

The Value of Incorporating Pro Bono into Your Practice

By Leor Barak

Pro bono representation is an integral component of practicing law. It is a long-standing tradition in the legal profession, and nearly every bar association in the United States stresses the importance of doing pro bono work. Aside from the ethical imperative, there are numerous reasons to include pro bono work in your practice, including its practical benefits to your career. Three important benefits are skill development, marketing and client development, and enjoyment and fulfillment.

Skill development

Pro bono work develops tangible skills—whether you are a firm associate, solo practitioner, or in-house lawyer—that may not otherwise be developed at the beginning of your career.

Client management. Managing clients is extremely important as a lawyer, and not all young lawyers will have the opportunity to work directly with clients early in their practices. Especially for solo practitioners, one's short-term success is dependent on the immediate development of client-management skills. A pro bono case gives a newer attorney the opportunity to build these skills through defining the work's scope, setting client expectations, setting appropriate methods and times for communication, facilitating and organizing client meetings, and providing clients with follow-up information.

Case management. This includes client management plus the ability to interact with opposing counsel, prioritize action steps, account for and manage time, be resourceful, and organize meetings with clients, attorneys, and experts. Pro bono work accelerates the pace at which a new attorney learns these skills. A pro bono matter can take a new attorney from a team's junior associate to the sole, lead counsel overnight.

Litigation skills. Young lawyers may lack a more experienced attorney's confidence in courtroom matters. In the pro bono realm, litigating is much more accessible. Commonly, law firms take on a pro bono litigation matter so that an

associate can gain litigation skills. Even transactional attorneys can benefit from expanding their legal practice experience to include litigation through pro bono work. At some point, it will come in handy, directly or indirectly.

Substantive law practice development.

Taking on a pro bono matter can enable a lawyer to jump into a new practice area by helping the lawyer develop substantive skills and cultivate professional contacts in new practice areas. A new attorney will likely find that colleagues will gladly lend their expertise on a pro bono matter.

Marketing and client development

Pro bono work often introduces attorneys to people who will play important roles in their careers. A new lawyer may do pro bono work for a nonprofit, only later to be retained by an influential board member on an unrelated matter. In general, interacting with community organizations and the people they serve expands a lawyer's professional network and career horizons.

Fun and reward. Too often, new attorneys lose sight of the importance of work-life balance. One way to gain perspective on work and life is to make professional opportunities fun and interesting. Pro bono matters can fill that niche by reminding lawyers what is fun about their jobs. Finding ways to make work enjoyable leads to career fulfillment, lasting relationships, and a smoother path to success.

Taking on pro bono matters enriches a lawyer's breadth of knowledge and experience. It also provides tangible skills and benefits that will positively influence an entire career. To the left are resources you can use to find pro bono matters, and to the right are considerations in picking the right one for you. Join the ranks of the many attorneys across the country who make pro bono work a regular part of their practices.

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WHERE TO FIND PRO BONO OPPORTUNITIES

- ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono & Public Service and the Center for Pro Bono www.americanbar.org/groups/probono_public_service.html
- Celebrate Pro Bono 2011 www.celebrateprobono.org
- Bar associations (local, state, federal)
- State bar websites
- Legal Aid and Defenders organizations
- Transactional pro bono programs
- University law school clinics
- Courts (e.g., federal bankruptcy court)
- Colleagues
- Friends and family

HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT PRO BONO MATTER

Consider the following when making a commitment to a pro bono matter:

- **Time.** Is the time commitment realistic? A pro bono matter requires utmost professionalism just like any other client relationship.
- **Expertise.** Is the matter within the lawyer's practice areas? If not, is the attorney capable of ethical, competent representation?
- **Pro bono broker.** Nonprofit legal service organizations and bar associations often vet and refer nonprofit matters. If applicable, consider how much support or intervention they can provide.
- **Client flexibility.** Does the client understand the schedule and a legal action's pace? Is the matter urgent? Is the client placing unrealistic expectations on the lawyer?