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MSBM

e-Zine

A Publication of Mona School of Business and Management

BUSINESS RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES

IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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Message from the Executive Director



Dr. David McBean
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There is a chorus line from a Peter Tosh song “Pick myself up”
*But I got to pick myself up,
Dust myself off, start all over, again*

This struck me as the way many businesses across the Caribbean and the world are thinking of these times, as we go through a one in a century event with the COVID-19 pandemic. As we are emerging from the more stringent measures to re-open the economy it is perhaps useful to remember that the world first survived, and eventually thrived through the last pandemic which was sandwiched between both World Wars, as well as preceding the Great Depression. But we need to find our way through, with solutions and ideas that are relevant to Jamaica and the Caribbean.

And that’s where we come in. Since its inception, Mona School of Business and Management has not only been the leader in business education in the region, but has also been a thought leader in developing and communicating insights to promote efficiency and

innovation in both the private and public sectors. Our graduates are nationally recognised for bringing value to private business, entrepreneurship and public sector management.

Over the years, we have been more than an academy concerned with teaching and learning, and through our research and consultancy projects, we do engage with the wider community in the search for solutions to critical public policy issues. We have done this through mechanisms like our seminal Business Roundtable, Business and Management Conference, public fora on contemporary issues as well as publications such as the MSBM Business Review.

The current pandemic resulting in a historic economic slowdown is one requiring agile responses to a situation for which we have neither precedent nor road map, as the last pandemic was a century ago in a totally different context. So we have to develop and implement new ways of thinking and acting to respond to the unfolding needs both of our primary community of students as well as corporate Jamaica. That’s the context for the launch of this new online publication, **MSBM e-Zine**.

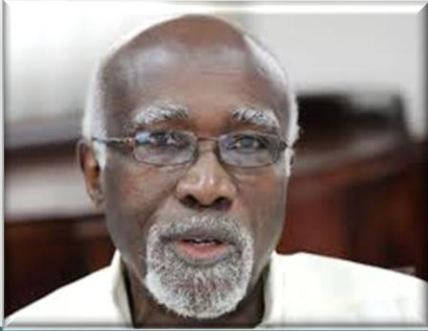
In each issue, our world-class MSBM faculty and other colleagues at the UWI, will offer their informed perspectives on the wide range of business topics and concerns executives and policymakers have to grapple with as the Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic forces us to re-think old orthodoxies, and identify and manage new risks not just to stay in the game but to compete and win. This is not a theoretical exercise; it’s about providing tools that managers can use to address real-world issues that pop up as firms try to find their footing in a landscape that is constantly changing.

In this first issue, our colleagues deal with several topics including: the changing workplace as, more and more, work is being done from home with implications for productivity and security; impacts on labour markets as tenure and job security are threatened; handling a communication crisis when negative media exposure threatens the revenue or reputation of the firm; handling disruptions to the supply chain; embracing new ways of thinking; finding opportunities in the crisis. We confidently hope that readers will find these insightful and rewarding.

On behalf of the Mona School of Business and Management, I am very pleased to present this latest example of MSBM’s tradition of engaging with the business community and the wider public in the search for solutions to business problems. Please tell us what you think. This is not intended to be a publication based on the old communication model of ‘we talk, you listen’. It’s new; it’s interactive; it’s sharing.

“Global Knowledge, Regional Solutions”

Editor's Note



Claude Robinson
Editor-in-Chief

Welcome to this inaugural issue of **MSBM e-Zine**, the online publication of the Mona School of Business and Management, of the University of the West Indies, Mona. This issue deals with some of the uncertainties surrounding the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic as businesses and individuals try to figure out the so-called 'new normal' and how to co-exist with it.

In this environment, we all need the best available information and insight to inform business and personal decisions. So, the MSBM, as the region's leading business school, decided to launch this enterprise to help provide the navigational tools business leaders and managers need to identify and manage risks and seize opportunities to reposition their firms not just to survive but to grow and thrive in the 'new normal'.

In a contribution titled *Opportunities for indigenous manufacturing to replace/supplement disruptions in the global supply chain*, Ambassador

Ralph Thomas, a Senior Teaching Fellow at MSBM and an experienced diplomat at the highest level, identifies strategies that business people can use in "navigating the perilous seas and sailing to safe waters and islands of opportunity...." They need to "batten down the hatches and consolidate cash flows and increase liquidity; then chart a new course based on a strategic review of their business in the new business ecology anticipated.

Dr Anne Crick, ***HR in the New Tele-Workplace: Opportunities to Create Value***, offers advice that will benefit both managers and employees in the emerging work place. "Moving to tele-working does not have to lower productivity and service levels and tele-work may actually create opportunities to increase them. This may only happen if managers think through and plan for it." Another specific piece of advice: Don't just relocate, re-engineer. **"As you relocate work, examine every process and see whether it is absolutely necessary."**

James Moss Solomon, Executive-in-Residence at MSBM draws on his extensive business experience to remind us that, "During times of disaster or crisis, the smooth sailing is disrupted and the traditional structures of normality require change, redefinition, and re-assignment, a sort of all hands in new deck positions. New normal supersedes old rules, and survival often needs new thinking that has no relationship to the previous hard and fast rules and regulations or even roles."

Danny Roberts, *Senior Lecturer and Head of the Hugh Shearer Labour Studies Institute at the UWI Open Campus*, argues that, "COVID-19 will undoubtedly have its greatest impact on our labour markets." He suggests several policy responses including "legislations to once again protect the most vulnerable and ensure that the workers on whose shoulders the economy must be re-built, are covered by international labour standards that provide for social protection, employment and income protection. The implications for contract workers and minimum wage earners are obvious."

Finally, my own contribution draws on several recent communication crisis cases at local firms that found themselves the subject of negative media exposure threatening reputational damage. As the economic impact from the pandemic deepens, more and more firms will face negative media scrutiny. Even before a crisis develops it's important to maintain a constant digital scan to identify potential risks and take pre-emptive action. Don't leave threats to revenue or reputation unchallenged!

CRISIS

OPPORTUNITY

Opportunities for Indigenous Manufacturing

To replace/supplement disruptions in the global supply chain

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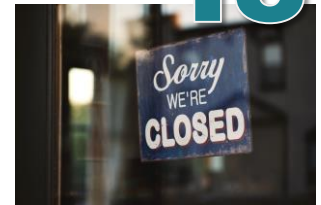
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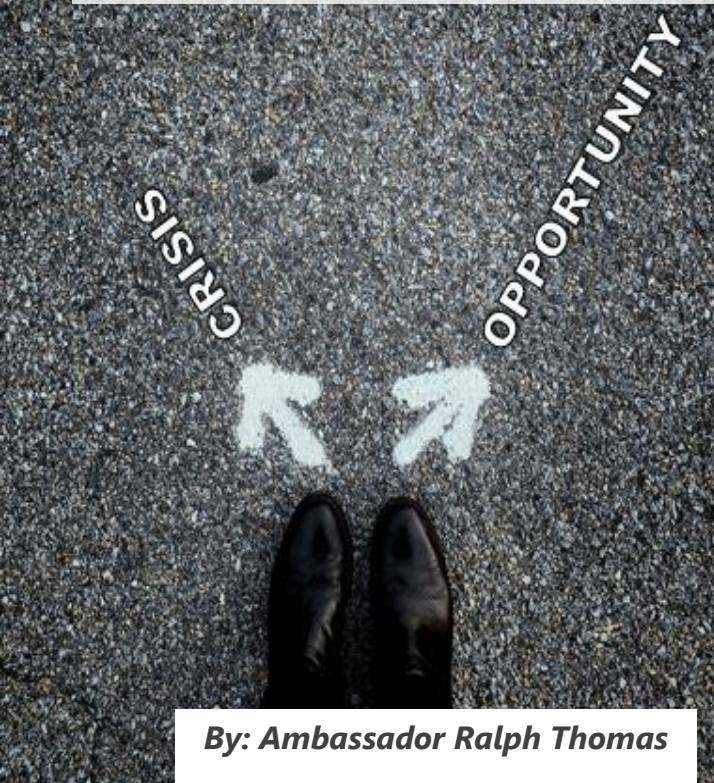


Job Retention Strategies

Amidst declining market shares & revenues

Opportunities for Indigenous Manufacturing

In Times of Crisis



By: Ambassador Ralph Thomas

Just as Columbus stood on the deck of his command ship the Santa Maria and surveyed the horizon, wondering if he and his crew would slip over the world's edge into the abyss, or alternatively sail into a bright new day of placid waters, discoveries, trading opportunities and gold; so too must heads of our indigenous companies quickly take stock of their situation and respond with agility. Firms must evaluate the new and expanded opportunities and threats faced and reimagine their vision of what the firm aspires to be in the radically changed future. They must take strategic and tactical action to ensure firm profitability and survival in the changed environment. Their ability to do so will depend on organizational strengths such as firm capital and liquidity, availability and access to resources, people, technological and production capabilities and the urgent steps taken to address their organizational weaknesses, including those inherent in their business models.

Three key risks presently confronting firms doing business in a global environment are the effects of deglobalization and tariff wars; digital disruption; and the rise of global pandemics. Strong forces of

deglobalization were evident prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, reversing the close integration between nations promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the opening of markets that expanded global trade. Trade wars between USA and China driven by rising nationalism, and the concurrent disintegration of economic alliances in Europe and elsewhere, such as BREXIT, have affected the cost and availability of goods worldwide. The combination of these three forces now changes the rules of engagement and requires urgent and appropriate action by indigenous firms.

The network of strategic alliances, production facilities located across the globe and the integrated and smooth flow of product and services through what is euphemistically called the Global Supply Chain, has been permanently disrupted by these seminal trends and by COVID-19 disruption. The global economy when it recovers, will arrive at a state described as the "New Normal". But what is this new normal that we expect and how should indigenous firms respond now and when it fully emerges?

“the Global Supply Chain has been permanently disrupted...”

The problem and its solution are far more complex and textured than it appears. What we do know is that the disruptions may present real opportunities for indigenous manufacturing, import substitution and innovation in creating solutions such as Mobile Apps and Platforms that redefine how we do business, exchange cash for products or value received and supported by new local production and supply and value chains that must be constructed at this time.

The COVID-19 epidemic accelerates and magnifies the scope and pace of the transformation of the global marketplace by shuttering production, restricting travel and decimating tourism, airlines, BPO, banking and other industries. It creates food security issues for the people of many nations and provides opportunities for firms to backward and forward integrate to produce, manufacture, distribute and serve new local demand. Telemedicine and agri-processing stand out as new areas of opportunity.

Profits derived from reconstructing the architecture of the global supply chain using new large scale and technologically enabled modes of production, inbound and outbound logistics and shipping and technology have evaporated, leaving some markets under-supplied with products. Indigenous firms must become more agile, and access marketing data and analytics that can with pin-point accuracy quickly identify these attractive customer segments that emerge as a result of disruption and can be competitively supplied with local manufacture

Indigenous firms must innovate by building their own digital platforms and Mobile Apps to support customer transactions and arrange digital and other alliances to create new value chains and supply chains. Collaborations may be established with Amazon and similar companies; who provide shared digital platforms of E-Commerce that allow market-access at lower costs without direct human contact and provide greater revenue and firm profitability.

“Indigenous firms must innovate...”

Business models must be redesigned as they reflect the dynamic combination of how the company creates value based on activities, key partnerships, key resources, customer relationships and segments served, revenue streams and operational costs, in a digitally enabled and disrupted environment. Based upon their capabilities and strategic posture, firms should restructure and deepen business collaboration within and across industries by entering or exiting select industries, while improving alignment to the new environment.



In navigating the perilous seas and sailing to safe waters and islands of opportunity amidst the storms, indigenous firms must first batten the hatches and consolidate cashflows and increase liquidity; then chart a new course based on a strategic review of their business in the new business ecology anticipated. They must set new goals and objectives based on their strategic foresight and execute with precision and without delay, while building a workforce capable of operating remotely. Captains must always pay close attention to their crew, a key resource of any firm and focus on the emerging management challenges arising from the changed work environment.



Ambassador Ralph Thomas is a Senior Teaching Fellow, Mona School of Business and Management

MSc in Logistics and Supply Chain Management



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Crisis Communication

In the time of the pandemic



By: Claude Robinson

Broadly speaking, a company has a communication crisis when negative media exposure threatens its revenue and /or reputation. The threat may be online through social media or through traditional media such as newspaper, broadcast and cable or electronic such as websites and social media platforms.

The sources of threat will vary but, typically, will come from one or more of the following: Disgruntled employees, executive misconduct, disaffected or angry shareholders, investigative bodies such as law enforcement or regulatory agencies, aggressive competitors and business rivals, extortionists, hackers, unhappy customers. Sometimes the threat is based on actual actions and events in the company; sometimes it is fabricated by bad actors.

Regrettably, some firms may choose to hide evidence of executive misconduct or management decisions that will negatively impact critical stakeholders in the vain hope that it will go away. Bad behaviour or action will not just disappear; rather when there is public disclosure the firm will find itself playing catch up. It's easier and more advantageous to tell your story up front rather than reactively respond to allegations which may actually misrepresent the truth.

As the COVID-19 pandemic plays out in Jamaica, several organisations will increasingly be the subject of negative media exposure with executives having to scramble to repair reputational damage. Business actions taken for firm survival in an uncertain environment may negatively impact some stakeholders such as workers or customers.

The firm has a duty to get the true story out as quickly as possible, not react to a narrative framed by people actually or potentially harmed by the events.

This article looks at a few examples of both proactive and reactive responses of firms faced with actual or potential communication crises connected to the pandemic.

Take the case of Mother's, the national fast food chain. Much of their revenue was from sales contracts to hotels and concessions at school canteens. But hotels have been shuttered by the collapse of international travel; and the government has closed schools as one of the measures to contain the spread of the virus by restricting large scale public gatherings or movement of people. Opening hours for business have also been cut. So the firm's business model collapses with dire consequences for hundreds of employees.

Mother's got ahead of the story by explaining that a 70 per cent reduction in business has forced it to close its 18 stores island-wide, relieving 900 staff and 200 vendors of their jobs for the next 30 days, *Daily Gleaner*, May 1, 2020.

“It's easier and more advantageous to tell your story up front rather than reactively respond to allegations which may actually misrepresent the truth.”

The announcement, which included a one-week notice period, gave the company time and space to discuss the details of the closure and future strategies with employees in a non-confrontational environment. They were proactive.

Reacting to a communication crisis

Notably, we have seen other approaches including the Alorica call centre in St. Catherine which has been described as the epicentre of the coronavirus spread in Jamaica. Also, Iberostar Hotels in St James which has been the subject of negative media comments by disgruntled employees claiming that deductions from their salaries had not been handed over to relevant government agencies thus rendering them ineligible for government unemployment cash grants.

Alorica, a large California-based Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) organisation with more than 100,000 employees at its 130 sites across 14 countries – including 800 agents at its two locations in Jamaica, found itself responding to two reputational threats: One from the government that it was a virus rogue responsible for the spike and spread of the infection. Said Health and Wellness Minister, Christopher Tufton, "... I am prepared to say, based on what I have seen, this particular facility did not observe the protocols that were established," (Daily Gleaner April 10, 2020.)

The other threat was from several disgruntled Alorica employees who seemed to confirm the government's claim of non-compliance or lax enforcement of disease mitigation guidelines. These comments put the company on the back foot having to deny the minister's assertion and respond to disaffected employees.

"The most recent GOJ (Government of Jamaica) health inspection from April 1, 2020, gave us a passing report," said Jose Ramirez, the senior vice-president and chief of staff for Alorica's operations in Latin America and the Caribbean, in an interview with The Gleaner. But the reputational damage as a virus rogue had already been done.

LEARN TO NAVIGATE AN EVER-CHANGING BUSINESS LANDSCAPE

CLAIRE GRANT
General Manager, Television Jamaica, MBA, Class of 2003

KEVIN DONALDSON
CEO, Sagor Investments Jamaica Limited, MBA (Banking & Finance), Class of 2008

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In the case of the disgruntled Iberostar employees in Rose Hall, St James, the Gleaner reported that several of them charged that they had been unable to receive the \$9,000 per fortnight which the government had announced as a cash relief for Jamaican workers, earning under \$1.5 million per annum and lost their jobs to the virus. The allegation was that the hotel had not handed over statutory deductions to the tax authorities as required by law and a prerequisite for getting the cash grant.

After the negative story had gained much traction, Iberostar was trying to play catch up explaining that the apparent failure to pay over statutory deductions was really the result of a computer glitch at Tax Administration Jamaica (TAJ) platform, which made it "unable to upload the requisite forms" due to "technical issues" at TAJ. This caused a delay and was not a case of non-compliance, they said.

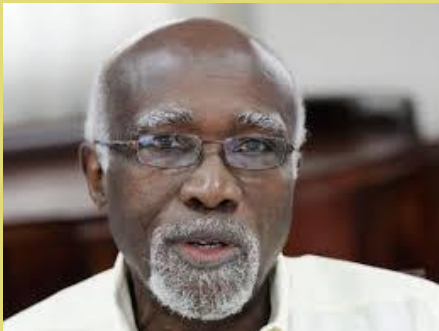
"Iberostar wishes to state categorically that there has been no wrongdoing on the part of the hotel and that Iberostar has not only complied with the letter of the law but also with its spirit," according to an official statement.

The company also did some amount of damage control by ensuring that all affected employees received the cash grant even before the company had received it from the government.

This brief review suggests a few guidelines for other businesses to follow in the event of a communication crisis in these COVID-19 times of business uncertainty:

- 1) Rebut a false, negative allegation as quickly and as fully as possible.
- 2) Develop a coherent and accurate message before going public.
- 3) Identify a spokesperson who is credible, preferably the CEO.
- 4) Stay on message with both internal and external stakeholders.

Even before a crisis develops it's important to prepare for it with a comprehensive communications plan identifying the risks faced by the company and the specific actions to be taken in the event of a crisis. The preparation includes a constant digital scan to see what's being said about your brand on-line and off-line. Don't leave threats unchallenged.



Claude Robinson is an Associate Teaching Fellow at Mona School of Business and Management.



HR in the New Tele-Workplace

Opportunities to create value



By: Dr Anne Crick

Jamaicans say “What never happen in a year, happen in a day”, and that is certainly the case with tele-work in the era of COVID-19. We’ve thought about and spoken about tele-work for more than a decade, but it was still news late last year when a major financial corporation announced its corporate policy on working from home. Just over 6 months later almost every business sector in Jamaica has had to incorporate tele-work. Is it the future of work in Jamaica or just a temporary blip on the horizon? In profit making enterprises the answer is likely to depend on the way in which such work affects the bottom line.

Working from home has many definitions and many variations, but in general it refers to a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of their position from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work ([opm.gov](https://www.opm.gov)). By current government legislation older employees must work from home, and this group is likely to include many managers and supervisors. Social distancing requirements also mean that workplaces are being thinned out and some employees are spending at least part of their work week at home while others man the fort. What has this meant for productivity and service quality?

If we are honest we will agree that productivity in Jamaica has been declining for decades despite

significant technological advances and a plethora of supervisors and surveillance mechanisms, Service levels are so poor that management consultant Francis Wade has jokingly proclaimed that the only good service is “Friend’ and “Tourist” Service. There are of course exceptions and beacons of light, but in general we have a long way to go in service and productivity levels. Our reluctance to adopt tele-work despite the compelling benefits has often boiled down to a concern about the ability to manage work remotely. The truth is that work is always evolving and effective managers should be ahead rather than behind the curve. Moving to tele-working does not have to lower productivity and service levels and tele-work may actually create opportunities to increase them. This may only happen if managers think through and plan for it. Some important strategies:

1. **Be laser focused on your mission, vision and values.** These are like a compass that always point towards your goal and they will keep everyone on track regardless of distance. Unfortunately, they are often relegated to wall hangings. Do virtual team huddles to discuss them and send out reminders of your mission and value regularly to your direct reports

2. **Establish clear protocols and expectations for tele-work.** Distinguish between processes and outcomes. If your emphasis is on the actual process then you may care about employees completing work within certain hours. If your emphasis is on outcomes, then establish clear deadlines for submission. The key is to be clear and consistent in your expectations so that both you and the tele-worker are on the same page. Many managers are accustomed to micro-managing and this often has deleterious results. Now is a good opportunity for managers working remotely to focus primarily on outcomes wherever possible and allow employees the opportunity to use their initiative in getting the job done.

3. **Reward important outcomes.** Many people are rewarded simply for showing up each day with perfunctory attention paid to productivity and performance. Now is a wonderful opportunity to build important metrics into the job. It should not be enough to serve a customer online but to do so

in a particular time period and with particular outcomes being met. We seldom measure how long a process takes place in person but this is easy to do when the process is online or on the phone. Systems may even be put in place to automatically generate a short customer satisfaction survey sent after a call or online interaction. By the way, internal customers matter too so measure their satisfaction as well! Measure the critical outcomes and provide regular feedback, recognition and reward to encourage direct reports to meet the expectations that you promise your internal and external customers.

4. **Select carefully.** Some people thrive on autonomy while others need structure. The best workers for tele-work are obviously the former. Make sure to create structure for employees who need it though by giving them regular deadlines and deliverables.

5. **Don't just relocate, re-engineer.** Many activities have redundancies and inefficiencies built into them and we have come to accept these as normal. As you relocate work, examine every process and see whether it is absolutely necessary. Quick case in point from a friend of mine who purchased a product online for curbside pickup - To her surprise when she went into the store she was still required to go to the cashier for a printed receipt as proof that she had paid even though she had proof of payment from the website. What a waste of the customer and the cashier's time not to mention paper! Now is the time to streamline your systems to reduce costs, increase productivity and customer satisfaction.

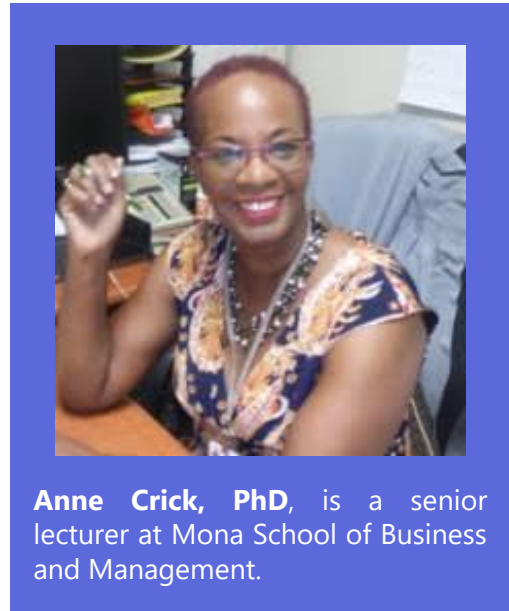
6. **Be creative.** Being apart physically does not have to mean the end of teamwork. As we are now learning almost everything can be done online so find ways to recognize excellent performance, to build camaraderie and to brainstorm online. You may find that normally reticent people will contribute to a conversation when they are online while others may participate in the chat feature. Some of your employees may be feeling disconnected so make an effort to bring the team together for anything from Zoom aerobics to stress management seminars.

7. **Be flexible and responsive.** Tele-work is new to many of us and some of the models and systems from other countries are not a good fit with our culture and temperament.

Call everything a pilot and monitor it carefully. If it isn't working then tweak it, fix it or change it. Encourage your direct reports to make suggestions about what could be done differently and test them.



COVID-19 is a crisis with tragic outcomes for thousands around the world but crises bring opportunities as well. Don't just plan for your business to survive the pandemic – plan for it to thrive. With open responsive mechanisms you can build better teams, be more creative and enhance your customer service delivery. Don't waste this crisis!



Anne Crick, PhD, is a senior lecturer at Mona School of Business and Management.

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Leadership & Management

In times of crisis



By: James Moss-Solomon

It is fair to think that leadership and management are different in normal times as one charts direction and destination (like a Captain on a ship), while the other follows the voyage charts and adjusts to changes in the sea conditions. There is a clearly defined relationship and synergy required between present and future time frames as represented by the two functions that often do not reside in the same individual.

During times of disaster or crisis, the smooth sailing is disrupted and the traditional structures of normality require change, redefinition, and re-assignment, a sort of all hands in new deck positions. New normal supersedes old rules, and survival often needs new thinking that has no relationship to the previous hard and fast rules and regulations or even roles. These times require definitive decision making in a very short timeframe that may otherwise impact human lives or property.

Peter Drucker opines: "Management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things".

The nature of a crisis forces usually incompatible people together. The futurists (creative) and the rules-based (regulatory) must of necessity work harmoniously to resolve the dangers, while lobbying for a change of rules that may favour

future directions where these may have been stifled prior to the crisis.

There is usually no time to resolve the timeframe for resolution of the conflict by forming the usual committees in order to slow the pace, and affording team members the opportunity to take sides that may be unrelated to the clear and present danger.

An example of rules changes in this current crisis is that the ordinary citizen can now easily open a bank account without the previous onerous procedures largely due to the need to make payments from government to them while keeping physical distancing. This must feel like a "near death experience" for those employees who have spent years trying to say no to the unbanked, and yet others who have had to audit now irrelevant regulation. For them there is the underlying fear of redundancy.

Although not explicitly stated in a job description for executives, the preservation of human life is often a greater priority than short-term performance or popularity. This is a corporate threat and the leader must be willing to take the risk or reward of the outcomes of decisions taken. The crisis manager often has to pivot and commit the corporation to an entirely new way of retaining and gaining new and previously less discussed products and services as the crisis subsides.

In their book "Built to last" Collins and Porras introduced the concept of BHAG's (big hairy audacious goals). The reality is that the goals may seem over-ambitious or plainly impossible. Imagine Hon. Douglas Orane saying, "We are going to double the productivity of every employee at GraceKennedy within five years." To many this could have been nominated for "best joke of the 20th Century award"; but it happened. It was a response to a crisis, and a way to the future.

Jack Welch has two relevant comments on leadership: (1) "When you were made a leader you

were not given a crown, you were given the responsibility to bring out the best in others.” (2) “If the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near.” These quotations suggest that leadership at any time, but more so in a crisis, requires an ability to empower others to feel committed to the set of actions that will cause most persons to emerge in a better place than where they entered.



It does not necessarily specify any particular leadership type that we study in our Business School at MSBM, but is a role to which all can adapt. I will close with Peter Drucker again: “If you want something new you have to stop doing something old.” To the effective leader, crisis=opportunity. Leaders present and drive the option.



James Moss-Solomon is Executive-in-Residence at Mona School of Business and Management.



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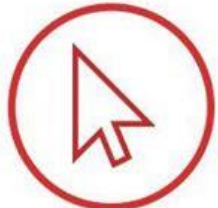
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Job Retention Strategies

Amidst declining market shares & revenues



By: Danny Roberts

Like all global crises dating back to World War 1, COVID-19 will undoubtedly have its greatest impact on our labour markets. And if we were to examine the period following the Great Depression of the 1930s, one could have fierce confidence in one's conclusion that the periodic commercial crises we have experienced, have exposed deep structural contradictions in the dominant international social, economic and political system of the last 100 years. This system has estranged workers from their humanity and created a basis for alienation of labour and capital within our global space. It was certainly the case with the 2008 global and economic recession, for although it had its genesis among the 1 percent Wall Street greedy, it quickly mushroomed into a virulent epidemic that severely affected the remaining 99 percent through reforms, not of the financial architecture, but of the labour market. Rising unemployment, wage stagnation and changes to the nature of the employment relationship for greater control of labour, were the consequential effects of the post-2008 global recession.

But this COVID-19 pandemic is different from the other crises, as no other crisis contemplated the total lockdown of an entire country as a means of combatting it.

This means the overall impact on labour markets is likely to be far more devastating. The early signs demonstrate how much labour markets are going to be greatly affected both from the supply side, with the fall in the production of goods and services, as well as the demands for consumption and the prospects for investments. The Caribbean region, already known for its vulnerabilities to external shocks, witnessed dramatic decline in its tourism and

hospitality industries, exposed its most vulnerable groups to the ravages of COVID-19, without adequate social protection, and face the prospects of a general disruption in supply chains across the world.

The ripple effects of these labour market shocks will severely affect the revenues of industries and businesses, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises, resulting in organisational restructuring and the potential for higher unemployment and rising poverty. Public sector workers are, of course, not immune from this, for the cost of the recovery and the strain it brings on the Government's fiscal budget could seriously affect the employment figures in the public service if the economy does not rebound quickly and return to full capacity.

Prime Minister Andrew Holness' message at a recent press briefing is the strongest indication yet that jobs are not safe in the public sector if revenues and taxes continue to decline. This brings us to the question as to what should be the most appropriate response from government to COVID-19 to prevent a downward spiralling in employment and rising poverty. There ought to be three areas of focus:

- (i) First and foremost, the protection of the health and safety of the labour force;
- (ii) To provide some level of income protection; and
- (iii) To ensure the sustainability of businesses and jobs.

What is patently obvious is that Jamaica cannot afford the closure of businesses and the wholesale loss of jobs, and therefore every effort must be made to ensure they remain open. But neither can the government afford to immediately open businesses and expose the population to a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, this would turn out to be even more devastating, as a lock-down of the country would now be inevitable.

From a public health perspective; rapid testing, the wearing of mask and social distancing are the obvious priority considerations.

The success, of course, depends on the discipline of the population. From a labour market perspective, what should we do to ensure effective policy responses to retain jobs and keep businesses open, and put the economy on a path of rapid economic growth?

The focus should be on policy responses that simultaneously address the immediate situation, and lay the basis for a long-term sustainable path to development. Enforcement of the public health measures are critically important, but in order to keep businesses open and guarantee income to workers to stimulate the economy, the introduction of a wage subsidy must be of utmost consideration. The argument that we cannot afford it, must be weighed against the long-term implications of business closures and job losses. This is where the decision as to whether a wage subsidy represents a viable option for Jamaica must be based on science not fiction or anecdote. The default response is that we cannot afford it, but can we afford not doing it?

A second policy response would be grounded in longer term measures. Our international partners – the ILO, World Bank, IMF – have all emphasised the importance of protecting the most vulnerable in our society. This means the need to put in place a comprehensive social protection system and quickly pass the Occupational Health and Safety Act to provide the platform for protecting the most vulnerable. Barbados was able to do that by extending to six months the benefits under its Unemployment Insurance Scheme.

A third policy response is in the area of providing employment protection legislations to once again protect the most vulnerable and ensure that the workers on whose shoulders the economy must be re-built, are covered by international labour standards that provide for social protection, employment and income protection. The implications for contract workers and minimum wage earners are obvious.

Finally, we have a national partnership council with supporting technical and administrative infrastructure. This is what needs to be activated and the research capabilities of The UWI – rated among the top 4% of universities globally – should be brought on board.

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