

A BarkerGilmore 20th Anniversary Executive Profile

In conversation with Managing Director Max Gelernter



Jessica Wenzell



Chief Legal Officer and
People Officer,
Brooks Automation

“The role of a legal leader is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to help organizations navigate it thoughtfully.”

Today's legal leaders are expected to navigate complexity, help organizations evaluate tradeoffs, and bring sound judgment to critical business decisions. For Jessica Wenzell, Chief Legal Officer and People Officer of Brooks Automation, that broader leadership opportunity was exactly what made the role compelling.

As part of BarkerGilmore's 20th anniversary, the firm is reconnecting with former placements whose careers reflect leadership at the highest levels. Jessica's journey highlights the growing importance of business partnership, judgment, and influence in the modern General Counsel role.

Beyond the Legal Function

What drew Jessica to Brooks Automation was not simply the opportunity to lead a legal department. The company was operating in a complex, regulated global environment while pursuing transformation, growth, and long-term value creation. The organization wanted a strategic partner capable of helping shape how the company manages risk, develops leaders, and creates enterprise value.

"What ultimately drew me to Brooks Automation was the combination of business ambition and leadership intent," Jessica explains.

For senior legal leaders considering a similar move, she believes the most important question is whether an organization truly wants a strategic partner. The right opportunity is one where judgment, curiosity, and leadership matter as much as technical expertise and where learning the business is as important as protecting it.

A Steward of Judgment

Many of the experiences that shaped Jessica's leadership occurred during periods of significant change, when organizations were navigating complexity, transition, and uncertainty.

“Some of the most formative experiences in my career occurred during periods of complexity and change, for example, crisis response (including significant regulatory change), leadership transitions, and major strategic transactions. Those experiences reinforced that the role of a legal leader is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to help organizations navigate it thoughtfully. I was fortunate to work with leaders and mentors who modeled calm, clarity, and integrity under pressure. One pivotal lesson I took from them was that credibility is built less by having the ‘right answer’ and more by asking the ‘right questions,’ understanding the business context, and helping leaders make informed tradeoffs. That mindset fundamentally shaped how I view the General Counsel role: as a steward of judgment, not just a subject matter expert.”

That perspective continues to inform how Jessica approaches leadership today, emphasizing business partnership and thoughtful decision-making in the face of uncertainty.

Scaling Leadership and Influence

As her responsibilities expanded, Jessica found that success depended less on her own output and more on the performance of the teams she led.

"The biggest shift was moving from being a strong individual contributor to effectively enabling, amplifying, and scaling the judgment and capability of others," she says.

The transition required patience and a willingness to allow teams to wrestle with ambiguity rather than stepping in too quickly. Her approach to decision-making evolved as well. Earlier in her career, she focused heavily on precision and risk mitigation. Experience taught her that speed, clarity, and alignment often matter just as much as technical perfection.

Those leadership capabilities became increasingly important at Brooks. Less than two years after joining the company as General Counsel, Jessica was promoted to Chief Legal Officer and People Officer, taking on responsibility for the organization's people strategy in addition to its legal function. The expanded role reflected both the trust she had built within the leadership team and the growing recognition that the judgment, communication, and leadership skills that define successful legal executives often translate far beyond the legal department.

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The same philosophy guides her interactions with executive leadership teams and boards. Trust is built through a deep understanding of the business. Leaders want advisors who surface issues early, communicate candidly about uncertainty, and remain focused on outcomes rather than simply identifying risk.

A Partnership Built for Long-Term Success

Having worked with executive search firms throughout her career, Jessica believes the best partners focus on long-term success rather than simply filling a role.

"The firms that matter invest deeply in understanding the business context, leadership dynamics, and what success genuinely looks like twelve to twenty-four months into the role."

Her experience with BarkerGilmore stood out because the firm's involvement extended beyond the search itself. As part of the engagement, Jessica worked with a Fortune 500 executive coach whose guidance helped accelerate her transition into the role and strengthened her impact during her first months with the organization.

Closing Perspective

Looking back, Jessica's career is a reminder that executive readiness is often built gradually rather than all at once. Each role added a new dimension to her leadership, creating a foundation that could not have been developed through any single position.

Her promotion to Chief Legal Officer and People Officer underscores that progression. The expanded scope of her responsibilities reflects the confidence organizations increasingly place in legal leaders who can contribute legal expertise, as well as enterprise-wide leadership, talent development, and strategic judgment.

For BarkerGilmore, the search succeeded because it recognized that trajectory. The question was not simply who had done the job before, but who was prepared for what the role would require next.

A Partner in Leadership

At BarkerGilmore, we believe the right leadership decisions shape organizations for years to come. For over twenty years, we have advised clients and candidates with a focus on fit, readiness, and enduring partnership. Learn more about our work and access additional resources on [our website](#), or reach us directly at [877.571.5047](tel:877.571.5047) or info@barkergilmore.com.