Dovetail

IN-HOUSE LEGAL RECRUITMENT

Mock Interview Guide

Practice Questions & Suggested Answers for In-House Lawyers

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Why Practise Interviews

Interviewing is a skill of its own, separate from being a good lawyer. Strong experience counts for little if you can't talk about it well under pressure. Practice closes the gap between what you've done and what the interviewer hears.

Rehearsing real questions pays off:

- **You sound calm, not scripted.** With answers ready, you stop composing under pressure and start reading the room.
- **Your best examples surface on cue.** Specific stories win interviews. Rehearse them so they arrive in the room, not in the car afterwards.
- **You land your key points.** Decide your three or four must-say points in advance so you never leave wishing you'd made them.
- **You handle the curveballs.** "Negative" questions test your composure, not just your answer. Prepare, and you respond instead of react.
- **You only need to be 1% better.** Margins are thin. A sharper example or a calmer delivery can decide it.

How to use this guide

Practise out loud, ideally recorded. The answers below are models, not scripts: keep the structure, swap in your own examples, use your own words. In-house interviews in Australia usually involve several people, the General Counsel, a senior business client, HR, sometimes the CEO, each looking for something different. This guide is organised by who's asking.

The Opener: "Tell Me About Yourself"

Almost always first, and it sets the tone. It's also the one question you can fully prepare. They don't want your life story; they want who you are, why you're here, and why you're worth listening to. Prepare a tight three-minute story and lead with it.

What a strong three-minute story does

- Runs in order, from university to now.
- Uses concrete examples, not generic claims.
- Makes you a person, not just a CV.
- Uses light, self-deprecating humour to build warmth.
- Frames every move around **pull factors** (what drew you forward), never **push factors** (what you were escaping). Don't bad-mouth a former employer, even if it's deserved. Talk about growth, opportunity, and being selective about the roles you take.

Suggested approach

> ***Sample three-minute answer (adapt with your own detail)***
>
> "Happy to. I'll give you the short version, pull on whatever's useful.
>
> I studied law at [University], almost by accident. I started in commerce and turned out to be the one person who enjoyed reading the contract. So I added law, and that's where my interest in the business side of legal work began.
>
> I started at [Firm] in [practice area], where I learned to draft properly and the partners taught me rigour. After a few years I wanted to be closer to the decisions, not advising from the outside, so I moved in-house to [Company]. That move shaped me. I went from external expert to the lawyer in the room when the business was deciding what to do, and I was good at turning legal risk into plain options the business could act on.
>
> At [Company] I [one concrete win, e.g. 'rebuilt contracting from scratch and cut turnaround from three weeks to four days']. I learned to be a partner to the business, not a handbrake. These days I'm deliberate about where I work, which is what brought me here. I've followed [Company] for a while, and [specific, genuine reason], so when this role came up it was an easy yes. I'm selective now, and this is exactly the role and team I want.
>
> So that's me: a commercial lawyer who likes being close to the action. How does that sound?"

Tip: Time it. Three minutes is the ceiling; two to two and a half is the sweet spot. End forward-looking and hand back with an open question.

Questions from the General Counsel

Usually, the hiring manager and your future boss. They're testing judgment, commercial pragmatism, and whether they can hand you work and trust the output. Lead with examples and show your reasoning, not just the answer.

GENERAL COUNSEL

"The business wants a contract signed by close of business, but you've spotted a material indemnity weighted heavily against us. How do you handle it?"

Why they ask: *Commercial judgment under pressure. Can you protect the company without killing the deal?*

Suggested approach

Frame it as managing risk, not a yes/no. Separate deal-breakers from the negotiable, and bring the business with you.

- Size the real exposure first. Is this a show-stopper, or a risk we can cap, insure, or live with?
- Take the deal owner options, not just a problem: ideal position, fallback, and walk-away point, each in dollars and likelihood.
- If the deadline's real and the risk moderate, find a path, a cap, a side letter, a sunset, or sign with an agreed follow-up, so the business can move while we close the gap.
- If it's a genuine deal-breaker, say so early, explain why, and escalate. The worst outcome is a surprise after signing.

The line to land: my job is to help the business take risk well, not to stop it taking risk.

GENERAL COUNSEL

"How do you decide when something needs external counsel versus when you handle it in-house?"

Why they ask: *Discipline with legal spend, and a realistic read on your own limits.*

Suggested approach

Treat the external budget as the company's money, and know what you don't know.

- In-house by default where I have the expertise and capacity: most contracting, advice, and first-pass review.
- External for genuine specialists (complex tax, litigation, niche regulatory), where independence matters for governance, or where capacity would otherwise hit quality.

- When I brief out, I scope tightly, fix a budget up front, stay close, and capture the knowledge internally for next time.

GENERAL COUNSEL

“Tell me about a time you gave the business advice it didn't want to hear.”

Why they ask: *Backbone with tact. Can you hold a line and keep the relationship?*

Suggested approach

Use STAR, and end on a constructive note.

- Situation: a senior stakeholder wanted to proceed with [initiative]; I saw [specific exposure].
- Action: I understood the goal first, then advised privately and directly. Not “no,” but “here’s how we get most of what you want, safely,” with the risk in plain terms and an alternative on the table.
- Result: [adjusted approach] hit the goal with the risk managed, and they came to me earlier next time, which is the real test.

GENERAL COUNSEL

“How do you keep across the legal and regulatory developments that matter to us?”

Why they ask: *Proof you stay current and can filter noise into what matters.*

Suggested approach

Show a system, and that you translate change into business impact.

- A light, regular routine [practitioner updates, regulator alerts, a couple of trusted newsletters], focused on our industry.
- Then I turn what matters into short “what this means for us” notes, not forwarded alerts. The value isn’t knowing the law changed, it’s telling the business what to do about it.

Questions from Commercial Operations

Your internal client, from sales, operations, or procurement. The one thing they want to know: are you an enabler or a handbrake? They value speed, plain English, and whether you make their job easier. Drop the legalese.

COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS

“Honestly, legal sometimes feels like it slows our deals down. How would you work with us to keep things moving?”

Why they ask: *Loaded but fair. They want to know you get commercial pace and won't be the bottleneck.*

Suggested approach

Own the frustration, then show how you cut friction without dropping the guardrails.

- First, find where the friction really is. Usually it’s not the review, it’s unclear hand-offs, late involvement, or one-size-fits-all process.
- I’m big on self-service for low-risk, high-volume work: playbooks, pre-approved fallbacks, templates you can use without me. That frees legal for the hard deals.
- And get me in early. Five minutes before terms are agreed saves a week of rework after.
- You’ll always get a clear turnaround and a usable answer, “yes, with these two changes,” not a list of problems with no way through.

COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS

“Explain to me, in plain English, why a limitation of liability clause matters. Pretend I have no legal background.”

Why they ask: *Can you make something complex simple? Clarity matters more than content here.*

Suggested approach

Ditch the jargon and use an everyday analogy:

> “Think of it like the cap on an insurance policy. If the deal goes wrong and the other side loses money, this clause sets the most we’d ever pay, and rules out things like their lost profits. Without it, our exposure is open-ended: a small contract could trigger a claim worth many times its value. It’s one of the few clauses where the numbers matter more than the deal price. That’s why I’ll always flag it, not to slow you down, but because that’s where the real money risk sits.”

Notice the answer ties back to their worry (“not to slow you down”). That’s what they’re listening for.

COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS

“Three teams come to you the same morning, each saying it's urgent. How do you prioritise?”

Why they ask: *They want a clear, risk-based way to prioritise, not “I work hard.”*

Suggested approach

Show a method, and that you communicate instead of vanishing into your inbox.

- I sort by risk and deadline, not by who shouts loudest. What’s the real exposure, and what truly can’t wait versus what just feels urgent?
- I reply to all three fast, give each a realistic timeframe, and flag anything that has to wait so they can manage their own people.
- If it’s all critical and capacity is the issue, I escalate early and ask the business to help prioritise, rather than quietly miss a deadline.

Questions from HR / People & Culture

HR is reading conduct, values, self-awareness, and fit, not technical skill. These are behaviour-based: past behaviour predicts future behaviour. Answer each with a real story using STAR. Don’t say “I’m a team player”; give the example that proves it.

> **The STAR structure**
>
> - **Situation:** set the scene, briefly.
> - **Task:** your specific responsibility or challenge.
> - **Action:** what you personally did. Spend most time here; say “I,” not “we.”
> - **Result:** the outcome. Put a number on it if you can; end on a positive or a lesson.

HR / PEOPLE & CULTURE

“Tell me about a time you disagreed with a senior stakeholder. What did you do?”

Why they ask: *Can you challenge respectfully and hold your view without breaking the relationship? Essential in-house.*

Suggested approach

Pick a disagreement you handled well, ideally one that strengthened the relationship. Avoid “I was right, they were wrong.”

- Situation: a [senior leader] wanted [course of action]; I saw it differently on [risk].
- Task: make my case without undermining them, especially in public.
- Action: I took it one-on-one, led with their goal, set out the risk and an alternative, and made clear the call was theirs with full information.
- Result: we went with [outcome]. They valued that I’d raised it directly and privately, and brought me in earlier next time.

HR / PEOPLE & CULTURE

“Describe a time you made a mistake at work. How did you handle it?”

Why they ask: *Integrity, accountability, self-awareness. Own it, without defensiveness or self-flagellation.*

Suggested approach

Pick a real, contained mistake. No humble-brags (“I work too hard”), no disasters. It’s about how you responded, not the slip.

- Situation: I missed [a detail / deadline / risk] on [matter].
- Action: I flagged it the moment I knew, owned it without excuses, and brought a plan to fix and contain it.
- Result: resolved with [outcome], and I changed [a process or habit] so it couldn’t recur. The test of a mistake is whether you turn it into a lasting fix.

HR / PEOPLE & CULTURE

“Give me an example of working with a difficult colleague to reach a shared goal.”

Why they ask: *Collaboration, EQ, and how you talk about others. Never just bag the colleague.*

Suggested approach

Be generous. Difficulty is usually style or pressure, not character. Frame it that way.

- Situation: I worked closely with [colleague] on [project]; very different styles, they moved fast and loose, I wanted rigour.
- Action: instead of letting friction build, I had a low-key chat about how we each work, found the overlap, and agreed a simple split, they’d give me the headline early, I’d turn around a clean version fast.
- Result: we delivered [outcome] and worked well because we covered each other’s blind spots.

HR / PEOPLE & CULTURE

“Tell me about a time you had to adapt quickly to a big change.”

Why they ask: *In-house means shifting priorities and restructures. They want resilience, not someone who needs everything stable.*

Suggested approach

Pick a real change, a restructure, a regulatory shift, a new system, and show you stayed effective.

- Situation: [a regulatory change / reorg / new leadership] shifted [what] almost overnight.
- Action: I focused on what I could control, got across the new rules fast, re-prioritised, and kept the business informed.
- Result: minimal disruption ([outcome]), and I came out more comfortable with ambiguity, which is part of why I like in-house.

Questions from the CEO

The CEO isn’t testing black-letter law. They’re deciding if they can trust you as a commercial partner. They think strategy, growth, risk appetite, judgment. Lift your answers up a level: talk about the business, not the legal team, and show that legal exists to help the company hit its goals.

CEO

“What's the role of legal in helping a business like ours grow?”

Why they ask: *A commercial, enabling mindset: a lawyer who thinks like an owner, not a compliance gate.*

Suggested approach

Position legal as a growth enabler that manages risk sensibly. Be concrete about the value.

- Legal should make good business faster: cleaner contracting, protecting what drives value (IP, data, key relationships), and giving leadership the confidence to move because the risks are understood, not ignored.
- The best legal function is invisible when things go right and decisive when they don’t. The test: do people see me as the one who gets them to “yes” safely, or someone they route around?
- For a business at your stage, that might mean [scalable processes / getting ahead of regulatory risk as you expand / protecting the next phase of growth].

CEO

“How do you balance protecting the company with letting it take commercial risks?”

Why they ask: *Does your risk appetite match theirs? They want neither reckless nor risk-averse.*

Suggested approach

Risk is to be priced and allocated, not removed, and the business owns the call.

- Risk is the raw material of business. My job isn’t to remove it, it’s to make sure we take the right risks, eyes open, at the right price.
- I separate the few bet-the-company risks, where I dig in hard, from everyday commercial risk, where speed beats a perfect contract.
- The call is the business’s. My job is a clear view of the downside and the options, so a risk taken is a decision, not an accident.

CEO

“What attracted you to this role, and to us specifically?”

Why they ask: *Real, researched interest, pull factors not push, and a sense you'll stay and invest.*

Suggested approach

Lead with the company and the role, backed by research. All pull factors, never escape.

- Be specific and sincere: name something real, its direction, a recent move, the team, the stage, and connect it to what you do well.
- Tie it to your direction: “I’m deliberate about where I commit now, and this is the business and role I want to grow with.”
- If asked why you’re leaving, stay forward-looking, the opportunity, the growth, the fit. Never knock your current employer.

CEO

“Where do you see the biggest legal or regulatory risks for a business like ours over the next few years?”

Why they ask: *Can you think strategically, and have you actually engaged with their industry?*

Suggested approach

This rewards research. Name one or two credible, industry-relevant themes, think ahead, and stay humble about learning their specifics.

- Pick themes real for their sector [privacy and data reform, AI governance, modern-slavery and supply chain, sector regulation, IR change] and say briefly why each matters to them.
- Show the enabling angle: those who move early and build trust beat those who scramble to comply late.
- Close with humility: “That’s my outside-in view; the first thing I’d do is test it against what you’re seeing on the ground.”

Final Checklist

Run through this guide out loud, not just in your head. Then check yourself off:

- A polished, timed three-minute “tell me about yourself.”
- Four or five specific examples ready, especially leadership, judgment, and problems solved.
- Every behavioural answer in STAR, ending on a positive or a lesson.
- Every career move framed as a pull factor, never a push factor.
- Two researched questions ready for the end, the team, the role, the challenges.
- I can explain one complex legal concept in plain English.
- I’ve researched the company, the news, and the people I’m meeting.

Good luck. You’ve got this.

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