

Why Firms Should Help Associates Do More Pro Bono Work

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Associates may hesitate to take on pro bono matters due to the added commitment, but pro bono work has tangible benefits for both associates and law firms.[...]

As a junior associate, I was looking for the elusive courtroom experience that is important for young attorneys who are just beginning their careers at large firms. I knew that getting into a courtroom would be the best way to improve my litigation skills and advance my career, but I also knew that it would likely be many years before I obtained that experience on a client-billable matter. I thus sought out pro bono projects that offered me the opportunity to argue in court, and handled two such matters as a third-year associate.

First, I drafted and argued a bond motion in immigration court where I got the on-my-feet experience that I was looking for. I visited my client in a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center, interviewed him to put together his motion papers. During the hearing in court, I had to address a new point from opposing counsel, which forced me to think and strategize quickly, a skill that I have been able to repeat many times since. I won the motion and it was a great feeling knowing that the family would be able to stay together while his immigration case was pending.

Next, I took on a domestic violence matter where my client was seeking a restraining order. At the hearing, I gave an opening statement, argued a preliminary motion, and handled the direct examinations of my client and of a police officer. While the matter was ultimately resolved through a settlement, the experience allowed me to counsel my client through a difficult negotiation process. In the end, my client received enhanced child support and sole custody of her children — a result well worth the time and effort.

These matters, as well as other pro bono projects that I have been a part of, have convinced me that all firms should develop pro bono programs that foster skill building for young associates. Pro bono cases allow young associates to be the main point of client contact, to drive the matter forward and to counsel their clients through legal issues that can sometimes be very complex.

While associates may not be getting that experience on billable matters, as they become more senior, they will eventually become the first call that the client makes, and past pro bono experience will allow associates to become comfortable handling client questions or concerns.

In addition to client interaction, associates learn about matter ownership, time management and team leadership on pro bono matters.

Finally, as described above, opportunities that allow for courtroom experience are especially valuable for litigation associates. To this day, I would have no courtroom experience if not for my pro bono matters. I feel much better equipped as a litigator having had that experience. At times, the practice of BigLaw can seem impersonal — like it makes no real difference in the world. Engaging in pro bono work counterbalances that feeling and provides a sense of fulfillment to associates.[...]

When considering taking on pro bono cases, associates should keep in mind that these matters are well worth the time and that nothing can compare to the great satisfaction that comes with knowing you actually made a difference in a client's life. I would encourage associates to make their supervising attorneys aware of the pro bono cases they are working on so that their workloads can be managed appropriately. For example, an upcoming court hearing on a pro bono matter may need to take precedence over other matters so that the associate is able to carve out time to prepare effectively.

My pro bono work was recognized by partners and discussed in my reviews as important substantive experiences where I built a litigation skill set. Firms should ensure that associates' pro bono work is acknowledged by partners and the attorneys to whom the associate reports.

Active partner participation in pro bono programs is key to encouraging pro bono work within a firm. It creates a positive perception of pro bono work among associates, and also assuages the concerns that associates may have that pro bono work is not seen as equal to billable work. [...]