

How Legal Teams Can Navigate the Tariffs of Uncertainty

By Daniel Hayter

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Recent conversations with General Counsel have underscored the mounting pressures that in-house legal teams face amid volatile shifts in global trade, economic policy, regulation, and international alliances. As one GC put it, “Tariff rates may go up and down, but the one constant is the tariff of uncertainty.”

The question now is how legal teams should respond. These conversations reveal a growing need for smart, measured action—moves that keep legal departments agile, efficient, and ready for whatever comes next.

When Doing Nothing Feels Safer Than Acting

A line from the classic BBC series *Yes, Prime Minister* comes to mind: “Something must be done; here is something; therefore, we must do it.” A seasoned adviser then offers a warning—sometimes doing something is more dangerous than doing nothing.

That sentiment resonates with many GCs today. In the face of persistent uncertainty, some have paused hiring, delayed investments, or deferred major decisions—waiting for the landscape to settle before committing resources. It’s not about denial, but about caution. Acting too soon—or in the wrong way—can backfire, and many legal leaders are understandably wary of repeating past mistakes.

But uncertainty rarely resolves on a predictable timeline. At some point, inaction carries its own



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risks, especially for the legal teams expected to shoulder growing workloads with shrinking resources.

Maintaining Morale While Managing Increased Workloads

Doing nothing doesn’t always feel like standing still. In many legal departments, it means working longer hours, absorbing more strain, and juggling competing demands with limited capacity. That can quickly erode morale and engagement.

One GC described how a key part of her role now is simply keeping the team energised. She focuses on distributing work evenly, ensuring reasonable hours, encouraging direct engagement with internal clients, and championing her team’s efforts in leadership forums. She also supports individual career development, keeping her lawyers informed about new opportunities and ensuring they feel recognised.

This kind of leadership helps transform uncertainty into cohesion. When people feel supported and valued, they're more resilient—both individually and collectively.

Prioritise Ruthlessly, Let Go Where You Can

If everything is a priority, nothing is. Legal leaders are increasingly taking a hard look at what the team should own—and what it should delegate or decline.

Start with risk triaging. High-risk or high-visibility matters need to stay with legal. But not every project requires legal involvement. It's easy to fall into a habit of reviewing everything—but in many cases, self-service or templated solutions may be a better fit. For instance, low-risk matters such as NDAs may not need legal review at all if the right tools and guardrails are in place.

By educating the business on where legal adds value—and where it doesn't—GCs can free up time and energy for more strategic work.

Outsource Smarter, Not Pricier

If internal teams are at capacity, it may be time to look outward. But be selective. Sending overflow work straight to external law firms may be the path of least resistance—but it's rarely the most cost-effective one.

Law firms make sense for high-risk or reputationally sensitive matters. For everything else, project-based work may be better served by an alternative legal service provider (ALSP). These providers offer experienced lawyers—many with in-house backgrounds—who can operate as seamless extensions of the internal team, often at a fraction of the cost of traditional firms.

The same applies to legal tech. If a tool might help ease pressure or improve workflows, explore it. Talk to peers, request demos, and try before

you buy. Just ensure your team has the support it needs to adopt new tools effectively.

Flex Your Way Out of the Talent Crunch

The legal talent market remains tight. Many high-performing lawyers are hesitant to move, worried they'll be "last in, first out" if things take a turn. At the same time, companies are holding tightly to their best people—making external hiring even tougher.

This may be the moment to embrace flexible resourcing. Flex lawyers bring deep experience, often from top firms or in-house roles, and can step in quickly to manage peaks in demand, cover gaps, or support special projects. They can be engaged on a short-term or project basis, and many ALSPs offer the ability to scale up or down as needed.

It's a smart way to add capability without taking on permanent costs—and in today's climate, that kind of flexibility is invaluable.

Conclusion: Play to Win, Especially in the Face of Uncertainty

While it's natural to hesitate in times like these, staying in a holding pattern for too long can become its own liability. Legal leaders must equip their teams with the tools, structures, and support they need to operate with speed and confidence—even when the road ahead remains unclear.

That means making tough prioritisation calls, rethinking who does what, and embracing flexible options that expand capacity without compromising quality. Because in this environment, adaptability isn't just a tactical choice, it's a long-term advantage.

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