

## **The Evolution of Pro Bono Service: What It Means for Corporations Today**

Thursday, August 27, 2009

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**In just the past year, pro bono service has increasingly taken center stage in many conversations among corporate giving professionals. Why the shift? There are several reasons, including the current economic climate and the commensurate growing needs of nonprofits, but perhaps the most direct reason lies in the fact that corporate giving professionals are seeking innovative ways to magnify the impact of their giving without spending more dollars. What better way to do this than by leveraging non-cash resources such as employee talent?**

### **The evolution of pro bono service**

Pro bono service has come a long way, beginning within the legal profession, which recognized early on that it is a great way to demonstrate a firm's expertise and attract more business, while creating significant impact in the community. But, these services were largely being provided behind closed doors and measurement of impact and business value was not common practice.

With the growth of the nonprofit sector overall, the need for pro bono services has increased dramatically. According to the Taproot Foundation, 200,000+ nonprofits are in need of infrastructure. And 89% of nonprofits believe that skilled volunteers could significantly improve their operations, yet only 12% report using these resources, reports Deloitte and the Points of Light Foundation in their 2006 Volunteer Impact Study.

Pro bono service is not just for lawyers anymore. To date, the Taproot Foundation has awarded over 1,100 service grants, providing more than \$53 million worth of pro bono services, while connecting high-impact nonprofit leaders with more than 4,000 business professionals, across various industries nationwide, which on average have more than 12 years of professional experience.

### **Increasing access to pro bono service**

The Pro Bono Action Tank, created by the Taproot Foundation in 2008, is leading the charge to increase access to high-quality pro bono service through proactive advocacy and tools and research that help corporations create strategic programming.

Driven by their motto, "We Do It Pro Bono....We Inspire Pro Bono.....We Enable Others to Do Pro Bono," the Pro Bono Action Tank partners with academic, trade and business leaders to enable the business community to engage in pro bono service, develop standards to ensure high-quality service delivery, and make it easier for all public benefit organizations to access the expertise they need to achieve their missions.

According to Jamie Hartman, executive director of the Pro Bono Action Tank,

"Our driving force is really our clients, the nonprofits, who tell us how companies can really help them. But companies like Target and Capital One have also shown the corporate world that they don't need to be a consulting firm in order to do pro bono service. These companies are extremely visible about their support of pro bono service, influencing and inspiring other corporations to get involved."

### **Defining standards for pro bono services**

In addition, the Pro Bono Action Tank has partnered with the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy to develop standards to "professionalize" the field and consistently ensure that the pro bono services provided to nonprofit organizations are high quality. This collaboration has resulted in a comprehensive definition for pro bono services and a current dollar valuation for services rendered; it varies by skill set and professional level, but averages \$120/hour.

Hartman points out several critical components that helped bring these standards to life. "We live and breathe just pro bono and having that sole focus had made it happen more quickly. Convening key strategic leaders also helped create a forum to share best practices of what works and does not work. And the consulting work we are doing has also helped identify key trends and common barriers for corporations."

### **Integrating pro bono service into your community engagement platform**

At a recent corporate roundtable discussion led by the Pro Bono Action Tank in New York, representatives from Merck, GE, Select Equity Group, Con Edison, Credit Suisse, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, American Express, Salesforce.com, Fidelity Investments, Moody's, and Time Warner convened to discuss how pro bono can be an innovative element to add to a full community engagement platform that brings new energy and a new approach to engaging employee talent. "Ultimately, if pro bono is done right, it is the opportunity for a company to maximize their impact by tapping into their core competencies," notes Hartman. "Pro bono is social innovation at its best."

Implementing an effective pro bono program does require infrastructure and management buy-in in order to maximize social value and business benefit. Other key factors to consider when implementing a pro bono service program include time commitment for employees, risk of failure, visibility/PR, staff resources, and a clear understanding of nonprofit needs as well as the relevant skill sets of employees.

According to the Pro Bono Action Tank, you need to engage multiple key stakeholders in order to conduct a thorough skills feasibility assessment of employees. And you should establish concrete roles and responsibilities for managing the program in order to keep project work on schedule and help manage expectations.

### **How to get started**

Companies do not have to implement a full suite of pro bono service to get

started. Across fields, programs range from grassroots efforts with little structure or dedicated resources to highly-centralized ones with formal infrastructures. Overall, the majority of pro bono service programs fall somewhere in the middle.

While every company is different and will manage, budget, and measure pro bono service differently, the Pro Bono Action Tank stresses that the most effective programs evolve organically over time, incorporate pro bono services into their standard business practices, and capitalize on the unique strengths, infrastructure, and employee talent of their organizations.

It is also important to remember that pro bono service is just one part of an overall strategic philanthropic platform. But in order for it to be sustainable, it should align with your company's overall strategy and objectives.

If your company is ready to take the plunge, there are several tools developed by the Pro Bono Action Tank, in collaboration with key corporate leaders and research organizations, to help companies begin the journey.

These tools include:

- Business Value Flashcards to help articulate the business value of pro bono service;
- Competencies Map 1.1 which helps match relevant professional skill sets to nonprofit needs; and
- Designing for Impact Framework which identifies key measures that help you design an effective project.

### **The future of pro bono service**

As we look ahead, the future is bright for pro bono service. The potential pipeline of professional talent is robust and the emphasis on community service should continue to flourish, especially in the pro-service climate of the current administration.

The Taproot Foundation notes that there are an estimated eight million business professionals in the United States with competencies that are needed by nonprofit organizations and if 10% of these professionals each donated a week per year, it would generate \$3.8 billion in new resources per year for the community.

Hartman added, "The traction is there for more companies to engage in pro bono service. Going forward we believe that most companies will integrate pro bono service into their Board placement programs or existing philanthropic programming. We also believe that awareness will continue to grow across all professions that they don't have to be a lawyer to do pro bono work!"

Learn more about being a champion for pro bono services by visiting the following online resources: [Pro Bono Action Tank](#), [Taproot Foundation](#), and [Corporation for National & Community Service](#).

### **About the Author**