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The business of going green: why law firms should reduce their carbon footprints

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Improving the sustainability of a law firm has various ongoing benefits beyond reducing its environmental footprint. Claire Chaffey and Briana Everett discover the value of going green and just what it takes for a law firm to get there.

Whether it's to reduce the environmental impact of doing business, to enhance credibility and reputation or just to make staff happy, more and more businesses are going green.

And although there is still significant work to be done, there is a growing awareness amongst the Australian legal sector of the benefits of chasing a sustainable future, with firms finally jumping on the sustainability bandwagon.

"What we're finding is a growing interest from firms in Australia," says Net Balance senior associate and former DLA Piper sustainability analyst Charlie Knaggs. "There are one or two firms that stand out, but the other firms are starting to feel that competitive urge.



"The ones that have stuck their head above the parapet are starting to get some recognition for the work that they've done and see some really solid results from their efforts. They're starting to see that there is something to be said for implementing sustainability policies and measures."

The drive to go green

There are a number of key drivers leading law firms to make operational changes to ensure they're ahead of the pack when it comes to sustainability performance.

Reducing environmental impact is an obvious advantage of improving a business' sustainability. However, there are additional benefits that arise which are becoming increasingly important for law firms.

Improving a firm's sustainability performance, both environmentally and socially, can have a massive impact on reputation, brand and staff morale. While different firms go green for different reasons, making staff happy is one of the biggest motivators amongst businesses across all industries today.

"What we've seen is the people angle which is really driving things," Knaggs says. "It's coming from the staff, particularly the younger grads who are just expecting it from the firms that they're a part of."

Clients and staff are the underlying issue when it comes to most sustainability improvements, according to Nick Harford, managing director of sustainability consulting and management company Equilibrium OMG.

"There are customers and staff that often have personal values and aspirations around good environmental behaviour and good social behaviour. It's to an organisation's benefit if they can align with that," Harford says.

Another pivotal driver for sustainability improvements is the potential enhancement of a business' brand and reputation.

"That's where you really start to get a value-add ... to show you're walking the talk and you're a good corporate citizen," Harford says. "There is a rise of consumer expectations in every sector around what companies should be doing around environment and social performance."

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Charlie Knaggs, senior associate, Net Balance



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Sustainability coach and former environmental lawyer Michael Mobbs agrees and says there are some really simple things firms can do to improve their sustainability, while also becoming more productive and creating a more enjoyable workplace.

"The example I would give is Google ... they employed a chef who provides terrific, locally sourced fresh food, free at work ... They've got 300 people in that office eating local, fresh foods which is good for their health and they feel good about it," Mobbs says, noting the benefits of utilising sustainably sourced food, which includes saving thousands of litres of water.

But enhancing a firm's sustainability, and in turn making staff happy, is not just about improving the office space.

Sustainability performance entails environmental factors as well as social factors, including a firm's contribution to the community sector - beyond traditional pro bono work.

"Environment is a very important area and there's a lot that firms can do. But there is also the social side," Knaggs points out. "Traditionally, firms have done pro bono work and maybe they have seen that as the embodiment of their social obligations. I think that's an area where law firms have a huge amount of value to offer but firms are also starting to do things in other areas from a community perspective."

In an effort to improve social sustainability performance, firms are becoming more strategic about the implementation of their pro bono programs, according to Knaggs.

Firms are now contemplating the business values that can be aligned with their pro bono work to maximise the long-term value for the business and, in turn, make their pro bono programs more sustainable.

Firms are now thinking: "What are our values there? What are we aligned with? How can we use our pro bono [work] in a more strategic way?" Knaggs says.

With an increase in competition amongst firms and with sustainability strategies now at the forefront, Australian law firms are getting more sophisticated when it comes to sustainability improvements, bringing long-term benefits to the business and the community as a whole.

"Most firms are obviously office-based environments so they don't necessarily have a large environmental footprint," says Harford. "Our advice is that firms look to take a true sustainability approach and that they look at their social performance and environmental performance and produce an approach to sustainability that helps align the corporate values with those of its staff and customers."

Making the commitment

Video-conferencing, paperless offices, double-sided printing, car-sharing, energy efficient lighting and water saving devices are just some of the initiatives implemented by offices across the globe in their commitment to become more sustainable.

But despite great intentions, a lot of businesses are unsure of where to start when it comes to getting serious about sustainability and implementing a successful strategy.

The first step firms should take, according to Harford, is to measure their current footprint.

"What's your energy use? What's your water use, your waste? What's your travel like?" Harford says, suggesting that firms consider their office machinery and computers as well as company-owned cars or the level of air travel.

By measuring the firm's current footprint and understanding the environmental impacts of the business, firms are then able to recognise the opportunities for improvement and to then set some sustainability priorities.

"[Measuring environmental impact] also helps in terms of timing," Harford says. "You may have old office equipment but it [might have] 18 months of life left. If you don't want to turn it over yet, you might look for alternatives that are more energy efficient [for later]."

When a firm has established its sustainability goals and priorities, this allows for policies and procedures - aligned with the business' goals and activities - to be drafted and put into place. Later, law firms can look to establish some metrics. "How are you going to measure this? What does success look like? How is it going to be resourced?" Harford says.

Although a number of individual firms have asked themselves these questions in an effort to improve their footprint, further information and collaborative effort is needed for there to be greater improvements across the industry as a whole.

The Australian Legal Sector Alliance (ALSA), which was formed last year, is an industry-led association which is working collaboratively to promote sustainable practices across the legal industry.

Modelled on the Legal Sector Alliance in the UK, the ALSA was established with nine foundation member firms including Swaab Attorneys, Norton Rose, McCullough Robertson, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, Maddocks, Jackson McDonald, Henry Davis York, DLA Phillips Fox and Clayton Utz.

"The idea is basically that you get law firms together in a collaborative way - which doesn't happen all that often - and get them to talk about their experiences with sustainability, the things that have gone well and to learn from each other," Knaggs explains. "[It was formed] to develop tools and resources that firms can share amongst themselves to help the whole sector move forward on sustainability."

Law firm members of ALSA make a commitment to reducing the impact of their operations; to work with external stakeholders and reduce their indirect impact; to integrate awareness of sustainability across the business; to work collaboratively and promote best practice across the industry; and to report on their progress and be accountable.

"The Australian LSA [officially launches] on the 29th of March to the legal sector," Knaggs says. "We want law firms of all sizes [to join]. We don't just want the big end of town."