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MEASURING SOCIAL IMPACT

BEYOND QUANTITATIVE TO THE QUALITATIVE

Tidal Marks 1 by Marilyn Wallace-Mitchell

Most of us will be familiar with the ‘*what gets measured gets managed*’ adage. For financial metrics like profit, revenue and costs, there are well established frameworks and numbers that can speak for themselves. But what about social impact, where qualitative results matter?

The 2023 State of Social Impact Report from the Impact Institute calls out 4 significant social trends influencing corporate Australia. These are: rising inequality awareness; the wellbeing economy; corporate efforts in ESG; and building constructive dialogues. These trends indicate an appetite from stakeholders for businesses to look much more deeply at the role they perform in society, examine how they maintain relationships and reflect on their impact.

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For law firms and other businesses aiming to contribute meaningfully, measuring and maximising social impact is central to achieving their purpose. More and more businesses are exploring why and how they can measure social impact, both positive and negative and are increasingly setting out the short, medium and long-term goals of their work. They are more clearly defining the transformative impact they seek, through thought-leadership opportunities, pro bono work, deep and genuine community partnerships, access and opportunity programs and broader social impact initiatives, including the networks they hold.

Measuring impact is more than a trend - it is a strategic priority for businesses committed to making a meaningful difference and being authentic about it. By consistently collecting and demonstrating the difference (whether small or large) made through their collective work, businesses gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of their efforts, the needs of their communities and how their own people are engaging with both the work and the issues they have chosen to engage with. This not only helps in ensuring accountability, but also allows for continuous improvement and the refinement of strategies for more sustainable impact.



SHORT-TERM GOALS: IMMEDIATE IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT

Businesses can measure inputs such as the number of hours dedicated to volunteering or pro bono or the relief provided to communities, to start to build a picture of the resources they dedicate and the causes they align to. Many organisations are using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (**UN SDG**) framework for consistency and to layer up into broader and more consistently understood themes. In the short term, asking about the immediate benefit of support to individuals' lives is a powerful way to demonstrate commitment and build trust within the community.

Additionally, businesses can benefit from measuring the engagement of their own employees in pro bono and volunteering activities. Tracking volunteer hours, participation in community events through platforms and employee engagement surveys can provide insights into the immediate advantages of participation reaped by both the business and its people.

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS: SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND EMPOWERMENT

Moving beyond inputs and short-term impact, businesses can set medium-term goals which often focus on building sustainable community partnerships and contributing to empowerment. This involves assessing the lasting effects of volunteering or pro bono work and access and opportunity programs on the communities, organisations or individuals supported. Metrics could include the establishment of relevant and lasting resources, the success of access and opportunity programs on the business's definition and recruitment of talent and the empowerment of marginalised groups through advocacy.

To measure medium-term impact, businesses can conduct assessments of their community partnerships, seeking feedback from organisations and individuals who have been part of their initiatives.

LONG-TERM GOALS: SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND LEGAL ADVOCACY

In the long term, businesses can aim for systemic and transformational change through initiatives that address underlying social issues and complex problems. By strategically aligning with issues that match their expertise and sphere of influence, businesses can measure the impact of their contributions on laws, policies, specific cohorts, targeted geographic areas and/or societal transformations. Long-term success is not just about individual cases but about contributing to a landscape that is more equitable and just.

For a firm like KWM, we are working to capture and track the long-term outcomes of legal empowerment programs, which aim to increase access to justice and/or improvement in community legal literacy more consistently. We want to see how we contribute to long-lasting change by using the law as an instrument for fairness and positive change. Likewise, we are committed to tracking the long-term impact of access and opportunity programs delivered by our firm (and the sector more broadly), through collecting and reflecting on the diversity of who gets into the profession and who succeeds. What we have learned is we need to have robust systems to routinely capture feedback and look for trends to course correct and dial up what is working. Additionally, we have learned that big ideas to promote lasting change take a long time and an ongoing commitment to gathering feedback, reflecting on what is going well and being honest about what works and what does not.

Measuring long-term impact is hard work – it involves tracking changes in legislation, policy outcomes, the overall societal shift towards accessible justice for all and shifting attitudes. Collaboration with other businesses, firms, NGOs and governmental bodies can amplify the impact of long-term goals, creating a network of professionals working towards systemic change and being courageous about the role we all play in creating and solving the challenges.

CAPTURING IMPACT BEYOND NUMBERS: STORIES AND STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

While metrics are crucial, businesses should not overlook the power of storytelling and stakeholder feedback in capturing the full scope of their social impact. Personal narratives of individuals positively affected by pro bono work, feedback from community partners and qualitative assessments of the firm's evolving talent pool offer a more comprehensive understanding of the impact generated.

Law firms and lawyers have a unique opportunity to be catalysts for positive social change. By setting short, medium and long-term goals and being thoughtful about tracking the impact of their social impact activities, businesses can make a significant contribution in the present and build a legacy of trust and confidence in the legal system across the communities they serve.

Albert Einstein was supposed to have said 'everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted'. The quote is frequently cited because it goes to *thinking beyond what we can see and easily capture and think about the experience of people and change over time in attitude, norms and beliefs*. The feedback we at KWM have captured has been invaluable – sometimes humbling – but always incredibly useful to hear and understand.



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