

# Making the Time

*How a young lawyer in a big law firm manages pro bono commitments.*

by Alison Arnot

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Most lawyers would probably like to do more work on a *pro bono* basis, but often can't find the time among client demands and billable hour quotas. So how do lawyers fit *pro bono* into their careers?



Jennifer Spencer

“If it’s important to you, you make the time for the things that have value,” says Jennifer Spencer, an associate at Blake, Cassels & Graydon LLP in Vancouver. “There’s extra work involved; however, the rewards are great, and being connected with your community

through law is a particularly great way to give back when you have specific skills that organizations need.”

Spencer, who began her career at Blakes as a summer student in 2001, provides corporate governance and risk management advice to the Parkinson’s Society of British Columbia and other charities, volunteers as duty counsel with *Pro Bono Law B.C.’s* Civil Chambers Duty Counsel Project, and takes on litigation matters for individuals who would otherwise be unrepresented. She is also a member of Blakes National *Pro Bono* Committee and volunteers her spare time with the YWCA High School Mentorship Program, providing advice and career guidance to high school students.

She says her firm’s support has been instrumental to her finding time to include *pro bono* activities in her day. Once Blakes approves a *pro bono* file, the first 150 hours count as part of the lawyer’s billable work — although, of course, the lawyer is not remunerated for it.

Spencer offers the following three key tips to help balance it all:

- Be selective in what *pro bono* work you take on and find something you care about.
- Limit yourself to two or three active *pro bono* files at a time.
- Treat *pro bono* clients as though they were regular clients. Their matters should receive the same amount of urgency and you should deliver the same level of service. It is not possible to do *pro bono* work “on the side,” after hours, or on the weekend.

If you manage to fit *pro bono* work in, the rewards are tangible. “The rewarding part about it is helping people that are struggling to get the type of help that they need from the legal system,” says Spencer.

There are also other, broader benefits to the firm. Regular clients want to align themselves with legal counsel who have this type of mindset. As well, students and recruits are increasingly attracted to firms with this type of culture.

Students ask about *pro bono* programs when interviewing for articling positions, Spencer confirms. “The passion that young lawyers and lawyers-to-be have for *pro bono* work is truly inspiring, and it often yields a great teaching opportunity or mentoring opportunity for more senior lawyers.”

Seems like a win-win situation for everyone, and one that can be achieved by selecting the *pro bono* cases that best suit you and getting the support of your firm.