

Pro bono for junior lawyers—a great experience



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Collaboration, confidence, skills development and the chance to have a meaningful impact—pro bono has many benefits, says **Joy-Emma Martin**

IN BRIEF

► A trainee solicitor at Reed Smith highlights four reasons why pro bono is great for client, lawyer and firm alike.

Pro bono is fast becoming a fundamental part of commercial law firms' practices, as the importance of supporting those in need of free legal advice becomes more widespread. Getting involved in pro bono provides junior lawyers with a host of benefits. As a trainee solicitor in Reed Smith's London office, I have first-hand experience of this. I was lucky enough to sit in the firm's pro bono team for my first six months as a trainee. Here are just four reasons why this was a great experience.

Collaboration with colleagues

Thanks to the brilliant training and supervision that firms receive from their partner NGOs on access to justice projects, it is often the case that lawyers at any level can get involved in these pro bono projects, regardless of their area of specialism. At Reed Smith, this has led to 100% trainee participation in pro bono for the past ten years. It also provides a great opportunity for collaboration with colleagues, with whom you may not otherwise have had a chance to work.

I am currently working on an application for an injunction for a victim of domestic violence, for which the team consists of tax and competition associates, as well as trainees. While we have all undergone the same training on how to make these applications, we each have very different day-to-day practices. What unites us is our passion for helping people in vulnerable situations seek life-saving legal protection.

I have also been involved in projects with international teams, which included lawyers from both our London and Singapore offices. As a trainee, working with a diverse array of colleagues has been invaluable, not least because they each come with a wealth

of experience and a unique approach to tackling issues.

Increased confidence

Beginning my training contract in September 2021 was both exciting and nerve-racking. Much of my unease came from having worked and studied for the LPC at home during the height of the national lockdowns, which felt like a lifetime. My seat in the pro bono team definitely helped build my confidence in navigating a large commercial law firm. This was largely due to the opportunity to work on a range of projects with colleagues across different departments.

It was also because the seat provided a great deal of autonomy, as I was able to choose from a long list of matters to work on based on my interests and development goals. Being trusted to participate in calls with prospective clients, and even introduce new clients to the firm myself, was very empowering. Pro bono also offered the chance to take on responsibilities outside of legal work; including preparing a trainee-focused monthly newsletter, interviewing colleagues for Q&A articles on their experience doing pro bono, scoping new clients and coordinating projects. As my involvement in different aspects of the practice grew, so did my passion for the work. I also felt more connected to the firm as a whole, pro bono being central to its culture.

Variety of work & skills development

Having spent time in a family law department as a paralegal—working on domestic violence injunctions, divorce disputes and children-related legal aid work—I felt somewhat prepared for doing pro bono work as a trainee. Even still, this was the tip of the iceberg of what would await me.

The vast array of legal disciplines I was exposed to in Reed Smith's pro bono practice included, among others, immigration, family, capital punishment in the US, human rights,

environmental, employment and prison law. This presented the chance to engage in project and client relationship management, contentious case work, client interviewing, drafting, letter writing, presenting, document review and desk-based research. This unique range of skills development opportunities greatly enriched my trainee experience. I would argue that this is vital for trainees and junior commercial lawyers!

Meaningful impact

Among the most rewarding highlights of pro bono is the impact you can have on others. Due to the nature of the work, you are often able to make a huge difference in improving the quality of life for very vulnerable people, who may have no alternative assistance.

I felt this most when working on immigration cases through Reed Smith's partnership with Kids in Need of Defense UK (KIND UK). These matters involve helping families to regularise their immigration status in the UK, providing them with invaluable peace of mind given the lack of legal aid for these applications. The work includes conducting witness statement interviews and drafting correspondence with the Home Office, among other things, to prepare applications for citizenship and leave to remain.

It is always heart-warming to receive client feedback after a successful outcome, which reminds me of the grave need for the work. I have also learned just how difficult the immigration process can be, even for lawyers!

Alongside my work on KIND UK cases, I am coordinating a research project with a racial justice focused non-profit organisation, in response to the strip search of Child Q, an incident that was horrifying to read about. This work is personally fulfilling for me as a Black woman, since Child Q could easily have been me. It is great to contribute to bringing awareness to the issues of race, gender and policing, which surround this case.

I would greatly recommend getting involved in pro bono as a junior lawyer, for all of its social, personal and professional benefits! **NLJ**

Joy-Emma Martin, trainee, Reed Smith LLP
(www.reedsmith.com).