



BEING STRATEGIC WHILE ATTAINING SUCCESS BY OPTIMIZATION

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As a leading business organization in Sri Lanka, what challenges do you encounter during the COVID-19?

The corona pandemic was such an unexpected incident for all of us. We were already aware of the situation, when the country decided to react to this crisis with the lockdown. However, since we already had an understanding we had already arranged a crisis management covid-19 admin team setup. We reacted immediately to this situation and by the 22nd of March, we already had a crisis management COVID-19 setup in the organization.

Our firm's primary focus of the



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business is construction. Thus, everything came to a standstill during the initial stage of the first wave of the corona epidemic. However, then we observed that construction in the other parts of the world was progressing even during the pandemic. In some countries, it was even classified as an essential service. If we could meet the protocols, we could operate. Accordingly, we were able to convince the management, and the government opened the construction industry to work. We observed the precautions of other countries such as Singapore and Australia; how they managed their work. In the meantime, the government came up with a

framework where we could operate. So we could go back to work.

What are the new business opportunities and threats that you identified during this period of crisis?

In the lockdown period during March and April, since we are a design building office, we used that period to review our own designs and value engineer them a little more which resulted in providing us some cost advantage. Although our design engineers were working from home, they were equipped with all the tools

and software they required, so they kept on working. Thus, even the complete lockdown period was also productive for us. We didn't wait until the crisis grew out fully to respond, we were proactive. So we were able to maintain some momentum with our business, keep our staff employed and occupy them to the required tasks.

Further, we have come to terms that this pandemic is going to be here with us for a while. We have adopted methods to survive and proceed within the crisis. An advantage we noticed especially in relation to the infrastructure development was that, for projects such as road development, we

found the communities helping with our work. With all that aid, productivity increased which contributed to recover what we had lost in the first quarter, especially in the month of April. The second wave of the pandemic may have disrupted our work a bit, however, we are proceeding with caution while meeting all the due protocols at the same time.

How did you cope with the unexpected crisis of COVID -19 using Technology?

We are one of the construction companies that consider the adaptation of technology to be a high priority. We are currently running on SAP; we have an ERP system. Even prior to the emergence of the crisis, we were using the technological platforms effectively, for we believe that usage of the modern technology can in fact enhance our business and add more value to it. We have been successfully using SAP during the last two years, however with the emergence of COVID 19, it became useful for us more than ever; our employees can access the system even through their smartphones to request approvals, mark attendance, to check the processing of orders, to make payments or even to monitor the projects remotely via the project management tool in the system. Thus, this system came into great use along with the restriction to mobility; there were so many lock downs and curfews imposed. However, none of these restrictions affected us severely since we were already on technological platforms to which our employees were accustomed to and thus our organization could function smoothly even during the pandemic.

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COVID-19 accelerate digital transformation in your workplace?

The majority of Sri Lankans are of the opinion that they have to go to an office to get their work done, however, I don't believe so. I believe they can work from home and maybe, be more productive by doing so. Based on the current situation anyway, the staff who are

engaged in field projects have to report to work. Only a minimum amount of office staff is allowed to come to work and the rest is working from home. We also came across an interesting finding with the implementation of the aforementioned process; from the productivity and efficiency perspective, we seem to be overstaffed. This revelation I believe is a silver lining that

appeared through the crisis we have seen. Our staff currently is working on a roster basis and they are fully engaged and productive at the same time. We have also come to the understanding that the organization can function quite well with the 75% of staff involved in in-house office work and that we have extra capacity for expansion. That is in fact the lesson we learned from the crisis. We realized that with the involvement of technology, the efficiency and productivity get increased and thus we can get the work done with less number of people. Even during the crisis, we made sure that our human resources were utilized in the optimum manner which brought

are currently using the excess staff quite effectively along with our expansion of projects.

What workforce strategies did your organization adopt during the COVID-19 situation?

Sustaining a business during a pandemic is highly challenging, yet imperative. Thus, with the arrival of the first and second waves we have been thinking about every possible innovative approach to ensure that the organization functions smoothly. All the segments of an organization may not function up

Our first initiative was to only occupy 80% of our staff and keeping the rest of the 20% at home. Although they were at home, they were remunerated. It was through this initiative that we noticed the excess number of staff we were occupying. The people at home only reported to work when they were asked to do so. With the arrival of the second wave, we are much more cautious now and we have put our staff on a roster basis. So the organization's functions are happening smoothly in this manner.

Did you try out any new innovations using modern technology?



us to the notice of the excessive number of human capital. We have now communicated to all the staff that is in excess and directed them to do different tasks. What's significant here is that our employees understood the significance of doing productive work, for we showed them the schemes how they can contribute and showcase their productive work. And as mentioned earlier we

to their optimum, yet some segments will have to. If not, the repercussions would be severe. There are livelihoods that are dependent on this place and they have to contribute productively to earn their wages. Thus, it was our responsibility to facilitate that we have done our best to ensure everyone could contribute productively and that they are remunerated.

I believe there are so many opportunities we came across because of this pandemic. It was true that no one had a clear idea as to what this pandemic was or how to react to it. However, this situation also made us realize the importance of integrating our work with the modern technology platforms and how to manage our business remotely to the maximum extent possible. Another



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who are not tech-savvy and proficient in English language.

good thing that resulted from this pandemic is that our launching on the e-document platform. This approach eased out a lot of manual documentation; this platform will facilitate the entire process of the procurement system. We already have about 16,000 suppliers registered with us. Once we place the required orders, any interested supplier can get involved in the tender process. This is our newest innovative approach and it really helps us to get rid of unnecessary documentation that usually happens in the tendering process. Further, we also noted that some project teams such as skill teams were idling. For example, we can take our team who are experts in piling. During the first and second waves, there was no piling happening for there were no new constructions happening. But this piling team couldn't contribute to us in any other way, for they were not skilled in any other way. Therefore we made an initiative to

multi-skill them by providing them relevant training so that we can engage them in different tasks. These are the new approaches that were initiated during this pandemic situation.

What communication methods did you use to communicate with your employees during this period?

The primary method we have been using to communicate with all staff is email. However, with the arrival of COVID, we began to use platforms like Zoom to hold weekly and monthly meetings. Irrespective of the place one is located at a given, he or she can join to the meeting thanks to the modern technology. Further, we have also developed a manual that contains all the preventive protocols for the benefit of our employees, by using both Sinhala and Tamil languages to aid those

What are the lessons learned at the pace of crisis?

We are in a pandemic. In order to get through this, we all need to take precautions. It's not few people, but everybody should have an equal understanding of the critical situation we all are in. That understanding seems to be lagging which is quite unfortunate. Sri Lankan government itself is going through a critical situation with all the expenses that are being incurred with all the testing and vaccinations. In fact, our government is going through a financial crisis due to these heavy expenditures. We are not a self-sufficient country, meaning we can't shut our borders to the rest of the world. Thus we have to take every precaution and meet all the protocols for the benefit of all of us.

By *Gayanthi Mendis/Hasini Gunasekara*