



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Jenny Van Veen

Why Pro Bono?—What You Need To Know

Try to list professions that inherently expect their members to give portions of their time to the underprivileged for free; it will probably be a short list. At the top of that list, however, would almost certainly be the legal profession.

Pro Bono Publico: For the public good. “Pro bono” is practically synonymous with the word lawyer. But why is it that lawyers, unlike many other prominent professionals, are expected to provide free legal services to the disadvantaged? And why do law firms continue to support this endeavor?

Part of the answer probably lies in the simple fact that indoctrination regarding pro bono work begins early. From the first day of law school, students are told that with the degree comes an obligation to donate time and services to those who otherwise would not be able to afford it. They are told that it is not only a moral responsibility, but a rewarding process that will contribute to their overall practice in many ways.

While students may agree pro bono is equally rewarding for both sides, they may find it difficult to put these thoughts into action. Many choose the practice of law with aspirations of providing a needed service—changing the world so to speak—and a commitment to “righting wrong.” Those individuals may not feel the pressure to donate their time and services, as it is probably incumbent of their practice. There are others, however, who practice for the intellectual challenge, power, prestige, and/or the lure of the almighty dollar. While they don’t blame others for wanting to donate their time freely, quite frankly, it is not on the top of their priority lists.

Nonetheless, look at the law firms of the attorneys who pursued private-service careers over public-interest ones and you will be hard pressed to find a firm that does not have pro bono prominently displayed on its agenda. The question is, how focused is the firm on making pro bono work an integral part of its culture and structure?

One example of a pro bono program may provide some clues. One of Atlanta’s largest and most respected firms, Powell Goldstein LLP, recently established the Powell Goldstein Fellowship, sponsored by the firm to serve the Atlanta Legal Aid Society. At Powell Goldstein, the Fellowship is viewed as an honor, and the recipient is carefully selected by the firm.

Leah Fisher, Manager of Recruitment for Powell Goldstein, stated, “Powell Goldstein established its fellowship with Atlanta Legal Aid as a way for the firm to show its continued commitment to pro bono work while also providing an incoming associate with a demonstrated interest in pro bono work the opportunity to work fulltime as a staff attorney at Atlanta Legal Aid for 4 to 6 months. The benefit is that the fellowship gives the associate the opportunity to develop client counseling and advocacy skills early on in his or her career while also providing valuable legal services to clients with low incomes.”

Still, fellowships and other pro bono activities appear focused on those already dedicated at some level to the work. And we know the work is important at least because of the obvious obligation to better society. Yet, given

A Tale of Two Cities

the tension between billable hours and non-paying, public-interest endeavors, one must wonder what drives firms to include pro bono commitment in their compensation and evaluation structure, initiate the creation of special committees, and sometimes create a management position dedicated solely to its pursuit? Plus, when pro bono work is integrated with the firm's requirements for associates, why should you be forced to take part? Several areas offer answers.

Relationships With The Community For our second case example, we examined a firm with a slightly different picture. Though this firm certainly scores high marks regarding large-scale transactions and marquis clientele, it is not considered one of the more traditional firms in New York. In addition to an undeniable New York presence, this firm is more notable for significant growth in other major United States cities and metropolitan locations across several continents.

Public perception is key to the success of any law firm. What better way to market a firm and attract clients than by having your firm name associated with activities that improve the community? Pro bono is an excellent way to build rapport and be viewed as a leader by the public.

Professional Development

Given the nature of a large-firm environment, work assigned to junior attorneys can be limited and at times tedious. Pro bono offers an associate the opportunity to get autonomy and experience not typically found early in a big-firm career. Pro bono is an excellent way to increase knowledge and develop legal skills quickly.

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Recruiting

Students are very interested and will heavily research a firm's commitment to pro bono. They look for firms who not only announce they are strong advocates of pro bono, but can demonstrate that it's an integral part of the firm's framework. Firms that work to create atmospheres in which the value of pro bono service is recognized and appreciated will most often attract future associates who may be the next big rainmaker.

Client Interaction

Low client contact is endemic to law firm life and often a major source of job dissatisfaction. Effectively handling a client is a key to the successful practice of law. As a result, partners are cautious about the amount of client face time associates receive. And there is the problem. Interaction with clients is a skill that has to develop right along with technical skills, but partners loathe to let junior attorneys near the firm's valuable clients. With pro bono, young attorneys deal with the clients immediately and are viewed as project leaders.

Diversity of Practice

In mid-to-large firms, attorneys typically spend their careers focused on a specific practice area. While there are definite advantages to being an expert in one area of the law, taking on a project outside the usual realm of one's practice can be a refreshing change. Indeed a pro bono project may be just what an attorney needs to keep the practice of law from becoming routine and stale.

So great, pro bono work will increase firms' places in the community and how they manage their associates, but what is in the work for you as an individual?

Simple. Roll all of the above into one, and you are likely to end up a much happier, more gratified attorney. By doing pro bono work, you will service your community, your firm will prosper (and, yes, when the firm is happy, your life at the firm improves), you will deal directly with clients, your skills will broaden, and your practice will be more diverse. In the end, it is difficult to argue that committing yourself to pro bono projects will not actually benefit you more than the other party.

Indeed, firms must understand that the work benefits them and their associates because although pro bono and the law have always gone hand-in-hand, firms' commitments to institutionalizing formal pro bono policies are becoming more common. True, firms may have offered some recognition to attorneys for committing their time to pro bono in the past, but written policies and stated goals are surfacing more and more. So for those who wonder why pro bono should be an obligatory component of your practice, just remember that not only is it for the public good, it's good for you too.