

PRO BONO WORK

On Monday November 25 2013 there was a discussion evening at Gresham College on the subject of Livery Companies and pro bono work. The evening was coordinated by Freeman Mary Linington who has suggested that this is an activity that our Company might wish to start.

The first presentation was from Linda Wickstrom, who is the administrator for the City of London Dragon Awards, gave an overall view of the City's approach to community engagement. She emphasised the importance that the City of London Corporation places on community engagement. The wealth of the City should be spread out to help the surrounding boroughs many of whom have a number of social problems. Heart of the City is a charity funded by the City of London and City Bridge Trust which brings companies together, creating a business community that champions Corporate Social Responsibility and makes it accessible to companies of all sizes. The City Corporation has recently produced a good practice guide for corporate community partnerships. The Lord Mayor's Dragon awards recognise and celebrate community engagement in Greater London. The scheme is designed to reward organisations which display excellence in engaging with their local communities, to provide examples of best practice and to inspire others to get more involved.

Her advice based on the work in the City is to start small and do not try to do everything at once. Any scheme should be relevant to the Company and there should be benefits for both the provider and the receiver. It is important that objectives are set and that an assessment is made of what has been achieved with what has been put in. The measurement of the impact of any scheme is important.

This was followed by Patrick Chapman, First Warden of the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants (WCoMC), who described how their Company keep a register of pro bono work done by their Freeman on behalf of the Company. This strand of work is one of the main areas that WCoMC address (Charitable Work, Friendship, Support to Professional Education, and Support to the Civic City). The main questions that WCoMC addressed in relation to their Charitable work and which Patrick believed our Company needs to think about when planning any pro bono scheme are:

1. Why should we do it? For most Companies it is done as part of their Livery Work which in itself gains sector recognition, builds the Company brand and positions the Company to be an organisation to be consulted on particular issues.
2. What should we do or want to do? Is there a market for the skills we can offer and who should we offer the service to?
3. Who might do the pro bono work and how should we do the work? Are we a like a 'marriage bureau' or will we be accountable for any pro bono support provided?

The WCoMC are like us, a modern livery Company, number 105 in the order of precedence. The main purposes of Livery Companies include networking, participating in the City and above all 'doing good'. The WCoMC set up a scheme offering management consultancy advice and mentoring support to charities and other not for profit enterprises. There is an enthusiastic community of active consultants who freely offer their time focusing the pro bono support where it can have the most impact on improving social outcomes. They particularly support the activities of charitable organisations that are either unable to pay normal consulting fees or have exceptional cases for support. Overall, they provide the equivalent of £1m of support each year through their pro bono programme.

WCoMC have found that the service needs to be marketed and scoped and the work is done as though it were a regular day job. There can however come a point where the client is asking for a lot of help and the relationship may have to be reassessed in order not to be an unfair burden on the volunteer consultant (the overarching terms of business cater for this eventuality) with guidelines if the work becomes commercial. The WCoMC has a register with each member listing the skills which they can offer. As a first stage, when a client approaches the WCoMC, a senior member of the Company meets the client to scope the needs for the project. The terms and conditions for the project are laid down because although the work may be done for free, the client will have to pay expenses incurred. The WCoMC acts as a marriage bureau between the client and the possible consultant. As a second separate stage a consultant meets the client and agrees a contract with them. It has been found to be rather difficult to have more than one consultant on a particular project. This two stage process enables the WCoMC to help strengthen its reputation but has no liability itself for the work offered.

The WCoMC does measure and report on the amount of pro bono work done annually but the most important measure is in fact the level to which the work has made a difference to the client. Value added is seen as the most important outcome.

The following points were made in the discussion.

- It is important that any scheme is done well as it might give bad publicity rather than good publicity to the Company if some work goes wrong.
- Our Company has taken over leadership on the Livery Schools Link which is a key vehicle for helping schools in the London area. There are few of our Freemen that volunteer compared to some other Companies.
- As a Company we need links with educators in City schools and universities but we must not be commercial in any way.
- It is important if we start that we start in a small way.
- We need to decide what it is that is special that we can offer. What is our Unique Selling Proposition?
- We might start with one project as the context in which advice is given is important.
- We should start with a project that is relevant to the Company and in an area near to those offering the work.
- We need clarity over any scheme we start with clear criteria as to what we can/will offer.
- We need to think about the possible exposure to litigation. There is a useful website from Cranfield University offering advice on this.
- Is there a need to measure pro bono work in any way as this might stifle some initiatives?

The discussion could have continued for a while and for some did with the customary informal supper in the local pub. The idea of a scheme will be debated further within the Committees of the Company but comments from Freemen will always be welcome.