

Who could have imagined that the Work from Home (WfH) project, which was under experimentation at the Mauritius Revenue Authority (MRA) six months preceding the advent of the lockdown, would become a reality?



Some 150 officers from various tax departments at the Mauritius Revenue Authority (MRA) have worked from home during the lockdown period to ensure an effective implementation of the Government Wage Assistance Scheme (GWAS) and the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme (SEAS) put in place by the Government. At the level of MRA Customs, 150 Customs Officers were physically deployed daily in essential services at the Seaport, the SSR International Airport, the Plaisance Air Transport Services (PATS) and the Surveillance & Enforcement Division. A further 180 others were accessing the Customs Management System (CMS) from home to clear consignments.

By the 13th of May, 2020, around Rs 4.5 Billion was transferred to the account of employers under GWAS to ensure timely payment of salaries to employees. By the same date, approximately Rs 1.3 Billion was credited to the account of 186,000 self-employed workers, eligible for SEAS, in the informal sector, with all arrangements being processed from home.

The Operational Services Department (OSD) spearheaded the implementation of SEAS and GWAS and interfaced directly with all businesses and self-employed workers having various issues with their applications. In this respect, the officers attended to around **43,700 phone calls** received at the Helpdesk 2076000 and responded to some **113,000 emails**. Officers from the Medium and Small Taxpayers Department (MSTD), the Large Taxpayers Department (LTD), the Objection, Appeal and Dispute Resolution (OADR), the Finance and Administration Department (FAD), the Fiscal Investigation Department (FID) and the Research, Policy and Planning Department (RPP), under the guidance of their respective Directors, provided the necessary support to deal with the heavy workload.

They all teamed up with the Information System Department (ISD) to provide the logistics for the staff to work from home. ISD officers developed online systems, purchased software licenses and distributed approximately 100 laptops. The bandwidth of MRA servers was increased by 4 times and security features were enhanced to support the WfH initiative. The Taxpayer Education and Communication Department (TECD) marked a regular presence in the media to inform the public relevantly to ease performing the online applications.

The FAD provided helpdesk officers with softphone facilities at home which were primordial to attend to manifold queries. Some helpdesk officers shouldered the responsibility to credit bank accounts of

beneficiaries of SEAS and GWAS promptly. Others have been keeping pace with salary processing, and revenue and expenditure monitoring. The Human Resource and Training Department (HRTD) kept the whole organization apprised of all sanitary and relevant measures. They also used mail-to-everyone to coordinate the collection of the MRA's contribution to the COVID-19 Solidarity Fund which, as at date, amounts to Rs 850,000.



Moreover, the HRTD, along with the FAD, ensured that Customs Officers working on site were provided with the safety components. They also designed a plan to guarantee that all necessary and reasonable measures and precautions be in place for resumption. Overall, all the other departments at the MRA - namely the Internal Audit Division (IAuD), the Internal Affairs Division (IAfD) and the Legal Services Department (LSD) - engaged themselves in their diverse capacities to live the unprecedented WfH experience.

An unprecedented achievement concerned the Assessment Review Committee (ARC). For the first time in Mauritius, the stakeholders used video conferencing to hear appeal cases lodged by taxpayers. This venture was successfully launched on 13 May, 2020.

To ensure that the MRA was responding effectively to all the challenges posed by the lockdown, Board Meetings and Management Meetings were held regularly from home through skype and zoom under the Chairmanship of Mr. Nayen Koomar Ballah and Mr. Sudhamo Lal respectively. By now, MRA departments have held some 120 virtual meetings to thwart any interruption of business activity. Some online sessions even involved international stakeholders such as the African Tax Administration Forum (ATAF), the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Customs Organisation (WCO) and the European Union (EU). Besides, to better our services, Inhouse Training for 51 Trainee Audit Officers are still occurring daily on Zoom.

The holistic approach to the management of business at MRA heralded a wonderful experience lived from home. Referring to SEAS, Mr. Sudhamo Lal labels its implementation as the biggest case study in change management at the MRA. He asserts that it took the Organisation several years to reach universal e-filing of some 175,000 income tax returns submitted mainly by the upper middle and the high-income earners. In fact, 10 days following the announcement of the scheme, the MRA received around 176,000 SEAS applications online mainly from low income earners, including many informal sector operators. Mr. Lal believes that the success of the SEAS can be attributed to providing the right facilities at the right time. The impressive fact is that the MRA attained this success merely from home.