

THE LAWYER

GC Interview of Rohan Paramesh, Habito. By Julia Hayhoe. Why Sustainability Matters

The Lawyer Business Leadership Summit explores how the dramatic acceleration of macro trends has placed Purpose, Sustainability and ESG issues top of the corporate board, General Counsel and increasingly legal provider agenda.

I have created this series of GC interviews, to inform this Summit and the webinar I present as part of this Summit, on Enabling Client Success in their Transitions to Purpose Driven Sustainable Businesses. It builds on my wider work in the Sustainability & ESG arena.

In this interview I speak with Rohan Paramesh, General Counsel of Habito, a digital mortgage broker and mortgage lender. Having initially spent five years in the Corporate team at Linklaters, Rohan moved in-house joining the Legal team of tech services provider Tata Consultancy Services (in both New York and London). Rohan subsequently moved to become GC and Group Management Board member at LOC Group, a private equity backed global energy and shipping consultancy.

At Habito, Rohan has built and leads a full-service Legal function, and sits on the company's ExCo and Senior Leadership team. Habito recently achieved accreditation as a B Corp, which are businesses that meet the highest standards of verified Social and Environmental performance, transparency and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose.

Rohan, tell us about why purpose and sustainability matters to Habito?

We have always been a mission driven business, and helping people find home is at the core of that. I feel like we are fortunate as, being both a mortgage broker and mortgage lender, we operate in a space which gives us a platform to really make a difference in peoples' lives. Homes are something tangible, to which most of us can relate, and they really matter. Homes are also physical things, often creating waste and harmful effects on the environment, which gives huge potential to help reverse this and make a positive contribution. We are very conscious of our potential to make an impact as a business and we are collectively driven to make the most of this opportunity.

What does being a B Corp mean and what examples can you give of how Habito is living its B Corp commitments?

Certified B Corporations are a community of businesses which operate with social and environmental impact at their core. We are so proud of our recently achieved B Corp status and very much see it as a springboard to an exciting new journey, rather than representing an end in itself.

We want to use the key B Corp principles to drive us to further broaden our thinking as to how we can make an impact. The whole business has come together to think big, generate ideas and challenge assumptions; what can we do to make a significant positive impact on our customers and other stakeholders? Two interesting areas for us are around driving financial literacy and also helping to end homelessness in our local community. We have lots of exciting ideas as to how we want to make a difference here.

The financial literacy initiative has been a particularly fascinating one, and we are really proud to have crafted the UK mortgage industry's first ever set of Fairer Finance approved "clear & simple" mortgage terms and conditions for our own Habito mortgage products. This was a labour of love and involved collaboration between lots of teams in the business – a very cool exercise and an outcome that we are extremely proud of.

What are some of the key challenges to implementing sustainability in practice?

We have worked hard to align the whole business and gain as wide a base of contributions as possible. For us, the focus on impact and sustainability is not just the job of a stand-alone committee which meets once in a while, but rather something that we want to thread through everything we do as a collective. This requires a lot of thinking, organisation and planning and is, I would say, a constant work in progress.

The other challenge is homing in on the initiatives that we believe can have the most impact. It is very tempting to pursue all of the good ideas that we have, but we are conscious of wanting to remain focused on one or two initially and do them really well, committing as much effort and resource to them as possible.

What are your lessons learned in affecting this transition?

To my mind, the most important aspect of really influencing this transition is to weave the fundamental principles into the every day. I don't

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think it can work if a focus on sustainability is something you do in addition to your business' standard operating model, something tacked on. Rather, the model has to incorporate the essence of what you are seeking to achieve. These objectives will be different for every business – that's the cool thing about considering "impact" in the broad sense; there is no right and wrong way and each business will be able to make an impact in very different ways. It's about understanding how you can help bring about change in the context of your industry or community or employee base etc. It's a very creative process to be honest, and really enjoyable too!

What expectations on sustainability does Habito have of law firms?

This is a really interesting question and one that I continue to grapple with. On one hand, I firmly believe that each business should do what's right for them and should never feel pressured into acting in a way which is unnatural for its people and its culture. On the other hand, it is so pleasing to hear from law firms that they really care about sustainability principles and want to make a difference. I find this to be an attractive quality when appointing external counsel – alignment of values is absolutely crucial when building relationships with business partners.

What could a firm do to wow you in this arena?

Be bold and suggest things! It's always very refreshing when a firm drops me a line to flag something relevant that they are doing in a different part of their business and looking to join the dots. How can we work together on an initiative or what introductions can be made to add a fresh perspective to something that is being worked on? Just picking up the phone and suggesting something can often make a big difference and is always warmly welcomed from my side.

Finally, to give us a flavour of your wider interests - If you could do any job in the world, what would it be?

That's easy - manager of my beloved Arsenal! Well, I basically just want to watch all the games and get to know the juicy club gossip, so being the manager feels like a good route to achieving that objective! In all seriousness though, for me the key characteristics of a dream job are having hard puzzles to solve in an industry that excites me, and having the space to think broadly and creatively about solutions. I really believe that GCs have and should have a platform to be creative and innovative within a business; and should seize every opportunity to do so.