



PILA talks pro bono to Susie Hoffman, Partner at International Law firm Crowell and Moring

PILA is grateful to Roisin Fitzpatrick, who conducted this interview with Susie Hoffmann, whom she met while on the Washington Ireland Programme in Summer 2011.

Roisin Fitzpatrick for PILA recently spoke about pro bono to Susie Hoffman who is the Public Service Partner at international law firm, Crowell and Moring in Washington DC.

Susie was featured by LegalTimes as among the 90 greatest DC lawyers of the last 30 years for her contribution to the DC legal community. Crowell & Moring LLP is an international law firm with nearly 500 lawyers representing clients in litigation and arbitration, regulatory, and transactional matters. It is internationally recognised for its commitment to pro-bono service. Under Susie's direction, the firm contributes more than 30,000 hours annually on pro bono matters. This is over US\$4 million worth of investment, and accordingly the firm has been twice honoured as Pro Bono Firm of the Year by Tahirih Justice Center in Washington, DC.

She gave PILA the following answers to some frequently asked questions about pro bono service:

Q - What personal benefit is there for the individual solicitor/lawyer who becomes involved in pro bono work?

A - Lawyers benefit from involvement in pro bono work in many ways, which is one reason that firms with structured pro bono programmes attract high-quality recruits. Pro bono work often provides professional development opportunities for attorneys, particularly those attorneys who are in the early years of their practice. For example, attorneys can further their skills in completing client interviews/intake, case management, problem solving, research and drafting and, for some attorneys, in-court presentations. In addition, pro bono work is usually personally rewarding. The ability to help an individual client or an NGO with a pressing problem can give attorneys a huge amount of personal satisfaction. For instance, our attorneys who handle political asylum cases are gratified in knowing that they helped a refugee who might have faced persecution or even death if he were deported, to remain in our country. Many pro bono matters are resolved in a much shorter amount of time than the typical commercial representation at a large firm, so being able to resolve a problem/case within a reasonable amount of time can be very satisfying.

Q - Following from that, what benefits do you think Irish firms could derive from having more structured programmes?

A - There are a number of benefits that Irish firms could derive from having more structured pro bono programmes. First, by having a structured programme, firms could make strategic decisions about the types of pro bono cases that they feel are more beneficial to the community and to the training and development of their individual lawyers. Second, as mentioned above, many recent law school graduates are attracted to firms who have structured pro bono programs because it reflects an institutional commitment to handling pro bono work. In the U.S. attorney recruitment is viewed as a major benefit of having a successful pro bono programme. Third, having a structured programme can better ensure that attorneys who handle pro bono matters are supervised, mentored, evaluated and given recognition for their pro bono work. Fourth, having a structured – and therefore more likely robust pro bono programme, will improved attorney morale and loyalty to the firm. Finally, having a structured programme is just good management. Law firms have structured programmes for a variety of functions within the firm that results in setting a budget, priorities and evaluation of performance/results.

Q - Finally what are the biggest issues you have come up against while supporting pro bono work in a legal corporate world and how have you (if you have) overcome them?

A - One of the most sensitive issues that arises in doing pro bono work in a corporate context is potential client conflicts of interest. Of course, we are not able to represent clients in litigation or on matters against companies that we represent. But the issue is even broader, because the pro bono work also needs to avoid setting adverse legal precedent on issues that matter to the firm's clients. I have dealt with this issue by learning as much as I can about our firm's commercial practice and clients so that I can be sensitive to their particular issues and avoid taking on adverse pro bono work. Fortunately, there are so many types of pro bono work and clients available that we always have plenty of issues and areas in which we can work even after avoiding these client conflicts.

Probably the largest issue is time. Attorneys are very busy – and the product that they “sell” is their time i.e. the billable hour. So, being able to persuade attorneys to devote time to pro bono work - which is clearly going to be at the expense of social life, client development and maybe even billable work – is a challenge. I have tried to overcome the drawbacks of the time-investment by emphasizing the personal and professional rewards of pro bono work. (Often the clients unwittingly help me in this respect, by endearingly expressing their gratitude). I have also worked within my firm to have our management give attorneys billable hour credit in the evaluation process for a certain amount of pro bono hours. Finally, I try to give attorneys who do pro bono work recognition in other ways – through our pro bono newsletters and our annual pro bono awards event.