

HARVARD LAW SCHOOL CLINICAL AND PRO BONO PROGRAMS

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Evaluating Law Firm Pro Bono Work

There are many good reasons to do pro bono work. The first, and perhaps most obvious reason, is that there is tremendous unmet need for legal services as non-profit organizations and legal services agencies cannot keep up with the demand. Private law firms and corporate legal departments are increasingly filling in the gaps to meet the legal needs of the poor and working poor.

Pro bono work is also immensely satisfying work. Especially within the context of a large law firm, pro bono work provides you with a great opportunity to build your lawyering skills (taking depositions, getting into court) and gives you greater autonomy on your cases. Building your skill set and professional network is especially important for future mobility within the legal profession. Most lawyers do change jobs throughout their careers; having worked on pro bono cases can give you the edge you need to get the next job of your dreams. It also makes you stand out within a firm and provides an opportunity for you to work with others throughout the firm you may not usually have the chance to.

If you are interested in working at a firm with a strong pro bono commitment, the following information may be useful to you in assessing the firm's commitment to pro bono work. Remember that, as with any job, the personal match between you and a particular firm is the key consideration. If you care about doing pro bono and/or you care about keeping your options open for a career shift later, then you should ask plenty of questions. If you don't ask about pro bono (out of fear that you may turn off the interviewer) then you may end up in a job that is not a good fit for you. Do keep in mind that the vast majority of your work will be on billable matters.

Assessing the Firm's Commitment to Pro Bono

- 1) Look at the substance of pro bono cases firms take. If you have a particular interest area and wish to build a skill set in that area, look to see if the firm is doing pro bono work on that issue (civil rights work, immigration, death penalty, etc.) Ask for examples of cases attorneys in the firm have worked on in the last two years. Some firms have conflicts that prevent them from taking on particular cases.
- 2) Ask if the firm works with particular non-profits on pro bono work? How are those relationships structured? (e.g. there are extended rotations at a non-profit, fellowship programs, weekly clinics, etc.) If there is a particular organization for which you'd like to volunteer, see which firms have members on its board or have devoted substantial resources to it. You may even contact the organization to discuss the relationship with and reputation of the firm.

3) Ask why the interviewer/associate/partner came to the firm and what makes this firm different.

4) Ask about the commitment of the firm to pro bono:

- What percentage of lawyers at the firm do pro bono work?
- How much time per lawyer does each spend on pro bono work?
- Do both associates and partners do pro bono work?
- Is the firm a signatory to the Pro Bono Institute's Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge?
- Has the firm won any pro bono awards?

5) Find out about the structure of the pro bono program:

- Who runs it? Is the role full-time or in addition to the attorney's other work? Is there administrative support for pro bono?
- Who assigns or distributes cases?
- How are cases brought into the firm?
- Can associates bring in their own pro bono cases?
- Does the firm have a written pro bono policy?

6) Ask about the effect of pro bono work on fee generating work:

- Does pro bono work count towards billable hours?
- Is there a maximum number of pro bono hours that can be applied toward the billable hour requirement?
- How are pro bono hours counted when determining bonuses and promotions?
- How does an attorney's involvement in pro bono work impact his/her advancement at the firm?
- Is it part of the firm culture to do pro bono?
- Is there a point at which doing too much pro bono work is frowned upon?

Additional Law Firm Pro Bono Resources

~ *Vault Guide to Law Firm Pro Bono Programs* (www.vault.com)

~ *American Lawyer* A-List ranks law firms on a variety of factors, including pro bono, diversity, revenue per lawyer, and associate satisfaction (www.americanlawyer.com) (usually July issue with pro bono scores)

~ NALP Directory (<http://www.nalpdirectory.com/>) Pro Bono/Public Interest tab

~ Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge (www.probonoinst.org) ABA's challenge to all law firms to dedicate 3 – 5% of their billable hours to pro bono work

~ www.corporateprobono.org

~ www.probono.net

~ Law Students Building a Better Legal Profession <http://www.betterlegalprofession.org/>

~ Law Firm web sites, Pro Bono Annual Reports, Pro Bono newsletters