number of ways. As an initial matter, the overall number of corporate counsel has quadrupled.\textsuperscript{19} Attorneys have also gained in power and prestige within the corporate structure with senior counsel directly advising and, in some cases, being tapped as the successor to the CEO.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, as will be explained in Part II.B., in-house counsel have taken on a wider range of duties and roles, both within the legal department and externally.\textsuperscript{21}

This shift has been accompanied by the recognition that corporate attorneys have a distinct professional identity, a development which can be seen most notably in the formation of the American Corporate Counsel Association ("ACCA"). Founded in 1982, the ACCA has grown to approximately 10,000 members.\textsuperscript{22} The organization represents the interests of in-house counsel in a number of ways, including lobbying for their political interests, filing amicus briefs in relevant litigation, publishing articles and studies of interest to the in-house bar, and providing opportunities for education, interaction, and exchange.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{17} Hazard, supra note 10, at 1012; see also Sung Hui Kim, The Banality of Fraud: Re-Situating the Inside Counsel as Gatekeeper, 74 FORDHAM L. REV. 983, 997 (2005).

\textsuperscript{18} Chayes & Chayes, supra note 6, at 281 ("The very existence of a properly established inside counsel pushes back the involvement of lawyers to an earlier phase of a transaction and shifts the mode from reactive to proactive."); see also DeMott, supra note 3, at 960; Kim, supra note 13, at 200; Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 23; Milton C. Regan, Jr., Moral Intuitions and Organizational Culture, 51 ST. LOUIS U. L.J. 941, 941 (2007) (discussing how in-house counsel "both shape and are shaped by the organizational environment in which they practice").

\textsuperscript{19} Daly, supra note 6, at 1059; Nishizawa, supra note 4, at 849 n.2 (citing Mary C. Daly, The Cultural, Ethical, and Legal Challenges In Lawyering for a Global Organization: The Role of the General Counsel, 46 EMORY L.J. 1057, 1057–58 (1997)).

\textsuperscript{20} Hugh P. Gunz & Sally P. Gunz, The Lawyer’s Response to Organizational Professional Conflict: An Empirical Study of the Ethical Decision Making of In-House Counsel, 39 AM. BUS. L.J. 241, 242 (2002); Kim, supra note 13, at 206; Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 998.

\textsuperscript{21} Gunz & Gunz, supra note 20, at 243–44; Kim, supra note 13, at 200; Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 998.

\textsuperscript{22} Daly, supra note 6, at 1063; see also Liggio, supra note 3, at 1211.

As a result of these changes, which Robert Rosen has dubbed the "Inside Counsel Movement," in-house attorneys are now "the dominant providers of legal services to corporate America." Despite the ascendance of corporate counsel, the role remains a challenging one, particularly in light of the current economic downturn. Companies are downsizing and looking to reduce back-office expenditures. Corporate legal departments, which are expensive relative to other departments due to high salaries and costs such as electronic research and legal education, are among those being slimmed. Therefore, there is increased pressure on in-counsel to justify his value to the company. Additionally, companies are also seeking to reduce outside legal costs by having in-house counsel do more hands-on work with respect to litigation and transactions. Thus, in-house counsel are required to juggle more roles than ever before.

B. Roles and Duties

The role of in-house counsel has expanded greatly over the past several decades. Where corporate counsel once served primarily as an intermediary between outside law firms and the company, they now perform a wide array of important duties. These can be broadly grouped into three categories: representation, counseling, and compliance.

First, in-house counsel now routinely represent the company in litigation and administrative proceedings, either independently or in tandem with outside counsel. In the context of litigation, they are typically involved in many activities such as preparing pleadings, prepping and conducting depositions, arguing motions in court, negotiating settlements, and even acting as trial counsel in some cases. On the transactional side, counsel may themselves handle significant deals for the company by negotiating and drafting agreements.

Second, in-house attorneys take primary responsibility for counseling the company on various legal issues. Corporate counsel provides guidance not

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25 Milton C. Regan, Jr. & Jeffrey D. Bauman, Legal Ethics and Corporate Practice 212 (2005); Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 999.
27 For example thirty-one percent of attorneys responded that the need to market law to businesses affected "the way they give legal advice." Robert L. Nelson & Laura Beth Nielsen, Cops, Counsel, and Entrepreneurs: Constructing the Role of Inside Counsel in Large Corporations, 34 Law & Soc'y Rev. 457, 477 (2000).
28 Daly, supra note 6, at 1062.
29 Liggio, supra note 3, at 1205.
30 Id. at 1210.
31 Id. at 1205.
32 Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 5–6.
only regarding legal conflicts or issues that have already arisen, but may also advise proactively by holding training on legal issues, drafting policies and procedures, and offering recommendations as to best practices to avoid legal liability.\textsuperscript{33}

Finally, corporate counsel often play a prominent role with respect to regulatory matters.\textsuperscript{34} This function, which is sometimes referred to as gatekeeping, involves ensuring compliance with laws and regulations at an \textit{ex ante} stage, as well as investigating potential violations.\textsuperscript{35} The in-house attorney’s role as gatekeeper has taken on exponentially greater significance following scandals such as Enron and Tyco, in which corporate attorneys were found to have been negligent, or in some cases, complicit in fraud.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, the passage of Sarbanes-Oxley in response to these scandals has placed a greater level of responsibility upon corporate counsel for detecting and reporting suspected violations.\textsuperscript{37}

In the wake of Enron and Tyco, much has been written about the role of the attorney as gatekeeper. Though a fulsome discussion of the topic is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth offering a few observations. First, the role of the attorney gatekeeper varies widely from company to company—in-house counsel may be the primary gatekeeper in a small business, or the organization may have an entire department dedicated to compliance with whom the attorney works. Indeed, various individuals in an organization, in addition to counsel, may play a gatekeeping function including internal entities or external auditors.\textsuperscript{38} Gatekeeping functions may also be shared with outside attorneys who may have the advantage of greater independence with respect to reporting violations but are hobbled by the lack of access to inside information enjoyed by inside counsel which enables them to more readily detect misconduct.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{33} Liggio, supra note 3, at 1208–09; see also Daly, supra note 6, at 1068.

\textsuperscript{34} Chayes & Chayes, supra note 6, at 284–85.


\textsuperscript{37} William E. Matthews, Robert M. Hoffman & Daniel C. Scott, \textit{Conflicting Loyalties Facing In-House Counsel: Ethical Care and Feeding of the Ravenous Multi-Headed Client}, 37 St. Mary’s L.J. 901, 905 (2006); see also Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 985 (noting that Sarbanes-Oxley has the effect of “singling out inside counsel for, the first time . . . for special treatment in the fight against securities fraud”).


\textsuperscript{39} Sung Hui Kim, \textit{Gatekeepers Inside Out}, 21 Geo. J. Legal Ethics 411, 413–14 (2007). As Sung Hui Kim has noted, there are “Four Quadrants of Gatekeeping”: 1) “capacity to monitor”; 2) “capacity to interdict”; 3) “willingness to monitor”; and 4) “willingness to interdict.” \textit{Id.} at 414. While in-house counsel has the advantage in the ability to monitor and interdict, willingness can be problematic because of the alignment pressures discussed in this Article.
Regardless of these organizational variables, it is clear that in-house counsel generally has some role in preventing and detecting wrongdoing and is in some sense a gatekeeper. As Tanina Rostain noted, “[G]eneral counsel wield great power inside the corporation. . . . GC’s translate and operationalize legal mandates, influencing how a corporation will internalize its compliance duties.”

Beyond these three principal areas of responsibility, in-house attorneys still maintain their traditional role of selecting and liaising with the outside lawyers. They decide whether a matter should be handled internally or externally, and where matters are to be handled jointly by inside counsel and firm attorneys, they determine the division of labor. They also supervise the work of outside counsel.

Significantly, the role of an in-house attorney may go well beyond the legal department, with counsel frequently participating in the business functions or decision-making processes of a company. Attorneys may undertake business roles as part of their duties in a legal department or may rotate out to occupy non-legal positions. Additionally, some counsel positions may be situated in parts of the company external to the legal department, in what are known as “embedded” attorney roles.

Thus, at any given time, corporate counsel may be wearing numerous hats, including those of advocate, legal advisor, investigator, mediator, compliance officer, business team member, and external liaison with outside counsel.

C. Inside and Outside Counsel Contrasted

In-house counsel often claim that their roles mirror that of their counterparts at firms. The tendency of corporate counsel to engage in what Sally

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41 Kim, supra note 13, at 203.
42 Chayes & Chayes, supra note 6, at 277–78.
43 Id. at 290 (“Although in the past the general counsel may have been little more than a switchboard, today with respect to outside law firms . . . legal services are managed with as much detailed control as other corporate services.”).
44 Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 6, 26; Weaver, supra note 16, at 1027–28.
45 Daly, supra note 6, at 1072 (“[S]ome lawyers find the business side of their job so satisfying that they ultimately forsake the legal department entirely and join the ranks of senior management.”).
46 DeMott, supra note 3, at 978; see also Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 35. For example, if a company has different divisions or departments based on functional duties or geographic location, an attorney may be placed within that part of the organization and report up through the head of that division, rather than working in a centralized legal department.
47 DeMott, supra note 3, at 957–58; see also Barclift, supra note 36, at 5–7.
48 Weaver, supra note 16, at 1031.
Weaver has dubbed "a public incantation of sameness,"\(^{49}\) may be an attempt to remain on equal footing with firm counterparts and avoid the return to the perceived inferior status associated with the role in an earlier era. Alternatively, corporate counsel may feel pressure to accentuate their legal capabilities in order to be seen as valuable and non-redundant of outside attorneys in a climate of leaner budgets and constrained resources.

Notwithstanding these claims, and despite the fact that many of the duties of corporate counsel mirror those of their colleagues at firms, the two positions differ significantly.\(^{50}\) First, while an attorney at a firm generally works for a number of different clients, in-house counsel has just one—the company which employs him.\(^{51}\) He has been hired by and owes his job security to that client.\(^{52}\) This creates much greater dependence upon the satisfaction of the client.\(^{53}\)

In-house counsel also plays a different role on the food chain than the firm attorney. Whereas in a firm the lawyers are the rainmakers or fee generators who bring in the revenue, in a company the attorneys are back office expense and arguably more expendable.\(^{54}\) They are therefore under pressure to make themselves relevant and useful.\(^{55}\) Thus, an in-house attorney needs to be seen as one who facilitates and enables client objectives in order to have merit to the organization which employs him.\(^{56}\)

While duties of the outside attorney and corporate counsel may overlap, their positions and points of view are entirely different. In-house counsel wear business as well as legal hats and participate in decision-making as officers of the company.\(^{57}\) This model, under which the attorney participates in formatting business objectives, deviates significantly from the traditional firm-client model whereby the client determines the objectives and the attorney determines the means. As Milton Regan has noted, "if in-house counsel do indeed become integrally involved in the formulating company goals and structuring company operations, it may be unrealistic to insist that they nonetheless remain legal technicians morally unaccountable for the consequences of those activities."\(^{58}\)

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\(^{49}\) Id.

\(^{50}\) Id. ("Corporate counsel actually do practice law in an environment that differs dramatically from that of their colleagues in private practice.").

\(^{51}\) Id. at 1027; Nishizawa, supra note 4, at 849; see also Kim, supra note 13, at 203.

\(^{52}\) Sarah Helene Duggin, The Pivotal Role of the General Counsel in Promoting Corporate Integrity and Professional Responsibility, 51 ST. LOUIS U. L.J. 989, 999 (2007); Kim, supra note 13, at 204.

\(^{53}\) Kim, supra note 13, at 204.

\(^{54}\) Liggio, supra note 3, at 1219.

\(^{55}\) Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1008.

\(^{56}\) Id. at 1004.

\(^{57}\) Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 6, 26.

\(^{58}\) REGAN & BAUMAN, supra note 25, at 203.
None of this is to suggest that firm attorneys do not face similar conflicts. Rather, as explained in Part III, infra, in-house counsel faces these conflicts with greater frequency and severity than outside attorneys, and the guidance and remedies available to them are scant or non-existent.

III. ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS AND CONFLICTS

A. Duty of Independence

An attorney's ethical obligations are generally guided by the Model Rules of Professional Conduct, which are promulgated by the American Bar Association and have been adopted by thirty-nine states. The Rules purport to govern all aspects of attorney conduct and are organized around the different aspects of practices such as the client-lawyer relationship, the role as counselor and advocate, transactions with non-clients, public service, etc. Although the Rules do include some provisions that are specific to law firms, they are intended to cover all attorneys, regardless of where they practice. There is not a separate code of conduct for in-house attorneys.

One of an attorney's most fundamental obligations is that of professional independence. As the preamble to the Model Rules of Professional Conduct notes, "A lawyer... is a representative of clients, an officer of the legal system and a public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice." Thus, although an attorney may work for a client, he has ethical duties not only to his client, but also to the larger legal system, including third parties and tribunals.

The duty of independence manifests itself in a number of different ways throughout the Rules. First, when acting in an advisory capacity, an attorney must offer independent advice to his client. Rule 2.1 provides, in part, that "[i]n representing a client, a lawyer shall exercise independent professional judgment and render candid advice." As the comments to this rule note, even though the advice may be unpleasant and contrary to what the client wishes to hear, the lawyer must give a candid opinion. Thus, an attorney must be prepared to tell a client "the good, the bad, and the ugly" without fear of the consequences it

61 See MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 7.1-7.5 (2009) (addressing firm business matters such as advertising and communicating with prospective clients).
62 Park, supra note 59, at 783–84.
64 Park, supra note 59, at 783.
66 Id. at R. 2.1 cmt.
will have. This often may involve advice that is unpalatable to a client or which may slow, frustrate, or stand in the way of the company’s business objectives or the desired means of achieving them.  

The Rules further reinforce the importance of attorney independence by prohibiting attorney self-interest. Rule 1.7 provides that “a lawyer shall not represent a client if the representation involves a concurrent conflict of interest,” unless:

(1) the lawyer reasonably believes that the lawyer will be able to provide competent and diligent representation to each affected client; (2) the representation is not prohibited by law; (3) the representation does not involve the assertion of a claim by one client against another client represented by the lawyer in the same litigation or other proceedings before a tribunal; and (4) each affected client gives informed consent, confirmed in writing.

Rule 1.7 does not offer strict prohibitions on specific conduct but rather highlights situations in which an attorney’s independence is likely to be compromised. For example, the comment to the rule advises against equity ownership in a client by an attorney, noting that it “may be ‘difficult or impossible’ for an attorney to give independent advice” when he “has a personal interest in a transaction.”

The Rules also require attorneys to exercise independent judgment in his dealings with the legal system. For example, an attorney may only bring a claim on behalf of a client which he believes is meritorious. Also, an attorney has certain duties of candor toward the tribunal with respect to the disclosure of factual and legal information that may be adverse to his client’s position. Finally, counsel also has duties toward his adversaries which require independent judgment, such as the disclosure of discoverable evidence.

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67 Interview with Ben W. Heineman, Jr., ACC’s 2007 Annual Meeting’s Keynote Speaker, in 25 No. 8 ASS’N CORP. COUNS. DOCKET 38 (Oct. 2007).

68 MODEL RULES OF PROF’L CONDUCT R. 1.7 (2009).

69 Barclift, supra note 36, at 14–15 (citing MODEL RULES OF PROF’L CONDUCT R. 1.7(a)(2), R. 1.7 cmt. (2004)).

70 MODEL RULES OF PROF’L CONDUCT R. 3.1 (2009) (“A lawyer shall not bring or defend a proceeding, or assert or controvert an issue therein, unless there is a basis in law and fact for doing so that is not frivolous . . . ”).

71 Rule 3.3 provides that “[a] lawyer shall not knowingly: . . . (1) make a false statement of fact or law to a tribunal or fail to correct a false statement of material fact or law previously made to the tribunal by the lawyer; (2) fail to disclose to the tribunal legal authority in the controlling jurisdiction . . . or (3) offer evidence that the lawyer knows to be false [to the tribunal].” MODEL RULES OF PROF’L CONDUCT R. 3.3 (2009).

The Rules also require an attorney to exercise independent judgment in determining when to withdraw from representing a client. For example, Rule 1.16 provides that an attorney may withdraw where representation would result in a violation of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct or the law.\textsuperscript{73} Rule 1.16 further provides that a lawyer may withdraw where “the client persists in a course of action involving the lawyer’s services that the lawyer reasonably believes is criminal or fraudulent,” where “the client has used the lawyer’s services to perpetrate a crime or fraud,” or where a “client insists upon taking action that the lawyer considers repugnant” or imprudent.\textsuperscript{74}

An attorney’s duty of independence may be derived from sources other than the Model Rules of Professional Conduct. For example, a related form of independence is required by the gatekeeper or compliance duties which Sarbanes-Oxley and other laws impose upon attorneys to monitor and report upon possible legal violations.\textsuperscript{75} Sarbanes-Oxley requires an attorney to report credible evidence of a material violation to a higher authority within the company, such as the audit committee or the board of directors.\textsuperscript{76} This requirement further intensifies the ethical dilemma of the internal attorney between his professional duties and allegiance to the organization which employs him and of which he is a member.\textsuperscript{77}

\textbf{B. Situational Conflicts}

In addition to the obligation to exercise independent judgment in the various circumstances described above, the in-house attorney is prone to a wide range of other ethical dilemmas which may arise as a result of his lack of autonomy.\textsuperscript{78} Most prevalent is the confusion over who is the client.\textsuperscript{79} Rule 1.13 provides that “[a] lawyer employed or retained by an organization represents the organization acting through its duly authorized constituents.”\textsuperscript{80} The rule, which embodies what is known as entity theory, clarifies that the attorney represents the corporation and must act in its best interests.\textsuperscript{81} However, the attorney inte-
tracts with the corporation through its agents, the employees, who may behave in ways which are anemic to the best interests of the corporate client.

Rule 1.13 provides that if an officer or other employee is engaged in illegal violations which might be "imputed to the organization," the lawyer should proceed "in the best interest of the organization" and take steps such as referring the matter to a higher entity within the company. In 2003, Rule 1.13 was modified to strengthen an attorney’s duty to report. Whereas before reporting was a permissive step that an attorney could take, Rule 1.13 now provides that when an attorney believes someone is acting not in "the best interest of the organization" he must report "to the highest authority that can act on behalf of the organization."

The problem arises when in-house counsel becomes aware that the CEO or any individual with whom the attorney interacts is behaving in ways that are in conflict with the interests of the organization, triggering the attorney’s duty to report the conduct. While outside attorneys might also encounter this scenario, it is clearly more prevalent and complicated for in-house counsel, who work alongside and in some cases for, the individual who may be engaging in misconduct. Maintaining the requisite independence to take the steps required by Rule 1.13 and reporting potentially wrongful conduct may be problematic in light of these close working and, in some cases, subordinate relationships. Additionally, individual employees of the company accustomed to receiving legal advice from in-house counsel with respect to various business matters, may be confused as to whom the attorney represents.

Another potential, albeit less likely, conflict in-house counsel may face is the situation where the attorney becomes a witness in a matter that he is handling. Rule 3.7 provides that "[a] lawyer shall not act as advocate at a trial in which the lawyer is likely to be a necessary witness." The problem arises in a variety of scenarios such as where counsel undertakes an internal investigation and then seeks to represent the company in a matter where the sufficiency of the investigation is at issue, or where the attorney participates in an underlying

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83 Id.

84 Id.

85 Park, supra note 59, at 791; see, e.g., Kim, supra note 13, at 205 (citing Balla v. Gambro, Inc., 584 N.E.2d 104 (Ill. 1991)) (discussing Balla v. Gambro, Inc., where “the general counsel . . . was terminated after the lawyer told his employer that he would do whatever necessary to stop the employer's proposed sale”).

86 In determining whether counsel should be required to testify, courts generally consider whether: 1) there are other ways to get the information needed; 2) the underlying communications at issue are privileged and/or not relevant; or 3) the testimony is crucial to the defense or prosecution of other party’s case. See Shelton v. Am. Motors Corp., 805 F.2d 1323, 1327 (8th Cir. 1987).

87 There are limited exceptions to the rule where “the testimony relates to an uncontested issue,” to “legal services,” or where “disqualification of the lawyer would work substantial hardship on the client.” Model Rules of Prof’l Conduct R. 3.7 (2009).
business decision such as a layoff which is later challenged in litigation.\textsuperscript{88} Although it is certainly possible for outside counsel to find himself as a witness in litigation regarding a transaction or case that he handled, in-house attorneys are more likely to face this dilemma because of the many legal and business hats that they wear. As a consequence of having worked on the underlying matter, counsel may be precluded from handling the litigation or proceeding. Moreover, even where counsel is not disqualified, he may have difficulty objectively handling a case which challenges a transaction of which he was a part.

Additionally, myriad issues may arise with in-house counsel regarding attorney-client privilege and attorney work product. Generally, the communications between counsel and client in which the attorney provides legal advice are considered privileged and are not discoverable in litigation. Similarly, notes and other materials containing the attorney’s legal analysis may be withheld under the work product doctrine. However, the applicability of the privilege is far from certain with respect to in-house counsel. For example, an attorney who works within a company may at one point in time provide legal advice, in which case attorney-client privilege would apply. However, at another time he may be acting in a business role, in which case it would not.\textsuperscript{89} Where the attorney’s role becomes blurred, it may be difficult to assert the applicability of the privilege.\textsuperscript{90} Thus, in-house counsel’s role is troubling both for its inherent lack of autonomy and the various situational conflicts that arise as a result.

IV. INDEPENDENCE PROBLEM OF IN-HOUSE COUNSEL

The Rules and other ethical obligations described in Part III, supra, apply with equal force to attorneys in private practice as well as in-house counsel, and the potential conflicts highlighted are present in their work as well. The question then is why are they any more problematic with respect to in-house counsel? How, if at all, are the ethical conflicts of in-house counsel any different or more complex? In-house counsel, by virtue of their unique placement and point of view, face an independence problem that is without parallel in the firm context in its pervasiveness and scope. In understanding the magnitude of the issue, it is necessary to examine the causes of the problem and the ways in which those causes manifest themselves in counsel’s thoughts and actions.

\textsuperscript{88} Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 32.

\textsuperscript{89} Matthews et al., supra note 37, at 913–14; Nishizawa, supra note 4, at 958–59; Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 27.

\textsuperscript{90} Rossi v. Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Greater New York, 540 N.E.2d 703, 705 (N.Y. 1989) (stating in dicta that communications between in-house counsel and their constituents may “blur the line between legal” and business advice); see also John Gergacz, Privileged Communications with In-house Counsel under United States and European Community Law: A Proposed Reevaluation of the Akzo Nobel Decision, 42 CREIGHTON L. REV. 323, 330 (2009) (noting that courts may take a closer look at the applicability of attorney-client privilege when communications involve in-house counsel rather than outside attorneys).
Scholars examining this issue have generally tried to attribute it to one of two factors: incentive or identity. The first body of scholarship casts the independence problem of in-house counsel as originating from economic incentives—the tangible factors inherent to working for a single client, which may subtly or overtly coerce an attorney into acting in ways which he otherwise would not, in hopes of receiving personal recognition and reward. The second group attempts to explain the issue in terms of social science, examining the way in which counsel perceives his identity and role, as well as the environmental factors and pressures which affect counsel’s subconscious filters and decision-making processes and result in cognitive bias.

This Article posits that the problem lies not with identity or incentive but a complex intersection of the two. Counsel are subject to both the tangible incentives for compliance and the more subtle psychological biases present in the organizational setting. Taken together, these make it virtually impossible for even the most well-intentioned corporate attorneys to exercise the independent judgment required of members of the legal profession.

A. Sources of the Conflict

1. Incentive

Historically, the scholarship addressing the independence problem of in-house counsel has focused on the issue of incentive. This emphasis is not entirely misplaced, as the structure under which in-house counsel is employed, assessed, and rewarded creates innumerable pressures. Imagine a firm that only has one client, is entirely paid by that client, and whose compensation is solely determined by the performance and satisfaction of that client.91 This is the role of corporate counsel. Unlike attorneys in private practice who may receive fees from numerous clients, in-house counsel is compensated solely by the company and is dependent upon the client, which employs him for salary and benefits.92 Corporate counsel is thus beholden to the company for his financial well-being.93

Corporate counsel are often compensated with other financial incentives based upon performance and value to the corporation, such as bonuses, which can reflect a significant portion of counsel’s total compensation.94 Unlike at a

91 Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1001; Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 11.
92 Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1006; see also Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 10 (“The CEO often controls the selection, hiring, firing and compensation of the general counsel, and the general counsel generally reports to the CEO within the management hierarchy.”).
93 Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 11 (“In-house counsel’s inability to spread employment risk over multiple clients may result in a temptation at times to ‘go along with’ perhaps rationalizing decisions the courses of actions sought by the mangers who hold the power to hire, promote, compensate and fire them.”).
94 Park, supra note 59, at 783.
firm, where attorneys may in large part be assessed by the number of hours they bill or the amount of business they bring in (i.e., “rainmaking”), the in-house attorney is evaluated by how well he helps the company achieve desired objectives.95 Thus, being a team player, or “playing ball,” often results in larger bonuses, merit increases, or other compensation.96

Another major piece of the in-house counsel incentive puzzle is stock options.97 Stock options are granted as incentive for management performance and are intended to align the interests of executive management with those of shareholders for a common goal of maximizing profits.98 However, this model is problematic with respect to corporate counsel. First, as explained in Part III, supra, the Model Rules of Professional Conduct make clear that the attorney should be acting without regard for personal interests.99 Moreover, the attorney’s mandate goes beyond that of short-term profit maximization. Counsel needs to give advice about legal liability and long-term legal issues, even where the best course of action for those objectives may be inconsistent with maximizing stock price. The attorney may also, in his capacity as gatekeeper, need to interdict with respect to plans that would increase profits but may be potentially fraudulent or violate the law. Scandals such as Enron highlighted the problem: corporate misconduct was attributed to emphasis by executives to maximize personal profits and attorneys were among those who stood to gain.100

Beyond the financial incentives of the in-house attorney’s job, there is the inducement of the very job itself. With counsel employed by his lone client, all advice given is under the dangling sword of being fired and losing one’s financial security.101 Even for an attorney who is willing to risk losing his job, there are more significant long term consequences. As Professor Hazard noted, “The ultimate risk is not only being fired, with loss of employment, fringe benefits and pension rights, but the possibility of being professionally blacklisted . . . Many [corporate officers] will not hesitate in firing a lawyer who gives them a hard time and then bad-mouthing the lawyer afterward.”102

95 Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1003. (“Management defines objectives, identifies specific responsibilities for inside lawyers, and determines whether an inside lawyer’s performance is acceptable.”).
96 Id. at 1006.
97 Moore, supra note 79, at 538 (noting that according to one study close to 70 percent of senior in-house lawyers receive some form of stock options).
98 Barclift, supra note 36, at 8–9; Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 12; Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1006.
100 Barclift, supra note 36, at 10–11.
101 Nishizawa, supra note 4, at 856 (“The in-house counsel therefore faces a difficult choice between not reporting and violating his ethical obligations—thus potentially losing his license—and reporting the violations and potentially losing his job.”).
102 Hazard, supra note 10, at 1015–16.
2. Identity

Recognition of incentive as a cause of the independence problem of in-house counsel is important, but tells only half of the story. By focusing on pecuniary security and wealth maximization as the principal influences on corporate counsel, earlier analysis has failed to take into account the effect that self-perception and organizational dynamics have on the psyche of counsel.103 More recent scholarship has attempted to explain the independence problem of in-house counsel by utilizing social science, arguing that it is the intangible elements, the environment in which counsel works and the pressures to which he is subjected, that subconsciously alter the lens through which he views his work and his decision-making processes.104 These articles focus on what has been dubbed the "identity" problem of in-house counsel.105

Identity is essentially the way in which an individual views himself and his role both within the organizational entity and in relation to other persons internal and external to it.106 Identity is multifaceted and, broadly conceived, may be broken down into three subsections: organizational identity, interpersonal identity, and actor identity.

Organizational identity pertains to the group or body of which an individual considers himself a member. In the case of in-house counsel, the attorney is situated in the client entity rather than a law firm. Additionally, where an outside attorney generally works for numerous organizations, an in-house counsel works for just one.107 Moreover, he is likely to work for this one entity for several years, perhaps even an entire career. Thus an attorney may come to identify himself closely as a member of the organization.108

The second identity problem is interpersonal, arising from the relationships which counsel forms with others within the corporation. While in-house counsel may work with a limited number of other attorneys, most of his colleagues will be non-lawyer members of the company.109 Counsel is likely to form long-term working relationships, and perhaps even friendships, with these peer employees. Additionally, the in-house attorney is likely to have very limited contact with other members of the legal profession who are not part of the company, unless he voluntarily seeks out bar or other professional training or

103 Laby, supra note 35, at 135.
104 As referenced in Part II.A. supra, there are certain business advantages provided by the situation of counsel in-house, including access to information and the ability to partner long term to achieve business objectives.
105 Robertson, supra note 36, at 14.
106 Id.
107 Kim, supra note 13, at 204.
108 Id. at 206–07.
109 Hackett, supra note 7, at 610 (noting that in-house attorneys work primarily in smaller legal departments or as solo practitioners).
activities.\textsuperscript{110} Thus, the overwhelming majority of counsel’s workplace interactions will be with non-lawyer members of the corporate entity. This immersion among non-lawyers lessens in-house counsel’s perception of himself as an independent advisor and more closely aligns his outlook with organizational constituents.

The third aspect of identity is the actor problem: in-house counsel acts on behalf of the company and participates in business and strategic decision-making. Thus, the attorney is often asked to defend or opine upon his own decisions, removing objectivity.\textsuperscript{111} As Tim Terrell noted, by acting in legal and business capacities for the company, “counsel is often in the uncomfortable position of, in effect, rendering legal advice to himself or herself.”\textsuperscript{112}

Cumulatively, the effects of organizational, interpersonal, and actor identity that evolve as a result of long-term membership in a sole client entity have powerful effects on counsel’s subconscious.\textsuperscript{113} As Cassandra Robertson observed, “When people internalize the meanings and expectations associated with these categories, these roles and ground memberships are termed identities and become a set of standards that guide behavior.”\textsuperscript{114} In-house attorneys who identify more readily with organizational goals than the mandates of the legal profession may be more likely to go along with business objectives rather than counsel against from a legal perspective.\textsuperscript{115} These attorneys are likely to seek a certain conclusion and engage in post hoc reasoning to reach the desired end.\textsuperscript{116}

The desire to reach certain conclusions may create cognitive biases in counsel’s decision-making processes. First, individuals who are predisposed to certain goals may be subject to cognitive filtering, or selective attention and interpretation.\textsuperscript{117} Thus, in an effort to satisfy the organizational objectives which he has internalized, counsel may engage in motivated reasoning, justifying a directional goal by searching for and interpreting information in a way that is consistent with the sought outcome.\textsuperscript{118}

These cognitive biases are heightened by heuristics, or mental shortcuts individuals employ with respect to decision-making to avoid complex analysis.\textsuperscript{119} These may be particularly potent with respect to smaller, more routine

\textsuperscript{110} Timothy P. Terrell, \textit{Professionalism as Trust: The Unique Internal Legal Role of the Corporate General Counsel}, 46 EMORY L.J. 1005, 1006–07 (1997).

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{113} Robertson, \textit{supra} note 36, at 13.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{115} DeMott, \textit{supra} note 3, at 977 (“Solidarity between a general counsel and other members of senior management can compromise counsel’s service as a legal advisor . . . .”).

\textsuperscript{116} See Regan, \textit{supra} note 18.

\textsuperscript{117} Robertson, \textit{supra} note 36, at 7–10.

\textsuperscript{118} Hui Kim, \textit{supra} note 17, at 1030.

decisions counsel makes on a day-to-day basis with little or no reflection. Moreover, counsel may also have bias blind spots that make it difficult to recognize and avoid their own cognitive biases. Thus, even where one is aware of the inherent biases, they can persist.

The fact that in-house attorneys have participated in underlying decisions further heightens the potential for bias. This phenomenon, known in the social sciences as commitment bias, demonstrates that actors tend to stick by decisions they have made even where proven wrong. They do so by focusing on information that supports the decision, also known as retrospective rationality or defensive bolstering.

Empirical studies examining the effect of identity on in-house counsel bear out the significance of the cognitive biases created by self-association of counsel with the corporate entity. For example, a study examining the effect of the relative salience of organizational and professional identities on counsel’s decision-making concluded that those who identified more closely with the company were more likely to choose deferential course. Similarly, another study identified a strong trend among in-house counsel to perceive themselves as business partners and render advice in a way that is amenable to corporate objectives. Thus, the goals that counsel adopts as a result of his identity results in cognitive biases which influence his reasoning, the ways in which he processes information, and the judgments he makes.

The relative intensity of the identity pressures may vary depending upon the working environment. For example, attorneys who work in smaller legal departments with fewer professional peers or who are imbedded directly within a business unit surrounded entirely by non-legal co-workers may face more intense psychological pressures than those situated in larger legal departments. Similarly, the reporting structures of some companies, whereby the legal department reports to the chief financial officer or other non-legal executive can also increase the conformity pressures on the law department. Identity pressures may also differ depending on the seniority of an attorney's position, e.g., the general counsel may have more autonomy by virtue of his position within the company and his access to the board of directors than a lower level attorney.

\[120\] Laby, supra note 35, at 137.
\[121\] Robertson, supra note 36, at 11.
\[122\] Regan, supra note 18, at 944.
\[123\] Laby, supra note 35, at 144.
\[124\] Id.
\[126\] Nelson & Nielsen, supra note 27, at 477–78.
\[127\] DeMott, supra note 3, at 978; Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 35.
\[128\] Further empirical studies are required to understand the impact of these various environmental factors on counsel’s identity.
Regardless of these variances, it is clear that all in-house counsel, by virtue of their long-term placement in the client organization, encounter significant identity pressures, and that these pressures affect their decision-making processes.

B. The Intersection of Incentive and Identity

Previous scholarship examining the independence problem of in-house counsel has focused on either incentive or identity as the cause. However, incentive and identity are not mutually exclusive factors. Rather, they overlap in ways that have a powerful effect upon counsel.

First, it is clear that both the elements of incentive and identity are present in the in-house counsel’s world. A corporate attorney is permanently situated within his sole client’s organization and is subject to all of the identity factors described above. At the same time, he is dependent upon that client for financial and professional well-being. Thus, in-house counsel’s thoughts, decisions, and actions are affected by both the need to prosper financially and the more subconscious pressures brought on by the dynamics of the organization. These influences may affect counsel to varying degrees depending upon the situation—for example, corporate counsel may consider his own position and remuneration with respect to major decisions and transactions, but may be affected in his day-to-day role by more subtle, subconscious influences.

In addition to being co-present, the problems of incentive and identity in the workplace may also serve to reinforce and strengthen one another. One such example is the relationship between counsel and those in higher positions within the company. Counsel may feel the “vertical pressure” of obedience and alignment, based on his subordinate position within the organizational hierarchy. As Sung Hui Kim noted, “[u]nlike outside lawyers, inside lawyers have a psychological contract with management that is more relational than transactional because of the continuing nature of their role as long-term or indefinite-term employees or subordinates.” However, this pressure is undeniably compounded by tangible incentives, and the conscious recognition that those who he seeks to please directly control his financial and professional security and well-being. Thus, the hierarchical relationship of a company lawyer to senior management may affect both the attorney’s identity and desire to render business advice that is helpful rather an obstructive. At the same, this reporting relationship creates powerful incentives in the way an attorney is assessed and compensated.

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129 Vertical pressures may also vary depending upon counsel’s relative seniority within the legal department and business organization (e.g., general counsel versus rank-and-file attorney) but are present to some extent at all levels.

130 Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1001.

131 Id. at 1004.
The dual pressures of incentive and identity exist not only with respect to the superior-subordinate relationship, but also in regard to counsel's co-workers and constituents. Studies reveal that counsel experiences formidable "horizontal pressure" to be a team player and get the deal done. Additionally, in-house counsel needs to be seen as relevant and bringing value to the business because they are a back office expense rather than fee generators. Implicit in this is the mandate to make advice palatable to the business in order to build trust with their clients. In-house attorneys fear that if they are too obstructionist clients will seek out a different attorney who is more amenable or perhaps forego legal advice altogether, which will cause either the individual attorney or the legal department as a whole to be seen as expendable. Thus, there is pressure to work as a business partner and to reach the objectives that they seek sometimes at the expense of legal issues. Such tension comes as a result of both the subconscious need to achieve the organizational objectives as well as the recognition of the need for compliance to protect one's own position and interests.

The compounded problem of identity and incentive is exemplified in a process known as the employee satisfaction survey. Companies periodically survey their employees on a wide range of subjects, including morale and concerns. These surveys frequently contain questions regarding how well the employee perceives various departments to perform, including the legal department, information technology, human resources, etc. As a result, the legal department is assessed by its internal constituents on how well it has met their business needs. The score that the department receives may determine part of the lawyer's compensation.

This type of assessment has powerful effects on in-house counsel. It implicates the notion of identity by sending the message that co-workers are

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132 Id. at 1019; Nelson & Nielsen, supra note 27, at 471 ("Staff functions such as the law are under pressure to reduce costs and reduce the drag on the velocity of business transactions."); Kim, supra note 13, at 207 ("Inside lawyers are often reminded that they are part of the corporate team and rewarded when they act as team players.").

133 Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1008.

134 Nelson & Nielsen, supra note 27, at 477; Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1006 ("[I]nside counsel feels unmitting pressure to justify herself and her department as a corporate cost center."); Regan, supra note 18, at 213.

135 22 No. 2 ACC DOCKET 23, at 27.

136 The working relationships counsel forms with his peers can also produce formidable social pressures which implicate both identity and incentive. An attorney who works in an organization for a long time becomes psychologically intertwined with co-workers. At the same time, he may be called upon to render advice which affects not only his own well-being but that of his co-workers. The attorney may consciously or subconsciously choose courses of action that will be most beneficial to his peers, such as approving a deal that will maximize employee profits or avoid a layoff.

137 From a business perspective, the employee satisfaction may have a number of positive effects on the legal department related to understanding constituent needs and providing better service.
somehow clients to be pleased as a primary performance metric. Assessing
in-house counsel’s performance against this objective also creates a strong finan-
cial incentive to satisfy business goals at the expense of independent judgment.
These effects are in direct tension with the attorney’s ethical duty to render in-
dependent advice to and act in the best interests of his actual client—the corpo-
ration.

As demonstrated above, the problems of identity and incentive manifest
in a variety of ways and combine to exert powerful pressure on in-house coun-
sel.

C. Incentive and Identity Manifested

Recognizing that the dual pressures of incentive and identity are present
in corporate counsel’s work environment, it is necessary to revisit the various
in-house attorney roles discussed in Part II, supra, to understand how they com-
bine to affect counsel’s judgment and actions.

First, with respect to counsel’s role as advisor, an attorney is expected
to render independent advice, even where it may be unappealing to the client or
may frustrate or thwart business objectives.138 Both identity and incentive are
implicated in such a scenario. As a result of the cognitive biases which result
from counsel’s organizational identity, he may fail to perceive the risk or may
minimize the risk in order to achieve business objectives.139 Second, with re-
spect to incentive, counsel may be reluctant to advise against a course of action
which is potentially beneficial to him. He may also hesitate to fully apprise the
company of the negative consequences of a desired course of action out of fear
of repercussions for his job.140

The conflict presented by the dual pressures of identity and incentive is
also readily apparent when counsel is acting in a gatekeeper capacity. An attor-
ney who is part of an organization and more focused on business objectives than
legal mandates may have a hard time recognizing conduct which is potentially
fraudulent or unlawful.141 Moreover, the relationships an attorney has developed

138 See, e.g., Nelson & Nielsen, supra note 27. This study assessed the self-perception of corpo-
rate counsels’ role as “cops” (gatekeepers), counselors or entrepreneurs (business partners) found
that lawyers were very reluctant to assert themselves in the gatekeeping roles which have now
become so important. Rather, in-house counsel viewed their role increasingly as that of entrepre-
neur, bringing a mix of business and legal advice to further organizational objectives; see also Hui
Kim, supra note 17, at 1017 (“These empirical findings suggest that the agnostic view of the law
(with the focus on adding value) has become the dominant role ideology for inside counsel in the
twenty-first century.”).

139 Robertson, supra note 36, at 14.

140 Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 11 (“In-house counsel may be tempted to refrain from
challenging courses of action sought by management for fear of placing his or her livelihood at
risk.”).

141 Nishizawa, supra note 4, at 856 (“The fact that management can be very involved in the
selection of in-house counsel may be a negative inventive for the in-house counsel to independent-

may make it even more difficult to report on potential wrongdoing. Similarly, as to the incentive problem, an attorney may fear personal and professional backlash from reporting those with whom he works. As the American Bar Association’s Task Force on Corporate Responsibility noted, “[T]he desire to advance within the corporate executive structure, may induce lawyers to seek to please the corporate officials with whom they deal rather than to focus on the long-term interest of their client, the corporation.” Thus, the lawyer acting as gatekeeper faces a perpetual dilemma: police mildly and preserve the relationship but risk ones professional standing, or monitor robustly as required by professional obligation but risk alienating the client.

For these same reasons of identity and incentive, the in-house attorney may be unable to exercise the requisite duty to meet his obligations to the tribunal or third parties. Take, for example, the scenario in which counsel may have the duty to disclose to the court facts or law adverse to his client’s position. A similar dilemma may arise where counsel has a duty under the discovery rules to produce documents to the opposing party which are unfavorable to his client’s case. Counsel, viewing matters through the corporate lens, may fail to clearly recognize these external obligations. Or where counsel is aware of a duty owed to a third party, he or she may have disincentive to act in an independent manner because of the risk and rewards attendant to going along with corporate culture.

Thus, identity and incentive combine to exert powerful influence over the thoughts and actions of in-house counsel. He must grapple with a complex and potent mix factors, consciously or subconsciously weighing the tangible and intangible risks and rewards of contemplated actions on himself, as well as the potential effects of such actions on his peers and the organization to which he belongs. These pressures affect the way counsel perceives issues, the manner in which he engages and counsels organizational constituents, as well as the manner in which he interacts with external entities, and make rendering the independent judgment required of all attorneys virtually impossible.

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143 Laby, supra note 35, at 135.

144 Regan, supra note 18, at 942.
V. PROPOSAL

The ethical issues presented by in-house counsel's lack of autonomy have problematic implications for individual attorneys, organizations, and the legal and business communities. Yet the limited scholarship to date has failed to comprehensively address the problem or provide a solution. This Article suggests that the role of in-house counsel needs to be restructured to ensure that those acting as attorneys maintain the requisite independence by working only temporarily within the client organization, while those who choose to remain within companies should occupy a business advisory role separate from that of attorney. This reconceptualization of the role of in-house counsel, while controversial, is necessary to ensure that the attorney may fulfill his ethical duty of independence.

A. The Need for Reform

The pressures of both incentive and identity are present in the current structure of the corporate legal department and combine to infringe upon the independent judgment of in-house counsel with a number of problematic effects. Weaknesses in the ethical code leave room for the law to be broken. As one scholar observed, "[b]ehavioral origins of lawyer acquiescence in corporate fraud are found in commonplace interactions."145

Indeed, the complicity of attorneys in high profile cases such as Tyco and Enron has prompted judges to ask, "[w]here were the lawyers?" with the troubling answer that the attorneys were there at the heart of the scandal, either refusing to see the crime that was being committed or in some cases facilitating it in the name of zealous advocacy.146 Beyond these high-profile cases, there has been on a more granular level a rise in the number of charges and investigations involving misconduct by in-house attorneys.147

Even separated from any actual or potential misconduct, lack of independence on the part on in-house counsel is troubling because it results in a perpetual ethical conflict. The obligations set forth in the Rules of Professional Conduct go to the heart of the legal profession, the notion that attorneys owe a duty to society and the legal system, a standard regardless of specialization or where or how they practice.148 This standard is a promise and it is part of what allows society to place special trust in the lawyers. By allowing one type of lawyer to occupy a role that is a de facto deviation from the rules, that standard is lowered, the trust compromised.

145 Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 997.
146 Robertson, supra note 36, at 14.
147 For example, during the period 2002–2005 the SEC initiated thirty enforcement proceedings against predominantly in-house attorneys. DeMott, supra note 3, at 956.
Yet a relatively low number of in-house attorneys are willing to acknowledge openly the inherent conflicts they face on a day-to-day basis.\textsuperscript{149} ACCA has been seemingly reluctant to discuss the issue, and a review of the organization's website archives finds only a few articles that discuss the ethical conflicts faced by in-house counsel.\textsuperscript{150} Those pieces generally acknowledge the tension in-house counsel faces: "But clearly, to be effective, you have to be a partner to the CEO as well as a guardian to the corporation."\textsuperscript{151} But rather than addressing the conflict holistically, the authors focus on limited situational conflicts, such as the risk that corporate officers may misperceive who the attorney represents, and advocate for practical safeguards such as the corporate Miranda warning.\textsuperscript{152} They also spend much time discussing how to couch advice in a way that is palatable to the corporate constituency, thereby underscoring the pressures which in-house counsel face and the impossibility of rendering independent legal judgment in that role.\textsuperscript{153}

Nor is there helpful guidance available elsewhere to in-house counsel in dealing with these ethical issues.\textsuperscript{154} The Model Rules of Professional Conduct do not provide separate advice for situations which are unique to or more prevalent in the role of in-house counsel. Indeed, in-house attorneys are likely to have less resources available to them when addressing ethical issues than their firm counterparts.\textsuperscript{155}

The deleterious effects of this ethical conflict for in-house counsel and the legal and business communities, as well as the lack of recognition of or resources for addressing the problem, necessitate re-examination and reform.

\textsuperscript{149} Gunz & Gunz, supra note 20, at 276 (examining the relatively low level of organizational-professional conflict reported by in-house counsel).

\textsuperscript{150} Interview with Ben W. Heineman, Jr., ACC's 2007 Annual Meeting's Keynote Speaker, in 25 No. 8 ASS'N CORP. COUNS. DOCKET 38 (Oct. 2007); Steven N. Machtinger & Dana A. Welch, In-House Ethical Conflicts, Recognizing and Responding to Them, 22 No. 2 ASS'N CORP. COUNS. DOCKET 23 (Feb. 2004).

\textsuperscript{151} ASS'N CORP. COUNS. DOCKET 38, supra note 150, at 39.

\textsuperscript{152} ASS'N CORP. COUNS. DOCKET 23, supra note 150. A corporate Miranda warning is a statement made by the company's in-house or outside counsel advising an employee of the company that the attorney represents the company, not the individual, and that the individual has the right to retain his own attorney.

\textsuperscript{153} ASS'N CORP. COUNS. DOCKET 38, supra note 150 (discussing the form, place and style of giving unfavorable advice).

\textsuperscript{154} Moore, supra note 79, at 498.

\textsuperscript{155} Id. For example, firm attorneys spend a great deal of time checking to ensure that there is no conflict before taking on a new representation and firms may have individuals or entire departments dedicated to ensuring that conflicts are avoided. But in-house lawyers generally do not have the same experience with or resources for dealing with this issue.
B. Proposals for Reform in the Existing Scholarship

As explained in Part IV, supra, a limited number of scholars have attempted over the past few decades to address the ethical issues confronting corporate counsel. Their work may roughly be characterized in two groups: the first developed in the mid-1990s as a result of the growing role and influence of in-house counsel. These articles tended to address some of the situational conflicts that in-house counsel face, such as the tensions that arise when representing both the corporate entity and its agents, or the implications of attorneys wearing multiple hats for the attorney-client privilege. The second wave of scholarship on ethical issues confronting corporate counsel has emerged in the past decade followed the Enron and Tyco scandals and the enactment of Sarbanes Oxley in 2002. These articles focused on the new and enhanced compliance obligations placed upon corporate attorneys, including the efficacy of counsel as gatekeeper and the conflicts that inevitably arise in trying to police an organization of which one is a part.

With respect to both scholarly epochs, there is widespread consensus throughout the literature that in-house counsel face significant and widespread ethical conflicts, and that the rules as presently written do not sufficiently address these issues. However, the articles suggest limited, piecemeal fixes that neither holistically address nor offer a comprehensive solution to the larger independence problem of in-house counsel.

1. Proposals Focusing on Attorney Judgment

The first body of work claims that the conflicts can be ameliorated through attorney judgment, leadership, and self-awareness. These solutions are generally put forth by those who see the problem of in-house counsel as one of identity and offer ways in which an attorney or in-house counsel can overcome the cognitive biases through self-regulation. For example, some commentators tout the importance of attorneys maintaining their professional identities through continuing legal education and bar membership. Other commentators have noted that a strong leadership role by the general counsel protecting

156 Matthews et al., supra note 37, at 913; Park, supra note 59, at 792.
157 Laby, supra note 35, at 127; Hui Kim, supra note 17, at 1008.
158 Nelson & Nielsen, supra note 27, at 457 ("Inside lawyers limit their gatekeeping functions, emphasize their dedication to managerial objectives, and defer to management's judgments about legal risk."); see also Weaver, supra note 16, at 1050.
159 Terrell, supra note 110, at 1009 ("[T]he position of general counsel carries with it an inherently higher set of lawyering values that, when exhibited, merit special acclaim.").
160 Hazard, supra note 10, at 1021; Liggio, supra note 3, at 1212; Terrell, supra note 110, at 1009.
161 Liggio, supra note 3, at 1212; Robertson, supra note 36, at 45.
junior lawyers from business pressures may abate many conflicts. These articles generally share the theme that the ethical dilemmas corporate attorneys face are outweighed by the benefit counsel may have in affecting positive corporate values and change.

There are several problems with this self-regulating or "man of honor" approach. As an initial matter, such solutions require corporate counsel to police their own actions, recognize potential conflicts, and avoid them. This is not different from the general obligation, imposed by the Model Rules of Professional Conduct, that attorneys detect and avoid conflicts of interest. But it ignores at least two fundamental differences between inside and outside attorneys. First, in-house counsel, by virtue of being part of the organization, are subject to much stronger cognitive biases and bias blind spots, which can impede their ability to recognize conflicts. Additionally, while counsel may be able to spot and avoid conflicts in major business decisions, he is unlikely to be able to account for and reconcile the biases affecting dozens of smaller actions undertaken every day with little or no conscious thought.

Second, even where in-house counsel is able to identify a conflict, he does not have the same remedies available to him. Rule 1.16 provides the means by which an attorney may withdraw from a representation where a conflict exists. Thus, in the firm context, an attorney may cease to handle a particular matter or work for a client altogether. This is far more difficult, if not impossible, for in-house counsel, where withdrawing from representation is tantamount to resigning and losing one's livelihood.

Additionally, the proposals of legal education and professional affiliations as a means of resolving the independence issue are simply inadequate. Counsel operates daily within the client organization and the identity pressures are omnipresent. The limited nature of these external professional affiliations is hardly an effective counterbalance. The ability to reduce bias through awareness education is similarly limited.

Moreover, reliance upon the self-awareness of individuals to attempt to reconcile the independence problem is conceptually misplaced. While perhaps the majority of corporate counsel who walk the tightrope in an attempt to avoid ethical conflicts, and some who succeed, this does not eliminate the conflict inherent in their roles. Further, it misconstrues the purpose of the rules—they do not exist simply because certain individuals are more or less likely to engage in ethical violations but rather to establish the standard for the profession. To allow exceptions and a de facto state of violation based on the presumption that in-

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162 Hazard, supra note 10, at 1021.
163 Nishizawa, supra note 4, at 861 (touting the general counsel as a champion of cultural transformation who "shapes how the corporation addresses its relationships with law and regulation").
164 MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 1.16 (2009).
165 Robertson, supra note 36, at 34–35 (noting that debiasing through education cannot resolve the identity dilemma).
house counsel are somehow better able to handle the conflict is not consistent with that purpose.

2. Proposals Focusing on Limited Structural Reforms

The second body of scholarship proposes limited structural reforms primarily aimed at ameliorating some of the direct incentive pressures counsel face.\textsuperscript{166} For example, some scholars recommend that counsel should clearly delineate their roles in terms of who they represent, and some suggest a written agreement noting the attorney’s duties and his professional independence.\textsuperscript{167} Proponents of this approach claim that the potential conflicts can be obviated by having “full, free[,] and frank” discussions with the board and executives about the potential pitfalls of serving in multiple roles.\textsuperscript{168}

In the same vein, others suggest structural limitations, such as limiting counsel to legal roles and not permitting them to serve on the board of the company by which they are employed.\textsuperscript{169} Proposed reforms also include regulating or eliminating attorney stock options or having counsel reporting directly to the board rather than within the corporate structure.\textsuperscript{170} Finally, some have suggested that corporate attorneys retain outside counsel where there is a possible conflict of interest or appearance of impropriety.\textsuperscript{171}

These suggested reforms are also problematic. First, to the extent that they attempt to separate the attorney’s conduct from financial incentives such as bonuses and compensation, they miss the point that the ultimate financial incentive—retention of one’s job, remains omnipresent in the mind of corporate counsel.

Perhaps more importantly, these proposals are largely premised on the assumption that the independence problem of in-house counsel is rooted in conscious choice and that it can be prevented.\textsuperscript{172} By addressing only the incentive component of the in-house counsel problem, these purported solutions ignore the identity dilemma—that in-house counsel will still be subject to the same cognitive issues arising from being situated in the company and interacting with co-workers over the long term. This again disregards the cognitive bias that may hamper the attorney and does not take into account the day-to-day ways in which these biases may affect attorney judgment.

\textsuperscript{166} Matthews et al., supra note 37, at 912; Park, supra note 59, at 794.
\textsuperscript{167} Matthews et al., supra note 37, at 912; Park, supra note 59, at 794.
\textsuperscript{168} Matthews et al., supra note 37, at 912; Park, supra note 59, at 794.
\textsuperscript{169} Barclift, supra note 36, at 31; DeMott, supra note 3, at 956; Kim, supra note 13, at 260; Weaver, supra note 16, at 1034.
\textsuperscript{170} Kim, supra note 13, at 1053; Veasey & Gugliemo, supra note 2, at 13.
\textsuperscript{171} Weaver, supra note 16, at 1045–46.
\textsuperscript{172} Robertson, supra note 36, at 34.
Thus, a review of the scholarship makes clear that no one has yet offered a solution that takes into account the problems of identity and incentive, perhaps because the proposals all contemplate solutions within the corporate legal department as it now exists.

C. *Toward a New Model*

This Article posits that it is simply not possible to operate within the corporate organization and meet the existing ethical obligations of the legal profession. The role of in-house counsel, one in which the attorney is part of the client organization and wholly dependent upon that entity for his livelihood, cannot be reconciled with the fundamental duty of independence. This leaves the in-house attorney in a state of perpetual violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct—one that is not resolvable by modest tweaks to the existing status quo.

How then can this violation be remedied? In contemplating a solution, it is necessary to look beyond the conventional firm-client model to non-traditional, and perhaps even non-legal, models. First, it is helpful to return to the notion of "going native"—that when an individual remains too long in a foreign environment, he or she is likely to begin to identify more closely with the values and objectives of the host entity. The United States Department of State and its counterparts in other countries address what is essentially an identity issue by not letting diplomats remain at a single foreign post for more than three or four years, and also, in some cases, requiring that diplomats return to their home countries periodically for service at the domestic unit.  

Contemplating such a model for corporate counsel would require the abolition of permanent employment of attorneys within a company. Instead attorneys would be seconded to a corporation for a finite period of time then return to the firm. This proposal would largely resolve the independence problem of in-house counsel. First, with respect to incentive, counsel’s long-term professional security would derive from the firm rather than the corporation, and counsel could therefore act and advise without the scepter of financial consequences. Second, while counsel would still have long-term relationships with individuals within the company, he would derive his principal professional identity from the firm and have a significant portion of his professional interactions there.

Despite these advantages, the proposal to extricate counsel from the corporation is highly controversial and would likely meet with opposition on a number of fronts. An initial criticism may attack the source of the model, arguing that the analogy between diplomats and in-house counsel is misplaced in that a diplomat is assigned to a foreign country as an agent of his own govern-

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173 Another example can be seen with respect to auditors, who are required to rotate off the audit of a particular client periodically in order to maintain autonomy. Laby, *supra* note 35, at 154.
ment whereby in-house counsel is actually an agent of the organization within which he is located. Certainly, it is not the intent of this Article to overstate the comparison, as there are significant differences between the two roles. However, the fundamental point remains that by being placed in a foreign setting for a long period of time one may begin to identify with the host entity at the expense of allegiance to the body from which he hails. Moreover, the independence problem is perhaps even more critical where the attorney is an actual member of the host organization and is compensated by that body. Therefore the need to rotate out is even more pronounced.

Beyond this conceptual challenge, the proposal is likely to meet with significant resistance from those presently employed as corporate counsel. Even where they acknowledge the independence problem, in-house attorneys generally consider themselves professionals with unique expertise distinct from firm attorneys, not interchangeable actors. It is also doubtful that corporate attorneys, having made a career and lifestyle choice to go in-house, would want to return to firm life. Moreover, corporate counsel are a well-organized professional bar and not likely to respond well to a proposal that calls for their demise.

The notion of excising the legal department would likely be unpopular with corporate management as well. The position of counsel has been entrenched in the corporate structure for decades and companies have become accustomed to and recognized the value of maintaining expertise in-house, and they are likely to balk at the significantly higher costs of getting their legal advice from firm and not in-house.

Finally, there may be an argument that seconding attorneys from firms to companies may create new conflicts even while abating existing ones. For example, an individual who goes from a firm to a client organization may show favoritism toward his firm with respect to business, knowing that he will ultimately return to the firm.

In order to address these concerns, the proposal contemplates a second option based on the European model of corporate counsel. Significantly, the role of in-house counsel in Europe is conceived very differently from in the United States. In Europe, corporate counsel are a distinct entity, with different training requirements in that they do not serve apprenticeships like lawyers who practice before tribunals. They also are not perceived as having the same independence as outside attorneys.

The European legal system has long been recognized that in-house counsel, by virtue of their placement within the client organization, does not

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174 Daly, supra note 6, at 1060.
175 U.S. courts have also noted problems with the independence of corporate counsel. For example, in derivative shareholder litigation, the court held that it was insufficient to have the company’s interests represented by corporate counsel, noting that “in-house attorneys are inevitably subservient to the interests of the defendant directors and officers whom they serve.” In Re Oracle Sec. Litig., 829 F. Supp. 1176 (N.D. Cal. 1993).
exercise the same independent judgment as outside attorneys.\textsuperscript{176} In-house counsel are therefore recognized with a separate status and their communications in the organization are not protected by the attorney-client privilege.\textsuperscript{177} This principle was brought to the forefront and codified recently in the decision of the European Commission in the \textit{Akzo Nobel} case.\textsuperscript{178} In that case, the company tried to assert attorney-client privilege for e-mails sent by in-house counsel during a government investigation into alleged anti-competitive practices by a chemical company.\textsuperscript{179} Counsel for the government argued that the privilege should not apply with respect to communications by in-house counsel:

Miligating against the proposition that an enrolled in-house lawyer is sufficiently independent is, first, the fact that, as an employee, such a lawyer is often required to follow work-related instructions issued by his employer and is in any event part and parcel of the structures of the company or group by which he is employed. In the words of the General Court, an enrolled in-house lawyer is “structurally, hierarchically and functionally” dependent on his employer . . . .\textsuperscript{180}

\textit{Akzo Nobel} attempted to counter by asserting that in-house counsel does in fact operate independently, pointing to external legal protections which prohibited a company from taking action against counsel based on differences of opinion.\textsuperscript{181} The court rejected this argument, noting “this [did] not guarantee that the relationship between an enrolled in-house lawyer and his employer will be genuinely free from direct or indirect pressure and influence in the course of day-to-day business.”\textsuperscript{182}

In explaining the lack of independence afforded to in-house counsel, the court touched upon issues of incentive and identity:

In addition to their economic dependence on their employer, enrolled in-house lawyers usually exhibit a considerably stronger personal identification with the undertaking for which they work, as well as with its corporate policy and corporate strategy . . . . There is also a real danger that, in eagerness to show ob-

\begin{footnotes}
\item[177] Id.
\item[179] Gergacz, supra note 90, at 325.
\item[180] \textit{Akzo Nobel}, ¶ 62.
\item[181] Id. ¶ 64.
\item[182] Id.
\end{footnotes}
edience to their employer, enrolled in-house lawyers will “choose” to give legal advice the substance of which will be acceptable to that employer.  

The court also noted that in-house lawyers are economically dependent and cannot easily withdraw.

Thus, under the European model, corporate counsel are afforded a separate and distinct status that, as a result of their diminished independence, does not carry with it the attorney-client privilege. The European model may serve as a useful example for the United States legal system for the creation of a business legal advisory role within companies that differs from that of the attorney. Unlike the attorney who under the proposed model would be required to return to the firm periodically, the business advisor could remain permanently employed in the company. In this role, a person could manage outside counsel and work in tandem with outside counsel on a day-to-day basis with the understanding that attorney-client privilege and work product doctrine would not apply.

This proposal has a number of benefits. First, it would allow attorneys who wished to remain in the corporation permanently to do so. Similarly it would enable companies to retain the expertise developed by in-house counsel. But the most important benefit to creating this different class of advisor would be the understanding that such individuals cannot maintain the independence required by the Rules of Professional Conduct and the elimination of the expectation that they do so, thereby ending the de facto violations of the rules which have been the norm for decades.

To effect these changes, the Rules of Professional Conduct would have to be amended. Specifically they should state that an attorney may not practice law while employed wholly by a corporation, but that such attorneys may act in a business legal advisory capacity in tandem with outside counsel.

The notion of creating a differing business legal advisory role is also likely to have its detractors. The proposal of a role which differentiates corporate advisors from outside attorneys may not be readily welcomed by the U.S. legal community, which unlike its European counterparts, has long embraced the concept of a unified bar. The idea is likely to be particularly unpopular with those presently working as corporate counsel. As Sally Weaver noted,

[Corporate counsel] clearly remember, however, a time in the not-so-distant past when many of their colleagues in private practice relegated them to the status of second-class citizens. They also fear that the development of different ethical rules for, or the different application of existing ethical rules to, cor-

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183  Id. ¶¶ 70, 65.
184  Id. ¶ 69.
porate counsel could relegate them again to that second-class status.\(^1\)

However, this differentiation carries with it many benefits, including the opportunity to engage in the business side of the company and enjoy the lifestyle of in-house counsel without fear of violating the ethical rules and calling one's credibility into question.

Companies may also perceive this alternative as less desirable because retaining counsel as well as in-house advisors may result in some duplication of costs. However, there are long-term benefits to the company in obtaining objective advice that will help to ensure strategies which are consistent with the law and which avoid potential liability. There may also be concern that removing the privileged status of in-house attorney communications may have a chilling effect and more research into this potential complication would be useful before implementing the contemplated rule changes.

Properly applied, a different status for in-house legal advice would need not be lesser but would be a proper recognition of the distinct role and function of the corporate legal advisor, one that would enhance the reputation and integrity of both in-house and outside lawyers and the profession as a whole.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current structure of the corporate legal department subjects in-house counsel to unremitting pressures of incentive and identity which render the attorney unable to exercise the independent judgment which is a hallmark of the legal profession. This complex problem requires a comprehensive solution which goes beyond modest structural safeguards and attorney self-awareness. The Rules of Professional Conduct should be amended to prohibit the practice of law by those who are permanently situated within the corporation. Rather, attorneys from firms should be seconded to corporations for finite periods of time. Those who wish to remain permanently employed by the corporation should be designated in business legal advisory roles that carry neither the obligation of independence nor the benefits of attorney client-privilege. This solution, which would require a reimagining of the corporate legal department, is the most effective means of ensuring that corporations receive the objective advice they require and that the most fundamental of attorney ethical obligations—that of independence—is preserved.

\(^{1}\) Weaver, *supra* note 16, at 1.