

THE IMPORTANCE OF CSR TO LAW FIRMS - ABREU ADVOGADOS

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Law firms cannot pay mere lip service to the way they interact with the wider society and must embrace the same strategic values as their clients

Si los despachos quieren realmente responder a las necesidades de las empresas, tienen que ver el mundo tal como lo ven sus clientes. Ello implica dar mayor importancia al desarrollo sostenible, al gobierno corporativo y a la responsabilidad social corporativa, según Miguel Teixeira de Abreu, Socio Director de Abreu Advogados, basado en Lisboa.

If law firms are to truly react to the needs of their clients they must also see the world as those businesses themselves see it.

This means placing an increasing emphasis on sustainability, corporate governance and corporate social responsibility (CSR) says Miguel Teixeira de Abreu, Managing Partner of Lisbon-based Abreu Advogados.

"We have to reflect the world we service and our clients are becoming ever-more concerned not

only about the impact of their own business on the environment, and the sustainability of their own operations, but also that of the businesses and advisers they work alongside."

Abreu Advogados was the first Portuguese law firm to publish a Sustainability Report and is now preparing for the publication of its second Report.

The firm is certified under International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9000, which objectively sets out the fundamentals of quality management systems.

"You cannot pay lip service to such issues, law firms have to make a commitment. It is not enough to undertake the necessary inward analysis or to publish such a report only in the good times. The issues touched upon take even more significance in many respects now we are facing more challenging economic times," he says.

Not everyone is however quite so evangelical. Nearly three years on Abreu Advogados continues to stand out as the only Portuguese firm to make its commitments quite so public.

Many General Counsel at the largest most sophisticated companies increasingly take technical legal expertise for granted, he believes.

The challenge therefore is to differentiate firms' offerings, to better understand the client's businesses, and to become more closely aligned to their own cultural values. General Electric, he notes, sets out risk management criteria as part of its legal tendering processes.

"At the end of the day law is a people profession and clearly what is important are the strengths of the relationships you build with the professionals and executives within a business. But what is also highly significant are the common ties institutions have, how they look at the world and their place in it, and which often define why they should work with one another."

But as well as defining the firm's external direction and corporate projection, an emphasis on sustainability and corporate social responsibility can also increase the strength of the bonds within the firm itself, believes Teixeira de Abreu. "What is important is the belief we all have in the strength and direction of our own project.

Such commitments help us also to define who we are, what we are doing and why we continue to choose to work with each other. It is part of the glue that binds us all together."

Such a focus is as important to the firm's support staff as much as the lawyers, he says. The issues affect all aspects of the way in which the firm operates and all levels. Abreu Advogados has featured regularly in Portugal's Best Place to Work surveys as the best portuguese law firm to work for.

"All of this helps us to build an institution that is much more than the individuals who work here. We have set out credible and objectively-defined and audited management processes that ensure that everyone who works here knows not only how the law firm is run, but how we expect it to be run."

Such an approach also helps build trust with the firm's younger lawyers. By defining the framework within which the firm as a whole expects to operate it also defines the standards expected of all the professionals within it.

The emphasis on transparency also extends therefore to the way the firm is managed, and helps define lawyers own career trajectory and progression.

"Corporate governance, sustainability and social responsibility cannot operate in isolation. They are the pillars that support not only the way in which the firm interacts with its clients but with society as a whole. Once you define what you are, you also have a much clearer understanding not only of where you are going but also of the principles of the team you need to get there."