

Making Pro Bono Work: Building Sponsorship Relationships

By **Michael Scudder** and **Jay Mitchell**

*Organizations around the globe are spotlighting pro bono efforts this week as part of an annual tradition observed across professions. Publishing throughout Pro Bono Week, this **Expert Analysis series** explores the challenges and rewards of pro bono work in the legal profession.*

Promotions of pro bono work often sound in the obligations of lawyers, the importance of equal access to counsel, and the satisfaction and enrichment that redound from helping individuals and organizations in need. As lawyers who work in BigLaw, one of us as a partner and the other a junior associate, we see a distinct and underappreciated benefit of senior and junior lawyers working closely together to make pro bono service an ordinary and regular part of their professional lives. Through collaborating on pro bono matters, young associates and partners can forge lasting organic sponsorship relationships that promote professional development while simultaneously contributing to the public good.



Michael Scudder

Most young lawyers enter BigLaw with a deep desire to give back to the community, including through active pro bono service. So, too, are they rightly focused on getting off to a good start within the firm, including by meeting partners, learning the ropes of private practice, understanding a firm's culture, and distinguishing themselves from their peers. In these ways, the desire to give back through pro bono work and the urge to get off to a strong start in private practice may seem in tension. In the midst of these dynamics, however, lies an important opportunity: by collaborating with a partner on a pro bono matter, young associates can cultivate sponsorship relationships at the very outset of their careers. Developing such relationships early on through collaborative pro bono work is an effective way to receive important and lasting professional guidance while making public service a fixture of life as a lawyer.



Jay Mitchell

Sponsorship extends beyond traditional mentoring and entails a partner (or other senior lawyer) actively investing in a young lawyer's career and professional development. What often results is a trusted and mutually beneficial relationship through which the partner becomes committed to helping to advance a younger colleague's career development. Associates, in turn, receive invaluable professional guidance from a senior lawyer who they will work with, or otherwise remain close to, for years to come. Although the parlance

might be new, the practice of sponsorship has long been a key ingredient of successful professional development, promotion and retention in BigLaw.

Sound sponsorship relationships require regular, meaningful and substantive interactions between senior and junior lawyers. While this type of contact between young attorneys and partners is possible in the ordinary course, sometimes case and deal demands can limit the amount of direct contact between associates and partners. By working together on a pro bono matter, however, young associates and partners can find those exact opportunities to interact and develop consequential relationships — all while answering our profession's call to serve those in need.

An Associate's Perspective

For a first-year associate entering BigLaw, having just completed law school, approaching a partner with a request to supervise a pro bono matter may be daunting. The associate may have interacted with the partner during a summer program, and even then, most likely in a social setting, such as a firm dinner or reception. New associates often perceive partners as "too busy" and "too important" to approach with any ask, let alone with a request to collaborate on a case for an indigent inmate, to help an immigrant enter America or obtain asylum, to assist a charitable organization with incorporating and obtaining tax-exempt status, and the like. We can do better. Young lawyers enter BigLaw eager to invest meaningful portions of their career in pro bono work and community service, while recognizing that their success will depend in no small part on building professional relationships with partners. Working directly with partners on pro bono matters is a good way to sow the seeds for what could grow into such an enduring and beneficial relationship.

A key benefit to working in BigLaw is the opportunity to learn from experienced and outstanding lawyers. Much of this learning occurs when partners invest in reviewing and providing direct feedback on associates' work. Unlike matters for paying clients, which typically require numerous associates at different levels of seniority, pro bono matters present unique opportunities for the most junior associate to receive direct and detailed feedback from even the most senior partner. Associates learn the most by sitting with and talking to partners, stripped of the hierarchical pecking orders that often and necessarily accompany other matters.

The value of the learning that follows for new associates cannot be overstated. Associates find themselves inside partners' offices discussing background facts, the best strategy for achieving a client's objectives, a concrete work plan, and how best to communicate with the client. Associates receive concrete input on their written work, ideas for addressing the most difficult issues or unexpected challenges, and how to answer hard questions posed by clients. Given how busy the typical partner tends to be, working directly with a partner also forces an associate to sharpen important soft skills, such as conciseness, organization, preparation and thoroughness. Ultimately, then, collaborating with a partner on a pro bono project allows a new associate to learn directly from a senior lawyer what it means to practice law — how to develop and deliver sound advice efficiently and effectively in circumstances where the stakes are very high for the client.

The relationship that develops between the associate and partner yields other clear benefits. Through their discussions with a partner, associates often find themselves learning about new cases or deals and potential opportunities to work on those matters. Associates likewise find themselves positioned to talk comfortably with the partner about their schedule and workload, a particular experience on a case or deal, and finding an opportunity to develop a new skill (like negotiating a deal provision or taking or defending a deposition). At its best, and in time, the associate-partner relationship grows and develops to permit valued and candid career discussions. The associate, in short, feels and experiences the benefits of partner sponsorship.

The Partner's Perspective

Partners, too, benefit from sponsorship relationships. Partners know that time devoted to training, developing and mentoring new associates is time well-spent. Partners recall their time as associates and the value they received from senior lawyers explaining a particular issue, teaching a skill, and otherwise showing them how to navigate private practice. They also understand that new associates enter the firm full of energy and drive — eager to interact with senior lawyers and to learn as much as possible as fast as possible. Agreeing to supervise and collaborate with a junior associate on a pro bono project is a great way to invest early in the development of the firm's next generation.

Working together with an associate on a pro bono matter provides not only a welcomed way for partners to remain or become involved in pro bono work, but also a means for identifying and developing talent and growing relationships with junior associates. Partners are able to play a meaningful role in helping their new colleagues transition from law school to private practice. Close collaboration between a partner and associate on a pro bono matter provides ample opportunity for the partner to convey practical guidance on the nuts and bolts of daily lawyering that will help the associate get off on the right foot with other clients and colleagues. The collaboration also allows the partner to get to know the associate — to learn more about the associate's short- and long-term practice interests and broader career aspirations.

As the relationship grows and solidifies, the benefits of sponsorship emerge, with the associate feeling comfortable turning to the partner for career advice, and the partner knowing the associate well enough to provide tailored guidance and essential support. Perhaps above all else, investing in sponsorship relationships with new colleagues yields enormous personal and professional satisfaction and enriches BigLaw practice.

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Scores of new associates have just entered BigLaw. Immense personal and career satisfaction will come not only from the relationships these new lawyers form within their firms, but also from the depth and diversity of their professional experiences. There is no better ingredient for success and satisfaction than for new associates to commit to making pro bono work and community service a regular part of their experience.

Within their first year, every associate should make it a priority to take on a pro bono matter and identify and approach a partner about supervising the project. The associate will receive invaluable training in a setting that offers the opportunity to develop a long-lasting sponsorship relationship that can provide indispensable personal and professional benefits. For their part, partners will develop relationships not only with the firm's next generation, including future leaders, but also with those they will rely upon for high-quality, and often time-sensitive, work across a range of matters. Embarking on the development of a sponsorship relationship in the context of a pro bono matter has the added and important benefit of reinforcing the reality and truth that BigLaw and a lasting commitment to pro bono service are fully compatible.

Michael Y. Scudder is a litigation partner at Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP in the firm's Chicago office. Before joining the firm, he was a White House legal adviser under President George W. Bush from 2007 to 2009, serving as general counsel of the National Security Council. From 2002 to 2006, he 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. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.

Jay E. Mitchell is a litigation associate in Skadden's Chicago office. He graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 2015. He was named a Skadden 1L Scholar as part of the firm's internship program in 2013 and was a summer associate in 2014 before joining the firm full-time in 2015. Prior to law school, he was a business analyst in the strategy and operations group at Deloitte Consulting LLP.

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