

# Pro Bono Service: Doing Well by Doing Good

By Esther F. Lardent

Despite the glass ceiling that has inhibited the advancement of women in major U.S. law firms, there are notable success stories—of women who have achieved national prominence and assumed leadership positions at their firms. These leaders have been successful because they are great, hardworking lawyers. But many of the most respected women in the law firm community share another, perhaps surprising, trait—a strong commitment to pro bono service.

## Pro Bono at Major Law Firms

Among the many changes in the nature of large law firms in recent decades—including the growth of the mega-firm, a heightened focus on the bottom line, increased billable hour and compensation expectations, multiple offices, globalization, a far more competitive environment, more centralized and business-like management—are the influx of women associates, increasing numbers of women partners, and an institutionalized commitment to pro bono.

Major firms have increasingly shifted from largely ad hoc and informal pro bono programs to structured, proactive efforts supported by top firm leadership, overseen by active and respected pro bono committees, and focused on maximizing pro bono participation by lawyers across practice areas, offices, and seniority. [More information on pro bono at major law firms is available on the Pro Bono Institute website at [www.probonoinst.org](http://www.probonoinst.org).] One of the most striking changes in pro bono practice at major law firms is the recognition that pro bono can and should serve the firms' strategic business goals, as well as advance the careers and hone the skills of their attorneys. These include:

- **Recruitment of new associates and laterals**

Even in an uncertain economy, the competition among large law firms for legal talent is intense. Firms that support strong pro bono programs enjoy a competitive advantage with many potential new firm attorneys. *American Lawyer* surveys indicate that a solid pro bono reputation is one factor that differentiates law firms and attracts young lawyers. Because compensation is relatively equal at large firms in the same geographic market, issues other than pay—including quality of life and pro bono—often become the deciding factors when a lawyer is choosing where to work.

- **Retention of productive partners and associates**

Turnover is an extremely expensive proposition for large firms that invest substantial resources—salary, overhead, and training and orientation costs—in new lawyers. It is estimated that the cost of replacing a departing attorney equals or exceeds the annual compensation for that position. While the decision to leave a law firm may be based on many factors, for many lawyers, a strong pro bono culture provides a sense of teamwork, interesting legal opportunities, effective mentoring and oversight, and recognition—precisely the qualities that promote retention.

Pro bono can be the glue that helps unify a firm by providing opportunities for lawyers (and other employees) to work together across specialties, levels of seniority, and offices, as well as providing a common frame of reference and pride.

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