

SBOT Leadership Interview Questions



Ronnie Blackwell
Legal Counsel at XTO Energy Inc.
Age: 33

1. What are your job responsibilities at XTO?

I provide legal advice and assistance regarding all legal transactions affecting the Marcellus Shale, Barnett Shale and South Texas, including acquisitions, custom oil and gas leases, easements, pooling agreements, master service agreements, operating agreements, regulatory issues, surface use agreements and unit formations.

2. Please describe your organizational structure (e.g., what department are you in, who do you report to, etc.).

I am in the Law Department of XTO Energy Inc. and report to Warren Ludlow, who is Vice President and Associate General Counsel. The XTO law department is a branch of the ExxonMobil law department.

3. What do you find most challenging in your position?

The most challenging part of my position is trying to give advice to my company regarding non-Texas legal matters in a timely fashion. Not having the legal background of other states requires me to research other laws without immediately arriving at an answer, sometimes relying upon outside counsel not Texas law.

4. It is sometimes said that attorneys who make the transition from a law firm to an in-house position may struggle when they are required to manage people because firms do not train lawyers to be good managers. Do you agree with this? Do you have any advice for improving management skills?

I do not agree with this statement at all. I believe good law firms also train attorneys to be good managers (good managers of people and managers of time). As you progress in the law firm you begin to manage younger associates, providing good experience in managing people. However, it is possible that some attorneys transition from the law firm quickly, which would not provide the managerial skills necessary to be a good manager, but that trait is a skill that should be easy to perfect. I would recommend having young attorneys (3 plus years) start managing baby attorneys (3 years or less). This would provide managerial experience early in an attorney's career to help with any transition, or even help them in the same employment position as they progress.

5. Do you enjoy managing people?

I guess I would say that I enjoy managing people, but a more accurate statement would be that I enjoy working with people that have a common goal. I think there is a fine line between “managing” and “working together,” and believe that the great managers are the ones that enjoy working side-by-side with other personnel to achieve a common goal.

6. What do you most enjoy about your position?

I enjoy working with a great group of attorneys who have a wide range of knowledge and experience. I have learned, and continue to learn, a great deal from each of them. I also enjoy identifying business risks and advising the company regarding such risks.

7. What do you wish you had known earlier in your career?

I am still so early in my career that I am sure there will be things that I wished I knew now. However, it would have been nice to know how important it is to have a wide-range of experience, regardless of your field. The more issues you can encounter within your field early on, the more prepared you will be for things to come.

8. Is there anything in particular you think a young attorney should consider before moving in-house?

Make sure working in-house is what you want to do before making the transition. In-house work is much different than other types of employment, and you need to ensure that you will be happy before you make such a leap.

9. Can you describe some non-legal job opportunities with energy companies that young lawyers might consider or pursue?

A lot of young attorneys are working as landmen (brokers, field, and in-house).

10. Can you compare working in-house to working within a firm?

There are numerous differences between the two. First, in-house attorneys have a single client and concentrate on one entity’s best interests, whereas the law firm has numerous clients and may represent different types of clients with differing interests. An attorney in a law firm is constantly trying to avoid business risk, and an in-house attorney has more flexibility to identify the risk and help management make a decision based on such advice. In-house attorneys are not worried about the “billable hours” and collections; rather they are worried about getting all of the work done no matter how much time it takes. In-house attorneys may have to advise their clients on out-of-state laws, and law firms attorneys generally practice the law of the state in which they are licensed.

11. In general, what can an attorney expect compensation-wise in an entry-level position with an in-house legal department?

Generally, a lot of in-house companies would prefer an attorney to have some experience before coming in-house, so there are not as many positions available for a new attorney. I believe that in-house compensation is very comparable with the compensation of local law firms. The companies have to keep law firm compensation in mind to attract good attorneys, otherwise, those attorneys will end up in a law firm.

12. What opportunities does a young attorney have for career development or advancement within your organization?

Young attorneys here at XTO have the opportunity to advance and take on greater responsibility, with the ultimate goal of becoming an executive within the company. Also, our attorneys have the opportunity to work in many different geographic areas, which provides a wide-range of experience.

13. Sometimes lawyers within firms express a desire to go in-house because of the perception of better work-life balance as an in-house attorney. How is your work-life balance?

My balance is pretty good, but it was also pretty good at the law firm. I don't necessarily know if it is "better" work-life balance, but it is definitely different. In-house attorneys are not worried about their monthly billable hours; they are simply focused on getting all of their tasks done in a timely manner. There may be times when there are not as many tasks to accomplish, thereby making the work-life balance easier. A break in work from a law firm's perspective, however, may mean fewer billable hours, which may result in less money, thereby causing that attorney to work harder to find work. But, both jobs can result in long hours.

14. Has the change in the economy affected your job or other legal positions at XTO? And if so how?

The change in economy has not had a direct effect on my job. However, XTO is now a subsidiary of ExxonMobil, which very well could have been a result of the economy. But, my role as in-house counsel has not changed.

15. What advice would you give young attorneys about seeking out a position with a company, either in a legal or non-legal position?

Do your research, network, and be able to provide concrete evidence as to why you want to work in that position. So many people simply apply for a job because it pays, but provide no evidence as to why they want that job (other than they need a paycheck). Use your resume to explain why you want to work in that position, whether it is because of experience, interest, education, etc.

16. Do you have any suggestions that might help young attorneys, especially new law school graduates, who are struggling in today's job market?

I get this question a lot, but I generally do not have the advice they are wanting to hear. If you are attempting to get in the oil and gas industry in today's market, and you are struggling to find a job in this industry, I would strongly encourage new attorneys to try to get their LLM in oil and gas. This would make new attorneys much more marketable. I would also recommend trying to get as much experience in the industry as possible, whether it is a legal job or a non-legal job in the field. This experience can be reflected on a resume to prove why you want a particular position. And, network! The more people you talk to and know, the better chance of something opening up.