



Christopher Garvey

Senior Vice President & Deputy General Counsel - Litigation and Regulatory Enforcement at Fifth Third Bank

Christopher Garvey was an attorney with Goodwin from 1997-2010 in the Trial Department, making partner in 2003 and equity partner in 2007. He moved to Bank of America to work in-house before transitioning to Fifth Third Bank in 2016.

Career Path

Q: What has your career trajectory been like?

A: I worked at a boutique litigation firm that merged into Goodwin in 2001 and we were part of the expansion of the New York office. After making partner, and a few long trials coming to an end, my friend and former partner, David Hashmall, recommended me for some new financial crisis cases Bank of America had arising from its Countrywide acquisition. I started working on some of the financial crisis matters for Countrywide, which was bought by Bank of America. About 18 months into that, the client reached out to me and said that they had a need in-house for people who knew the business of Countrywide. Goodwin loaned me to Bank of America, and it was always my intention to go back to the firm as I had nothing but positive experiences. I do have to say that the in-house work was interesting enough that Bank of America was able to lure me away in 2010 and I stayed there until 2016. We saw some unique problems in-house at Bank of America working to resolve the financial crisis issues. I had the pleasure of working with many of my former Goodwin colleagues during those years. So, as we were winding up our work, a former colleague from Bank of America had joined Fifth Third Bank and asked me if I would be interested in coming over with her as they did not have a centralized litigation department. She wanted me to come over and form and lead the group. I thought it was an interesting growth opportunity to start a litigation group from the ground up, recruiting people, putting procedures in place, as well as working on a lot of interesting stuff. I have been here ever since.

Q: What was your biggest surprise going in-house?

A: I was warned about this by some people on the way in-house, but it is still worth remembering that when you are in-house, you only have the one client. When you are in-house, you go extremely wide, but not as deep, on your cases. Although with certain exceptions, you get to pick and choose the matters that you do decide to dive deep on. That can be very interesting and fulfilling.

In-House Perspective

Q: Now that you are in-house, what do you look for in outside counsel?

A: The biggest thing I look for in outside counsel is finding who you can trust to take care of you and your matters. That covers a lot of ground, and it changes based on the individual matters that you have. When I was in-house at Bank of America with the financial crisis, we had hundreds of matters, and so many of them were huge. Now running litigation and regulatory enforcement at Fifth Third, the matters are more diverse from the very small to the extremely large and complicated. We have matters that only concern the particular people in the line of business involved in the lawsuit, to matters that involve my Chief Legal Officer (CLO), our board, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the shareholders, etc. You are looking for outside counsel to be committed to you and partner with you. They need to understand your business, your concerns and be prepared for the different types of issues that might arise. Firms differentiate themselves by their level of service commitment and their ability to inspire that trust and confidence. In most circumstances, you wonder if this is somebody that I could put on the phone with my client, my CLO, my Chief Risk Officer, my CFO or my CEO. Could I envision bringing them to a board meeting if I needed to? Can they help me speak to the regulators, if necessary?

Q: What do you think are the biggest challenges to industry right now and what are the biggest opportunities?

A: That is hard to pinpoint since so much about the American financial services industry is in flux right now. I would say that there are a number of challenges. One is determining what type of scale we are going to have in the industry. We had a regional banking crisis in the spring when a couple of banks failed, which was the first time that happened in a very long time. It cost some confidence in the system that has caused us to ask the question of what do banks need to look like to be safe and successful? We are seeing a number of proposed regulations about capital and liquidity which add a lot of complexity, not to mention overhead and infrastructure to the efforts of running a business. It is something that I think the industry is still working through and sorting out.

In terms of opportunity, I think it is a more widespread collective consciousness – knowing what you are good at, and what you should be involved in. In that regard, there are always changes, whether it be in a law firm, with your client, in your industry, in the country or the world. Just as importantly, it is important to know what you should not be involved in and then focusing on being very, very good at the things you do very, very well. I think it is always the most important strategy. We talk about that with our team – how to make sure we are delivering excellent service to our clients, and we talk about it with our law firms as well. It is something that law firms would do well to keep in mind.

Q: What advice would you have for someone if they are considering transitioning from a law firm position to an in-house position at a banking institution?

A: I never thought I was going to make that transition. When I was at Goodwin, I thought I was going to stay for 30 years. So, I would say, do not be afraid of change. You have to be open to reinventing yourself a number of times in your career – whether you are at a law firm or in business or looking to make a transition to in-house. I would say if people were interested in doing that, do not be afraid of it. Do your due diligence. You want to know your prospective organization. You want to talk to people who have trod on the path that you are thinking of walking. It is important to know who you are going to be working with, which goes back to trust and confidence as lawyers. Frankly, all we have is our reputation, our willingness and ability to work hard and try to be smart, your ethics and your credibility. You have to make sure that you are going to be comfortable with the people you are working with, and you are working with good people. As lawyers, we tend to fixate on the minute details, but a lot of that tends to work itself out. It is very important to get the big things right. And also remember, nothing is necessarily forever, so if you do something that you think it is a good idea and you try it, but find out that it is not for you, then try something else. I think it is nice to have a rich, diverse set of experiences in your career. But do your due diligence and then take the jump and work hard at it.

Personal Perspective

Q: What is your favorite memory from working at Goodwin?

A: I know it sounds trite, but it is the people. When I think about who I worked with and what I did there, all I think about is the people – the people I am still friendly with, friends that I have had lunch with recently, and friends I have gotten back in contact with, other friends I have been in contact with for a very long time. It is the partners and associates that you are working with, as well as your clients. We spend so much of our time at our jobs. Along with our families, it is probably our most significant connection. Some days you may spend more time at work than with family, so liking the people is essential to being satisfied. A few times in the past few years I have run into some former colleagues. And when we have had the time, we have dropped what we were doing and sat and talked for a long time and then made plans to stay in touch. I think that speaks to how great the connections we forged at Goodwin. I am grateful for the former colleagues I still work with and am still in touch with.

Q: You were heavily involved with the pro bono program at Goodwin while you were here. What was that experience like?

A: Goodwin has a wonderful pro bono program. I was also involved in training, which is also great at Goodwin, and it was a privilege to be involved in that. I was lucky enough to work on a case with one of my former partners and friend Jeff Simes, as well as a whole bunch of very, very capable associates. We were working on a case that changed how homeless children were housed and educated in part of New York State and I am very proud of it. Jeff was the team lead on the case as he had conceived it and asked me to help him out. It was an honor and privilege to do it and it is one of the cases I still tell my kids about. It was an incredibly serious case to work on because of the way that Suffolk County, New York – on Long Island – was treating at-risk children. The children in that situation really needed the stability of school but were not getting it because of the constant disruptions.

One of my favorite memories happened when Jeff and I were in federal court in Long Island with our clients waiting for a hearing to start. As is natural, we started talking about the case and our own experiences during grade school. We quickly came to realize that not only had we both grown up in the same city, and had been in the same school together, but we had actually been in the same first grade class together – the same teacher, the same classmates. The clients absolutely loved watching us come to this realization. It was just a weird coincidence and it turned out that a third lawyer at Goodwin was also in our class. It was such a bizarre, fun, random coincidence on an otherwise important case that made it even more special.

Q: If you were not a lawyer, what would you be?

A: A lot of people have told me that I am right where I should be, which I think is a compliment, but I am not 100 percent sure. My mom was a teacher for 40 years in high school English. And she was excellent at it. Maybe I would have been a teacher because I respect and admire her so much. Ironically, she wanted to be a lawyer, but grew up in a time when less opportunities were available for women to do things like that. She was such an excellent teacher and I find the profession to be very noble. I hope one day it will receive more recognition and the support it deserves. But I also continue to believe, even after more than 30 years, that law is a noble profession and am very grateful for the career I have had so far. My time at Goodwin was a huge part of that. I look forward to some more fun in the future.

Any views expressed during this conversation are Chris's own personal views.
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