



Understanding and Optimizing Pro Bono Work

by Joey Tamer

The lure of pro-bono work is the involvement with some project or company that captures your spirit and passion. It may be a start-up entertainment company, with the glamour of that industry. It may be a political or community project that you believe in and want to further. It may be a charismatic leader that you want to support in her efforts.

First, sort out if this is a professional pro-bono opportunity, or a personal contribution you want to make. Then assign it to its proper time: within the business time; or not.

Your professional pro-bono work

1. Limit your professional pro bono work to one pro bono client at a time, even if that relationship lasts for years. This means you will say no to all other requests.
2. Make sure there is a win-win involved: your professional pro bono client should offer you some professional gain other than compensation (e.g., exposure to potential clients; speaking gigs; publication of your writings; opportunities for involvement that will somehow directly enhance your practice).
3. Offer your basic expertise on a consistent basis. Do not assume (however informally) any key leadership role, project or responsibility that should be fulfilled by a paid executive or staffer. This would be unpaid work, not a pro bono contribution. And your fulfilling this role unbalances the organization's chart and understanding of what staff and overhead are required, since you are not a key employee.

4. Be clear with your pro bono client how many hours each month are available from you, and control that time. Manage these expectations for both of you.

5. If asked to do an in-depth project, offer to do this at your standard (or slightly reduced, say 10-20%) consulting fees. Make sure the project will not interfere with your paid client work.

6. Beware of pro-bono work that you want to believe is prospecting. I have seen many early-stage consultants spend time on projects they hope will become clients later – but which cannot afford to hire them now, usually from mismanagement or naïveté. By “hoping” the organization will grow enough to compensate her, the consultant puts in many hours of expertise (and project work) for no compensation, and often with no agreement for compensation in the future!

7. Beware accepting “stock” or “participation” in such naïve enterprises – this is often vapor-paper and never comes to anything.

8. Do not work without an agreement covering your involvement, lack of liability, and all parties’ expectations, even if no compensation is involved.

9. Know when to walk away: if you are contributing to an organization, and you come to understand that this organization cannot succeed, even with your help and your network, or you find that fatal flaw that cannot be overcome, excuse yourself with an appropriate termination time to wrap up or transfer your responsibilities. Then find another organization with more chance of success which can use your expertise.

Your personal pro-bono work

10. Your personal time can be spent on any contributions or community involvement you choose. You can spend as much of your non-work time (other than the 40-60 hours per week required for your business).

11. Do not work without an agreement covering your involvement, lack of liability, and all parties’ expectations, even if no compensation is involved.

12. Remember to balance your work, your personal pro bono efforts and the rest of your life, so you have all of them.

My experiences (read, errors) exploring these opportunities taught me about pro-bono work (see sidebars). As we can see, my weaknesses are for excellent, early ideas, charismatic leaders, and dreamers. What are yours? It is good to find out, and to remember. Best of all, these experiences led me to understand how to handle my pro-bono work. My current single pro-bono client is a delight, with exchanges of value, mutual appreciation, and pleasure.

Experience One

I once spent years (off and on) providing pro-bono strategic consulting to an exciting product still in its development phase. The factors that got me included: the CEO was a close colleague; he was charismatic; the software product idea was simple, elegant and ahead of its time; I was given 5% of the company. For me this was more like play.

The Pros: I had a good time with the CEO and all the players; I refined my understanding about what someone says and what he can and will do; I didn't spend much time on it, and really had relegated it to "personal" time; it never interfered with my core workload; it wasn't the first vapor-paper I'd ever received.

The Cons: But after many years of failing to produce the software, and regularly-changing key players; no consistent capital strategy; and the CEO's persistent excitement about each new team, I gave up. It was clear no one actually understood the software development process, and that this was the CEO's dream but not his primary focus.

Experience Two

I later spent a good deal of time with a small group of entertainment entrepreneurs who were beginning to build an online entertainment website portal. The market timing was appropriate (if they could move quickly); they had a good rolodex that might support the venture; they had enormous enthusiasm; they had a charismatic spokesperson; I liked all of the partners. I was restless at that time and wanted something more fun to work on. In the end (not very long after we began), I left the group when it became clear that not one of them would step up to the actual leadership of the venture, and essentially wanted me to assume that role.

The Pros: I had a good time with them while I helped them, and learned more about them. I enjoyed my time with them. I didn't set any deal in place while I investigated what they could do, so there was nothing to "undo."

The Cons: I spent far too much time with them while I was busy with paying clients, so I created more pressure for myself than I needed to. I was disappointed to see that none of them would assume a leadership position, which refined my perspective about entrepreneurs who dream by do not do. (this last part is a "pro.")

Joey Tamer consults to Fortune 500 companies and capitalized start ups to launch, build and expand technology companies, often serving as a "shadow CEO" to extend the CEO's bandwidth. She also advises consultants and service companies on their growth and profitability. She has consulted since the early days of the PC through to her Web 2.0 clients of today. Clients include J.P. Morgan Capital, Sony, IBM, Apple, Hearst, Blockbuster, Technicolor, Harper Collins, NEC, Time-Warner, Agfa and Scitex, and many early stage ventures such as Earthweb and iSuppli.