



Embracing Pro Bono Is Gratifying, But Can Be A Cultural Shift for Internationally Trained Lawyers



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"Certainly, life as a lawyer is a bit more complex today than it was a century ago. The ever-increasing pressures of the legal marketplace, the need to bill hours, to market to clients, and to attend to the bottom line, have made fulfilling the responsibilities of community service quite difficult.

But public service marks the difference between a business and a profession. While a business can afford to focus solely on profits, a profession cannot. It must devote itself first to the community it is responsible to serve. I can imagine no greater duty than fulfilling this obligation. And I can imagine no greater pleasure."

— Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, 78 Or. L. Rev. 385, 391 (1999)

To provide legal services to those who are unable to afford skilled professionals, or working pro bono, is a concept that exists predominately in the United States. With an increasing number of clinical programs and structured opportunities available to provide pro bono services at law schools, students are exposed to pro bono opportunities early on in their legal careers. However, it is markedly different for lawyers who get their first law degree in a different jurisdiction and then come to the United States to get another degree or practice here.

In most countries, law school is focused on rigorous academic achievement and internships. Unless you choose to work in the public sector, a young lawyer is often immersed in legal briefs and commercial agreements with little time for much else. Further, there is little exposure to pro bono because the culture of pro bono is predominately non-existent in law firms and corporations outside the United States.

Therefore, for most international law students or lawyers, the introduction is delivered by a recently enacted requirement by the New York State Office of Court Administration, which mandates the completion of 50 hours to pro bono legal services before being admitted to the bar.

This initiation to the world of pro bono is taking a step further by Rule 6.1 of the Rules of Professional Conduct, which strongly encourages attorneys to provide at least 50 hours of pro bono legal services every year. This creates a culture that young lawyers can embrace early on in their career.

The world of pro bono can also be addictive—the gratification of using one’s law degree to make a tangible difference is second to none. To be able to hear life stories from clients, often those of struggles, dreams, financial incapacity and abuse, and to learn from their perseverance and strength isn’t an experience traditional legal jobs usually provide.

Advising a 20-something entrepreneur who has a business idea, but no idea of where to begin, helping a parent obtain legal immigration status so he won’t be separated from his children, and aiding a woman who is being abused, but doesn’t know who to call for help is where a young lawyer can bring together both passion and purpose.

Pro bono allows young lawyers to develop legal skills by providing an opportunity to draft documents, negotiate with opposing counsels, draft pleadings, and represent clients at trials. For many, it is also an opportunity to gain training and support from senior lawyers in their areas of interest, including from some who are often available to supervise or mentor young lawyers interested in volunteering. Pro bono also gives young lawyers a chance to develop skills in new areas they may not necessarily have worked in.

As a young lawyer who was first introduced to pro bono while attending an LL.M. program in the United States, it was one of the first things I immersed myself in when admitted to the New York State Bar, and I cannot be more grateful. Pro bono has allowed me the opportunity to enhance my skills by providing legal services to small businesses and low income entrepreneurs in New York, made me a more confident lawyer and made me more deeply compassionate to the stories of others.

Some pro bono resources:

NYSBA's Pro Bono Services Department

www.nysba.org/probono

NYSBA's Pro Bono Opportunities Guide

https://www.probono.net/ny/nysba_oppsguide/

Pro Bono Net

<https://www.probono.net/ny>

Volunteers of Legal Service:

<http://www.volspbono.org>

New York Legal Assistance Group:

<http://nylag.org>

Law Help New York:

www.lawhelpny.org

New York Free Legal Answers

ny.freelegalanswers.org

Attorney Emeritus Program

<https://www.nycourts.gov/attorneys/volunteer/emeritus/>

New York Pro Bono Reporting Requirements

<https://www.nycourts.gov/attorneys/probono/reportingreqs-intro.shtml>

New York Bar Admission Pro Bono Requirements

<https://www.nycourts.gov/ATTORNEYS/probono/baradmissionreqs.shtml>