



ADVOCATING EMPATHY

HOW ARETI CHARIDEMOU & ASSOCIATES LLC HAS
CREATED A GREAT WORKPLACE CULTURE BY LENDING
AN EAR TO ITS EMPLOYEES AND ENCOURAGING THEM
TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES By Adonis Adoni



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1990, Areti Charidemou, a self-starter entrepreneur, founded a small law firm and worked her way up through sheer force of will and an unmistakable talent to intuitively predict the needs of her clients and the market. The one-time small office has grown into one of the biggest law firms in Cyprus, offering a broad range of legal services – corporate and commercial law, property and immigration law, as well as litigation. In the last ten years, the firm has tripled the number of staff and is still constantly expanding its team and clientele to embark on new and exciting projects. Today, Areti Charidemou & Associates LLC counts thirty talented lawyers, among them many a rising star, and sixty-three employees in total. With a new office coming up in Athens, the firm is soon to move into a brand new, elegant and modern office building in Limassol city centre.

“When we talk about a great workplace culture,” says Christina Roumba, organisational psychologist and the firm’s HR Manager, “we tend to think of ping-pong tables and free gym memberships, which, of course, are great benefits to offer, but a workplace culture is much more than that.” For this firm, it is all about creating a place where people are happy to work, where they know they can truly be themselves and feel their efforts are valued. “Our people know that they have a voice and they are free to express their thoughts, ideas and suggestions,” she notes, “and most importantly, they know that their voice will be heard.” Its recent accreditation by Great Place to Work Cyprus, the organisation that recognises good employers, is further evidence that the firm is doing something right: Some 96% of employees, in response to a recent survey, said that they were proud to tell others they worked at Areti Charidemou & Associates LLC.

When it comes to adding talent to its roster, the firm looks for candidates who share like-minded values and possess complementary skills that bring added value to the existing team. An onboarding plan was created to help new employees integrate properly and become productive as soon as possible. Newcomers are trained on tasks related to their duties but they are also encouraged to immerse themselves in all areas of the firm’s activities, rotating through departments, meeting people to become familiar with the procedures and understanding how the firm operates.

“Beyond these policies and structures,” Roumba notes, “it is important to identify behaviours or psychological factors that influence employees and the company’s performance in a negative or a positive way; this is where being an organisational psychologist helps.” Research in the field of organisational psychology clearly demonstrates that an employee’s wellbeing is intrinsically linked to beneficial organisational outcomes, and so the firm has adopted this approach as a guiding principle. “We learn to exercise empathy; we develop a deeper understanding of why others feel and behave the way they do,” she says. By doing so, it allows the firm to identify issues, as well as possible solutions. “Besides,” she goes on, “just listening and talking about feelings, thoughts and needs is itself very therapeutic and, through this approach, solutions may emerge naturally.”

In 2020, in an article published by the World Economic Forum, Robert J. Shiller, a Nobel laureate in Economics and Professor of Economics at Yale University, heralded the coming of a second pandemic: financial anxiety. Indeed, for most employers, finding effective ways to respond to rising concerns among their teams about the financial uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 arose as a huge challenge. Areti Charidemou & Associates LLC was no exception. “Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Cyprus,



our priority was to provide safety and stability to reduce stress levels as much as possible,” Roumba explains. During this period, the firm’s employees received their full salaries and remuneration packages remained intact. “We had to implement a work-from-home policy,” she notes, “but only on a rotating basis to reduce the feeling of isolation and ensure that business continuity would be unaffected.” The firm’s action plan to curtail the effects of the pandemic, financial and otherwise, earned them third place at the 2020 Cyprus HR Awards. And, to the firm’s credit, it did not rest on its laurels: since then, it has continued to address the fundamentals around physical security, while at the same time developing a systemic approach to provide support and recognition to its people.

Having well-defined goals is key to improving performance. To this end, the firm has developed a relatively simple appraisal system. “Through our performance appraisals,” Roumba says, “we are deepening the conversation for defining new and personalised goals, we talk about what is expected from each employee in terms of deliverables and behaviour, and we constantly invest time in empowering feedback.” This appears to be an ongoing process as the firm continues to fine-tune its appraisal system to calibrate performance, using learning and development mechanisms that will enable its employees to grow further.

Areti Charidemou & Associates LLC takes a holistic approach to the benefits that employees enjoy, making adjustments and improvements along the way to meet their changing needs. The firm’s benefits plan is built around personal development opportunities, health and wellbeing, and financial and family wellbeing, among other things. Besides the training provided to keep their employees up to date with recent developments, there is plenty of room for upskilling, while the firm also offers paid study leave, discounts on university fees and loan plans for studying



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purposes. Other benefits focus on ensuring a good work-life balance through opportunities to disengage a bit more from work via flexible working schedules, paid long weekends and paid vacation stays at 5-star hotels in Cyprus.

“Our mission is to bring value to our clients by offering our professional legal services. We do this with a passion to constantly move forward, to push into new areas and improve the existing solutions we offer,” Roumba says. “We are proud to be an employer of choice and we make sure to create an inclusive and safe work environment, which offers a range of opportunities and an exciting way of working.” **G**