J-L. Bouchard (Econocom): "CSR has become an essential part of entrepreneurial freedom"

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The circular economy is a core concern for Econocom, a Group that has specialised in digital transformation services since 1973. Founding chairman Jean-Louis Bouchard discusses how companies can reduce their digital carbon footprint.

Décideurs. You have been promoting the circular economy in the digital sector for 50 years. How did it all begin?

Jean-Louis Bouchard. In order to exist we had to generate value-added, as we are a service company, not a manufacturer or publisher. We have always promoted the circular economy by seeking to make computer equipment last as long as possible by recycling used computers and renting equipment to customers. Our revenue has quadrupled over the past decade and we expect similar growth over the next ten years. People often tell me I've jumped on the bandwagon. Since inception, we have always sought to make the economy as lean as possible in the digital sector.

How do you make digital technology leaner?

There are three stages to the process. In our new equipment distribution business, which accounts for over one billion revenue, we help customers choose the best solution from an economic, social and societal point of view. Our use of IT equipment is guided by a genuine CSR choice. We also offer businesses ways to optimise their equipment and thereby reduce waste. We have applied this consulting policy to our own business, which has enabled us to reduce our digital impact by 50% in only four years. Finally, let's remember that these days computers and telephones have a relatively long lifespan but a relatively short useful life. That's why we recycle 430,000 items of equipment a year through recovery, cleaning and dusting. A company can choose between building a responsible building and building an irresponsible building. The same applies to digital technology.

Can you give an example?

We offer bespoke solutions for managing the carbon footprint of information systems. We analyse their impact, particularly the impact of hardware. Then we provide our customers with long-term guidance in order to gradually reduce their impact through a series of measures. For example, a desktop computer consumes more than a laptop, which is therefore the preferred choice. We can also extend useful lives and increase pooling of data centres.

"Companies are seeking solutions to decarbonise their own IT"

You combine the concepts of enterprise and CSR. What's the reasoning behind this?

Previously, there were big companies and craftsmen but only a handful of entrepreneurs. The counterweight to the rise of enterprise is the fact that companies are taking on this essential environmental and societal commitment. By disregarding major trends, you'll only end up on the blacklist. CSR has become an essential part of entrepreneurial freedom.

Do you think that companies are more committed than before?

You can't change the nature of your customers: some are lean and thrifty, while others are big spenders. Due to the nature of our solutions, our first customers were already responsible; nowadays, however, almost all tender specifications require 20% used equipment and verification that the equipment is properly recycled. Companies are seeking solutions to decarbonise their own IT. We are witnessing a ramp-up in demand for responsible digital solutions.

Interview by Olivia Vignaud