

The Hidden Benefits of Pro Bono

By Deb Mallgrave – December 17, 2013

Pro bono work provides lawyers with opportunities to give back to the community, but there are other, less-recognized career benefits that stem from pro bono work. Newer lawyers can gain experience, confidence, connections, and visibility both inside and outside their firms. More senior attorneys, particularly when they lead a firm's or office's pro bono program or a larger team on a significant pro bono case, can gain even greater visibility as well as case-management and law-firm leadership skills.

Junior Associates—Gain Experience and Confidence

Experience. Through pro bono cases, litigation associates can get their first depositions, hearings, or even their first trial. The experience of Kendra Beckwith, with Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell LLP, in Colorado, demonstrates the breadth of experience pro bono can provide. She took on her first pro bono matter as a third-year and soon found herself running a major case with several other associates. As a young associate, she learned to delegate and manage a team of associates (even giving one attorney his first deposition). Her pro bono experience allowed her to showcase her skills to senior partners without having to brag about them. She did not have to tell them what she could do or what experiences she was ready for; she could simply show them.

Another associate, Sara McClammer, with Hoover Hull LLP, in Indiana, believes her pro bono work has helped develop her oral advocacy skills. Sara volunteers regularly at a local clinic, doing client intake or screening interviews. In the clinic setting, she is required to think on her feet and be responsive to clients in need of real-time advice.

Pro bono cases also offer valuable client-management skills. Associates can learn how to work with a client and discover how to meet a client's objectives and expectations (or even help clients redefine their expectations). Because pro bono clients may be less sophisticated than corporate clients, associates also must learn to communicate effectively and drop the legalese to explain the purpose and strategy of the legal proceedings.

Confidence. Gaining experience also increases a newer attorney's confidence. There is such a steep learning curve following law school that it can be easy for attorneys to slip into the "nothing I do is good enough or fast enough" mindset. Taking a pro bono case gives associates an opportunity to try out new skills, take charge, and gain confidence from doing so.

Partners, including those the associates work with or turn to for advice with pro bono matters, may take notice of an associate's new skills and experiences—which can lead to better work assignments and increased responsibility. That was certainly Kendra Beckwith's experience. Through her pro bono case, she established a relationship with a senior partner that led to new opportunities she otherwise might not have received. She earned a spot on that same partner's next trial team and argued a case in front of a federal appellate court as a fifth-year associate.

I also credit my pro bono efforts with enhancing the role I played during one of my first trials. Just as I was to begin the trial, our local public law center announced that I would be honored as attorney of the year for my pro bono efforts. The trial judge responded to the announcement by congratulating me from the bench (out of the presence of the jury). I was second chair in that trial, but once the judge congratulated me, my responsibilities increased dramatically. I questioned more witnesses than originally planned, including an expert. I also prepared and argued jury instructions and other motions, and the client looked to me more for advice and assistance.

Senior Attorneys—Pro Bono as a Path to Leadership

For more senior attorneys, pro bono can also be a path to becoming a leader in the community and the firm.

Community leadership. Shortly after I entered the pro bono arena, I became our office's representative on the firm's pro bono committee. In addition to my litigation work, I managed pro bono cases, tracked pro bono activity, and worked to ensure that my office met the firm's pro bono expectations.

As part of my role, I became involved with a local organization (led by a retired justice of the California Court of Appeal) that hosts a yearly reception to introduce new associates to the pro bono opportunities available to them. I also participated in a community-wide, law firm pro bono effort to stop an ordinance targeted at closing a homeless shelter. Over the years, I continued to work with a local public-law center to place cases with our firm and assist with their community outreach efforts. I now proudly serve on the board of directors for that organization.

Rita Lin, of Morrison & Foerster, credits her success with a high profile pro bono case for earning her a spot on the *Daily Journal's* list of 100 "Top Women Lawyers for 2012." The case was *Golinski v. U.S. Office of Personnel Management*. While the case started out as a challenge to an administrative ruling denying Golinski's request to add her same-sex spouse to her employer-provided health benefits, it blossomed into a constitutional challenge to the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Golinski was one of the four DOMA challenges the U.S. Supreme Court was asked to consider when the Court agreed to hear *United States v. Windsor* (ultimately finding Section 3 of the DOMA unconstitutional). The case definitely promoted Rita internally and externally, and likely helped set her apart as she was made partner in 2013.

Law firm leadership. Managing a firm's pro bono program also provides leadership opportunities. I developed leadership ability by creating and managing a more structured pro bono program in our office, for which the firm was recently recognized with a statewide award.

Developing a sustainable pro bono program was not as simple as I first thought. There were three significant challenges in the way. First, the associates were not aware of the firm's pro bono policies—that attorneys were expected to do 50 hours of pro bono work a year, and the firm gave full billable credit for every pro bono hour worked (even for hours over 50). Second, some associates were nervous about taking a new case for fear of not having a senior partner to guide them if they needed support. Third, associates did not know where to find cases that might interest them.

I addressed each of these aspects systematically. I made sure to inform associates of the firm's policies and used my own experiences as evidence that the firm stood behind them. I also dispelled the notion that being in charge of a pro bono case meant associates were on their own. To the contrary, the firm required that a partner be on every pro bono case. Third, I surveyed attorneys to determine the type of cases associates and partners were looking for, and then sought to match them with those opportunities. When I found opportunities that matched an attorney's known interest or expertise, I sent targeted emails to those individuals, made phone calls, or even walked down the hall for a face-to-face conversation about taking a new pro bono case.

To generate additional interest in pro bono, I created a program that would provide leadership opportunities to junior associates and utilize our office's summer associates. I found discrete pro bono cases that the summer associates could work on and potentially complete during their summer. The cases were not substantively complex, but involved different skills used in the legal practice—client meetings and fact gathering, legal research and digesting certain federal regulations, and investigative research and skills. Each summer associate was paired with a junior attorney, paralegal, and a translator. We are now in our seventh year of that program.

Along the way, we began hosting the same program at a local law school. Our office now supervises six to twelve law students a year in handling these same types of cases. These cases seek humanitarian immigration relief for victims of serious crimes (including domestic violence, sex abuse, and human trafficking) who cooperate in the investigation or prosecution of the crime.

In just the past two years, the office has handled more than 90 pro bono matters benefitting more than 200 individuals, and we have donated more than 3,100 hours a year. At any given time, more than half of the firm's attorneys are involved with pro bono matters, and most contribute to the firm's overall efforts. The cases cover a wide spectrum and include human rights, immigration relief, adoption, elder abuse, collection defense, personal injury, employment and transactional assistance to nonprofits.

The firm's efforts were recognized in 2012, when the office received the California State Bar President's Pro Bono Service Award. That same year the office was recognized by The Public Law Center of Orange County as the 2012 Law Firm of The Year for its exemplary commitment to providing access to justice for low-income residents of Orange County.

It is hard to predict the hidden benefits that attorneys will find through pro bono, but based on my experience I am convinced the benefits go far beyond "doing the right thing." Pro bono efforts certainly help those in need, but more than that, they provide attorneys with opportunities to gain leadership and case-management skills that are crucial to advancing their careers.

Keywords: woman advocate, litigation, pro bono, associates, leadership, summer associates, human rights

[Deb Mallgrave](#) is counsel at Snell & Wilmer LLP in Costa Mesa, California.

© 2014 by the American Bar Association. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved. This information or any portion thereof may not be copied or disseminated in any form or by any means or stored in an electronic database or retrieval system without the express written consent of the American Bar Association.