

W+K: The opportunities and challenges of pro bono within one of the fastest-growing law firms in Australia



W+K's International Women's Day 2024 and launch of the W+Kadetship in partnership with Arise Foundation to provide employment pathways to women who have experienced financial abuse. Event panel speakers (L-R), Catherine Fitzpatrick (Author, 'Reimagining general insurance to improve financial safety'), Heidi Anderson (Wotton + Kearney), Rebecca Glenn (Founder and CEO, Centre for Women's Economic Safety), Tasnia Alam Hannan (Co-Founder, Arise Foundation), Fariha Chowdhury (Co-Founder, Arise Foundation)

This accelerated growth, particularly in the last four years, has provided significant opportunities for our pro bono practice, as well as some inevitable challenges. Throughout it all, a strong foundation of pro bono culture and management support has enabled us to adapt, build impactful relationships with the community legal sector, and engage many with our purpose.

Establishing a pro bono culture

By Heidi Anderson
and Leanne Ho

It is just over 12 years ago that we established our pro bono practice at Wotton + Kearney (W+K). This has coincided with a period of significant growth for the firm. Founded in 2002, W+K has grown from two partners and four lawyers to 76 partners and over 450 lawyers across offices in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra, Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, with a Singapore office opening in June.

Our pro bono practice was established at the same time we launched our broader Community Footprint program. Having the one team driving both pro bono and social impact helped us to harness a culture of contribution throughout W+K with opportunities for everyone within the firm, making it part of the way we work.



We established our pro bono program at a time when there were no panel requirements for the firm. Our pro bono culture has been driven by a commitment to making a positive contribution whilst appreciating that there is a special role that only lawyers can play in improving access to justice and strengthening the rule of law.

Strong management support

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of management support of pro bono at W+K is the investment in the pro bono team itself. W+K has two pro bono partners, Heidi Anderson and Leanne Ho, two special counsel, an associate and a paralegal. With the dedicated team predominantly based in Sydney, we are supported by pro bono champions in each office who help drive initiatives on the ground.

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weekly (because they are!). This has necessitated a level of fearlessness, some big thinking, innovation and a really supportive team culture. Every member of the W+K pro bono team has played a role in growing our pro bono practice, by 44% in FY23 and an anticipated 83% in FY24. It hasn't been easy, but it has most certainly been rewarding to see the team's efforts translate into pro bono matters and projects that make a difference to people's lives.

Keeping it real

For those striving to meet the Pro Bono Target (W+K became a signatory in July 2022), working in a rapidly growing firm can present a number of challenges. The goal posts can seem like they are changing

Greater focus and impact

As our pro bono practice has evolved and grown, we have identified a need to have greater focus to deliver more meaningful impact. A few years ago, we aligned the work of our pro bono practice to the UN Sustainable Development Goals of Gender Equality, Reduced Inequalities, Climate Action, and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

Pro bono support for people seeking asylum and refugees is where our Community Footprint program started over a decade ago and remains a key area for our practice, since we have developed expertise over the years. Through partnerships with RACS, Refugee Legal, and the Human Rights Law Centre, we provide support through clinics, secondments, client referrals and litigation support. With three experienced litigators in the pro bono team in Heidi Anderson, Special Counsel Angela Tan and Associate Renee Magee, our growth has enhanced the pro bono team's ability to engage in impactful strategic litigation.

In addition, the diverse backgrounds of our pro bono leadership means that we are often able to provide a uniquely diverse, deep and wholistic offering to our pro bono clients and community partners in all our areas of focus. This includes expert law reform and advocacy support, which goes beyond legal research and submission drafting, to strategic advice supported by Leanne Ho, who has years of leadership in the community legal sector, and Special Counsel, Roland Everingham. As technology moves at breakneck speed, the pro bono support we provide is also assisting our community partners to understand what it will mean for them and the cohorts in whose interests they advocate. For example, some highlights include supporting:

- the Centre for Women's Economic Safety with their latest publication in the Designed to Disrupt series, 'Reimagining general insurance products to improve financial safety'
- the Australian Human Rights Commission background paper on neurotechnology, along with our own submission to the parliamentary inquiry into Australia's human rights framework

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- Basic Rights Queensland’s Working Women Queensland program with a secondment and community legal education session on the impact of AI on women’s work, and
- the Human Rights Law Centre’s campaign for a national Human Rights Act with factsheets demonstrating how human rights acts have made a difference in the jurisdictions that already have them.

What’s next?

With continued growth at W+K, we envisage the pro bono practice will also grow, providing more opportunities for W+K lawyers to get involved in the program and help to build the impact of our pro bono work.



With our social impact and responsible business programs also maturing, we are identifying more opportunities to address societal issues with a whole of firm response. Most recently, we have been able to help survivors of financial abuse through a new

cadetship program, W+Kadetship in partnership with the Arise Foundation, whilst also providing pro bono support to partners including the Centre for Women’s Economic Safety and the Redfern Legal Centre Financial Abuse Service.

What we have found throughout the evolution of our pro bono practice, is that the Australian Pro Bono Centre and the collaborative pro bono sector has provided immense support. As we look to what lies ahead, we do not doubt it will involve learning from others in the sector and continuing to share our experiences. ■

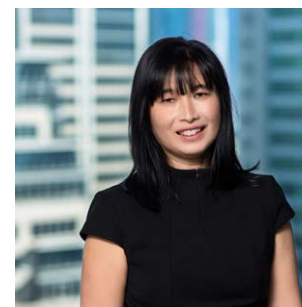


Heidi Anderson, Partner, Head of Pro Bono & Responsible Business, Wotton + Kearney

Heidi leads Wotton + Kearney’s Pro Bono and Responsible Business Program, Community Footprint, and is a passionate supporter of pro bono and community advocacy. Heidi decided to give up her successful insurance litigation practice to concentrate on establishing

Community Footprint and since 2016 this has been her sole focus. She was awarded winner of Pro Bono Partner of the Year at the 2018 and 2019 Lawyers Weekly Partner of the Year Awards.

Heidi is also passionate about driving responsible business practices and leads Wotton + Kearney’s response to modern slavery and commitment to environmental sustainability. She champions Diversity & Inclusion within Wotton + Kearney and is the partner sponsor of the firm’s Gender Employee Network.



Leanne Ho, Partner, Pro Bono, Wotton + Kearney

Leanne manages Wotton + Kearney’s human rights practice. Leanne has more than 20 years’ experience as a human rights lawyer and trusted policy advisor to government, with former roles including international legal advisor to the United Nations and CEO of Economic Justice Australia.

Leanne is known for driving large-scale collaborative projects that bring together lawyers from the community and corporate sectors to advocate for the systemic changes that reduce inequality and make everyone’s lives better. With her leadership experience across these sectors, she understands different perspectives and helps bring together ideas and people in collaborations that make a positive social impact.

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