Switchboard

Where the hours go for in-house real estate legal teams

A working guide to where an in-house real estate legal team's hours go, and how to get them back. Separate the reading from the deciding, measure it in your own numbers, write your positions down, and know what to build first. The lawyer decides on every page.

SECTION 01 · START HERE

What your first read **costs**

Four inputs: leases you touch, the share on the tenant's paper, hours per first read, and the cost of that hour. **The output is hours, and hours turned into a number your COO or CFO already understands.** The interactive page runs it live; the numbers below are what a typical team gets.

On a typical team: 12 leases and amendments a month, half of them on the tenant's form, four hours of first read each.

34 hrs	10 weeks	$60K a year	22%
of first read a month	of one person's year	at a $150 loaded hour	of a lawyer's year

The four-hour figure is RSM's benchmark for abstracting one real estate lease, plus an hour of review. Your own numbers go into the calculator on the interactive page, or into the first tab of the workbook.

Sources for the defaults: RSM US, Lease abstraction planning (three to four hours per real estate lease, one hour of quality review). LegalOn and In-House Connect, The 2026 State of AI for In-House Legal, 452 in-house professionals (3.1 hours per contract, all industries).

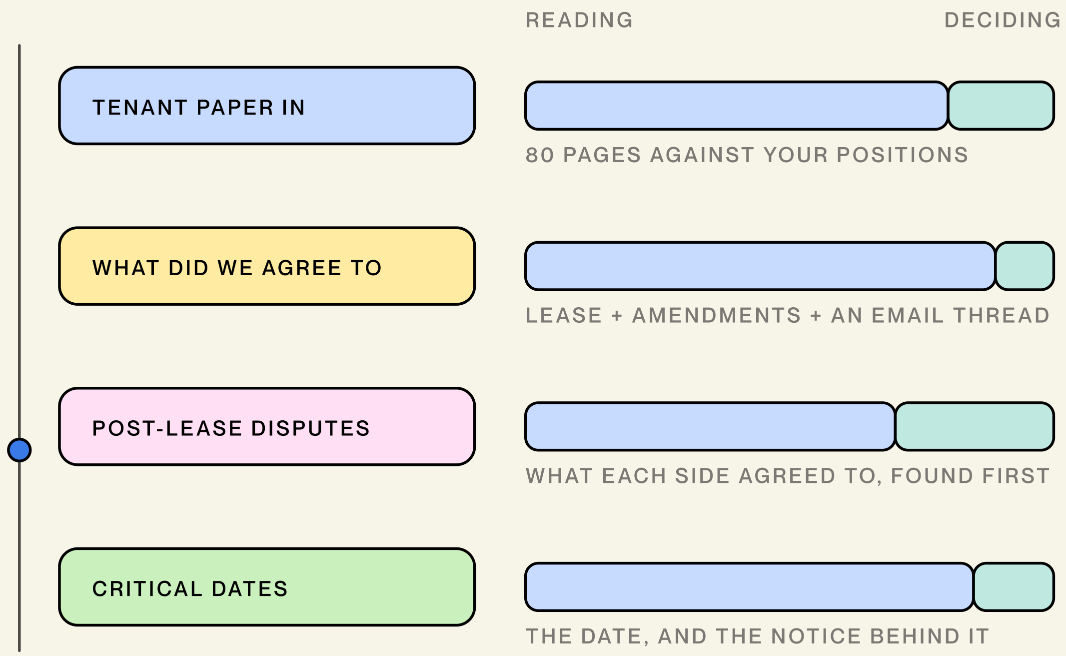
SECTION 02

Your week, in four loops

The calculator priced one loop, the first read. It is the biggest of four loops that every in-house real estate legal team we talk to runs, whatever the asset class and whoever the tenants are. Tenant paper comes in and someone reads it against the company's positions. Leasing asks what was agreed to years ago, and the answer is spread across the lease, two amendments and an old email thread. A dispute, an estoppel or a CAM reconciliation lands, and the work starts with finding what both sides actually signed. Underneath all of it sit the renewal windows and consent deadlines that cost real money when they slip.

In every one of those loops, the reading takes most of the hours and the deciding takes the last few minutes. The drawing below has the shape of it, and the calculator above has your numbers.

THE FOUR LOOPS · READING ON THE LEFT, DECIDING ON THE RIGHT



The widths are the shape of the work, not a measurement of yours. **The teal end needs a lawyer. The blue part needs a reader.**

What the field says about where those hours go

None of this is a real-estate-only problem, and the industry-wide numbers say why it's getting heavier.

367	Company employees supported by the median in-house lawyer in 2026, up from 300 in 2021. The team is thinner and the business is bigger
0.43%	Of revenue spent on legal in 2026, a six-year low. Spend is down while volume is up, so the gap is absorbed by the team's hours
4 hrs	To abstract one real estate lease, plus an hour of review, across 80 to 100 data fields. Reading a tenant's draft against your positions is harder than abstracting
52%	Of in-house legal teams are already using or evaluating AI for contract review, and active use has nearly quadrupled since 2024. The question has moved from whether to which kind
79%	Of the teams that adopted it report less time on routine legal work. The hours come back when the reading is the part that moves
80%	Prefer AI that works under a lawyer's control over anything that decides on its own. That is exactly the review layer: the system reads and flags, the lawyer decides

Sources: ACC Law Department Management Benchmarking Report 2026, 576 legal departments, as reported by Corporate Counsel Business Journal · RSM US, lease abstraction planning · LegalOn and In-House Connect, The 2026 State of AI for In-House Legal, 452 in-house professionals. The capacity figures are cross-industry.

Read together: the team isn't getting bigger, the reading is the biggest block of hours that doesn't need a law degree, and the teams that moved got hours back with a lawyer still in control. **That is the case for moving.** What follows is how, without handing a single decision to software.

SECTION 03

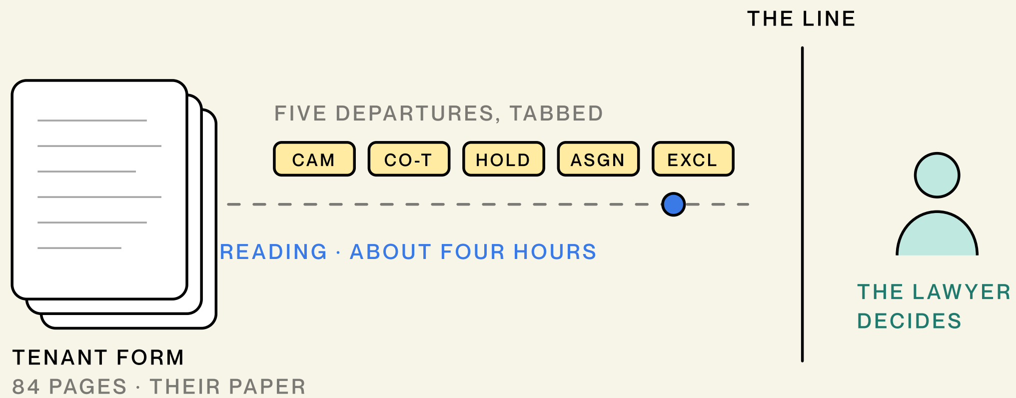
Reading is not **deciding**

> Think of the paralegal who reads the whole file and leaves a tab on every page you need to see. Nobody lets the tabs sign.

General counsel tell us the same thing: leases are too bespoke, and the liability too high, to hand any of it to software. Agreed, for the judgment. Nobody should let a model decide what the company will sign. But "software" covers two very different jobs.

So picture a piece of software built for your team and nobody else's. You hand it a tenant's lease and the positions your company holds. It reads all 84 pages, marks every place the tenant departs from what you've written down, and shows you the page each mark came from. Then it stops. **That is a system: a reader that stops at the line.**

WHAT CUSTOM SOFTWARE COULD LOOK LIKE AT YOUR COMPANY · ONE TENANT LEASE



A review layer built for your team, drawn. It reads all 84 pages of the tenant's form and leaves a tab on every departure from your positions. **The tabs stop at the line. The lawyer starts there,** and nothing to the right of the line is software's to touch.

Now look at the four hours before the decision. Finding every clause where the tenant's form departs from your positions. Pulling the operative text of section 8 after three amendments. Checking a tenant's estoppel redline against what the file actually says. **None of that is a judgment call. All of it has to happen before one can be made.**

The line between the two is the most useful thing a legal team can draw. On one side, work a system can do and show its sources for. On the other, work only a lawyer can do, and only a lawyer should.

THE WORRY

"Leases are too bespoke, and the liability is too high, to hand any of this to software. I sign off. I carry it."

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS

The system never decides. It reads and flags. Every redline still goes through a lawyer. What it removes is the four hours of page-turning before the lawyer gets to decide anything. And every flag cites the page it came from, so you check the source, not the software.

READING · A SYSTEM'S JOB

- **Compare** a tenant's form against your written positions, clause by clause
- **Resolve** the operative text across a lease, its amendments and side letters
- **Extract** the dates, and the notice mechanics behind each one
- **Draft** an estoppel from the resolved record and the rent roll
- **Flag** where a tenant's redline contradicts the file
- **Cite** the document and page for every one of the above

DECIDING · A LAWYER'S JOB

- **Accept, reject or counter** every flagged departure
- **Choose the fallback** to offer, and to whom
- **Sign** the estoppel, the consent, the notice
- **Withhold consent** to an assignment, and defend the reason
- **Escalate** to outside counsel, and decide what they get
- **Own the outcome.** That does not move

SECTION 04 · THE PRACTICAL CORE

Write your positions down

A positions document is the one page every first read gets checked against. For each lease term tenants push on, it says what the company will agree to, what it will not, and the fallback it offers before walking away. Many legal teams carry it in two attorneys' heads: ask what the company gives on a CAM cap and you get an answer, ask for the document and you get a pause.

Writing it down is the first step, and everything after it depends on it. It is what lets a new attorney redline a tenant's form without asking anyone. It is what keeps redlines consistent across the team. And it is the ruler any software would read against: without it, a system has nothing to compare a lease to, and the first read stays a lawyer's job by default.

Below is what one looks like, three rows of it. Then you can watch what a system does with those three rows when a tenant's form arrives. The workbook's second tab is the template for writing yours.

WHAT ONE LOOKS LIKE · THREE ROWS OF A POSITIONS DOCUMENT

STANDARD POSITIONS · RETAIL LEASES · IN-HOUSE LEGAL

ONE ROW PER TERM THE TENANTS FIGHT OVER. REVIEWED QUARTERLY.

TERM	WE WILL	WE WON'T	FALLBACK
CAM cap	Cap controllable opex at 5% a year, non-cumulative	Cap taxes, insurance or utilities	Cumulative cap for an anchor tenant
Holdover	125% of last month's rent, first 30 days	Holdover at base rent	150% after day 30, month to month
Assignment	Consent not unreasonably withheld	Consent deemed given on silence	15-day window, silence is a denial
Co-tenancy			

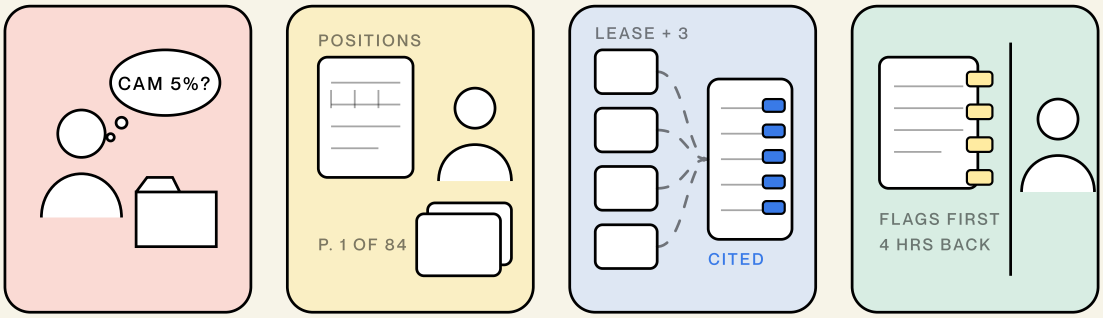
Three rows from a positions document, and a fourth left open. **Yours will differ; the shape won't.** Note the assignment row: a deemed-consent clause is a clock, and this document is where you decide how it runs.

SECTION 05

Where you are on the **curve**

Every in-house real estate legal team sits somewhere on this four-stage curve, and no stage is a judgment on the team; most of the field is on the first two. The drawing shows the same tenant lease being handled four ways. **Find the Monday that sounds like yours.** Each stage carries its next move, and it is never "buy everything."

FOUR MONDAYS · THE SAME TENANT LEASE, FOUR WAYS OF HANDLING IT



STAGE 1
IN PEOPLE'S HEADS

STAGE 2
WRITTEN, HAND-READ

STAGE 3
ONE RECORD, CITED

STAGE 4
READ BEFORE OPENED

The same tenant lease arrives in all four. In the first it waits for the one person who knows the positions. In the last, **the flags are on the pages before the lawyer opens it.** The cards below say which Monday is yours, and what the next one takes.

STAGE 1 — It lives in people's heads

MONDAY LOOKS LIKE	The positions are known, not written. Leases live in a folder. Dates live in a calendar and in one paralegal's memory. Every first read starts from page one.
THE NEXT MOVE	Write the positions down: for each term tenants push on, what you will give, what you won't, and your fallback. One page, this week. Nothing else on the curve works until it exists.
YOU'VE OUTGROWN IT WHEN	A new attorney can redline a tenant's form without asking anyone what the company will accept.

STAGE 2 — Written down, still hand-read

MOST OF THE FIELD IS HERE

MONDAY LOOKS LIKE	A positions document and a review checklist exist. The lease system belongs to accounting and legal is a data supplier to it. The first read is still four hours of a lawyer's Monday.
THE NEXT MOVE	Measure the reading: two weeks of logging minutes reading and minutes deciding, per document. That number is what gets the next stage funded.
YOU'VE OUTGROWN IT WHEN	You can answer "what did we agree to" from a record, not from a hunt.

STAGE 3 — The record is resolved

MONDAY LOOKS LIKE	Every lease family is one resolved record: the operative text of each clause, citing its document and page. Dates and the notices behind them come off that record. So does the first draft of an estoppel.
THE NEXT MOVE	Put the first read on the same record. The positions document is the ruler; the system does the comparing and returns the flags.
YOU'VE OUTGROWN IT WHEN	An estoppel is a draft to sign, not a document to assemble.

STAGE 4 — The reading is done before the lawyer opens it

MONDAY LOOKS LIKE	Tenant paper arrives and a redline with ranked flags is waiting. Each flag names the position it departs from and the page it sits on. The lawyer starts at the flags and decides. Every deviation agreed to is logged.
THE NEXT MOVE	Depth. The same record now serves consents, disputes and notices. The deviation log starts showing which positions you actually hold.
YOU'RE DOING IT RIGHT WHEN	Every flag can show the page it came from, and no decision has ever been made by the system.

You climb this curve **one loop at a time**, and stage 4 is only reachable from stage 3. Software reading against positions nobody wrote down is noise. Software reading against a resolved record and a written document is a redline.

Test it on your own paper

Two things to do before you talk to anyone, including us. Both cost nothing, and both leave you with something: a number nobody in the company has seen, and the seven questions that tell you in ten minutes what you are being shown.

Step 1 · Measure two weeks of reading

For two weeks, every document that gets a first read gets a row: what it was, how many pages, who read it, minutes reading, minutes deciding. **The split between those two minutes columns is the finding,** and it's the number that starts a budget conversation.

ARTIFACT · THE TWO-WEEK FIRST-READ AUDIT

FIRST-READ AUDIT · WEEK 1 OF 2 · ONE ROW PER DOCUMENT

DATE	DOCUMENT	PAGES	WHO	MIN READING	MIN DECIDING	LOOP
Mon 9	Tenant form lease, national retailer	84	AK	**210**	35	1
Tue 10	Estoppel, lender request, due Fri	6 + 41	AK	**95**	10	3
Wed 11	Assignment consent request	12 + 58	JR	**40**	25	4
Wed 11	"What did we agree to", co-tenancy	3 docs	JR	**70**	5	2

LOOP · 1 TENANT PAPER · 2 WHAT WE AGREED · 3 DISPUTES · 4 DATES

Four rows of a real week, drawn from the four loops. **The two minutes columns are the whole point.** After two weeks, add them up and the sliders at the top of the page stop being defaults.

Step 2 · Seven questions to ask anyone who shows you software for this, including us

Most of what a real estate legal team gets shown falls into four categories: lease abstraction, which reads the leases you already signed; lease accounting, which belongs to the controller; lease drafting, which speeds up your own form; and generic contract review, built for NDAs and MSAs. Each is good at its job. **None of them reads the paper you didn't draft against the positions you hold,** and these seven questions are how you find that out in the first ten minutes of any conversation.

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1. **Can it read one of my tenant leases, today, in this meeting?**
   Not the demo file. If the answer is a follow-up, the answer is no.

2. **What does it compare the lease against?**
   Your positions document, or a library somebody else wrote.

3. **Does every flag cite the document and page it came from?**
   Without that, you are checking the software instead of the source.

4. **Give it a lease plus two amendments. What comes back?**
   One operative text, or three separate documents.

5. **Ask what a co-tenancy failure does to a rent step.**
   A tool built for general contracts will not know.

6. **Does it ever decide?**
   The right answer is no, said without hesitation.

7. **Where does my positions document live, and in what format?**
   If the answer is inside their product, so is your leverage.

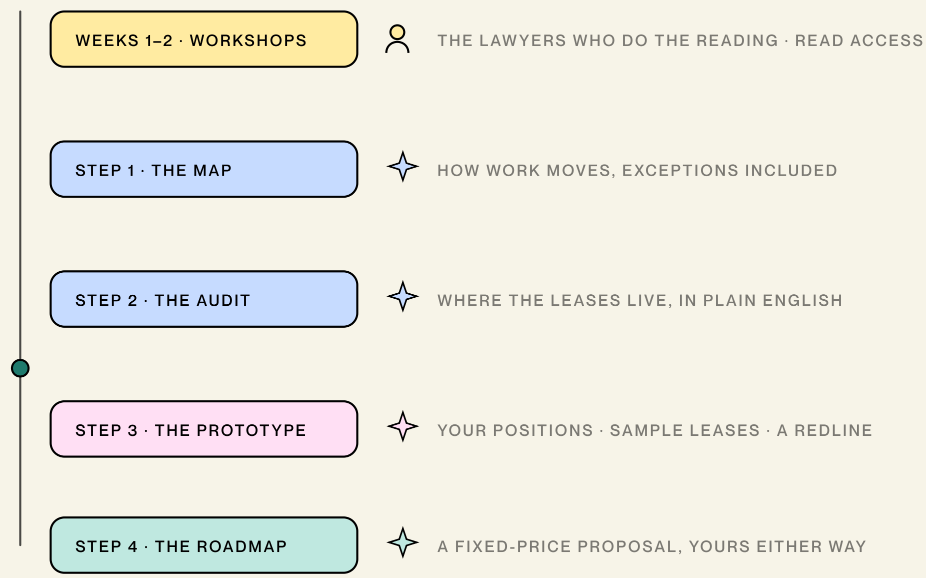
Ask us the same seven. **The answers are the review layer described above,** and a Jumpstart is where you check them on your own paper.

What we do, and what we would ask

Switchboard maps how a team's week actually runs, then builds the software around the reading. Custom software, with AI where the reading is and a lawyer at every decision. **We build the review layer, the software that reads a lease against your positions and hands the lawyer a redline with the flags already on it, around your own paper.**

The way in is the **AI Jumpstart**: fixed scope, fixed price, two to four weeks for one workflow. For a legal team that workflow is almost always the first read. We ask for read access to how the work runs today, and workshops with the lawyers who do it. Nothing migrates and nothing in production is touched. If you build with us afterwards, the same team carries it through the **AI Deployment Studio**, as a project or a retainer.

THE JUMPSTART · TWO WEEKS OF YOURS, FOUR STEPS OF OURS



The person marks the two weeks your team carries; the spark marks the four steps we hand back. **Your current folder, calendar and lease system run untouched the whole time.**

Everything above is yours. The map, the audit, the prototype, the plan, whether or not you build with us. And your positions document is the ruler all of it measures against.

If this is your team's week, let's talk

Twenty minutes. No deck. A conversation about which loop takes the most hours at your company, and what mapping it would look like. Bring whoever owns the budget. **Book a call: withswitchboard.com/book-a-call**

This playbook also lives as an interactive page, with a calculator for your own numbers and a downloadable workbook: the calculator, a positions document template, the two-week audit sheet, with a one-page guide. **withswitchboard.com/playbook/legal-real-estate**