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Benefiting from Pro Bono Support

What is pro bono?  
Traditionally, pro bono refers to legal work undertaken without charge, especially for a client on low income. However, more and more it is offered by other professional services including financial advisors, architects, surveyors, marketers and management specialists.

It is a very specific type of volunteering where a company/professional will offer its time and expert knowledge free of charge (or in some cases for a much reduced cost).

Some companies are wary of offering pro bono advice because they could be liable if the advice causes the receiver to make decisions that prove to be costly or wrong. They may however be able to provide guidance or thoughts as opposed to formal pro bono advice.

How could it help your organisation?  
Pro bono support allows organisations access to expensive professionals whose fees may otherwise be prohibitive. While traditionally pro bono support is offered where there are no means to pay, some professionals will chose to provide free services to aid an organisation whose cause they wish to support which frees up finances allowing the cause to be furthered.

Charity trustees have a responsibility to “recognise and acknowledge when they need advice”[[1]](#footnote-1), but must also “manage their charity’s resources responsibly”. For organisations with very limited financial resources pro bono specialist advice utilised effectively can help trustees balance these two requirements.

Pro bono support can be delivered in three main ways

Pro bono support works particularly well for a clearly defined project or activity. For example, a firm of auditors may agree to carry out an independent examination of your accounts each year. Alternatively, your group may want to purchase a building and require a structural survey. These projects have clear outcomes that can be agreed in advance and most professionals could accurately estimate the time it will take them to complete.

Pro bono support can also work on a retained basis. Much like a paid contract, you may have an agreement or understanding with a professional to provide your legal advice (see case study from NSPCC below) or a company may commit to provide ongoing web hosting and support after initial development free of charge.

Thirdly, a more distinct form of professional support could be capacity building or mentoring for management and decision makers. This may take the form of a year-long partnership between a senior decision maker at a community growing project and a private business offering opportunities for each to learn from the experiences of the other.

Why do professionals offer pro bono support?

The motivations for companies to work in this way vary. For larger firms, it will often come under the banner of corporate social responsibility and fit into their strategy. Linked to CSR is employee recruitment and retention, research for Unilever[[2]](#footnote-2) found that community engagement and sustainability were key drivers for graduates researching companies to work for. Many employee volunteers get involved in pro bono work to ‘give something back’.

Pro bono can also form an integral part of a company's professional development plans for employees. It provides opportunities for younger or less experienced staff to ‘have a go’ and build a reputation before charging clients.

Of course, there are less altruistic motives as well – in 2012 the voluntary sector accounted for more of the UK’s GVA (gross value added), than the agriculture sector[[3]](#footnote-3) – this is a huge market for professionals to access and while pro bono support is initially free, future advice may cost.

Are there any downfalls to using pro bono support?

Community groups often take whatever is available and this may the right thing to do, but it is necessary to exercise caution when seeking professional support. Some individuals may be specialists in their field but you should always check their references and ensure they hold professional indemnity insurance if they are formally providing professional advice, on the off-chance that something does go wrong. If you are using a larger firm, there is more protection offered through the company but it is still worth doing your research and getting references where possible.

The phrase ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ is particularly applicable for pro bono support. Paying clients will almost always come before pro bono which can cause delays and frustrations when you have deadlines to meet. The flipside is community groups also not understanding the value of the specialist support being provided. This can lead to groups failing to do adequate preparation, follow up or implementation and the project not delivering the expected outcome.

Professionals engaged to complete a piece of work pro bono are volunteers. It is very hard for many groups to make complaints against volunteers; this is particularly prevalent where no agreed timeframe, product or method of working has been established in advance.

Finally, in addition to possible delays or changing goalposts, many larger firms will use pro bono contracts as staff development opportunities resulting in community groups receiving inexperienced employees to support them. This isn’t necessarily a negative as they may be very enthusiastic to be given additional responsibility; it also fits with many groups’ missions to enable the development of communities and individuals through their project.

How do we find a professional to support us?

As with all business partnerships, first port of call will normally always be the people you know – trustees, friends and existing supporters – don’t forget that businesses you have relationships with will have supply chains and may be able to pitch on your behalf. However, you may not know anyone with the required expertise or in some instances it may be preferable to have an uninterested individual.

In this instance you could write directly to a business, contact your Growing Together Advisor or use one of the links below. Please note that Growing Together cannot make recommendations.

* Pro-Bono Economics - [www.probonoeconomics.com](http://www.probonoeconomics.com)

Pro Bono Economics matches volunteer economists with charities wishing to address questions around measurement, results and impact.

* Pro Help (BITC) - [www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/prohelp](http://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/prohelp)

A network of professional firms who are committed to making a difference in their community by offering their services for free to community organisations in need of support.

* The OR Society - [www.theorsociety.com](http://www.theorsociety.com)

Operational Research (OR) is about finding ways to apply analytical methods to make better decisions. Third Sector organisations face extremely complex decisions about the direction they should take and how to allocate scarce resources. 

* Pilotlight - [www.pilotlight.org.uk](http://www.pilotlight.org.uk/)

Pilotlight offers free tailored strategic planning support to charities and social enterprises that are tackling disadvantage in the UK by matching directors from charities and social enterprises with teams of senior business people and facilitating a year-long engagement to plan for sustainability, development and growth.   

* Law Works - [www.lawworks.org.uk](http://www.lawworks.org.uk/)

**LawWorks operates within England and Wales to connect not-for-profit organisations with the skills and expertise of lawyers willing to meet those needs for free.**

* National Pro Bono Centre - [www.nationalprobonocentre.org.uk](http://www.nationalprobonocentre.org.uk/)

The National Pro Bono Centre is a charity which is designed to be a “hub” for pro bono charities across the legal sector. It supports the wide range of pro bono projects and brokerage which the charities support, helping individuals and community groups all over England and Wales.

* IT 4 Communities (£85 registration fee for community groups) - [www.it4communities.org.uk](http://www.it4communities.org.uk/it4c/home/index.jsp)

The UK's leading national IT volunteering programme helps community/voluntary groups to find volunteers to help with their IT needs such as building databases or websites.

* Pimp My Cause - [www.pimpmycause.org](http://www.pimpmycause.org/)

Pimp My Cause brings together worthwhile causes with talented marketers – including innovators, strategists, advertisers, graphic designers, web developers, PR specialists and researchers who can provide transformational input pro bono. The site features a Twitter helpdesk for organisations to get instant advice from forum members.

* Charity Property Help   
  [www.rics.org/uk/about-rics/what-we-do/corporate-responsibility/charity-property-help](http://www.rics.org/uk/about-rics/what-we-do/corporate-responsibility/charity-property-help/)

Offers registered charities and voluntary organisations a minimum one-hour consultation with a RICS-regulated firm free of charge from planning and the environment through to project management and maintenance.

* LandAid   
  [www.landaid.org/our-cause-impact/givereceive-free-property-advice/receive-free-property-advice](http://www.landaid.org/our-cause-impact/givereceive-free-property-advice/receive-free-property-advice)

Charities seeking free property advice will need to be registered in the UK and be doing work that positively impacts the lives of disadvantaged children and young people.

Top Tips

1. Define clearly what you want from a business. Decide what your objectives are, what resources you need, why you need them, how long you need them for and what exactly you want people to do. Brokerage bodies can help.
2. Risk assess. If the project is time critical or highly sensitive it may be safer to pay for a service that is guaranteed. If the company offering support doesn’t share your ethics, do you want to be associated with them?
3. Identify a named person to be responsible for the project from both parties.
4. Write up the project brief as a service level agreement that both parties sign.
5. Have a programme of review and evaluation to make sure that pro bono partners are meeting your needs or to establish whether your needs have changed. Be ready to tell them if they need to do something different.
6. Identify opportunities for your partner. Do they want to involve staff in volunteering? Could a partner or director speak at an event?
7. Find out what the actual cost of the support would have been and use this figure in reports and bids to recognise gifts in kind.
8. Agree with the pro bono partner how you publicly communicate their support and ensure you formally thank them for the support given.

Case Study[[4]](#footnote-4) – taking it one step further

In 2011, the NSPCC claimed a first for the sector when it appointed a team of legal firms to provide pro bono support following a competitive tender process. The process, which ran from September to December 2010, involved the NSPCC inviting 21 firms to tender. Eleven submitted proposals and four - Clifford Chance, Baker & McKenzie, Wragge & Co LLP and Walker Morris – secured a place on the legal panel.

The firms will provide legal support in areas including employment, intellectual property, commercial and IT issues - worth around £250,000 to the charity. Other benefits will include legal training and use of meeting rooms. The firms will also encourage staff to get involved in volunteering for NSPCC projects such as its helpline ChildLine.

When Catherine Dixon, general counsel at NSPCC, came into post some 15 months ago, she found that the charity had been accessing pro bono legal advice on an ad hoc basis. *"I thought we could create a panel of trusted advisors,"* she explains. *"The idea was for this to be mutually beneficial, for law firms looking to enhance CSR or opportunities to get staff volunteering."*

****[**www.growingtogether.community**](http://www.growingtogether.community/)

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-essential-trustee-what-you-need-to-know-cc3/the-essential-trustee-what-you-need-to-know-what-you-need-to-do> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.silvermanresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Unilever-Webinar-Research-Sustainability.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac12/how-big-is-the-voluntary-sector-compared-to-the-rest-of-the-economy/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/pro-bono-nice-work/governance/article/919530> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)