

# How Much Should I Feature My Pro Bono Experience?

Attorneys are often given conflicting information regarding what law firms do and don't want to hear about pro bono work. There is indeed tension between law firms' desire to participate in highly visible pro bono work, and their desire to have their associates perform maximum billable work.

The long and the short of it is this: while firms often love the positive publicity of performing pro bono work, they often shy away from someone who is *too* enthusiastic about it. The obvious reason for this is that they want someone who will make money for the firm, and pro bono work does not pay. If you appear to prefer pro bono work over billable work, the firm may see you as someone whose primary goals do not include making money for the firm. For this reason, many attorneys are guided by counselors and recruiters to downplay their pro bono work, and, in the traditional interview context, this may be a wise move.

However, there are some situations in which pro bono work should not be downplayed.

## 1. *You are looking to take on a level of responsibility higher than your class year.*

If you can get experience above and beyond your year, the work is very much worth mentioning. For example, a litigator may get an opportunity to argue a matter in federal court at an early stage in her career, and handle the entire thing. A corporate attorney may have the chance to incorporate a non-profit organization, or a tax attorney may be able to advise that entity with some autonomy. These are all valuable experiences which will show that the firm has enough faith in you that they are willing to invest in you by allowing you to spend some non-billable time building your own skill set. This reflects well upon you. Still, you should probably not put these matters as your first resume line item if you are performing these tasks within your own practice area. Rather, they should probably be towards the bottom of the list, with the prominent billable matters listed first.

## 2. *You are looking to transition to another area of law.*

Pro bono work can be a great way to gain experience within another area of law. If, for example, you are a corporate attorney looking to transition to litigation, you should feature any pro bono litigation experience you have gotten front and center on your resume. [You should also mention in a cover letter that you have targeted this pro bono work with an eye towards gaining experience in this second field and ultimately transitioning to it.](#)

## 3. *You are looking to practice in a quasi pro bono capacity within a law firm.*

I sometimes get positions for pro bono coordinating attorneys, or affordable housing attorneys within law firms. These positions are very rare, but they do come up. Of course, if you are applying for one of these listings, your pro bono experience should be prominently featured.

## 4. *You are looking to transition out of the law firm context and into the public, government or non-profit sector.*

Again, if you can show that you have been active in the pro bono community even while doing well at a law firm, this is very appealing to pro-bono and service oriented employers. Even non-private employers want to know that you will work as hard as a big firm attorney, but also that you have a passion for their cause.

In sum, in many cases, those who are applying for traditional law firm jobs within their own practice area may indeed want to downplay some of their pro bono experience, so as not to appear to prefer pro bono work over billable work. However, in some situations, highlighting pro bono work may be more than appropriate.