

VOLUNTEERING IN A SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE AS A MATURE AGE STUDENT OR GRADUATE BENEFITS YOUR FUTURE CAREER.

international legal experts. Volunteering also exposes you to the internal social culture of working in a firm environment: in particular we have discovered the joys of Friday evening drinks with our colleagues!

Client contact

Working in a social justice practice has occasionally involved us interacting directly with clients. This has allowed us to learn how to maintain rapport and deal with different client needs and expectations. On the other hand, we have also had to learn how to deal with the inevitable professional reality of clients receiving unfavourable outcomes in their matters. Learning these skills is vital for students and graduates, especially given the fact that lack of communication is one of the largest areas of complaint against lawyers in Victoria.

Juggling your time

Most volunteers will inevitably have to combine volunteering with study and/or paid employment. Dealing with this challenge requires flexibility on both you and your employer's behalf: you may at times need to do voluntary work from home or renegotiate your availability with your contact at the firm. It should also be noted that voluntary hours can fluctuate – we have worked between four and 20 hours a week, depending on our availability and the practice's needs.

Conclusion

Volunteering, as either a law student or a graduate, has become increasingly necessary in today's competitive job market. Yet volunteering in a social justice practice is not just a path to employment – it can also be an opportunity for free practical education. Whatever area of law you are hoping to forge your career in, the skills you learn from a volunteer position in a social justice practice are some of the most valuable and transferable. Perhaps more importantly, they are skills of the kind that you don't generally learn at university. ■

TRENT VITTORIO is Social Justice Volunteer with Shine Lawyers.



Lending a hand

For the past five months my colleague and I have had the privilege of volunteering in the social justice practice of Melbourne firm Shine Lawyers.

The most rewarding part of our work has been assisting on meaningful cases with clients who would otherwise struggle to access the legal system. However, we have also found that, especially given our respective backgrounds (a postgraduate student and a law graduate returning to the field), volunteering in a social justice practice has successfully and substantially enhanced our professional development.

Professional skills

Law school may provide you with a theoretical framework for practice. However, we have both found it doesn't necessarily teach you the practical skills needed in the workplace: for example, how to draft a pleading or prepare a proper index. Working on a major Federal Court matter in a social justice practice has given us the opportunity to learn how to perform these essential tasks directly from legal professionals. This could be attractive to young lawyers who

may not yet have been granted this level of responsibility at their paid employer.

Try before you buy

For a law graduate returning to the field after working in another sector, volunteering in a social justice practice provides an ideal opportunity to discover whether legal practice is for you and whether professional skills that have been developed elsewhere translate into a legal environment. Alternatively, many of the cases we have confronted while volunteering touch on aspects of the law we had not previously studied: for example, matters dealing with anti-discrimination, privacy and extradition. This type of exposure has had the potential to spark an interest and even open up new career opportunities in fields that we hadn't previously considered.

Networking

Volunteering in a social justice practice provides opportunities to develop professional networks beyond the people you work with in the office: for example, we have participated in conferences with foreign law students and