

## **Pro bono and developing the 'human touch'**

The identity of the legal professional is changing. Participating in the Digital Justice Project (2021), gave me an insight into how the use of technology in legal practice can increase the efficiency of the provision of legal services through process standardisation, documentation automation and artificial intelligence (The Law Society, 2019). However, sensitive, or vulnerable client management requires a 'human touch' that legal technology currently falls short on (Edwards, 2019). Therefore, having discussed my participation in the Open Justice Law Clinic ('OJLC') with a variety of legal practitioners, I have come to appreciate the value of pro bono clinic work for providing the opportunity to improve the 'human' attributes needed for legal practice. These include approachability and personability, requiring development of emotional intelligence and teamwork skills (Hilborne, 2022).

While participating in the OJLC, an interview with a client overran by nearly an hour. I was very anxious that this would reflect badly on our time management skills - appearing unprofessional to the client. I recorded in my OJLC diary that, "if I was asking the questions (as opposed to notetaking), I would have tried to interrupt the client's long narratives with more closed-answer questioning" ('Extract 1') - focusing on efficient information gathering, rather than the client's feelings. Whilst I recognise that timekeeping is an important factor in chairing meetings, I can see now that it was more important for the client to feel heard at the interview, as the client later expressed feeling "ignored and forgotten" by organisations previously dealing with the issue ('Extract 2'). This experience has helped me to recognise other people's feelings, while refining my self-awareness about how my emotions may affect an interaction with a client. This has improved my empathy and sensitive client management skills, which will be vital in later legal practice (International Bar Association, 2022). In future, I will concentrate on actively listening to the client, while observing their body language, to help me recognise their expectations and needs earlier during the interview process (Matich, 2022).

Working on real cases in the clinic has felt overwhelming at times. I wrote at the start of a new case, "I don't know where to begin, there is so much information and I don't know this area of law" ('Extract 3'). I was nervous, questioning my ability to manage

my workload. Nevertheless, at the first group meeting about the case, I expressed my concerns and found that all four of us in the firm (students) were feeling the same. I feel that our team cohesion was strengthened by this as we collectively encouraged each other - acknowledging the skills and attributes offered by each individual member. This made me realise that pro bono work, or any legal case work, requires the contributions from a group of people - not just an individual, working together to find solutions to an issue (Thompson, 2019). I hope that this positive group dynamic can be replicated in future by encouraging and supporting peers and sharing responsibility for the workload (The Open University ('OU'), 2021, 4.1.3).

I initially thought that the value of pro bono legal work was in the fight for social justice, and while this is still an intrinsic motivation, I now recognise its extrinsic value in relation to my own professional development (OU, 2021, 3.2). I feel that engaging with the experiential learning in the Clinic has heightened my awareness of the attributes, values and experiences required to be a successful legal practitioner. This has helped me to focus on my skill development, including emotional intelligence and teamwork, enhancing my own professional identity as a student lawyer in a positive and meaningful way.

## References

### **Books**

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