

The Rise of Networks for Dedicated Law Firm Pro Bono Professionals

The role of the lawyer leading a pro bono practice within a commercial law firm has evolved into a dedicated profession, reflecting the legal industry's maturation in its approach to pro bono work. Pro bono participation is no longer just best practice. In countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia, it is now accepted as standard that top law firms appoint an expert or team of experts to run their pro bono practices. Those dedicated experts work to deliver on their firm's public promise to prioritise the delivery of free legal services; to foster a true culture of service within the firm; and to ensure that the firm's pro bono work supports access to justice and contributes to the public good effectively and with integrity. It also reflects the growing recognition that, like any legal speciality, expert and specific skills are required to navigate the complexities of pro bono work, and that effective and impactful pro bono practices require dedicated leadership, strategic planning, and a deep understanding of both legal and societal issues.

As the numbers of these dedicated and specialist pro bono practitioners have risen in the US, Australia, the UK and Continental Europe, they have joined together to create local professional development networks that support their work, facilitating the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practice. These groups provide a forum to engage in important discussions on topics such as risk management, project management and monitoring and evaluation, and are a platform for connection, learning and collaboration.



The **Association of Pro Bono Counsel (APBCo)** was established in 2006 as a professional organisation for pro bono lawyers and today has over 270 members representing over 130 firms. APBCo is US-based and its paid membership includes pro bono professionals located anywhere around the world. The majority of its members are lawyers who fully dedicate their time to pro bono work at commercial law firms, but applications are considered on a case-by-case basis from lawyers who commit a majority of their time to pro bono efforts, as well as individuals without law degrees who manage law firm pro bono practices full-time. APBCo uses a messaging system for members to communicate and hosts a site for practice management and professional development material such as their **Statement on Eligibility (Mission Matter Means)**. The group organises an annual Academy in September of each year in different locations across the US, with the 2024 Academy to be held in Washington DC, as well as ad hoc programming throughout the year. APBCo also facilitates joint advocacy on policy issues. *"APBCo's growing membership reflects the continued development of law firm pro bono programs. Our members eagerly support each other by sharing best practices, collaborating, and generating ideas towards the shared goal of increasing access to justice through the delivery of pro bono legal services,"* says APBCo's Co-President Dan Brown, SheppardMullin. To join APBCo please complete the form [here](#).

The **Australian Community of Pro Bono Lawyers (ACPL)** was formed in 2023 and focuses on supporting dedicated pro bono professionals based in Australia. Membership is free and is open to lawyers who dedicate at least half of their professional time to managing pro bono practices within commercial law firms. As at July 2024, the ACPL had 125 members from 35 law firms. The ACPL facilitates an email distribution list and quarterly calls, and also co-hosts with the Australian Pro Bono Centre an annual professional development Academy, the next

one to be held in Melbourne in October 2025. The ACPL also offers a group mentoring/networking scheme for all members, with groups rotating on a six-monthly basis. *“One of the things I like most about working in the pro bono sector in Australia is the collegiality between firms – that we share insights and discuss issues relevant to the sector - with the ultimate goal of us all playing our part in improving access to justice in an effective way. The ACPL has been a great vehicle for facilitating more of those collegiate conversations,”* says ACPL's Secretariat member, Rob Reed, MinterEllison. To join the ACPL please contact Secretariat member, Amy Grunske, Orrick, at agrunske@orrick.com.

The **European Pro Bono Initiative (EPBI)** is a community of pro bono professionals across Europe. It was set up in 2019 with the aim of identifying growth opportunities for, and removing barriers to, pro bono involvement, and to increase collaboration within the sector. Membership is free and includes lawyers who are fully dedicated to pro bono work at commercial law firms within Europe, those with European responsibilities based elsewhere, and others in Europe who invest significant time into pro bono management at firms, associations and companies. EPBI runs an email distribution list and hosts quarterly calls. EPBI is involved in organising the European Pro Bono Week every year in collaboration with PILnet and EPBI members also organise country roundtables in Europe (such as Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Germany, etc.) to exchange information and discuss best practises. EPBI also engages with the European Bar Associations to seek their support for pro bono and involve them in advocating for the removal of barriers to pro bono. In October 2023, EPBI, PILnet and the Federation of European Bars organised a session on “European Bars and Pro Bono” to provide an opportunity for European Bars to exchange information on their pro bono policies. To join EPBI please contact Steering Group member, Özgür Kahale, DLA Piper, at Ozqur.Kahale@dlapiper.com.

The **UK Collaborative Plan for Pro Bono (UKCP)** was set up in 2014 to bring law firms together to grow their pro bono practices. It is free to join, however participating firms must have at least one UK-based office, agree to an aspirational target of 25 pro bono hours per year, and submit annual data which is grouped and de-identified in a **published snapshot document**. Each of the 80+ member firms designate a number of representatives to join an email distribution list and participate in quarterly meetings - these are typically the dedicated pro bono professionals at their firm but can also be other lawyers and non-lawyers who contribute to pro bono management. The network also provides resources for professional development through an Intralinks site and hosts an annual professional development conference, UKAdemy, as well as additional UKAdemy+ sessions on different topics throughout the year. It also offers member firm representatives a one-to-one mentoring scheme. One of the UKCP Secretariat members, Amy Grunske, Orrick, *says “We have been lucky enough to be involved with the UKCP since its inception, and it has been invaluable to the development of our pro bono practice in our London office. Through the network we have been able to partner with other member firms on collaborative projects with law centres and NGOs, focused on assisting some of the most vulnerable and marginalised individuals in our community, with a collective impact that far surpasses what any of us could achieve by ourselves.”* To join the UKCP please contact the Secretariat at ukcp-secretariat@googlegroups.com.



The ACPL, APBI, UKCP and EPBI jointly organise a **Global Convening of Law Firm Pro Bono Professionals** each year, held in connection with the **PILnet Global Forum**. The convening is a day-long meeting which provides an opportunity for pro bono professionals around the world to connect with each other, exchange best practice, share innovative ideas and strategies, and delve into critical conversations on some of the most complex challenges confronting the sector. The 2024 Global Convening will be held in Bangkok in November 2024

and topics of discussion will include elements of a successful/mature/elevated pro bono practice in each region, different models of and strategies for firm engagement, balancing commercial considerations with meeting greatest need, strategic law reform, new ways to measure and report impact, and sustainable funding models for pro bono partners and projects. Registration for the convening is through the PILnet conference website [here](#).



Networks are also currently being established in regions where there are fewer (but growing) numbers of pro bono professionals:

The **Asia Law Firm Pro Bono Network** was established in 2024, connecting local law firm professionals and those that manage pro bono practices in the region from other locations. The network facilitates quarterly calls and an email distribution list to share knowledge and experience and to encourage collaboration on projects in the region. *“From small beginnings, we’re delighted to see the network in Asia expand and connect not only those in the region but also those outside the region with regional coverage. These connections are invaluable in supporting the growth of pro bono work in Asia,”* say two of the network’s founding members, Catherine Husted, A&O Shearman, and Penny Barsha, Linklaters. *“We’re looking forward to sharing knowledge, challenges and successes, and facilitating more lawyers in Asia to take on pro bono work and make an impact in our communities.”* To join this group please contact Amy Grunske, Orrick at agrunske@orrick.com.

In **Latin America**, a cohort of law firm professionals who work full-time on pro bono matters created an informal network with each other in 2023 (which includes local pro bono organisations such as Pro Bono Network of the Americas) to discuss best practice, share relevant information and experience, and refer and collaborate on projects. They connect via a WhatsApp group and quarterly calls. *“I have led the pro bono programme at my firm on a full-time basis for over a decade, and have faced many challenges within that time,”* says Julia Anabel Sainz, Human Rights Lawyer and Head of Pro Bono at Marval O’Farrell Mairal. *“Getting to know my pro bono professional peers in LATAM and sharing similar day-to-day working experiences has been so helpful for me to continue to strengthen the pro bono work within my firm.”* If you are a dedicated pro bono professional based in the region and interested in joining this group please contact Lina María Moya Ortiz, Gómez-Pinzón, at lmoya@gomezpinzon.com.

In the **Middle East**, the Dubai Pro Bono Roundtable is a group of international firms locally based who meet to discuss pro bono initiatives, share knowledge on pro bono opportunities and work together to explore collaborative opportunities. They have an email distribution list and WhatsApp group. *“This is a friendly network and useful resource for us as we all work together to create local pro bono initiatives in the Middle East”* – Ed Brown, Counsel and Pro Bono Committee Member, Gowling WLG. If you are a dedicated pro bono professional based in the region and interested in joining this group please contact Heidi Newbigging, Gowling WLG at heidi.newbigging@gowlingwlg.com.

As the creation of dedicated pro bono roles becomes more widespread globally, these networks will no doubt continue to expand and evolve. For specialist pro bono professionals these networks are invaluable, not just for sharing resources and expertise but for a sense of community; and more than that, they are hubs of innovation, collaboration and collective progress that truly help to drive forward the pro bono sector.

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