



IN-HOUSE PRO BONO IN PRACTICE PROFILE: BEST BUY CO., INC.

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Program Background

When the Minnesota State Bar Association (MSBA) spearheaded a “Call to Honor” in October 2003, asking the legal community to increase its pro bono involvement, Joseph M. Joyce, senior vice president, general counsel and assistant secretary of Best Buy Co., Inc. (Best Buy), not only heard the call, but he joined the chorus. A native of Minneapolis, home to Best Buy’s headquarters, Joyce’s lifelong connection to the city and his belief in corporate social responsibility informed his decision that the Best Buy legal department should offer its significant resources to the community that had, for so many years, offered so much to him and to the corporation. In November of 2006, Joyce signed the Corporate Pro Bono ChallengeSM.

Program Infrastructure

Within a month of the “Call to Honor” by the MSBA, Joyce directed the Best Buy law department to create a Pro Bono Committee (Committee) and develop a department-wide pro bono program. The Committee scoured the Internet, found examples of corporate pro bono programs in various business sectors, and picked elements of each that best fit Best Buy’s culture and the interests of the approximately 30 attorneys and 20 non-attorney staff in its law department. “The most fundamental challenge,” according to Jill Barnett, corporate counsel and member of the Committee, “was to develop a program that would attract and put at ease attorneys who were removed from law firm practice and the attendant skills traditionally thought necessary for doing pro bono work.” With that in mind, the Committee thought it best to partner with a well-established legal services organization that offered a dependable pro bono infrastructure, malpractice insurance, and, most importantly, onsite training for the volunteers. After some research, Volunteer Lawyers Network (VLN) presented itself as the perfect match and the law department launched the Best Buy Pro Bono Program in January 2004.

Projects, Recruitment and Sustainability

Response to the program was immediate and enthusiastic. Just one month after the program was announced, VLN launched a Criminal Expungement clinic that Best Buy volunteers were the first to staff. The clinic was so successful that the Best Buy staff continued to participate in it two days per month for the next two years. Eventually, the volunteers started to take part in several other VLN projects, including unemployment law cases, family law cases, and a housing clinic, which they have participated in for the past three years.

With the preliminary issues of training and malpractice insurance resolved, and with a number of streamlined projects well underway, the Committee shifted its focus to the challenges of recruitment and sustainability by developing methods “to keep people excited, interested, and enthusiastic,” says Barnett. The first method is to periodically offer fresh projects that introduce varied venues and

legal matters to attract new participants and keep the interest of the old. One especially successful example was a tax clinic with Volunteers of America and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Held during tax season and equally accommodating to attorneys and paralegals, this clinic proved very popular and resulted in a spike in volunteers.

Another method is to motivate participants with incentives, recognition, and awards. Incentives include designation as “Employee of the Month” or gift certificates to those who put in a certain number of pro bono hours. Recognition may come from a supervisor evaluating an employee who has chosen to include “pro bono activity” in his or her personal development goals, or from the general counsel who presents awards to individuals and teams of volunteers who have performed more than 40 or 45 hours, respectively, of annual pro bono work. As an affirmation of Best Buy’s tradition of charitable giving, these awards also include financial donations to organizations of the recipients’ choice.

Perhaps the most significant method to gain and retain staff interest in the program is the prominent and constant display of support by the law department’s leaders. Executive support is invaluable in conveying to the staff that pro bono work is important, encouraged, and manageable. “Joe [Joyce] has been key in fostering an environment of support from the top,” says Barnett. Joyce attends almost every Committee meeting and, when he cannot, he asks for detailed status reports. Moreover, at least three other Best Buy vice presidents have participated in several of the department’s pro bono ventures. Judging by the Committee’s data, these methods are quite effective, as program volunteers devote an average of almost 500 collective hours to pro bono work annually.

A bar association heralded a rallying cry, that cry triggered an executive’s altruistic impulse, and that impulse spurred a group of generous and committed people to provide several hundred hours of free legal assistance to benefit the community they inhabit. It is clear, however, that the pro bono clients are not the only ones to benefit from these efforts. The volunteers gain not only the gratification of helping those in need, but also the opportunity to learn new aspects of the law, to earn positive recognition from leaders, and to create stronger bonds with colleagues. And if you ask Barnett, a former legal aid clerk, she will say that there is an added bonus for her. “I consider myself a legal aid attorney who ended up in a corporation,” she says, “so I’m thankful for being allowed to fulfill that need within myself.”

Lessons Learned

- Recognition and incentives encourage involvement. That way, members of the legal department know participation is not just permitted, but encouraged and rewarded.
- Offer variety to ensure participation. Gauge associate interest in pro bono projects and allow them to choose the project most interesting to them.
- Support from the top is key. The legal department’s leaders and the company’s executives encourage pro bono activities, which fosters increased participation in and enthusiasm for pro bono initiatives.

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