

OPINION

Firms Should Support Graduates' Goal to Provide Pro Bono Service

During job interviews, students fear revealing that they would like to volunteer.

BY MICHAEL SCUDDER

Every now and again you hear something disturbing that you wish was not true. Recently, I heard from two law students that they were hesitant to mention any interest in pro bono work during their upcoming on-campus interviews. Influenced by the legal media, online how-to guides, well-meaning guidance counselors and older classmates, law students, I was told, are increasingly of the view that expressing any interest in pro bono service will leave hiring attorneys with the fatal impression that a candidate lacks the requisite focus, drive or commitment to enter and succeed in private practice.

If ever a fear needed to be dispelled and advice undone, it's here—and urgently so.



RICK KOPSTEIN

The demands on new associates at big firms are very real. Firms invest significantly in young lawyers and expect them not only to hit the ground running, but to be prepared to endure sprints and

marathons alike for the good of their clients. Long hours, challenging deadlines, never-ending emails and the pressure to perform at peak levels are a fair picture of a firm's expectations for young attorneys.

EMBRACING CHALLENGES

None of this is about to change, and in my experience, lawyers entering private practice expect and, indeed, often embrace these challenges. Their eyes are as wide open as their energy is inspiring.

But many associates also enter large firms with a resolve to make pro bono work a meaningful part of their careers from the very beginning of their practice. They see pro bono service not just as a professional responsibility but also as a personal calling—a way of giving back and using their talents to better their communities. Many law schools reinforce this desire, instilling in students the truth that lawyers shoulder a special and weighty responsibility to serve those in need over the course of their entire careers.

Whether from experiences in law school clinics, inspiring talks by judges and practitioners, or informal mentoring discussions with professors, young associates know that pro bono service also provides welcomed opportunities to get to know clients, appear before courts, think on their feet, and convey advice to individuals and organizations relying on them for help.

Above all else, they believe and see by example that pro bono work will make them

better lawyers, yielding satisfaction beyond the lucrative compensation of private practice. There is something unsettling and artificial about shying away from any discussion of such an important part of the legal profession during on-campus interviews. This hesitancy risks creating the mistaken view that there is no place in private practice for lawyers to serve private clients while also working for the public good.

Reality and idealism can coexist in our profession. Young associates can give their all for the firm's paying clients while making time to take on a criminal or habeas corpus appeal, help an organization acquire tax-exempt status, represent an indigent client, or serve on a charitable organization's board.

With many firms encouraging young associates to strive for this balance, students should be open about their interest in a firm's (often well-publicized) pro bono opportunities. A healthy and well-expressed interest in learning more about a firm's commitment to pro bono service, accompanied by genuine enthusiasm for and a commitment to commercial litigation, mergers and acquisitions, tax, restructuring or the like, shows that applicants have actually

taken the time to think about what they can contribute to an office or practice group. It also shows that applicants are being candid about their desire for a well-rounded career.

OPEN DISCUSSION

As we begin the upcoming hiring season, I hope all involved welcome open discussion about the full range of important demands on our profession—demands that include genuine responsibilities to the underserved in our communities. To do otherwise would jeopardize not only the fulfillment and retention of young talent, but also the continuance of a legal culture built on duty as well as drive.

A glance through the pro bono pages of many large law firms will reveal that there's just too much riding on this to chart a different path.

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