Big firms pull together on the ENVIRONMENT

Coming to grips with our environmental impact can be so daunting that many of us give up before we begin. A two-year project, designed especially for high-flying firms, promises to provide a foothold. It all starts with disclosure, as Anne Susskind reports.

Right of Australia’s biggest law firms have “put their heads above the parapet” on their environmental performance, and undertaken to try and drive the issue through the entire sector, says Charlie Knaggs, of Net Balance, and a guide on the Australian Legal Sector Alliance (AusLSA).

Plans for an alliance (see LSI April 2010) have come to fruition with the launch of AusLSA late last month. The new set is modeled on the UK’s Legal Sector Alliance, which has 200 number firms and represents about a third of solicitors in private practice in the UK’s current foundation members are Clayton Utz, DLA Phillips Fox, Henry Davis York, Jackson McDonald, Maddocks, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, MacLough Robertson, Norton Rose, and Swab Attorneys.

Knaggs, who 18 months ago returned from London where he was a sustainability analyst at DLA Piper, and a taskforce representative to the LSA there, described AusLSA as a collaboration of firms coming together to talk “about what the main environmental impacts are, so you make sure if you’re talking about the material things — the big ticket items for law firms. Law firms don’t traditionally capture this information in a good way.”

Members, he said, were prepared for the media to be critical, and were comfortable with that. “They shouldn’t be criticized for high or low impact, but applauded for putting their heads above the parapet.”

“Of the real strengths is that it is sector specific and sitting down in a forum with like-minded firms and understanding your unique circumstances has the potential to result in much greater benefits.”

Leading the way

Henry Davis York’s chief operating officer, Kelvin O’Connor, spearheaded the firm’s sustainability program and was on the working group which devised AusLSA’s environmental consumption calculator (ECC). “It’s the first time any sector has got together to consider our collective environmental issues.”

“We have a lot of output — it’s not just paint, but we work odd hours, use lots of paper and leave lots on, and sort of, so how are we doing,” he said.

At the high-profile launch of AusLSA to the industry, a report, The Environmental Consumption of AusLSA Members 2009-2010, “captured the footprint of numbers and was the first public demonstration of the executive members’ commitment. Firms of all sizes, including sole practitioners, as well as barristers and the judiciary, were encouraged to sign up.”

At the time of going to press, full results of the report were not yet available, but Knaggs said all the information and the results of a survey of seven of the eight executive member firms on their resource usage, showed that 59 percent of all firms’ emissions were derived from electricity consumption, and 23 percent from flights. The remaining two percent came from car, paper, and food (including coffee, tea, and cars), on-site combustion and refrigeration.

AusLSA Executive members reported a mean consumption of 122.97 kg of paper per employee, ranging from a minimum of 89.73 kg to a maximum of 178.11 kg.

Knaggs said: “One thing for sure is that law firms will struggle in the years to come to provide all the future energy required.”

“People could accomplish in their everyday lives, a large part of which were fixed in the office environment.”

The legal sector did have some success for example, it was document dependent, and occurred a large amount of commercial office space in Australia.

“Consequently, it had a significant environmental footprint. The suite of tools AusLSA was providing would provide a benchmark, and a base to measure improvements. Working collaboratively was also exciting,” he said.

For me, it’s part of who I am — I am not a tree-hugger, but I honestly believe we’ve been given a world which has a limited amount of natural resources which we need to use in a sustainable way for the benefit of our children and future generations. The establishment of AusLSA has given the legal sector a clearer understanding of how lawyers can contribute to achieving sustainable development and discharge our broader social responsibility.”

Clayton Utz’s Sydney office will soon move from one to six-star rated building, Utz said, a much more energy efficient building with a central air conditioning system. 

Soft floor plans, and, for example, encourages staff to use alternative means of transport such as cycling, by the simple measure of providing additional shower facilities. In Melbourne, staff were offered tram tickets to travel to see clients within the CBD rather than taking taxis.

Managing sustainability

Measuring environmental impact can be a nightmare, daunting to even think about. Aside from all the questions about climate change, which we cannot possibly be fully aware of, there are many other commitments for a business wanting to do the right thing and work out where it stands in the environmental stakes.

Everybody thinks different things should be measured. What AusLSA’s calculator promotes to do for law firms is provide some order in the swarming mass of indicators, compared with each other, and quantify a result that will be consistent with all other firms, thus allowing a comparison between them. It promises consistency and transparency, and seems to have built it in a remarkable number of factors, and be very up to date in the indicators it is
**CASE STUDY**

**Automated computer shutdown saves a packet**

This is an edited version of a case study supplied to AusLS by its director of environmental sustainability at Norton Rose Australia.

1. **Norton Rose** used a##

2. **In 2009, Norton Rose** adopted a##

3. **Norton Rose found that** a##

4. **This change in energy consumption** a##

5. **The automated shutdown process** a##

6. **The other initiatives** included:

7. **McMillan** said, "Where there is an elderly person who is trying to prevent a vulnerable elderly person from being exploited, including those who hold power of attorney.

8. **McMillan** said there has been a demand for an applied law master.

9. **The course is online, with face-to-face components consisting of workshops, webinars, and mentoring. It costs $1,350 a subject and the next semester starts on 8 August. Law Society accredited specialists will have enhanced standing in the course. For more information, visit www.colinlaw.edu.au/Pearson-Students/App/Law-Programs/Wills- Estates."