

# OPINION: Law Students Should Explore BigLaw Pro Bono Options

By Michael Y. Scudder, Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP

Law360, New York (August 15, 2016, 11:07 AM ET) -- Striking the right professional balance is among the most difficult challenges lawyers face. BigLaw asks a lot of lawyers, compensates them well for running through walls for clients, and relies heavily upon smart, committed and tireless associates as a key ingredient of success. Nobody senses these realities better than law students, and a question often top of mind during law firm interviews is how best to strike the proper balance as a new associate. One part of the answer is to commit from the very outset to making pro bono work a meaningful part of your career. Set the goal of having always one pro bono matter or community improvement project ongoing at all times, and then find a firm that places the same priority on giving back.



Michael Y. Scudder

The call to give back is one most law students hear loud and clear. They enter law school with life experiences, perspectives and ambitions focused on serving others — clients and communities alike. The desire to help and serve is part of who they are as individuals, reflects who they want to be as lawyers, and often explains why they decided to go to law school in the first place. This idealism is important and healthy — needed today more than ever — and reinforced by great law professors, life-changing experiences in legal clinics, and guest lectures by renowned judges. The call to serve defines much of the fabric and culture of our nation's best law schools.

These truths sometimes find themselves nudged to the backseat in law students' discussions with law firms. I worry too many students see the demands and priorities of BigLaw in tension with a meaningful commitment to pro bono work. This perception understandably results in many students, consistent with advice they receive from well-intentioned career counselors, being reluctant to ask questions in interviews about pro bono opportunities and a firm's commitment to its community.

This needs to change. Robust commitments to a law firm's core practice and active civic engagement are not mutually exclusive. The two can and should coexist, and law students should prioritize confirming this reality when interviewing with firms. It is entirely appropriate during an interview, especially when asked if you have any questions about the firm, to inquire about pro bono opportunities for new associates.

Finding a law firm with a demonstrated commitment to pro bono work and active community engagement — and our profession is blessed with many — will enable young lawyers to actively participate in these important service opportunities from the outset of

their careers. The opportunities are as vast as the needs are acute, ranging from representing an indigent criminal defendant, helping to incorporate a nonprofit food pantry, mentoring at-risk kids, volunteering at legal aid organizations, serving on a charitable organization's board of directors, or working on criminal justice reform projects.

Set your goal at always having one pro bono or community service matter on your desk at all times. More often than not you will find the goal realistic and even helpful in speeding your own professional development. You will see your efficiency increase and your capacity to manage multiple responsibilities expand. You will find yourself working with increased focus and will experience firsthand how sharper thinking can emerge from rotating your work between multiple matters over the course of a day or week. Oftentimes our work improves when we can put it on the shelf, if only for a few hours, and then return to it with fresh eyes. Pro bono work can be a regular part of this ordinary rotation.

The value of regularly stepping forward to serve your community or a neighbor in need cannot be overstated. You will experience very directly what it means for real clients with real challenges to rely on you. You will be forced to assess risks and think critically about facts, to listen carefully and react on your feet, to communicate clearly, and to manage expectations in often challenging circumstances. You will learn through your service what it means to be a trusted adviser — in short, how to be the lawyer you want to be for all of your clients, paying and pro bono alike.

Make no mistake, though. There are sure to be times in your career, including as a new associate, when the demands of private practice will overwhelm and precede other priorities. Briefing and discovery deadlines, deal closings, bankruptcy filings and the like can require degrees of focus that necessitate putting everything else on the back burner. Everyone understands this reality of our profession; sometimes certain obligations do not afford much room for juggling others.

Always having one pro bono matter on your desk, then, is not a rigid rule. It is an aspirational objective to set for your career and to act on throughout your professional life. When work demands become overwhelming, taper your pro bono work. When your regular client work ebbs, double down on your pro bono commitment. The right goal and mix is a steady, sustained commitment to consistent pro bono and community work over the arc of your career. Let the sense of obligation to give back become stitched into your life as a lawyer. Let your commitment to give back define your ordinary days.

In doing so you will feel meaningful ownership of your career. You will see that our profession, though undeniably demanding, affords ample room and time to answer the call to serve those in need. Committing to always having one pro bono matter on your desk will ensure a balanced legal career. You will put action behind your belief that lawyers shoulder a special opportunity — indeed, a privileged obligation — to serve causes that cannot be satisfied or measured by numbers on paychecks.

Law students will approach the on-campus interviewing process with boundless energy, informed questions and an overarching goal of finding the right firm. The process of evaluating law firms has always involved weighing practice opportunities, size, geography, and personal assessments of fit and firm culture. Pro bono opportunities should be elevated to the same level of importance as these other considerations. The stakes are way too high personally, professionally and for those in need to do otherwise.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Michael Scudder is a partner in Skadden's Chicago office and leads the firm's accounting practice, which provides integrated litigation, regulatory and transactional legal services to major accounting firms. Before joining the firm, he was a White House legal adviser under President George W. Bush from 2007-2009, serving as general counsel of the National*

*Security Council. From 2002 to 2006, Scudder was an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York. He previously served as a clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy and for Judge Paul V. Niemeyer of the U.S. Courts of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.*

*The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.*