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Who Has the Best Legal Department?

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For the past few years, we've periodically taken a look at the achievements of corporate legal departments around the nation. But until now our kudos have been limited to distinct areas: technology; quality of life for lawyers in the department; innovations in managing litigation, or outside counsel; and so on.

This year we decided to ask a really big question: Which department among the *Fortune* 500 is the best? A tall order, to be sure, but a rewarding one, too. And for this exercise, we wanted to look at an entire department, not just the achievements of the general counsel or other recognized in-house leaders.

But how would we know who tops them all? We decided to invite the legal departments themselves to make a pitch for their lawyers and what they'd accomplished in the last two years. We sent each of the *Fortune* 500 companies' general counsel a detailed questionnaire and asked all sorts of intrusive questions: How big are their budgets? What is their litigation strategy? How much time do their lawyers devote to pro bono?

It wasn't easy figuring out what questions to ask. To put together the form, we talked to our own writers and data gatherers, and we chatted with consultants and management experts. After giving us some technical advice on what to look for in a top-notch legal department, one consultant, Rees Morrison, of Somerset, N.J.'s Hildebrandt International Inc., perhaps said it best: "Look for a group that's punching above its weight."

With Morrison's advice in mind, a group of editors and writers went to work. One of our writers screened all the entries and made a first cut. Then six of us got together to rank the remaining submissions. Everybody at the table rated those nominations, and we were prepared to argue for our choices. But a funny thing happened -- we all decided quickly on a winner, and we mostly agreed on the three other departments that came close. To see who's number one in our book, read on.

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And here are the three runner-up law departments, in no particular order:



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