

Global Pro Bono Guide 2026

Pro Bono Practices and Opportunities in Japan

Introduction

The Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA) is the autonomous national body that oversees guidance, coordination, and professional supervision of Japan’s attorneys and its 52 local bar associations, including matters related to pro bono. Japan does not impose a statutory requirement for attorneys to complete a minimum number of pro bono hours; historically, the profession has placed greater emphasis on legal aid than on pro bono services. Interest in pro bono is growing, and both domestic and international law firms are increasingly engaged. This momentum is driven in part by regional initiatives such as the Asia Law Firm Pro Bono Network and the Asia Pro Bono Roundtable Consortium, which convene pro bono managers, NGOs, and clearinghouses for regular in-person and virtual gatherings. While these groups focus on the broader Asia region, developments and opportunities specific to Japan are discussed.

At a glance

Minimum pro bono hours requirement for lawyers?	Specific pro bono licence required?	May foreign lawyers practice pro bono?	Insurance required for law firm pro bono?	Insurance required for in-house pro bono?	Rules to limit advertising pro bono work?	Does pro bono work count to CLE credit?	Limitations for in-house lawyers to do pro bono?
No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

The landscape

Professional regulation	
<p>1. Describe the laws or rules that regulate the provision of legal services, including any licensing required to provide legal services. Please highlight any differences for lawyers working as in-house counsel.</p>	<p>The JFBA is an entity established through the Attorney Act (1949)¹, which regulates the provision of legal services by lawyers in Japan. Alongside the Attorney Act, the JFBA Articles of Association² and the JFBA Basic Rules on the Duties of Practicing Attorneys (“JFBA BRDPA”)³ set out the scope of lawyers’ practices and disciplinary action procedures.</p> <p>In Japan, the legal department within a company, known as “Houmu-bu”, consists of individuals who handle legal and compliance matters. Many</p>

¹ See <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/1878/en> (last visited on 9 January 2025)

² See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/Articl_Bar_Associations.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

³ See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/Basic_Rules_Practicing.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

	<p>individuals in these roles have legal training and experience, but they may not be licensed attorneys. The term “in-house counsel” or “in-house lawyers” in this memorandum only refers to Japan-qualified lawyers.</p> <p>The JFBA BRDPA states that in-house lawyers must: (1) be aware of “the freedom and independence which constitute being an attorney”⁴; and (2) take appropriate measures when a person belonging to its organisation has or is about to violate any law or regulation.⁵</p>
Regulatory landscape for pro bono	
<p>2. Describe the laws or rules that regulate the provision of pro bono legal services.</p>	<p>In Japan, lawyers are tasked with seeking to protect fundamental human rights and achieve social justice (Article 1 of the Attorney Act). Law firms providing pro bono activities is one key way that they can seek to satisfy this legal requirement.</p> <p>In addition, by-laws of some local bar associations may require that their members perform “public interest activities” (<i>koeki katsudo</i>), which could include certain forms of pro bono work in some local bar associations. Some local bar associations require lawyers who do not meet the public interest activities requirement to make financial contributions to the bar associations in substitution for such activities.⁶ However, imposing mandatory public interest activities hours is not necessarily a practice of all local bar associations in Japan.</p>
<p>3. Do lawyers need a license to provide pro bono legal services (beyond usual local qualification to practice law)?</p>	<p>Local qualifications are typically sufficient for the provision of pro bono legal services in Japan.</p>
<p>4. Do foreign-qualified lawyers need any additional license to provide pro bono services (beyond their foreign qualification to practice law)?</p>	<p>Beyond obtaining valid qualifications to practise law in their home jurisdiction, foreign lawyers in Japan have to register as registered foreign lawyers in Japan (<i>gaikokuho-jimu-bengoshi</i>). This process also involves registering with the JBFA</p>

⁴ See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/Basic_Rules_Practicing.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

⁵ Articles 50 and 51 of the JFBA BRDPA. See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/Basic_Rules_Practicing.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

⁶ See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/legal_info/legal_apprentice/inhouse/about_lawyer.html (last visited on 28 January 2025)

	<p>and a local bar association.⁷ These requirements are relevant for foreign lawyers looking to provide pro bono legal services in Japan.</p> <p>However, registered foreign lawyers are barred from certain forms of practice, for example, representing clients in proceedings at Japanese courts or government tribunals, even if these proceedings are related to the laws of the country of primary qualification or the designated countries. International arbitration is typically permitted.⁸</p>
5. Are lawyers required by such rules to work a minimum number of pro bono hours? If so, how many?	Generally, lawyers in Japan are not required to work a minimum number of pro bono hours. However, local bar associations may provide incentives for lawyers to engage in pro bono work, such as allowing certain types of pro bono hours to count towards mandatory “public interest activities” (<i>koeki katsudo</i>) hours. ⁹
6. Are aspiring lawyers required to complete a minimum number of hours of pro bono legal services to become licensed lawyers?	Some bar associations may require their members to perform public interest activities. ¹⁰ Local bar associations may recognise certain types of pro bono activities as fulfilling these public interest requirements. Otherwise, aspiring lawyers are not typically required to complete a minimum number of hours of pro bono legal services in order to become licensed lawyers.
7. Aside from mandatory targets (if any), are there aspirational pro bono hours targets for lawyers set by the local bar association, regulatory body or other body?	Generally, lawyers in Japan are not required to work a minimum number of pro bono hours.
8. Do lawyers receive any “Continuing Legal Education” (CLE) or equivalent credit for pro bono hours worked?	Lawyers in Japan do not receive any “Continuing Legal Education” or equivalent credit for pro bono hours worked.
Insurance and advertising	
9. Do lawyers need professional indemnity legal insurance cover for pro bono legal services they provide? Does the	Lawyers in Japan do not require professional indemnity legal insurance cover for any pro bono legal services that they provide.

⁷ See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/JFBA_Brochure-pamf_2024.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

⁸ See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/JFBA_Brochure-pamf_2024.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

⁹ See <https://niben.jp/admission/koeki/seidogaiyou.html> (last visited on 28 January 2025)

¹⁰ https://www.jmsc.co.jp/knowhow/topics/4643.html?utm_source (Last viewed on 1 March 2026).

<p>requirement differ for in-house lawyers?</p> <p>If insurance is required, can lawyers meet the requirement by working under the cover of another pro bono provider, e.g. in partnership with a private law firm or organization working on the same pro bono project?</p>	
<p>10. Are there any rules that limit or prohibit advertising of pro bono successes or soliciting new pro bono clients?</p>	<p>Pro bono advertising or soliciting pro bono clients is generally permitted. However, the JFBA BRDPA sets out certain requirements of client solicitation, including that a lawyer may not provide misleading information or solicit a case for unjustifiable purposes (Articles 9 and 10 of JFBA BRDPA).¹¹</p>
<p>Pro bono practice and culture</p>	
<p>11. What are the main areas of law which require or present opportunities for pro bono? What are the major unmet legal needs?</p>	<p>Some of the main areas which present legal pro bono opportunities relate to what is described as “public interest activities” (<i>koeki katsudo</i>). Examples are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing support to disabled support centers or foster care facilities; • contributing to legal education (for example in schools or for students living in orphanages); and • assisting on lawsuits regarding certain social issues (such as diversity and inclusion) with low legal fees. <p>Law firms in Japan are increasingly getting involved in pro bono legal work. However, as bar associations and the government focus primarily on legal aid and court-appointed criminal defense counsel, there are arguably limited opportunities for lawyers to get involved in substantive pro bono legal work.</p>
<p>12. Who are the main providers of pro bono legal services?</p>	<p>The main providers of pro bono legal services in Japan are private law firms (including international law firms). These law firms often collaborate with NGOs or other public service bodies.</p> <p>Law firms may also collaborate with their local</p>

¹¹ See https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/library/en/about/data/Basic_Rules_Practicing.pdf (last visited on 9 January 2025)

	<p>bar association or the JFBA to provide pro bono services. For example, they may accept appointments as investigation-stage criminal defense counsels (<i>touban bengoshi</i>), court-appointed criminal defense counsels (<i>kokusen bengoshi</i>) or work with the Japan Legal Support Center (<i>houteras</i>) (the key provider of civil legal aid in Japan).</p> <p>Universities in Japan are also increasingly offering pro bono legal services and clinics, which may include qualified lawyers providing support (both in terms of legal advice and training to students).¹²</p>
<p>13. Are there any noteworthy examples of how innovative technology or artificial intelligence is being used to enable access to pro bono or otherwise as part of pro bono cases or matters?</p>	<p>Law firms in Japan are beginning to incorporate innovative technology and artificial intelligence as part of their commercial legal services. These developments are expected to be used by law firms in Japan as part of their pro bono work.</p> <p>Regarding technological innovation and artificial intelligence enabling access to justice more generally, Reiko Fuchigami (the current President of the JFBA) has discussed the importance of rapid IT adaptation in the Japanese judicial system. Notably, the JFBA's goal for 2025 was to implement the online submission of court documents in civil court proceedings.¹³</p>
Sources of Pro Bono Opportunities and Key Contacts	
<p>14. Describe notable sources of pro bono matters or resources in your jurisdiction.</p>	<p>The main sources of pro bono matters in Japan include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Asia Regional Pro Bono Roundtable is a quarterly online forum organized by a rotating consortium¹⁴ (with PILnet as the 2025 secretariat and TrustLaw in 2026) that convenes legal professionals, civil society, academia, government, community leaders, and corporates to share Asia-focused pro bono practices and opportunities that advance access to justice and the rule of law. This includes

¹² https://ls.sophia.ac.jp/20250801/post-2210?utm_source (Last viewed on 1 March 2026).

¹³ See <https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/en/about/us/message.html> (last visited on 9 January 2025)

¹⁴ <https://www.probonocentre.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Voco-Article-t1.pdf> (Last viewed on 22 February 2026).

	<p>Japan.¹⁵</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lawyers interested in opportunities to provide pro bono legal services may want to consider the Japan Association for Refugees¹⁶. This organisation offers services to support refugees and is open to both local and foreign lawyers. • LEDGE is Japan's first full-time, non-profit organization dedicated to public interest litigation and legal empowerment. Pro bono lawyers can assist LEDGE with research to support its cases. In 2026, LEDGE launched a report: “<i>Pro Bono in Japan: Corporate Law Firm Practice, Challenges, and Pathways Forward.</i>”¹⁷ • Japan Legal Support Center (<i>houterasu</i>), launched by the government, aims to improve access to justice, especially in areas outside the larger metropolitan areas of Japan.¹⁸ • Japan Federation of Bar Associations.¹⁹ • Tokyo Bar Association.²⁰ <p>Legal Counseling Centers operated by the Tokyo Bar Association, Dai-ichi Tokyo Bar Association and Dai-ni Tokyo Bar Association.²¹</p>
<p>15. Is there any public or private organization with which a local or foreign lawyer can register to be made aware of pro bono opportunities?</p>	<p>Lawyers can join the Asia Law Firm Pro Bono Network which was established in 2024. The network connects local law firm professionals and those that manage pro bono practices in the region. The network facilitates regular calls and an email distribution list to share knowledge and experience and to encourage collaboration on projects in the region, including in Japan.²²</p>
<p>16. Are there any awards, lists or rankings related to pro bono work?</p>	<p>There are recognitions for organisations or individuals who have made outstanding contributions to pro bono projects, for example, the Chambers Asia-Pacific and Greater China</p>

¹⁵ <https://www.pilnet.org/asia-regional-pro-bono-roundtable-2025/> (Last viewed on 22 February 2026).

¹⁶ See <https://www.refugee.or.jp/en/support/legal/> (last visited on 10 February 2026)

¹⁷ <https://ledge.or.jp/en#about> (Last viewed on 22 February 2026).

¹⁸ See <https://www.houterasu.or.jp/> (last visited on 10 March 2025)

¹⁹ See <https://www.nichibenren.or.jp/en/about/us/message.html> (last visited on 10 March 2025)

²⁰ See <https://www.toben.or.jp/english/> (last visited on 10 March 2025)

²¹ See <https://www.lccf.info/us/> (last visited on 10 March 2025)

²² <https://www.globalprobonohub.com/export/sites/pro-bono/resource/downloads/Global-PB-Hub-Article-Pro-Bono-Professional-Networks.pdf> (Last viewed on 22 February 2026).

	<p>Region Awards²³, and the IFLR Asia-Pacific Awards²⁴.</p> <p>The Tokyo Bar Association's Human Rights Award honors outstanding human rights protection activities conducted by individuals, groups, or organizations (both private-sector and members of the association), and is intended to contribute to the establishment and development of fundamental human rights.²⁵</p>
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Learn more

[Navigate the full Global Pro Bono Guide](#) to explore the global landscape and pro bono practices and opportunities across 100+ jurisdictions.

²³ See <https://chambers.com/events/asia-pacific-awards-2024> (last visited on 10 March 2025)

²⁴ See <https://resources.legalbenchmarkinggroup.com/IFLR-APAC-Awards-Methodology-2025> (last visited on 10 March 2025)

²⁵ <https://www.toben.or.jp/english/general/> (last viewed on 1 March 2026).