

Interviewer: Léon Wijnands
Text: Cleo Scheerboom

The sustainable challenges of online data provider Relx are numerous and diverse. Director of corporate responsibility Márcia Balisciano on the far-reaching social impact, privacy and editorial integrity: 'a sustainable strategy is not static and always changes a bit.'

Sustainability is becoming increasingly important, with a great acceleration in recent years. The experience of Márcia Balisciano, director corporate responsibility at Relx, illustrates the advancing insights. When she started at the company in her current position twelve years ago, it was thought that two years were enough to develop the community engagement-strategy, the forerunner of the current sustainability strategy. However, monitoring the importance of sustainability in the different facets of the company proved to be an ongoing process.

Sustainability is now an important part of Relx's business strategy and remains high on the agenda of the Board of Directors. The focus of Balisciano's work has changed considerably in recent years, as a result of developments in society, but also the transformation of Relx.

The listed company, Relx - the former Reed Elsevier - transformed itself from a publisher of print editions to a big data company that offers scientific, medical and legal data to professionals and governments. The publications for consumers were sold, also the opinion magazine Elsevier Weekblad, known by many Dutch people.

Relx has become the new name since 2015 which refers to the four activities: Reed, Elsevier (the precious Elsevier Science), LexisNexis Risk Solutions, LexisNexis Legal & Professional and Reed Exhibitions. Recently, the company simplified the dual structure of its parent company into a single parent company Relx plc, but remains listed on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange. Millions of doctors, lawyers and scientists worldwide use the data and scientific information collected by Relx. Meanwhile, 85 percent of turnover - 8.4 billion dollars in 2017 - comes from online products and face-to-face activities. The most important market is the US, about half of the total turnover is realized in North America. In both Europe and the rest of the world about a quarter of the turnover is achieved. Basliciano monitors, as director of corporate responsibility, the sustainability of the previously British-Dutch company. From London she travels to the United States and the Netherlands, among other places, to shape the sustainable strategy. She does this with a multicolored round pin, in support of the sustainable development goals of the United Nations (UN). Relx embraces the sustainable developments goals of the United States.

Which topics are on the desk of the director of corporate responsibility at a company that deals with data analysis and professional information?

'A range of subjects. Such as the accessibility of our data products for people with disabilities to protecting the editorial independence of our scientific publications. The connecting factor is that we want to reduce and remove the negative impact of our activities on society and want to increase the positive impact our activities have on society. That is the joint responsibility of the 30,000 people who work at Relx worldwide. It is not one team or one person who does it all.'

Because of this shared responsibility, you run the risk that everyone in the organization looks at each other when it comes to determining and implementing the sustainability strategy. How can you prevent that?

'At Relx, sustainability is explicitly on the agenda of the board. There is a lot of consultation and twice a year, together with the board of directors, we review our corporate responsibility objectives - our *publicly stated objectives* - and we track the progress we have made. In addition, more than 750 people within the various business units are engaged in one of our sustainability networks. Out of interest and because it directly influences their daily work. There is no doubt about how important, for example, the monitoring of the editorial independence of our scientific publications is, like The Lancet (the British medical journal published by Relx that is regarded as one of the most renowned scientific journals, ed.). If clients no longer see our content as reliable, it has a direct impact on the continuity of the company. That also falls under sustainability for us.'

One of your goals is to increase the positive societal impact. That requires choices. How do you determine the priorities?

'We first focus on the activities we are good at, what we call our unique contributions. If one of our teams is going to paint a school that is important, but the greatest added value for us is to make information available.

Through our data we contribute to better healthcare, better legal systems and a safe society. In all these areas we try to increase our societal impact. For example, the specialists in our Accessibility workgroup continuously investigate how we can offer customers access to the information in the best way possible, also customers with a physical disability. We are legally required to do this for many of our customers in the US, such as governments and universities. but we are also intrinsically motivated to increase our social impact by taking an extra step. We invite customers with restrictions to learn from them how they can best be served. We make the knowledge we gain this way available online so that other companies can benefit from it.'

The sustainable dilemmas of a data company like Relx cannot be compared to, for example, those of an oil company. Does sustainability in your view have sufficient urgency within the organization?

'When I started, we thought we needed two years to determine the sustainability strategy. This attention to sustainability and social developments, however, generated a stream of questions within the organization. "How much recycled paper do we use?" "How do we know that there is no child labor at our suppliers?" The questions have only increased over the years and are becoming more and more detailed. Moreover, a sustainable strategy is not static, it changes over time, just like the company itself. Take the determination of the editorial policy for scientific publications. In the first version we made in 2008, social media was not even included, now we pay extensive attention to the influence of social media on our publications. I see the importance of a good sustainable strategy increasing. Shareholders expect a company to achieve its financial goals, but in an ethical way. Everyone knows by now that if you do not act in an ethical manner this has an effect on the sustainability of your business, it is not sustainable in the long term. This has a direct impact on the financial results and the share price. That is why non-financial indicators are now just as important as financial ones. I see that within the organization and outside. Our CEO Erik Engstrom has recently been chosen by the Harvard Business Review as one of the best 100 CEO's in the world, based on both financial and non-financial criteria.'

Relx is one of the companies that endorses the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. How do you use these goals within the company?

'For us, they form the structure for our sustainable strategy. I see the goals as a to-do list for a better world, to which Relx can contribute through its activities. The goals give direction, they provide the framework for our sustainability strategy.'

The SDGs seduce some companies to a retrofit: the existing sustainable policy is simply refitted in the various SDGs. What does Relx do differently than before due to the sustainable goals?

'It does not really matter which terms you use for your sustainable strategy. Companies must ask themselves in my view: What are we good at, and how can we maximize the positive impact of conducting our business. For Relx, the SDGs provide a good structure to investigate how we can make the world better with our knowledge. That requires specific choices, you cannot be involved in everything. We want to make a real contribution and not just put our name on the attendance list. A natural fit for Relx, for example, as a provider of professional legal information is goal number 16 that focuses on peace, justice and strong public services. The societal impact of a good legal system on, for example, property rights, education and gender equality is enormous. We have participated in the consultations of the UN for this goal.

Relx has been organizing since this year, the Rule of Law Café, where people working with law within companies, governments and organizations discuss where societal improvements are possible. These meetings are not only in London, but recently also in Malaysia. With the change of power in the country, there is an important opportunity to advance the rule of law. We help indigenous people, for example, to get a registration in the population register. Such registration is necessary to claim your land rights, the ownership of a piece of land gives people the chance to build a better future for themselves and their families.'

How can you assess the impact of an activity?

'Sometimes a project with a big impact starts with one conversation. When the United Nations introduced the SDGs in 2015, we released a free report, Sustainability Science in the Global Research Landscape, to explore the role of science in realizing the goals. We wondered how

scientific research can support the goals. That eventually led to the RELX Group SDG Resource Centre, a free tool we have developed with leading edge content, tools and events about all seventeen goals. You click on an individual goal and you have access to research, information, events and tools that Relx has available on the subject. The database has already been used many times by customers and the general public.'

Did providing of all these sources for free not result in internal discussions?

'No, that is the advantage of the scale on which we operate. Within Elsevier alone, we publish 4 million articles a year. In practice, the SDG Resource Center is unintentionally a very attractive showcase for new customers.'

New technologies also raise new questions. For example, how do you, as an organization, deal with the privacy of consumers and other ethical questions?

'Our data analytics help banks and insurers to prevent fraud and money laundering. With the same technology, American governments save millions of public money by preventing people from illegally applying for financial assistance in different states. We are very aware of the responsibilities that the use of public data entails. We also train our employees in this. Technology can provide solutions for such ethical issues. A company that we acquired this year analyzes data to prevent fraud by customers of internet shops and banks. The data for the digital identification is anonymous and impossible to trace back to a person. I expect that what is called the fourth industrial revolution will change our work. Technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning can help professionals make better decisions. An example is Lex Machina which allows lawyers to see what has been decided in similar cases, or what the background of a counterparty is. As with the more traditional scientific publications, you do have to be able to guarantee the quality of your sources.'

How do you see the developments in the area of sustainability at Relx in the coming years?

'Sustainability remains important in all our activities, it is integral to what we do. An example is the exhibition we organize for the travel sector in London – World Travel Market. There you can hear which tourism destinations are attractive in Spain, but there is also attention on critical sector issues, such as the consequences of over-tourism and human trafficking. We address challenges with which our customers struggle and which we must address as well. That we always look at ways in which we can increase our positive impact on society, also benefits the company.'

Interview by Léon Wijnands, Global Head of Sustainability ING Bank. For Management Scope he interviews and writes about the global economy. This interview is published in Management Scope 01/2019

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Márcia Balisciano

Education

- PhD economic history, London School of Economics and Political Science
- MA International Relations, University of Chicago
- BA, English / Political Science, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Career

2002 - present

Director Corporate Responsibility Relx

2006 - present

Board Member of Child Rescue Alert Development Board

2016 - present

UK national Crime Agency / missing people

2017 – present

Member of the Board of UN Global Compact UK

2017 – present

Member of the Board of the Ban Ki-Moon Center for Global Citizens