

CAREER ROADMAP

How to Become Privacy Counsel: Career Roadmap

Learn the legal, commercial and operational experience needed to become Privacy Counsel and advise organizations on data protection.

IN THIS ROADMAP

- Quick answer
- Key takeaways
- What Privacy Counsel does
- Skills employers want
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- A five-stage career roadmap

A free career roadmap from GRC Careers · AGJ, the AI governance job board

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Privacy Counsel advises an organization on how personal information may be collected, used, shared, retained and protected. The work can span product development, contracts, regulatory change, incident response, investigations, litigation, employment, marketing and artificial intelligence. It is a legal role, but the strongest privacy lawyers do more than interpret statutes. They help teams reach defensible decisions and turn those decisions into workable practices.

QUICK ANSWER

To become Privacy Counsel, you generally need a law degree, admission to practice in the relevant jurisdiction and experience applying privacy law to commercial or operational questions. Develop a foundation in the laws governing your target employers, then gain practical experience with contracts, product reviews, incidents, rights requests and cross-border data issues. A regional CIPP can help demonstrate subject knowledge.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Privacy Counsel is an attorney role and should not be confused with a non-legal privacy specialist position.
- Commercial contracting, regulatory counseling, employment law, cybersecurity and product counseling are common feeder practices.
- Employers value lawyers who can give clear, risk-based advice under time pressure.
- A CIPP concentration is widely recognized, while the IAPP Privacy Law Specialist designation applies only to eligible US attorneys and has additional requirements.
- Privacy Counsel can progress to Senior Counsel, Assistant General Counsel, Head of Privacy, General Counsel or Chief Privacy Officer.

WHAT PRIVACY COUNSEL DOES

The precise scope depends on the employer. In-house counsel may support a product line, region or global privacy program. Law-firm attorneys may advise several clients on regulatory compliance, transactions, incidents and enforcement.

Common responsibilities include:

- Interpreting privacy, consumer-protection, cybersecurity and sector-specific laws
- Advising product, engineering, marketing, HR and data teams
- Drafting and negotiating data-processing, data-sharing and transfer terms
- Supporting privacy impact assessments and high-risk processing reviews
- Advising on incidents, notification duties and regulatory communications
- Responding to individual complaints and regulator inquiries
- Monitoring legal change and translating it into business actions
- Supporting AI, biometrics, children's privacy and automated-decision issues

SKILLS EMPLOYERS WANT

Legal analysis is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Privacy Counsel must gather technical and operational facts, identify the real decision, distinguish legal requirements from preferences and explain options in language a business team can use.

Commercial judgment matters because privacy questions rarely arrive in isolation. The organization may be negotiating a strategic contract, launching a product or responding to an incident. Strong counsel identifies material risk, proposes practical safeguards and records the reasoning without turning every question into an absolute prohibition.

Technical fluency is increasingly important. You should understand data flows, cookies, mobile applications, cloud vendors, APIs, access controls, encryption, de-identification and the ways AI systems use training and inference data. You do not need to build the technology, but you must ask informed questions about it.

EDUCATION, LICENSING AND CREDENTIALS

Privacy Counsel positions generally require a JD or equivalent legal qualification and active admission in the jurisdiction specified by the employer. Job descriptions should distinguish true legal requirements from preferences and should not imply that a privacy certification authorizes legal practice.

A CIPP concentration can demonstrate knowledge of a regional legal framework. The CIPM is useful for counsel who helps operate the privacy program, and the CIPT helps lawyers who work closely with product and engineering teams. The IAPP Privacy Law Specialist designation is available to qualifying US attorneys who meet its certification, ethics and practice requirements. State rules can affect whether and how a lawyer may describe a specialty.

A FIVE-STAGE CAREER ROADMAP

Stage 1: Build the legal foundation

Study the privacy and sector laws that govern your target market. Learn how those rules affect notices, rights, contracts, security, retention, marketing, employment and cross-border transfers.

Stage 2: Gain adjacent legal experience

Seek assignments involving commercial technology contracts, cybersecurity incidents, consumer law, healthcare, financial regulation, employment data or product counseling. These matters build the fact-finding and risk judgment privacy work requires.

Stage 3: Create applied work product

Develop a sample product-review memo, data-processing addendum issue list, incident analysis and regulatory-change briefing using fictional facts. Show concise advice, alternatives and an implementation path.

Stage 4: Own a privacy portfolio

Move from occasional privacy questions to sustained responsibility for a business unit, region or workstream. Build relationships with privacy operations, security, product, engineering and procurement.

Stage 5: Lead the function

Senior counsel must set legal strategy, supervise outside counsel, engage regulators, communicate with executives and build a team that can support the business at scale.

CAREER PROGRESSION

Stage	Typical title	Scope
Foundation	Associate, Commercial Counsel or Regulatory Counsel	Adjacent matters and supervised privacy work
Dedicated role	Privacy Counsel or Data Protection Counsel	Day-to-day privacy advice and contracts
Senior	Senior Privacy Counsel	Complex matters, major products or regional ownership
Leadership	Assistant General Counsel or Head of Privacy Legal	Legal strategy, team leadership and regulator engagement
Executive	General Counsel or Chief Privacy Officer	Enterprise accountability and executive leadership

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Certifications: [CIPP](#), [CIPM](#), [CDPSE](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can a non-lawyer become Privacy Counsel?

No. “Counsel” denotes a legal role. Non-lawyers can build successful careers as Privacy Analysts, Specialists, Program Managers, Engineers and, depending on the jurisdiction and structure, DPOs or privacy executives.

Is law-firm experience required?

Not always. In-house regulatory, product, contracting, compliance and incident-response experience can provide a strong path.

Should Privacy Counsel also learn AI governance?

Yes. AI systems create privacy questions involving training data, transparency, automated decisions, sensitive inferences, vendor terms and individual rights. Privacy counsel should understand where privacy law ends and broader AI governance begins. ## Next steps Browse [privacy jobs](<https://www.ai-governance-jobs.com/privacy-jobs/>), review [How to Start a Career in Data Privacy](<https://www.ai-governance-jobs.com/guides/how-to-start-a-career-in-data-privacy/>) and compare this path with Privacy Program Manager and Chief Privacy Officer. Employers can use the matching [Privacy Counsel job description template](<https://www.ai-governance-jobs.com/templates/privacy-counsel-job-description/>). ## Sources - [IAPP CIPP certification](<https://iapp.org/certify/cipp>) - [IAPP Privacy Law Specialist](<https://iapp.org/certify/privacy-law-specialist>)

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