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France Telecom-Orange Corporate Responsibility Report 2010: Lacking the human touch

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France Telecom-Orange's otherwise intelligent report fails properly to address the company's worker suicides

France Telecom is Europe's third largest mobile phone operator, with more than 100,000 employees, and is the continent's biggest provider of broadband internet, operating under the Orange brand.

In some circles, the name France Telecom has become synonymous with employee suicides. More than 30 employees reportedly took their own lives during 2008 and 2009. Many left suicide notes blaming stress and misery at work. The story continues in 2011, with at least two suicides, including a 57-year-old employee who set himself on fire in the company's car park.

Naturally, one would expect France Telecom's corporate responsibility report for 2010 to explore this fundamental corporate issue in some depth. And the report opens with a statement from Stéphane Richard, the new chief executive appointed to clean up the suicide disaster. He writes: "For France Telecom-Orange, being a responsible corporate citizen means first and foremost building a more supportive, more caring, more human enterprise that is attentive to its employees."

However, this is far from a frank and open discussion of what is arguably the single most important issue that this company must face in terms of business continuity, reputation and corporate social responsibility.

The word “suicide” does not appear anywhere in the report. Instead, in describing the new “social contract” that France Telecom has put in place to halt the suicides, there is a euphemistic reference to the “social crisis encountered in France in 2009”. Two fatal work accidents are noted in the report, but not the suicides, of which at least ten were reported in 2010 in the press. France Telecom does not disclose data on suicides, or suicide attempts.

Avoiding the issue

Instead of data, there is detail about how the company is “re-establishing its people at the heart of the company”, plans to re-motivate teams and even develop a human resources department that is closer to employees. The limited assurance of this report by Deloitte confirms compliance with the A+ application level of the GRI reporting framework but fails to address a conspicuous absence of disclosure on the company’s biggest crisis in the past few years.

This omission raises questions of accountability and transparency at France Telecom. Frankly, the fact that the company has collected 600,000 mobile phones and achieved a 58% recycling rate in 2010 seems to pale into insignificance against the employee suicides.

Moving past these issues, the 144-page France Telecom corporate responsibility report must be used in conjunction with the company’s annual 620-page registration document. This is France Telecom’s regulatory financial report, which is referenced in the GRI Index and where much of the core data you might expect to find in the CR report is contained.

The GRI Index is a navigation nightmare, sometimes referencing documents that seem to take hours to locate. Data tables are grouped in appendices at the end of the report and are hard to follow, with no commentary.

For example, the narrative section on reducing the group’s carbon footprint boasts measures including optimised energy-efficiency in data centres, renewable energy usage and solar installations and eco-friendly vehicle fleets. Total carbon emissions as reported in the appendix are higher than they have been in the past five years, despite a turnover reduction in 2010. New countries have been added but their impact on total footprint is not clear.

Stakeholder engagement is becoming formalised with a new CR Dialogue Toolkit, which is being rolled out across the France Telecom group, resulting in a location-specific materiality analysis for each subsidiary.

Two matrices are shown: one for an eastern European country and one for an African country. These demonstrate differences, reflecting local sensitivities, with network and service quality being the top item in eastern Europe and ICT for health being top in Africa. While the local angle is a very positive approach, in future it would be nice to see a global overview of materiality, showing how stakeholders influence France Telecom's sustainability progress at corporate level.

In other respects, the France Telecom report is impressive and seems to strive for transparency in all triple bottom line dimensions. This includes great coverage of actions to enhance mobile accessibility for vulnerable populations and economic development, reflecting the true social mission of France Telecom.

Detailed roadmaps by section for 2011 activities reflect strong sustainability plans and a more human approach by this giant organisation, which, in future reports, should aim to enhance trust through more human reporting.

Snapshot:

Follows GRI?	Yes, GRI A+.
Assured?	Yes, limited assurance.
Materiality analysis?	No but shows examples of two subsidiaries.
Goals?	Yes
Targets?	Yes
Stakeholder input?	No
Seeks feedback?	Yes
Key strengths?	Good section on advancing accessibility.
Chief weakness?	Omission of frank discussion on suicides issue.
Pleasant surprise?	2011 roadmap summaries by section.

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