

WILLIAM ROBERTS

The Secrets to Successful Pro-Bono Programs

How to maximise the effectiveness of CSR

Canadian lawyers have a long history of offering pro bono services. For many, it's a great way of giving back to their community, gaining experience, or supporting a cause they're particularly passionate about. Pro bono work is good for law firms too. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are often appreciated by employees and well-received by clients. However, while many law firms encourage participation in pro bono work, often there is little structure behind these programs. As a result, the programs can lack substance and/or are not sufficiently embedded into the corporate culture of the firm.

So how do you ensure your pro bono initiative is a success? Here are some recommendations:

- **COMMITTEE:** Create a committee to develop and oversee the execution of the program. If people are made accountable, the program will have a better chance of success.
- **POLICY:** Develop a formal pro-bono policy. This policy needs to include: an outline of the vision for the initiative; details on who is eligible to participate (ideally everyone in the firm); the process for participating; and how pro bono cases will be managed by the firm's administrative system.
- **DEFINE WHAT "PRO BONO" MEANS:** The concept of a "pro bono program" means different

things to different people. It's important to explicitly state what "pro bono" means for your firm.

Commonly "pro bono" means offering legal services in civil matters for disadvantaged or low income individuals, donating time to legal information clinics or to charitable, religious, civic, community, public health, and educational organizations.

At Lawson Lundell, all of these activities are classified as "pro bono." Some examples of recent work include:

- providing legal advice to a society working to connect aspiring farmers with owners of unused land;
- assisting an individual to have a Certificate of Incapacity vacated;
- incorporating an organization that has developed technology to identify handicapped parking spaces to municipal bylaw officials for ticketing as a charity for tax purposes; and
- working with the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) on a variety of matters, and, most recently, by appearing on their behalf at the Supreme Court of Canada in a Facebook

defamation case (*A.B. by her Litigation Guardian, C.D., v. Bragg Communications*).

- **CAUSES:** Will any cause be supported or will a particular issue be prioritised, such as environmental causes?

Often the cause supported is the personal choice of the lawyer. However, given the commercial realities of how law firms work, it is important to define, or at least consider, the parameters of the program before launch.

- **TIME:** To encourage participation, law firms should consider a guideline for hours to be spent on pro bono files each year.

At Lawson Lundell, up to 50 hours of pro bono work annually will be counted as billable time when evaluating performance.

- **CONTINUED PROMOTION:** Once the program has been

established, regularly remind employees about the initiative. Given the billable system in law firms, time is precious and it's easy for pro bono projects to be forgotten. Use internal communication channels to remind people about the scheme and encourage participation.

There is a great deal of value in pro bono work, both for law firms and the lawyers themselves. However the success of the program is dependent on how it is managed – so take the time to develop the vision and the structure of the program. It will be rewarding in the long-run.



William Roberts, Partner, Lawson Lundell LLP