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## **Q&A: Green light for sustainability as firms join forces**

**In our latest Q&A, DLA Phillips Fox chief executive Tony Holland explains why major firms are backing a new alliance to promote sustainability within the profession.**

**Can you tell us about the Australian Legal Sector Alliance (AusLSA) and what its members are hoping to achieve?**

“This initiative is about collaboration within the legal profession to promote the sustainability issues that relate to us as a sector. Specifically, the alliance wants to measure, manage and reduce the environmental impact of our operations by promoting sustainable business practices.”

**Definitions of sustainability often vary dramatically, from environmental themes to other management-driven philosophies. Briefly, what does sustainability mean to the alliance?**

“AusLSA has decided to use the term ‘sustainability’ in its broadest sense. That is, the understanding that, ultimately, businesses need to balance economic, environmental and social priorities if they are going to be successful in the long run. Having said this, members have voiced a desire to address environmental impacts as a first priority. This is in recognition of the fact that environmental issues are important to many of our people. There is also quite a lot of ‘low-hanging fruit’ in this area, and generally, environmental efficiencies lead to cost reductions for the business.”

**In terms of promoting more environmentally friendly practices for firms, are there some specific targets – such as better water use or cutting air travel – that they can focus on?**

“AusLSA is currently in the process of developing a suite of tools and resources which will enable member firms to reduce their environmental impact. This includes a benchmarking tool to monitor and report on firms’ environmental performance, and a procurement guide providing guidance on developing policies that incorporate sustainability and information on issues relating to products that are heavily consumed in the legal industry. These resources will enable AusLSA to develop best practice guidelines for the Australian legal sector and will be backed up with practical suggestions and relevant case studies to help firms improve their environmental performance and achieve or exceed their predetermined targets.”

**Likewise, on the corporate social responsibility front, what are the major outcomes the alliance hopes to push?**

“Our initial objective is to tackle environmental issues, but with scope to broaden to social and community sustainability. Our expected outcomes include developing best practice guidelines that apply to the Australian legal sector, fulfilling clients’ expectations that we are serious about implementing

those best practice guidelines, attending to the concerns of our employees, and demonstrating to the general public that the legal industry is engaging in the sustainability agenda.”

**It is rare for major law firms to join forces in such an alliance. Why do you think this issue of sustainability has been such a 'binding' one for the firms?**

“Sustainability and particularly climate change is a major global concern that requires collective action. By sharing our knowledge and experiences we believe we can play an important role as influencers and contributors to this issue when working with our clients and suppliers. Being a member of AusLSA provides the opportunity to demonstrate commitment and enables member firms to share best practice and understand relevant industry trends.”

**At this stage, the alliance has attracted some very significant firms? Who is on board and is there an optimum number of firms for the alliance in future? And do you see a role for smaller firms?**

“We now have nine member firms, with Jackson McDonald recently joining Clayton Utz, DLA Phillips Fox, Henry Davis York, McCullough Robertson, Maddocks, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, Norton Rose Australia and Swaab Attorneys. These firms comprise the ‘foundation membership’ who are working together to develop the AusLSA initiative. Each of the foundation members has accepted the challenge to act as champions of AusLSA and to demonstrate sustainability leadership within the legal sector. They have each committed to providing time and resources to the development of the various tools which will become the framework of AusLSA. We plan to open membership to the entire legal sector early in 2011. It is hoped that people from a broad spectrum within the legal profession, including smaller firms, will feel encouraged to participate.”

**The alliance has raised the importance of benchmarking sustainable practice. How will this work and how important is it to be able to 'measure' outcomes?**

“AusLSA has established a benchmarking working group which includes operations and management personnel from a number of member firms. This group has been tasked with developing a methodology for measuring the main environmental impacts of member firms, such as carbon emissions, consumption of paper and water and production of waste. Benchmarking is an essential part of environmental management because it allows firms to understand where their main impacts are, and this of course enables them to take action to reduce those impacts. It’s important to note that AusLSA won’t be benchmarking firms against each other in a competitive ‘league table’ manner. What’s important to us is providing the membership with a clear framework to allow us all to improve our environmental performance.”

**AusLSA is modelled on the Legal Sector Alliance in the United Kingdom. Will the Australian alliance largely follow that model or do you think there will be certain country differences that shape the**

**group?**

“We were first made aware of AusLSA in 2009 through DLA Phillips Fox's global alliance firm DLA Piper, who have been heavily involved in the UK LSA since its inception in 2007. Since then, the UK LSA has been very generous with their time and resources. There is an appetite within AusLSA to set our own course, and to tackle the issues that are important to us locally. The scope of the UK LSA is on ‘tackling climate change’ but we have approached the issue more broadly, deciding that our scope should include more than carbon emissions. However, we also recognise the great success of the UK LSA, and the benefits of sharing experiences and challenges, and we want these to be hallmarks of the Australian alliance. So I think it’s fair to say that we’ll be closely associated to the UK initiative, but will definitely retain a ‘local flavour’.”

**What impact do you think the AusLSA initiative will have on the perception of firms from the public or clients? Is this an important factor in the marketing of the profession or individual firms?**

“It is clear that one of the drivers behind legal firms becoming more sustainable is the demand from clients to do so. But there is also impetus coming from within firms – from employees encouraging their employers to do more. The objective of AusLSA is to facilitate firms adopting more sustainable business practices. This, of course, will then allow individual AusLSA members to demonstrate to existing and prospective clients their commitment to sustainability. But it is also hoped that by adopting a cohesive approach to reducing the environmental impact of the legal profession and enhancing the sector’s corporate social responsibility will be perceived by the public as an enormous positive step.”

**Are there any other key messages the alliance wants to convey?**

“We recognise that legal firms are at different points in their sustainability journey and have different experiences and skills. The collaborative and inclusive approach of AusLSA encourages firms to share knowledge and to share the success of their current policies. This will enable the development of best practice guidelines and reporting frameworks specifically for Australian law firms. The UK LSA has nearly 200 members which represents approximately 30 per cent of all private solicitors in England and Wales, making it an incredibly powerful mechanism for change. When AusLSA launches to the sector in 2011 it aims to begin the process of replicating that success.”