



Law Firms Expanding in Asia Adopt Strategic CSR

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Corporate social responsibility programs among the international law firms in Singapore originally involved simply writing checks to support local charities, but that's changing. International law firms are facing pressure to expand CSR programs to Southeast Asia as clients, regulators and recruits demand genuine attention to their social impact globally.

While CSR is standard policy in the U.K., the U.S. and Australia, the regional Asian offices of international law firms have been playing catch up. Singapore is seeing some of the most marked efforts to fill the gap.

Lawyers in the city-state say they are observing an attitudinal shift in terms of institutional support for their CSR programs, and that pro-bono opportunities and industry expectations are increasing as senior partners increasingly recognize the role CSR plays in reputation building, recruitment and retention and client relationships.

The foreign law firms' abilities to contribute and help drive CSR engagement across the local legal sector were specifically welcomed by the President of the Law Society of Singapore, Thio Shen Yi SC in his speech at the Opening of the Legal Year 2015, culminating in a call to "tap their reservoirs of expertise, experience and manpower."

CSR Enhances Business Development

As consumers have become more ethically conscious of their purchases, companies in sectors as varied as financial services, garments, fast moving consumer goods and technology are increasing their focus on responsible procurement. Some of the global financial institutions, for example, are now requiring disclosure of CSR practices in their global and regional panel applications and U.S. multinational corporations routinely ask law firms to submit questionnaires outlining their CSR commitment.

Apart from legal adviser selection, some companies—particularly the international banks—are reaching out to the law firms for collaboration on CSR projects. For example, Bank of America (among a number of others) has a longstanding relationship with Points of Light, a global organization dedicated to volunteer service, which has been expanding its volunteer offerings globally, in particular in the Asia Pacific region.

Senior management commitment enables CSR

An effective and sustainable CSR strategy also requires a strong personal senior partner commitment. Relatively young Singaporean firm TSMP Law has built a thriving community commitment, led passionately from the very top by the joint managing directors, husband and wife team, Thio Shen Yi SC and Stefanie Yuen Thio. Their annual CSR program dedicated to children, the elderly and migrant workers, includes charitable donations focused strategically on the most under-resourced of the nonprofit organizations working in these areas; two full office days a year dedicated by the entire staff of the firm to community engagement; as well as a strong commitment to providing pro bono legal advice with every lawyer in the firm required to commit to a minimum of 25 hours.

Sometimes simple gestures can be effective in fostering a culture of CSR. Latham & Watkins's Singapore office enthusiastically decorates the office doors of its lawyers that regularly meet or exceeded pro bono targets, creating indirect peer pressure for others to get involved and share in the fun.

Singapore's Growth Drivers for CSR

While international law firms are increasingly sophisticated in their CSR programs, they generally are mostly focused at their main headquarters. Regulatory changes and customer trends are driving some international firms in Singapore to revamp their approach and “walk the talk” locally.

As the government continues with its initiatives to make Singapore a regional hub for the international legal market, foreign law firms seeking to renew or receive their Qualifying Foreign Law Practice last year scrambled to demonstrate their commitment to the community.

There are also the new demands that Singapore is putting on its current and future lawyers. The amended Legal Profession Act will come into force this year, and will require all Singapore qualified lawyers to disclose annually the number of hours they have spent each preceding year on pro bono work. Also, the two law faculties in the city-state, at National University of Singapore and Singapore Management University, both now require pro bono hours of community service as part of their degree. Both initiatives raise awareness of pro bono activities and encourage lawyers to participate in the work throughout their careers.

Separately, law firm rankings are also starting to incorporate CSR activities. The coveted American Lawyer rankings and awards now honor global citizenship, looking at each firm's overseas pro bono activities not just their CSR programs in their American offices. This could have a dramatic impact on the perceived “world order” among the global elite firms, as there is still a lot of catching up to do in Asia. “In the U.S., it is a matter of shame not to complete 60 hours, but in the regional offices, it is a matter of honor to complete 60 hours,” said one U.S. law firm associate we spoke to, noting how difficult it can be to reach that number while working in Asia.

Challenges for Translating International CSR Programs in Singapore

International law firms have a long history of harnessing their specific professional skills to

make a greater impact in communities and engage employees and clients in their home jurisdictions. The challenge these firms are facing is how to extend that culture to the regional offices where they operate with much smaller teams.

Recent changes are raising the profile of pro bono work in Singapore and driving participation and innovation from foreign and domestic lawyers alike. For example, while many pro bono programs such as legal clinics require the presence of a Singapore-qualified lawyer, the Pro Bono Services Office of the Law Society of Singapore (itself a registered charity) has developed opportunities for international lawyers that do not require Singapore qualification. These include prison interviews, legal research, contributions to community legal handbooks and the Joint International Pro Bono Committee, which is a clearing house for international firms to be matched with cross-border pro bono work in the region.

Time and lack of expertise are also issues. But both the senior partners and associates alike can participate in flexible projects that can be managed during lull periods, such as the Pro Bono Services Office's research programs, and leverage their corporate law skills for the Law Society's manual for social enterprises affected by cross border issues, or, for more senior lawyers, by volunteering on nonprofit boards in Singapore.

"Lawyers box ourselves," says Linklaters partner Sophie Mathur, who is admitted in Singapore as well as England and Wales and is a champion for the firm's diversity and CSR initiatives. "Our core competence is legal advice," she continues, "but lawyers can contribute more widely. We are professional transaction managers, we are business savvy."

Because overseas offices tend to be lean and less profitable, capacity issues and opportunity costs are intensified when a lawyer takes time out on pro bono matters. In these cases, charity activities are often a first step into CSR before taking on higher-value, skills-based volunteering. Olswang, a U.K.-based firm that is focused on technology and media, has collaborated with Urban Farm and the Willing Hearts soup kitchen. Staff and lawyers help grow vegetables in urban areas, and spend mornings chopping vegetables to donate meals to the needy in Singapore.

With the right leadership and planning, international firms can embed a strategic approach that takes into account not only social good, but also the untapped business benefits.

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