

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT AND RECOGNITION

Recruiting and recognizing legal department volunteers is key to maintaining a successful in-house pro bono program. When a pro bono program is just getting off the ground, or expanding to incorporate more opportunities to address community needs, or when the enthusiasm has waned due to competing priorities, pro bono leaders may face challenges keeping volunteers fully engaged. This can be especially difficult when employees are working remotely or facing significant stresses, as happened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite these challenges, there are many strategies to effectively engage and recognize volunteers, allowing pro bono leaders to strengthen their legal department's pro bono efforts. Engagement and recognition strategies go hand-in-hand in developing an in-house pro bono program. Recognitions and rewards for pro bono work incentivize participation by both current and new volunteers, and help show attorneys the great impact that they can have through pro bono work.

I. Strategies for Engaging Volunteers

There are many strategies that corporate legal departments can employ in order to engage pro bono volunteers:

Getting Your GC/CLO Involved: It is essential to have the support of your General Counsel or Chief Legal Officer and other senior leaders, to show that pro bono work is valued and encouraged. Having your GC or CLO commit to participating in a pro bono event sets a strong example for the rest of the team. Increasing pro bono programming and events where the GC sends out the invitations, or speaks at an event, can also promote participation.

Performance Evaluations: It can be helpful to incentivize pro bono by considering it in performance evaluations or promotion opportunities. While few legal departments require pro bono, some legal departments have made participation and leadership in pro bono a positive consideration in performance evaluations, like [Bank of America](#) and [PNC](#).

Incorporating Pro Bono Into the Onboarding Process: When hiring new legal department employees, engage them in pro bono from the start by having a meeting to formally introduce them to the pro bono program and outline participation expectations. By having these conversations early, it will make clear to new team members that pro bono is an integral part of the department's work.

Sharing the Impact of Pro Bono through Storytelling: Persuading attorneys and other legal staff to get involved with pro bono requires storytelling, sharing the impact of pro bono work in communities and reconnecting volunteers to their passions outside of their daily work. Many people go into the legal profession with the desire to help people and make a difference. Sharing the ways in which individuals and communities are affected by pro bono can spark participation. Whether it is through a monthly newsletter, annual

report, or social event within the legal department, sharing pro bono feel-good stories captures the impact of pro bono work and increases engagement. Volunteers sharing their stories of how they helped a pro bono client can inspire new volunteers to overcome their hesitancy to participate. First-hand accounts of how the training adequately prepared the volunteer to serve, how meeting the client was impactful, or how the experience was doable and rewarding, encourages other members of the department to participate in the next pro bono opportunity. Additionally, companies can bring in representatives of legal services organizations to speak about the training opportunities, the impact of pro bono, and how to engage legal staff in activities.

Assessing Volunteer Needs and Interests: Attorneys and other legal staff will be more likely to pursue pro bono opportunities if the work matches their interests and scheduling needs. When starting a pro bono program, surveying all legal department staff is helpful to gauge what kind of projects or issues people are most passionate about. As the program grows, continue to survey department staff and adapt programming based on how the team responds. During the pandemic and other times of stress, be compassionate and strategic when discussing pro bono project opportunities with legal professionals. Many people have personal obligations, financial and emotional struggles, health concerns, and overall fatigue during this time. Be transparent about expectations and focus on those who express an interest and ability to take on pro bono.

Mentorship and Training: Many lawyers and other professionals within legal departments feel that they lack the skills or time to complete pro bono projects. Mentorship can be helpful in training and supervising new pro bono volunteers, pairing new volunteers with more experienced volunteers to help build their confidence. For attorneys, adding CLE credit to a training is helpful. Also, opening up pro bono opportunities to any lawyer in the organization can expand networks within the company and broaden mentorship.

Leadership Opportunities: Becoming involved with pro bono can help build management and leadership experience, particularly for younger staff looking to move up in a legal department. Encouraging new staff to pilot a pro bono project or become a liaison with a partner organization will allow them to develop new skills and confidence, and this may incentivize other new employees to get involved.

Making the Most of Technology: Adapting online platforms to engage volunteers, particularly remotely, is essential to keeping people engaged. Updating information online and adjusting communication, both internally and externally, helps incentivize legal employees to pursue pro bono, such as:

- Creating and updating a pro bono section on the company's website home page
- Integrating pro bono into an everyday tool by putting it on a company mobile app
- Completing and sharing annual pro bono reports online
- Creating or enhancing internal pro bono portal
- Updating virtual trainings

One-on-One Invitations: Incorporating personal invitations to invite colleagues who are not participating in pro bono can be very effective. According to Corporate Pro Bono's [2020 Benchmarking survey](#), individual outreach to new pro bono volunteers remains the most prevalent engagement strategy, with 94% of respondents utilizing one-on-one invitations. The Pro Bono Chair does not need to send all invitations. For example, the Pro Bono Chair can send out five invitations and recruit other involved individuals to send out five invites each. In an office environment, knocking on someone's door or desk and inviting them face-to-face can be highly effective; in a remote environment, a call or a personalized email can substitute.

Establishing a Pro Bono Culture: More people will be willing to participate in pro bono activities if it is a prominent part of your office culture. According to Corporate Pro Bono's [2020 Benchmarking survey](#), incorporating a social element into programming was the second-most popular strategy among respondents. Combining social interaction and networking with developing personal relationships and accountability between coworkers creates a successful environment for pro bono engagement.

For example, there are many ways to host a social event highlighting pro bono:

- Virtual or in-person “Lunch and Learns” to educate staff about pro bono opportunities, or highlight an exciting recent opportunity or pro bono “win.”
- Planning pro bono team socials, as [Freddie Mac](#) has done in the past.
- Planning events where all staff do pro bono or days where the whole company does community service. For example, BMO has a [Volunteer Day](#) where anyone can attend, expanding engagement in pro bono activities.

II. Strategies for Recognizing Volunteers

Recognition of an employee's accomplishments, including pro bono participation, boosts confidence and fulfillment at work, and acknowledgement of pro bono participants by leadership and coworkers can also incentivize others to engage in pro bono. In addition to a desire to have a positive impact on their communities, employees are motivated to do pro bono when they feel it will affect the way their GC, leadership, and coworkers see them as a colleague and person. When pro bono work is visibly commended, it honors the volunteer and the pro bono program as a whole, encouraging other legal staff to join. Also, when pro bono becomes a norm in a legal department, it may also incentivize colleagues who have not historically participated in the program to start engaging. Including the GC or CLO and other senior leaders of the legal department in the recognition process will increase the significance of the awards.

There are many ways to recognize volunteers, whether it is through rewards, small recognitions, or company-wide acknowledgements:

Tangible Awards: Giving out awards for pro bono has been historically effective at honoring the individuals who receive them and also engaging those who are not participating. For example, many companies recognize individuals with awards on display in their cube or office, including stickers, ribbons, magnets, or certificates with messages like “I did pro bono!” These awards can have negligible or low costs, and high

impact. Some companies give out different color magnets or ribbons for participants to keep at their desk, highlighting the number of hours they have completed (e.g., 25, 50, or 100-hour magnets). Some companies present an inexpensive trophy to the group within the legal department that has the highest level of participation during a given time period. Other employees notice these awards in an open workspace and it becomes a conversation starter, engaging employees who were not originally interested in pro bono. For a virtual substitute, award ideas include giving out pro bono email certificates or designing a special email signature for individuals who do pro bono, which also helps to get the word out about pro bono.

Annual Awards: Recognizing top performers within the department with big annual awards is also an effective way to honor those individuals and inspire others to do pro bono. Many departments award an annual Pro Bono Volunteer of the Year in the office in the presence of the GC (either in-person or virtually). This individual is also highlighted on the website or in the newsletter of the pro bono program or department.

Friendly Competition: Friendly competition between colleagues is a fun and engaging way to recognize pro bono team members. Giving out a trophy, t-shirt, gift card, or other give-away to an employee or team of employees for impactful pro bono participation, attending the most pro bono events, logging the most pro bono hours or another goal may also incentivize others to participate.

Special Events: Planning special events to honor pro bono team members is an effective way to celebrate the accomplishments of individuals who have already participated in pro bono while also motivating others by showing the impact of the pro bono engagement. Hosting a thank you lunch for the volunteers or an awards ceremony, whether in-person or virtual, will honor engaged employees as well as inspire others to get involved.

Personalized Recognitions: Much like how one-on-one interactions incentivize engagement, recognizing individuals in a personalized manner makes them feel special and appreciated for their hard work. Sending handwritten thank you notes to engaged individuals will be much more meaningful and personal than an email, and others may observe this and feel compelled to get involved. Personalized emails from the leadership of the pro bono program or the GC or CLO are a virtual option.

Pro Bono and Philanthropy: For departments with a budget for pro bono and philanthropy, some allow pro bono volunteers to choose a legal services organization or other nonprofit entity for the legal department to support financially if the volunteers reach a certain target (such as a \$1000 donation for 25 hours of pro bono service). This may be a powerful incentive for individuals to sustain their pro bono engagement and impact their communities through both pro bono and philanthropy.

Pro Bono Honor Rolls: Internal or external Pro Bono Honor Rolls can be an effective way to recognize your pro bono team. Pro bono leaders can nominate employees, or ask employees to nominate themselves, to a departmental or corporate honor roll for volunteers, or to the pro bono honor roll of a state bar association or court. By publicizing

and congratulating the honorees when the honor roll is published, you can celebrate highly involved individuals and incentivize others to get involved.

Recognition in Publications: Highlighting top pro bono performers on the company website can encourage participation across the team. Publishing articles about a particular pro bono achievement or highly engaged individual and how they served their clients, as well as sharing these publications with your GC and team internally, will honor the individual and spark engagement. These publications may appear on your pro bono program or department's or company's intranet page, in an email newsletter, or in an annual report.

Takeaways

Engaging volunteers and recognizing their efforts can be challenging, and it can be difficult to convince coworkers to pursue pro bono. These strategies are intended to inspire you to continue engaging and recognizing volunteers, further inspiring people to work outside of their everyday practice and serve their communities in a meaningful way.

Above all, remember these points for engaging and recognizing pro bono volunteers:

- Engage and involve your leadership.
- Share the impact of pro bono both through storytelling in your department, in your company as a whole, and in the community.
- Recognize volunteers for their time and effort, both internally and externally.
- Be compassionate, and take care of yourself and others.
- Be flexible to learning what your team is interested in through surveys and pivoting to new opportunities.

To discuss ideas for volunteer engagement and recognition for your department, reach out to Corporate Pro Bono staff at cpbo@probonoinst.org.

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