

Service Package „Complaint Center“ – Background, Objectives and Process

Background

The eco-tex consortium¹ aims to work towards achieving sustainability objectives in business and industry. In this context it sees itself as a mediator between different interest groups, be it between the North and the South, be it between profit-oriented companies on the one and non-profit institutions on the other hand. The global efforts to adjust the ways in which we trade and produce with regard to quality and standards are often compromised by communication problems and interest conflicts. Information about one another is frequently absent, moreover, knowledge and skills to communicate requirements from the North to the South are often lacking. It is evident that economic relations are not restricted to mere economic facts and issues. Rather, a number of additional aspects are also implied in the big and the small picture, as for example environmental and social factors, or issues of education policy.

Against this backdrop the eco-tex consortium develops and implements tools that should help conveying, to all interest groups and particularly to those in the developing countries, the steadily growing number of rules as to how to do sustainable business. These instruments always rest upon adjusted and system-based processes that are monitored and controlled from the outside but need to be motivated from the inside.

In the framework of the complaint center, the co-operation of non-profit organizations and for-profit companies will be utilized at the same time, in order to initiate internal processes between management and staff with the objective of improved quality. Therefore, voicing critique should generally be understood as being constructive.

The complaint center is also supposed to protect the company against external attacks like i.e. unjustified criticism, and to counter allegations that the rights of employees would not be safeguarded adequately. The complaint center will be organized by the eco-tex consortium in cooperation with local organizations in the manufacturing regions.

Objective

Due to both changing trade relations as well as reforming trade regulations, manufacturers in developing countries are required to constantly adapt to changing requirement criteria on the part of trade companies of the North. The requirements set forth in the social field (freedom of union association, equality of treatment, equality of pay, working hours, health and safety, social needs, ban on child labor, voluntary employment, and communication) provide the opportunity to integrate the aspect of human development into the working process. Implementing social standards does not mean to merely follow a technical procedure but is also depending on human consciousness. This consciousness is relating to the social situation of staff and their work environment. Only the involved players themselves – management, workers and employees – are able to modify or improve this work environment. Yet, as it is the case in each form of professional organization and staff development, some cost-effective external assistance is needed in the process. Such a process can be efficiently steered from the outside through services of institutions that work in the field of adult education, and are familiar with working processes, labor rights, management systems as well as social and cultural

¹ Hereafter, the eco-text consortium is labeled “eco-tex consortium” or simply “consortium”.

conditions in the respective country. This kind of service is solely focused on consulting and monitoring such an internal process, without any third party having a particular stake in it. This means that all information remains confidential. For this to happen, the integrity and independence of the adult education institutions – mostly non-governmental organizations (NGO) – need to be ensured.

By establishing an anonymous complaint center, workers and employees ought to be activated to consciously participate in the modification of their company's social working environment. This is mainly relating to those weak points in the company that affect the majority of the staff. However, it can actually also refer to each person's own situation, depending on the case. Here, it has to be differentiated as to the degree to which problems are personalized or involve the person's own perception. It is the objective of the process to improve the quality of working conditions and to cut the range of conflicts. It will be the local complaint service's task to distinguish and assess the quality of the weak points. To provide the possibility for workers and employees to file complaints lies with the responsibility of the company which is assisted in that task through the eco-tex consortium. It is important that management adjusts the relevant information about and backgrounds of the complaint service and communicates them to their staff in a comprehensible way. The eco-tex consortium follows and supports the complaint service's implementation process and cooperates with each local one in the respective target countries, i.e. about the handling and assessment of complaints.

It is fundamental to take note of the fact that the employment contract, for the majority of staff members, constitutes a crucial part of their social status. Moreover, it earns them and their families a living. Thus, with respect to prospective complaints, a certain level of anxiety could be involved. There is therefore the demand to shield staff from potential effects of hierarchy and power structures which are, particularly in developing countries, often highly complex and distinctive. However, they should be animated to point at grievances because in the end, it is the quality of their work which is at stake. To improve quality and give employees the opportunity to impact on their overall working environment is the core objective of the complaint center endeavor. Hence, this process of consciousness needs to be inspired and accompanied from the outside.

Process

The complaint center has been designed as an independent tool and is supposed to back up internal development in the field of social requirements. The following operational process plan illustrates in detail the different stages of the complaint center.

1. The auditing company commits itself to transferring to the audited companies all necessary information and documentation relevant for establishing a complaint center. The local audited company signs a letter of intent, has to translate the documents into the local language and to display them at one or several central locations in the company. After completion of the audit, the auditing company furnishes information to the consortium in order to establish contact with the audited company. Simultaneously, the consortium receives both the pre-assessment as well as the audit report (performance report).
2. Eco-tex consortium informs the audited company about its own function and the role of the local complaint center. It again forwards all information and

essential material in the particular local language or in one of the common international languages (English, French, Spanish), as the case may be. Parallel to this, the responsible local complaint center is informed about the company in order to get the process prepared for potential complaints.

3. The audited company's management or human resources department informs its workers and employees about the possibility of filing complaints. Here, different procedures are feasible (i.e. management informs the human resources department, which in turn briefs each departmental manager who again furnish information to their departmental staff). The information and materials are always to be kept in local language. The workers and employees ought to receive, from the part of management, information about the local complaint center (explanatory local-language placard displaying the complaint forms and the local complaint center's address). Yet, for newly hired staff it is not possible to use the forms before the expiry of their probation period (normally six months). In general, it is necessary to distinguish between permanent and seasonal employees. The complaint center arrangement is only valid as far as permanent staff is concerned because it is only for them to assess the social working environment adequately. However, if a serious violation (i.e. sexual coercion) of the rules laid down in the code of conduct is committed against a probationary or seasonal employee, the local complaint service is to be informed immediately. All necessary information should be bindingly displayed in writing at a central location to enable workers and employees to read them at any time they see fit. Furthermore, the local complaint center's contact address will be affixed so that workers and employees can ask for additional complaint forms at no cost. The complete procedure is to be documented by the manufacturer.
4. If workers and employees identify flaws and problems and want to point to them, it is left to their discretion to send the complaint sheet to the local complaint center via the contact address.
5. The complaint center receives, administers, and assesses all the forms before sending them to eco-tex consortium in line with a stipulated time frame. It is made sure the local complaint center is able to deal with all relevant languages. The consortium gives notice about the complaint's content to the auditing company involved. In order to allow for adequate complaint assessment, the auditing companies need to send both the pre-assessment report as well as the audit report to central office in Cologne. Complaints that prove to be substantial are forwarded to the auditing company so that it can ask the manufacturer to rectify the weak point or solve the problem and to report on the measures taken, and document them, respectively. The overall time and process plan can be found again in the appendix.
6. Eco-tex consortium gets informed about the complaints' processing by the auditing company. If serious problems that need external intervention become evident, the local complaint center, with its trained personnel, can be commissioned with managing the conflict on the spot, and developing possible solutions. When on-site visits therefore become necessary, notice always needs to be given.
7. If, within a period of six months, the same complaint is filed again, the procedure recurs (see phase 5 & 6). However, both communication as well as verification from the part of the auditing companies would intensify in such

cases. Should problems and weak points prove so serious that, from the perspective of the auditing companies, solutions are no longer feasible, the trade company as customer would be informed.

8. A broad exchange of information should be facilitated for all companies and their staff by generally reporting about weak points and grievances in an online newsletter. Furthermore, companies' strategies of handling critique constructively shall be introduced. These information ought to be distinguished by both industrial region and sector in order to highlight differences.
9. As an additional component in the advancement of the complaint center tool, a so-called Awareness-Program ought to motivate human resources managers to involve themselves in professional development in this field. This could be taking place through e-learning or on-site seminars.

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