



Accelerating Impact through Pro Bono Partnerships

Pro bono working

Why it's time to ramp up your commitment

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Definitions

Pro bono working means providing professional services for free which result in benefit to the community that might otherwise not be available. Pro bono is short for the Latin phrase **pro bono publico which means “for the public good.” This is different to **volunteering** which is a more general term meaning giving time and labour for community service. Pro bono working is also not the same as **corporate partnerships** which refer to agreements often between large companies and the not-for-profit sector to deliver a well-defined project by sharing both resourcing and funding. For the purposes of this article, pro bono partnerships refer to the ‘gifting’ of professional services by a commercial organisation to a not-for-profit organisation.**

Starting the Conversation

Charities, social enterprises, communications agencies and consultants ALL benefit from the exchange of individual and organisational kindness. Our industry is fuelled by creative and inspirational people who are skilled at delivering powerful and important messages. We all strive to work on purposeful projects with our fee-paying clients, so why not boost our contribution to society by committing to pro bono work as well?

This article is intended to kick-start a conversation about the benefits of ramping up our commitment to pro bono working. Some of the questions we may want to ask are: should there be an industry expectation to commit to pro bono work and how much? should employees be able to set aside a set percentage of their time to work on pro bono? should experience of working with the not-for-profit sector be a pre-requisite for promotions? That's just for starters!

The Context

As the world feels increasingly chaotic and unsteady, there is recognition that the global issues we are facing require a consolidated effort from governments, from organisations (commercial and third sector) and from individuals. In his book, *Citizens*, Jon Alexander explains that everyone needs to take responsibility for solving the vast number of issues we face in society

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In order to survive and thrive, we must step into the Citizen Story. We must see ourselves as Citizens – people who actively shape the world around us, who cultivate meaningful connections to their community and institutions, who can imagine a different and better life, who care and take responsibility, and who create opportunities for others to do the same. Crucially, our institutions must also see people as Citizens, and treat us as such. When they do, everything changes.¹

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So, Why Make a Pro Bono Commitment?

The simple answer is because you want to. Committing to pro bono is a choice you make alongside decisions like how much holiday to give employees, whether to award sabbaticals, and how to carbon offset. Ultimately, the commitment to pro bono must be driven by your organisational values and a belief there is a duty to conduct business with a wider sense of responsibility.

But it is also important to acknowledge that entering a pro bono partnership with a not-for-profit organisation is mutually beneficial. Set up in the right way, pro bono partnerships are good for commercial organisations.

How Agencies Benefit from Pro Bono Working

A Safe Space to be Brave and Creative

Creativity is our lifeblood and working as part of a “pop-up” team, possibly unfettered by SMART objectives, is hugely liberating. Enhance the creative experience by kick-starting the work with a well-structured co-creation workshop involving diverse people and fresh stimulus to fuel new thinking. And commit to trying new things with the understanding that we learn and evolve by making mistakes.

Developing Your Team

While the quality of the work should never be compromised, individuals working on pro bono projects can learn new skills in an environment which feels less pressured. The nature of the work may also provide access to a new group of stakeholders or media contacts or give a new perspective on a challenge.

Showcasing Best Work

Sharing case studies of the work through marketing activities and entering awards can help both commercial organisations and the not-for-profit organisation raise their sector profile, helping with business development and funding respectively.

Enhancing Your Employer Brand and Driving Recruitment

The ability to attract the brightest and the best is critical to having a successful business. And being able to demonstrate your values and commitment to purposeful work will often tip the balance in your favour during the recruitment process, sometimes more so than offering a higher salary. Sharing your approach and experience of pro bono working in your candidate interviews is hugely powerful and according to The Caffeine Partnership, “employers should spend less time worrying about a never-ending list of benefits and enhancements and more time thinking about what drives motivation and engagement².”

Improving Employee Engagement

During the pandemic, people stood together on the street clapping for the NHS and volunteering in their communities. Collective acts of kindness build team-spirit and resilience.

Having a pro bono plan will be both motivating and rewarding for your employees. A recent survey showed that when employees were asked to rank employer behaviours that were important to them, 33% said

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a brand that contributes to broader society.²
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Many UK businesses have done their best during the pandemic to look after staff and provide them with a range of benefits, but as we look forward, we believe there is a need for employers to focus on those factors that drive real motivation. This will necessitate the creation of more purposeful employee context, one where leadership behaviours are congruent with a business's stated purpose and values, where individuals and teams have a degree of autonomy over what they do and where they do it, as well as the opportunity to learn and develop and an overall sense that what they are doing is in the broadest sense meaningful.

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**Purpose, Pay or Perks?
What Matters Most to Employees²**

Agencies - The Challenges

It is often not the 'pull-on-profit' but the 'pull-on-resource' that stands in the way of committing to pro bono work. There is a perception that "we just don't have time" or that there are more important things to focus on.

Consider the following

Over-servicing – have a look at how much time is 'lost' to over-servicing through under-budgeting or scope creep. If you can put in place some new measures to address existing inefficiencies, then you have created time to use to do some good. This drive to improve efficiency is motivational and feels less like a 'stick' to your team.

Re-frame pro bono hours as 'learning and development?' By ensuring that the right projects are matched with the right people, pro bono has huge value as an employee development opportunity. So, can the hours you set aside for team training be appropriated to a pro bono project, or at least some of them?

Maximise unused capacity – make sure that involvement in a pro bono project is factored into resource forecasting. While the goal is to have a dedicated pro bono team who is resourced to the work, you can always mop up any other resource for ad hoc work. A client project may be delayed freeing up team time for a few weeks or even days.

How Charities and Social Enterprises Benefit from Pro Bono Working

Accepting the offer of free professional support is not straight-forward and requires equal focus and commitment from the charity or social enterprise as the Agency. If the partnership is well-thought through, then the benefits are substantial.

Supporting Your Future Commitment to Communications

Working in partnership with communications specialists provides an opportunity to enhance your communications output over a set time frame and to assess the impact of the work. The offer of support is a responsible way to consider your future spend on an in-house communications role or function and the contribution communications can make to achieving organisational goals.

Extending Team Skills

You may ask your pro bono partner to upskill your team either formally or through on-the-job learning. When the partnership comes to an end the team may continue to deliver communications support and the experience may also result in changing their existing role profiles to incorporate communications elements. Equally, you may decide to recruit in a new area of expertise to your communications team.

Enhancing An Existing Function

If you already have a communications function, you may decide to extend the remit during the time you are receiving pro bono support. For example, you may launch a new digital channel, create a content plan and library or extend the reach of an existing campaign.

Charity and Social Enterprises – The Challenges

It is often the fear of the unknown that is the barrier to seeking pro bono support. You may feel uncertain about working with a team from outside your organisation and you may also not know how to find the right pro bono partner.

Consider the following

There is no set way to find a pro bono partner but don't hold back in communicating about the 'search'. Brief your trustees, post on your social media channels and do your own research, looking for agencies who may have clients in your sector or who you have an affinity with – do you like what they say on their website? are you impressed by their work?

Receiving pro bono support from communications experts is something to be proud of and is a progressive and responsible approach to your organisational growth – communicate the partnership and celebrate the success you achieve together.

Remember this is a partnership. Your role is to be clear about what you want to achieve through the communications support and don't be afraid to say where your gaps are. Remember that your partner is doing this to learn from you too – it is a fair exchange.

How to start

A commitment to pro bono working should be captured in a pro bono strategy and actively supported by the leadership team. It may be part of a wider responsible business strategy or an action plan to achieve B Corp Certification. It's important that, whichever, the commitment has full buy-in across the team, that resource is factored into your plans and that you agree to honour this commitment.

What matters is that the benefits you gain are not your reasons for doing it (although they can provide a useful justification) and that you all agree with the principle of behaving responsibly, collaborating and giving something back.

The first consideration is how much time do you want to dedicate? A medium to long-term pro bono partnership between an agency and a charity or social enterprise can enable you to deliver a significant piece of work which makes a meaningful difference.

But delivering one-off events and enabling individuals to pursue stand-alone projects may also have a place in your pro bono strategy.

6 Steps to Getting Started

A step by step guide to entering a pro bono partnership

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Finding the right partner

The most important factor when entering a pro bono partnership is that your organisations share the passion for the cause and both partners should be aligned on values. Other considerations may relate to the nature of the work that is needed, the demographic of the community served or simply geographic location.

So, in summary, ask yourselves the following:

Is everyone passionate about the cause and the work?

Do the pro bono partners share the same organisational values

Does the team delivering the pro bono have the right skill set?

Is there mutual respect in the partnership?

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Partnership Goals

Have an open discussion at the beginning about what you hope to get out of the partnership. If you are keen to build the confidence of members of your team or if you want to win awards for great work, then say that! Or perhaps you want to give your mid-level managers a specific challenge. At this early stage, it is also critical to understand each other's ways of working, internal stakeholders who need to be kept updated and other organisational priorities which may come into play.

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Agree Communications Objectives

Sit down together and establish the objectives and success criteria of your work. For example, it may be raising the profile of the organisation with a particular stakeholder, augmenting their social media presence, or creating a campaign to address a particular issue or policy. Committing time to the partnership is likely to be the Achilles heel, so be focused and aim to do "a few things well."

4 Immersion

In the early stages of the partnership, you need to ensure that you are “sharing the love” of the partnership across your organisation. As well as appointing a core team to work on the project, involve others in workshops and one-off projects. Discuss how you can immerse your full team in the goals and purpose of the work. This should go beyond going on their website, reading their Annual Report (sometimes shared as an Impact Report) or social media posts. Ideas include attending educational events, taking part in fundraising activity, inviting the CEO to deliver a presentation at a company meeting or arranging for a member of the community they serve to do a talk. The more you can be immersed in their purpose the more effective it will be.

5 Measuring Impact

Be clear on how the impact of the communications will be measured. This should include the impact of the work itself (so the usual suspects like audience reach, message delivery and behaviour change) but also how this ladders up to the overall purpose of the not-for-profit organisation. Discussing this at the outset will help you define what measurement you can use. Include both qualitative and quantitative measures.

When the project is completed insist on doing a thorough evaluation and wrap up where you discuss both the work and the relationship. Any constructive feedback will help you both get more out of your next partnership! And of course, also make sure you recognise and celebrate success together.

Don't forget to record the time spent on the pro bono work on a separate job code. This could be an important measure for your ESG evaluation or B Corp Certification.

6 Exit Plan

It may seem odd to be discussing the split when you have only just got to know each other but agreeing a plan at the end of your commitment period is essential. If extending the relationship is not going to be an option, then be clear about that. There is nothing worse than coming to the end of your commitment and feeling that you are leaving your partner in the lurch or under-valued. It is also important to discuss legacy from your work, what have you learned and what should be maintained as a result?

Forming A Partnership Agreement

It's a good idea to capture these key principles in a Partnership Agreement at the start of the relationship. Among other things, you need to be clear about what you hope to achieve and why you are both investing in it. Often the discipline of putting this in writing can reveal misunderstandings or differences of expectation.

Partnership Agreement – A Checklist

What are the goals of the partnership and the focus of the work?

What does success look like for all involved?

Who is the partnership sponsor – both partners should name a senior sponsor and these individuals should agree to have regular check-ins?

Who will work on the project and approximately how many hours per month and for how long?

How will the partnership and the work be communicated to Agency and Not-for-profit stakeholders (e.g., clients, potential clients, donors, trustees)

When is the partnership ending and what is the legacy?

What legal and compliance documentation is needed to support the partnership e.g., confidentiality agreement, professional indemnity, intellectual property and data protection.

References

1. Citizens - why the key to fixing everything is all of us, by Jon Alexander. Published by Canbury Press, 2022
2. Purpose, Pay or Perks? What Matters Most to Employees, commissioned by the Caffeine Partnership