

Europe-wide legislation has helped us to think globally in how we meet the demands of users in the office according to **Jorgen Josefsson**, country manager of RH Chairs. But national standards can help to raise the bar for everyone by driving change beyond what is expected at a local level.



- CSR and drinking water
- CSR in hotels and venues
- Health & safety in the workplace
- Disability and investment
- Carbon reduction commitments

International Standards

The butterfly effect

You may recall an idea known as the Butterfly Effect that was popularised a few years ago. The gist of it is that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in New York could ultimately affect the weather in China. It encapsulates the idea that changes in local conditions in a complex and dynamic global system can have far-reaching and possibly unforeseen consequences.

Although rooted in the science of Chaos Theory, the principle has been used to describe conditions in the globalised economy. It is also applicable to how ideas that spring up in one part of the world as a result of local conditions can swiftly influence thinking on a global scale, even to the point where they can rapidly supersede local legislation and culture.

There are many examples of this sort of thing. Over recent years the UK has been seen globally as the recognised driver of facilities management innovation and application. In my opinion, this is not only justified but inevitable as local conditions in the UK make a sophisticated approach to FM essential. These conditions include local legislation and culture which make a focus on the productivity and well-being of employees essential; the growth of the knowledge economy; the shortage of employees in key areas, and the availability and cost of commercial property.

The UK is also a great proponent of corporate social responsibility and this is reflected in the broad-based approach that facilities management takes to the various threads that make up the fabric of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The most prominent of these threads may continue to be the environment, but the scope of CSR and our

ongoing inability to agree on what exactly we mean by CSR is extremely reminiscent of the perpetual debate about the nature and role of FM.

So we do as we do with FM; each organisation devises its own approach depending on its objectives and local market. Cynics would argue that this creates the conditions for firms to make their own rules and possibly give an undue corporate gloss to their activities. This may be true in some circumstances, but the same mutability that characterises both FM and CSR also means that where local conditions are appropriate and where people have the right mindset, great things are possible. The UK is visible proof when it comes to both innovation and best practice in both FM and CSR.

Focusing on ergonomics

To take another example, the core principles of individual well-being as we now see them are very characteristic of Northern Europe. For example, Scandinavia is one of the regions, along with the Netherlands and some other areas of Northern and Western Europe, most focused on ergonomics. This is essentially rooted in the approach these countries take towards cultural issues such as individual well-being and productivity. Such regional differences can produce micro-climates of innovation and regulation that can have a knock on effect on the way other countries around the world address the whole issue.

In Scandinavia for example, they have a strong focus on TCO labelling, which you've probably seen on your own monitor screen but may have ignored. TCO Certification is a series of product certifications based on

New York, New York: Can the flapping of a butterfly's wings really affect the weather in China?



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environmental standards for office equipment commonly associated with computer monitors but later TCO revisions also define standards for computers, keyboards, printers, mobile phones, and office furniture since 2004.

Now, TCO labelling on furniture has never formally caught on in the UK, but one of the interesting things about the way that such ideas spread across the world is that when firms design and make stuff to meet these sorts of regulations in their local markets, they are also meeting those same regulations on a global scale by default. They spread informally and we all benefit as a result. Local legislation is met and exceeded by something better.

Governments can't always keep up although there are welcome signs that they are more likely to take an international approach, such as with the changes to BREEAM regulations, which are gaining wider use around the world and the new Environmental Product Declaration (EPD) system which focuses on published research and data. Plus other factors such as resource use, global warming potential, and generation of waste (both hazardous and non-hazardous).

Environmental objectives

However, legislation takes time to develop and introduce so frequently and inevitably falls behind the demands of buyers. This demand for something more and better can feed innovation at a local level and, in the case of multi-nationals, drive change directly on a global scale. For example, governments may now be introducing new legislation on flexible working but in many respects they are way behind firms who've long seen it as a good way of looking after employees and cutting down on commuting.

Similarly, my own firm is constantly challenged by customers who think that our own various company and product standards are all great but that they really want us to go the extra mile to meet their own policies, especially when it comes to meeting environmental objectives.

Although challenging, this is often the way that real change comes about. For all the work we can do in terms of research and development, there's nothing quite like a customer telling you what they really need. For example, in recent years, the number one

topic that clients have raised with us is how they've left the traditional posture based approach to ergonomics behind and are now keen to encourage people to move more. Partly this is rooted in more mobile workstyles and the greater use of mobile technology and partly it's a response to a changing population, especially the increasingly important attitudes and demands of Generation Y.

Another example is how local populations can change the world on a global scale. Europeans in North America were far taller than those in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, several nations, indeed many nations in Europe, have now surpassed the US in terms of average stature, particularly the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries. Most marked is the Netherlands where average height has increased at the greatest rates.

In the late 19th century the Netherlands was a land renowned for its short population. Today it has the tallest in the world with young men averaging well over six feet tall. The end result is that the relative giants of Northern Europe tend to produce chairs with a wider range of adjustments than countries with smaller populations. Yet these same highly adjustable chairs are available to everybody.

So, local conditions have produced an end result that can be seen on a global scale with everybody benefitting as a result. So it is across the board of business ethics. The development of global BREEAM standards is another perfect example of an idea that has flourished in the fertile ground of one place – in this case the UK – having a beneficial knock on effect in other markets. ■