

Accomplish More with Pro Bono Services: Are You Making the Most of This Valuable Asset?

Every nonprofit should have this book.



By Terrence Fernsler

Powered by Pro Bono: The Nonprofit's Step-By-Step Guide to Scoping, Securing, Managing, Scaling Pro Bono Resources


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The economy has forced many nonprofit organizations to reconsider how to accomplish their goals. Money alone won't solve the immense social challenges of today. Nonprofits must look more closely at time and talent to supplement — or work hand-in-hand with — treasure resources. In *Powered by Pro Bono*, the Taproot Foundation shares what it has learned in its 10 years of promoting and using pro bono to help our organizations embrace this important tool for fulfilling our missions.

Nonprofits are complex. As government funding continues to decrease, nonprofits are becoming harder to manage. Professionals from many fields — law, information technology, human resources, accounting, financial planning, marketing, and organizational strategy — have skills to offer our organizations. Indeed, pro bono volunteers are often encouraged by their professional organizations to donate their talents to nonprofit organizations. We must know how to recruit and motivate them, however.

First, this means understanding what we need. Once we know this, we can align our needs with the pro bono skills available. We must then respond to pro bono work professionally, especially being realistic about timelines.

Clear communication with pro bono professionals is critical. It's important to remember that learning goes both ways: While volunteers demonstrate how we might reach our goals more efficiently, our organizations can inform professionals about our issues. This keeps them involved and makes our organizations more sustainable.

Once an organization successfully engages in pro bono, it can then begin to involve multiple departments, programs, and staff. This is what community building is about — accessing the abilities of supporters and prospective supporters as a core contribution to the civil sector. This builds a more just and inclusive society. It's why every nonprofit organization should have this book. 

Terrence Fernsler has been a nonprofit professional for over 30 years and is currently a candidate for a Master's in Nonprofit Leadership degree at Seattle University.

Keys to Securing Pro Bono Resources

More than 15 billion dollars in pro bono services are donated to nonprofits every year — four times more than all corporate grantmaking. These precious resources are at your fingertips. Are you taking full advantage of their potential?

Powered by Pro Bono will help you secure these resources to get the results you need. Here are a few of the keys:

Understand the difference between volunteer and pro bono assistance. Traditional volunteers provide extra hands for direct, immediate demands. Pro bono professionals furnish skills-based support for long-term leadership needs.

Don't look for pro-bono support unless you meet these criteria:

- **Your needs** are important but not urgent.
- **Your project** has a clearly defined scope.
- **Staff members** are ready and willing to be part of the pro bono experience.

Engage pro bono professionals proactively. For example, you might post an ad on volunteermatch.org, craigslist.org, or idealists.org with the title “Pro Bono Copy Writer Needed” or “Lend Your Strategic Expertise to a Nonprofit that Needs You.” Be specific about what you're seeking. Spell out what the professional will gain in return (“You'll meet a tremendous group of like-minded professionals. You'll deepen your connection with your community. You'll create lasting relationships.”)

Write a proposal. This isn't like a grant proposal. It's a collaborative document that you create in partnership with the pro bono professional. Crafting the proposal together will serve as a pilot for working together. Your proposal should describe your needs, your organization's mission, the impact the pro bono work will have, a time line and estimate for total hours necessary, and the expectations you have of each other.

Build a pro bono culture. Turn pro bono work into systematic support that extends beyond one project by following these suggestions:

- **Always be looking six to 12 months ahead** to identify areas of need that you can address through pro bono. Be ready to seek resources with ample lead time.
- **Weave pro bono** into your strategic planning and budgeting.
- **Form partnerships** with organizations that are in it for the long haul.
- **Before launching any project**, ask: Could pro bono help us here?