**Charles Russell Speechlys**



**Environmental Sustainability – The Professional Approach**

Humankind’s impact on the planet sometimes reminds me of the five ages of man from Greek mythology. In short, it’s a passage of humankind from the golden age of innocence and harmony, degenerating into selfishness and destruction.

Our challenge is to turn those five stages on their head and put them dramatically into reverse order, turning our current ways of living into one of harmony with the planet. What can we practically do as a responsible law firm about the environment? How can we encourage others to do the same? Well, to explain I’ll continue with the five stages theme. It can apply to any business or commercial organisation.

**First stage**

Characterised by a fairly basic recognition that an organisation should be seen to be doing something to help the environment and reduce waste.  For us, that was probably 10-12 years ago with a new environmental policy.  Other features would have included:

* central recycling bins for waste paper
* an attempt to have all individual office bins removed to encourage recycling
* movement-activated lighting in offices to try and reduce energy wastage.

**Second stage**

For us, this began around four years ago when I set up an Environmental Sustainability Task Force.  This was made open to all volunteers and currently has a membership of 40, with representation across all our UK offices and teams.  The first task was to come up with a shorter name: “eFORCE”.   Since then eFORCE has led the way in:-

* Getting rid of difficult to recycle plasticised paper cups, and giving everyone their own keep cups for hot drinks and re-useable water bottles.
* Running internal competitions to reduce printing and paper usage.
* Getting rid of plastic cutlery, straws etc. and sourcing all take away cartons and food containers from the in-house café in recyclable non-plastic materials.
* Enhancing recycling facilities across the firm resulting in nil waste to landfill, and introducing some whizzy technology that monitors food wastage (e.g. from meetings) and recycling it all.
* Most recently, running a survey to try and understand our “export” of energy usage into the home by way of home working during the Lockdowns.

**Third stage**

This was a recognition that everything done to date is worthy but a general ambition to reduce our environmental impact is insufficient.

We needed to do more to put ourselves on a trajectory to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.  To do that, we engaged an external expert consultancy to help demystify what is involved.  Their work has resulted in some very helpful recommendations and milestones to achieve over the remainder of this decade.  Specifically, a target of achieving net-zero by 2030 has been adopted as part of our firm’s 2021 strategic review.  This is by reference to independently verify GHG emissions from 2019 as our base year.

For any professional services organisation, the biggest impact comes not from the running of the office or even international travel, but from the goods and services that we buy in – our supply chain. Measuring and reducing the GHG in our supply chain is our biggest challenge.

To that end, various members of eFORCE have participated in a pro bono project over the last two years known as The Chancery Lane Project (TCLP).  It’s a collaborative effort by a whole range of lawyers and firms to create an open-source depositary of contract clauses that seek to establish carbon reduction commitments in supply chains and in different sectors: property; construction; banking & finance; employment and corporate affairs.

The idea is founded on the understanding that the commercial world is a vast interconnected web of contractual relationships. Feeding in carbon reduction commitments into that web will cause those commitments to filter down and across the whole interconnected network. As one business contracts with various suppliers and those suppliers in turn contract with others, the chain expands. We’re keen to help spread the good news of this free to use the resource and give guidance on its application – see [TCLP](https://chancerylaneproject.org/).

As you may gather from the five stages, the work is not yet complete.

**Stage Four** is achieving net-zero by combining significant carbon reductions and the balance made by investment into carbon offsetting schemes, such as reforestation, remedying degraded land and renewable schemes in developing countries. That is offsetting the carbon that we have not managed to eliminate.

The final **Stage Five** would be further reduction in our really difficult to eliminate carbon emissions, (usually found in our supply chain) and going beyond net-zero by offsetting our other contributions to become net positive in our contribution to GHG emissions reductions.

I hope your business is participating in this journey.

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