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The Benefits of Community Service to the Lawyer

BY SHAYDA ZAERPOOR LE ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2014 ·



I'm here to advocate community service. I'm not just talking about providing legal services to the poor. I'm talking about all different kinds of community service undertaken by lawyers. And I'm not advocating community service in hopes that your bleeding heart will succumb to doing good unto others. Or because it's your duty. Or because it will make you feel good. I'm advocating community service because of the incredible tangible benefits it brings to the lawyer.

Engaging in community service will sharpen your skills in whatever area you are volunteering. People learn by doing. Pro bono representation of clients in a low income tax clinic will undoubtedly help you learn how to practice tax law. You will learn terminology, legal analysis, familiarity with whatever topics or issues you undertake to research, and a range of possible options on how to achieve your client's legal goals. These are all skills that will make you a better lawyer, and a more valuable member of whatever firm or office you practice in.

Community service also helps you develop skills beyond your substantive practice area. Indeed, you will develop these skills even if the service you are undertaking involves no legal representation whatsoever, and they are *crucially* important skills. They also tend to be the skills most underdeveloped in attorneys, particularly in young attorneys, and that are not taught in law school, but are essential to success in the workplace. Yes, I'm talking about the "soft skills," (although why they're called soft instead of the "man, these are the big-deal skills," I'm not entirely sure): leadership, communication, decision-making, and confidence.

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The opportunities to develop these skills are endless. Plan a CLE. Join a bar committee. Organize a social event for lawyers. Head a volunteer event. Join the board of a nonprofit that you believe in. You will learn how to (and how not to) lead, encourage, and motivate others who are working on these events with you. Business folks like to call this “leading sideways” and “leading upward,” scenarios in which you are not the boss and the recipients of your message are not strictly obligated to follow what you say. This is an incredible skill to take back to your workplace, one that will enable you to affect the way that your peers and your superiors interact with you, not just those who are technically below you on the totem pole. As a younger attorney, research and analysis have likely been your bread and butter since the first day of your 1L internship, but decision-making? That’s often left to the big dogs.

When you plan your own event, however big or small, you start to develop the acumen and the confidence to call the shots: to gather the best information that you can and confer with your cohorts, and to then pick a path and see it through to the end. This will become increasingly important as your professional career progresses. And in a cumulative way, these skills will help you develop a stronger sense of professionalism, pride in your work and confidence in your abilities.

Volunteer work and community service also expose you to other attorneys. How many of us take time to network with other attorneys, either to aid in getting a first or second job, to learn about a particular area of law, or to develop a mentorship relationship? I’m sure many of you face the same challenges that I have faced – how to do a good job of presenting yourself, your skills, your personality, your interests, obtain the information you need and make a meaningful connection with another person in the span of time it takes you to very slowly sip a cup of coffee. On the other hand, half an hour in a committee meeting with someone once a week, every other week, or several hours spent over the phone planning an event, or half a day together running a volunteer group is an opportunity for exposure and information-gathering in a much more detailed and significant way. It’s enough time to *show* your strengths, not just talk about them. It’s enough time to learn about the target attorney’s personality, casually ask about some details of their firm and firm culture, demonstrate interest in particular areas in which they practice, and most importantly, it can be done naturally and organically.

Even if you are engaging in community service that has absolutely nothing to do with legal representation at all, every hour that you spend out in your town or your city helps expand your relationship with the local community. I have been told, over and over again, at all varieties of marketing seminars, career development mentorship circles, coffee dates, etc., that the best way to expand your network and bring in clients is to be *out there*. Be seen. Be someone that people think of when their issue or their need comes up. By being out in your city, you develop a sense of how industry functions, and you become familiar with the attitudes and values of your community. These people that you serve with, and often the people who are the recipients of the service, are your future potential clients, sources of business, referrals, resources for information, and your friends. The most active and engaged professionals that I know, lawyer or not, are also the ones who can always respond to my queries for assistance with “I know a guy who” How do they always know a guy? It’s because they are present and engaged, and being involved with your community is an incredibly easy and genuine way by which you can be the same.



To close, I do strongly believe that lawyers should provide legal services to the disadvantaged and the underrepresented. I do believe that our bleeding hearts should move us toward doing good unto others. I do also think that engaging in community service will make you “feel good” – that thing that lawyers often think about as an abstract or unimportant concept. Ask me to grab a cup of coffee and we can talk about it. But a whole host of other, compelling reasons support why you should make community service part of your life and part of your career development.

What other activity can you think of that is so multipurpose? Sharpen your legal skills, develop leadership and decision-making abilities, get to know other attorneys and build relationships in a way that coffee networking dates can rarely accomplish, and develop a source of clients and referrals. I believe all of this will be true for the duration of our professional lives, but particularly in a time in our careers when expectations are high, time is limited, and competition is fierce, I can’t imagine how you can afford not to seize upon such an incredible opportunity. Also, you will feel good.

About the Author

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