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Beyond the Job Description

Interviews and Profiles





Eleanor Lacey

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT & GENERAL COUNSEL

SOPHOS

Eleanor Lacey, the (relatively) new senior vice president and general counsel of Sophos, the UK-based global cybersecurity company, was busy conducting meetings with her direct reports the day she spoke with the Docket. Before she accepted her current position, she had made vacation plans with her family and was committed to following through on those plans. As general counsel of a large public company, she can't check out completely, but she can deputize her team to handle any crises that may arise. After the calls, she had to drive her daughter to get shots — it was their first overseas vacation together as a family and it was part of the recommended travel advice. Lacey wasn't just excited for her vacation however — she makes it a point to say she's an involved parent. "If people see me doing that, and hear me really being open about it," she explains, "then I think they'll feel more free to do that too."

Lacey looks to impact her company in more ways than just legal. She considers herself a strong advocate for family friendly policies. After working in-house for over 30 years, she reflected on why she loves being a general counsel. "For someone like me, it's about finding a role beyond the job description. That thing should be true to who I am and finding my passion," she says. Her other passions are growing corporate diversity and advocating for women.

She joined Sophos in November 2016. In part, it was because she knew that the company valued what she valued — diversity and inclusion. Lacey had worked with the CEO previously and didn't hesitate to join the executive team, even though she was the only woman. With offices in 31 countries, she thought that her impact would be greater at the global company.

The road ahead

Sophos makes internet security software and hardware that they sell primarily to businesses. It has an expanding portfolio of network and endpoint device security products including encryption, anti-malware and unified threat management. Right now, the focus is on the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and its rollout in May 2018. Lacey is working to seal patents — a time-consuming process that will protect the company's knowledge assets.

From a personal perspective, she is focused on building her legal department and finding people who understand the business. “The point of being in-house, in my view, is to make a bigger impact than just telling somebody the law,” she says. Sophos is growing quickly and its legal department needs to mirror that growth.

Lacey approaches hiring decisions with the knowledge that networks are powerful. Most senior people are hired through recommendations, she notes. It's imperative to not get caught up in the referral machine because those networks inherently produce a similar type of person. She also cautions against using a standard job description. There's technology that can remove words that attract more male candidates than females. For example, the phrase “under pressure” will draw more male applicants and “extraordinary” [will attract more female applicants](#) than the similar word “exceptional.”

Language is something that Lacey values a lot. The conversation around women in technology is one she's had with her own daughter. While there's a perception that to be involved in technology is to be a coder, Lacey says that she considers herself a technology worker — albeit one on the legal side of things. “Part of it is also creating a bigger definition and promoting it,” she believes.

To be successful in-house, she recommends honing legal skills like precise deadlines at a law firm or at a large multinational. But, then again, it was never her plan at all to go into corporate law.

A view east

Lacey's original plan was to be a public interest lawyer who helped secure the rights of children, particularly in Asia. She had developed a deep love of Chinese language and history — a fluke because she was compelled to enroll in an unpopular history class in college and ended up loving it, especially her post-college 1990 trip to China — and wanted to expand her knowledge. She worked for a summer at a law firm that did joint ventures in China and found that her love of law and love of Chinese culture didn't mesh like she envisioned.

Since she was already working at a law firm, she decided to become a litigator. After an early morning of wordsmithing with a colleague, she realized she needed a change. She went in-house, and hasn't looked back since.

Getting to know... Eleanor Lacey

Do you have a favorite vacation spot?

Yes, Thailand! You don't get sick all the time, which happens in some places I've visited. I took both of my daughters to China and my younger daughter got really sick, and that was scary for me. So, in Thailand I've never been sick.

I like that everything in Thailand is different. The clothes are different, the language is different, the food's different, but also it's still very accessible. And my experience there has been that people are really welcoming in teaching you about the culture, and so, there's an ease of learning that I really enjoy. I'm not a "go sit on the beach for two weeks" person. I like beaches but I want something else when I go to the beach so I get that in Thailand. I get all the beauty but I get that everything is different.

Yeah, I love the food as well. That's important to me. When I'm traveling I want to like what I'm eating because vacations are limited. The vacation that we're taking is unusual. We'd never taken this long a vacation, other than when we were students, so certainly not with our kids but it was something that we already had planned. Sophos agreed to let me do it if I was coming on board.

If you could teach any subject in law school, what would it be?

If I think about how I've been most effective in my roles and what I feel like has really launched me in my career, it has been truly understanding as much as I can the business. I mean I'm not thinking very big here, but if I'm thinking about if you want to be a general counsel in a company you better be interested in the company first, and it would be teaching that skill.

I think it is a skill and it is not intuitive and it's not what you're taught in law school. You're taught in law school to analyze law. And you may be taught black-letter law or you may be taught theory, it doesn't matter but that's your main focus. When people come out of law schools or law firms, sometimes they come into a company and that's their main focus, and it's so much more fun to have that be, yes, as a requirement, as a prerequisite of supporting your company but the company is what you're looking at.

And I think the other thing is, I don't know how I would do it but is really the way we funnel people into roles today, it starts in elementary school, right? My daughter is identified as a soccer player. My other daughter is identified as a ballet dancer. And in order to participate, by the time they're 12 or 13, it's five days a week often. And it goes back to that — there was a really interesting interview I heard on NPR that was on this topic and I never heard who the person was, but it was a guy who was happily working at Google but found that his choices and his preferences were limiting him. If I think of myself that I stumbled into Chinese history and studying Chinese and I stumbled into going in-house, and both of those things are giving me a lot of joy in my life.

So, he quit his job and created an algorithm that would just choose events near him then just choose one for him to attend. There was no preference in there. And he started doing it for like a year. And he said sometimes it'd be very awkward. He would show up at the Young Russian Professionals Get-Together and he was not a professional, nor was he Russian, but he said he learned so much and it just broadened his life. And I would say pay attention to how much these preferences are narrowing your experience and then decide whether that's something you want. I don't think everybody needs to broaden their experience. That's not everybody's cup of tea. But for me, it's exciting. And I was unintentionally narrowing myself, so I try not to but I think it's really hard.

[Joshua H. Shields](#)



Editor

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