

## SUMMER ASSOCIATES

## The 'Pros' Of Pro Bono

**These projects offer  
opportunities for insights  
into law firm life.**

**By George Royle**

**S**o you've landed a job as a summer associate. Congratulations! This is your opportunity to learn about the hands-on practice of law, the skills that make a good lawyer, and the firm where you have chosen to spend three months.

Taking on a pro bono assignment during your summer can serve all three of those ends, as well as give you a chance to put what you've learned so far in law school to work for the common good. Here are some pros and cons (mostly pros) of doing summer pro bono work, and some practical advice on how to make that experience rewarding.

### Four 'Pros' Of Summer Pro Bono

Each of the following "pros," standing alone, is a reason for you to take on a pro bono project this summer. Taken together, they should make your decision to do it a no-brainer.

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First, taking on a pro bono project is the best and quickest way for you to learn what it means to be a full-fledged lawyer making decisions that affect a client's well-being. Intensive involvement on the pro bono project will be a huge plus because you will be able to gain a "big picture" perspective on a matter that may teach you about the challenges that more senior attorneys face daily.

Second, a pro bono matter is a great opportunity to practice three essential skills for effective lawyering: communicating with your client, strategic decision-making and legal writing.

For example, my first summer pro bono assignment was to incorporate a community center in upper Manhattan. That meant spending time with the client to understand its goals for the center, thinking through the corporate structure that made the most sense to meet those goals,

and drafting corporate bylaws to match. Whatever the subject of your pro bono matter, it will inevitably involve these three components, all of which a good lawyer must master.

Third, taking on a pro bono project will help you evaluate your summer firm. Although most pay lip service to the importance and value of pro bono work for their associates, their commitment to pro bono can vary substantially, and is likely to reflect the firm's overall desirability as a place to start your career.

Take on a pro bono matter, and then ask yourself: Do partners and senior associates show interest in mentoring me on non-paying work? If I were a full-time associate, would the firm give me full credit for the time I spend working pro bono? Are the activities limited in scope, or does the firm participate in a wide variety of pro bono activities that demonstrate a true commitment to it? How did my project find its way to the firm? The answers to these questions will demonstrate a lot about the firm and its people.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly,

your summer pro bono project is an excellent opportunity to do good. Whether it involves obtaining a restraining order on behalf of an abused woman, fighting housing discrimination, or helping a non-profit incorporate and lease office space, the tools you have already developed as a law student, coupled with the resources of your summer firm, can have an immediate, lasting, positive impact on your clients' lives or the lives of those they serve. Don't miss your chance to make a difference.

### There Are A Few 'Cons'

Of course, summer pro bono isn't all fun and games. While I can't think of any reasons not to take on a project, good lawyers should always keep their expectations realistic, and anticipate the following potential downsides.

First, you might not see your pro bono project resolved. A sizeable portion of law practice is a marathon, not a sprint, and three months pass quickly.

But don't let the prospect of not concluding your project deter you from taking one on. Instead, anticipate your early departure from it, and use that as an impetus for working closely with an associate or partner who can mentor you on the matter during the summer, and take it over when you leave.

Second, pro bono projects, like any legal matter, do not always end in your favor. Your client may be denied asylum, or the not-for-profit may not get off the ground. Most often, this isn't your fault, but rather a reflection of the fact that lawyers aren't miracle workers. Of course, that doesn't make it any less disappointing when it happens—but it should not deter you from investing your time and energy in pro bono.

Third, pro bono work can be emotionally taxing. Many such projects that firms make available to their summer associates involve personally sensitive issues

such as domestic violence, political persecution or racial discrimination.

It would be a mistake for you to decline pro bono work merely to avoid confronting the ugliness of these issues, particularly because your position as a summer associate gives you the opportunity to right significant wrongs. But to be an effective advocate, you should prepare yourself mentally for the possibility that your pro bono project may be deeply affecting.

### Some Practical Summer Advice

You can make the most of your summer pro bono project by following these practical tips:

- **Get involved right away!** Your summer will fly by, and although there's no guarantee that you'll see your project through to its conclusion, the chances of that happening are better if you pick up a project your first week on the job.

- **Team up with an associate or partner as a project mentor.** It's likely that your firm will do this for you initially, but you should be sure to keep your mentor involved once the project is underway. Remember, your supervisors are busy too, and cannot always be counted upon to keep tabs on you.

Giving them weekly reports on the progress of your pro bono matter is good training, makes a great impression, and helps protect your client's interests if the summer ends before the matter is concluded.

- **Treat your pro bono client exactly as you would a paying client.** The ethics rules require this of you and your summer firm, and it's what your client deserves.

- **Make sure your pro bono client understands that you are not yet a licensed attorney, and that you are being supervised.** Your client should have your supervisor's contact information as well as your own.

- **Don't underestimate the amount of**

**time a pro bono matter will take from your schedule.** Your pro bono project will likely eat up as much, if not more, time than a paying matter. If you're unsure about the level of commitment required for a pro bono project, be sure to ask your supervisor or a member of your firm's pro bono team before you take the matter on.

- **If you begin to feel overwhelmed by your pro bono project—or any other project—whether because of the workload, the substance, or the emotional strain, ask for help.** Even the most senior lawyers struggle to balance the professional demands on their time. It will be considered a mark of professionalism for you to alert your supervisors if you think you are stretched too thin to be an effective advocate for your clients.

- **In the same vein, if a scheduling conflict arises between your pro bono work and another project to which you have been assigned, be sure to keep your supervisors on both projects informed.** Do not assume that you should dedicate time first to a paying matter and let the pro bono matter slide. You and the firm are obligated to pay attention to both. Let your supervisors on both projects decide how to allocate your time.

- **Be aggressive and make the project yours.** More than any other matter you work on this summer, your pro bono project will allow you to sink your teeth into legal issues, strategize, agonize, and make an immediate difference in the life of your client.

Isn't that what you went to law school for? •

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