never knew I’d end up holed up in a make-shift work center in a hotel in the middle of Alabama representing a man who is on death row, a month into the start of my practice at a large firm. As a law student, I kept hearing how much law firms value pro bono work, not only because it is good for the broader community, but also because it provides young associates with valuable experiences early on in their careers. I was never sure how much to believe this hype. As I finish my first year of practicing law, though, some of the best experiences and fondest memories I have had as a law student and at the start of my career relate to the pro bono work I have done.

While it can be easy for some young attorneys to get swept up in their billable work, pro bono work provides unique opportunities for young lawyers in a number of ways. Pro bono work can expand your areas of expertise, increase your comfort with new situations, provide opportunities for you to refine your legal skills, engage you in more prominent leadership roles in your matters, facilitate earlier client contact, and increase your overall satisfaction with your role in the community and your work as an attorney.

Pro bono work can expand your areas of expertise and comfort with new situations. When I first started as an employment law associate at Sidley Austin, I was asked by my associate mentor if I had time to read through an old trial transcript and make notes and observations about the actions of the defense counsel in a decades-old murder trial. I was brand new and completely free, so I naturally agreed. A few short weeks later, I was heading with a team of attorneys to Alabama as part of Sidley’s Capital Litigation Project. The project is part of a firm initiative to ensure that inmates incarcerated on Alabama’s death row have access to high-quality legal representation. In our case, we were going to an evidentiary hearing, to argue that our client’s original defense counsel was ineffective. I developed direct examination and cross examination questions, prepared exhibits, took detailed notes at the hearing, and did research regarding ineffective assistance of counsel. I was treated as an equal member of the team; my lack of experience did not matter, as we were all working around the clock to present the best case we could. I was thrown into the practice of law. Many attorneys never see the inside of a courtroom, while I was able
to actively participate in a trial team within my first month of practice. In the end, we spent about five days in Alabama, but did not finish presenting our evidence and making our arguments. I will return with the team to Alabama in October 2018 to conclude the hearing.

Even before I started at Sidley, I already had some experience with being thrown into completely new situations through public service opportunities. During my time at the University of Chicago Law School, I worked in the International Human Rights Clinic, where I was given the opportunity to travel to Tunisia as part of my work with the Clinic. We had been doing research about how women were being affected by violent-extremism-prevention efforts, but realized that on-the-ground research with interviews and observations would be the only way to get the answers we needed. I had never traveled to that part of the world before and had never spoken to others about heavy topics like violent extremism and terrorism so extensively and thoroughly. During the trip, not only did I develop my interviewing skills, but I also learned a lot about international agencies and human rights research. The project culminated in a written report to further inform the work that the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights is doing on gender equality and preventing and countering violent extremism. For more information, please visit: https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/view-ground-what-students-law-schools-international-human-rights-clinic-learn-abroad.

While I am not sure I will ever be a criminal defense lawyer or work in international human rights, those experiences were invaluable to me. Aside from the analytical legal skills I gained, these experiences taught me to think on my feet, be creative, and be comfortable in new and sometimes uncomfortable situations. Even with highly refined legal and analytical skills, lawyers cannot be effective advocates for their clients if they are not confident in new situations and able think creatively and quickly when new facts or developments arise. The best attorneys I have worked with always seem to have a backup plan and are not shaken when new, potentially damaging information is uncovered. Stepping out of your comfort zone and being put in situations that are slightly uncomfortable for you is a great way to get this kind of experience. Pro bono work is a terrific way to get this kind of exposure, because often, the work is outside of your primary practice. This expands your areas of expertise and can increase your own marketability as you develop different skills and learn about other areas of the law.

Pro bono work can help you refine your analytical legal skills and get leadership experience.

My second year in law school, I worked in the Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights, which works to promote the best interests of immigrant children who cross into the United States unaccompanied, in the hope of reforming the children’s immigrant justice system. I was a Child Advocate for two teenage boys who had come into the United States on their own from Africa, one of whom was escaping persecution in his home country and the other who may have been tricked into signing up for a child labor and trafficking program. I met with both of these boys once a week at their immigration detention center until they were placed in a foster home. I became a constant contact in their otherwise very unstable lives and learned how to build rapport with those who are very different from me. I also learned how to extract important and, at times, very sensitive information from them to aid in their immigration cases. I would then use this information to help write summaries of the case to present to immigration judges. For more information, please visit: https://www.theyoungcenter.org/.

Developing my interviewing skills in law school was invaluable for me as an associate, particularly when I joined an internal investigation for a pro bono client. I assisted with numerous interviews and developed a strong grasp of the factual record as a result. Learning how to effectively interview witnesses and clients is an essential skill for any young litigator. I have now had numerous opportunities to individually conduct and lead interviews in my pro bono matters, and am becoming very comfortable doing so. Pro bono projects are often more leanly staffed than billable matters, so the opportunities to build skills like these and take a leadership role are numerous.

Pro bono works give you more direct client contact and can lead to other professional development opportunities.

More recently, I was asked by a small non-for-profit to help them restructure many of their employment arrangements following the loss of a significant grant. I took the lead on counseling the client through their first terminations. They never had to fire anyone before and were very concerned about the process and how it would impact employee morale. I drafted and reviewed numerous separation agreements and offer letters for them, counseled them on the differences between having employees or independent contractors, and helped them determine the appropriate way to deliver news about terminations and restructurings to their employees. I am this pro bono client’s first point of contact when they have any employment questions, and while I do not have immediate answers to all of their questions, it is very rewarding to know that they have full faith in me to use my available resources and experience to provide an answer for them.

Client contact is something young lawyers covet. Professionalism and effectiveness in client communications is not something that is readily taught in law school; it is something that must be observed and practiced. Learning how to effectively counsel clients, manage their expectations, and explain technical legal concepts simply to non-lawyers is very important. Because pro bono clients typically are smaller organizations or even individual people, it is easier to get this direct contact with them as a junior associate. Client contact also expands your personal network and helps to build your reputation in the community. It is entirely possible that the CEO of the small non-for-profit I work with may one day be the CEO of a much larger company,
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and this connection could lead to other opportunities.

Pro bono work is rewarding, which can increase your overall job satisfaction and longevity in the practice.

Not only does pro bono work provide young attorneys with opportunities for valuable experiences early in their careers to build and hone their legal skills, it also provides a certain personal satisfaction. Being able to directly connect with the people who will benefit from your work can be very personally rewarding. The idea that someday a man on death row could live a full life and avoid the death penalty because of work I am doing is humbling and exciting. Knowing that as an associate at a large law firm, you can make a difference in the organizational structure and longevity of a non-for-profit organization that is doing important community work can increase your engagement with your work, provide perspective, and increase your overall life satisfaction. This work serves as a constant reminder to me of the value I provide to society as a lawyer.

It is undisputed that the need is there. The ABA Model Rules encourage all attorneys to do at least 50 hours of pro bono service a year, and according to the Legal Services Corporation’s 2017 report Documenting the Justice Gap in America, 86% of the civil legal problems reported by low-income Americans in the last year did not receive adequate legal help. (https://www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGap-ExecutiveSummary.pdf.) Even without any of the other benefits explained above, this statistic alone should be enough to convince all attorneys that it is our professional obligation to assist those who are unable to pay costly per-hour attorney rates with the significant legal problems impacting their everyday lives.

Pro bono work has so many potential benefits with almost no drawbacks. Whether you are a law student or a young attorney, you should always look at pro bono work as an exciting opportunity to grow and develop personally, but also as a way to help those around you. You never know where pro bono work will take you, whether rural Alabama or Tunisia, or what doors it will open for you in the future.

Not only is it our duty as lawyers to use our experience and education to help those that cannot help themselves, it is also a way for us to grow and develop our own skills, so we can be more effective attorneys for our clients, both those that are able to pay and those that are not. 

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