

Small Business

Smart lockdowns business continuity and digitisation

by Tara E. Frater

The Government of Barbados has adopted bold and decisive action in the face of the coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic, by, pursuant to the Emergency Management (COVID-19) Order 2020 declaring that a public health emergency exists in Barbados and implementing a 24-hour curfew or "lockdown" which is, at present, scheduled to terminate on April 14.

In taking these steps, Barbados has joined a growing list of countries worldwide which seek to halt the transmission of COVID-19 and flatten the curve of its spread, by curtailing the movement of humans, the effective vectors for the virus. It is a list of which no country would like to be part, but which very few can avoid in the face of a rapidly escalating public health crisis.

In the midst of grappling with the spread of a virus, the likes of which is wholly unprecedented in modern times, our challenges are myriad and include: public health issues, economic well-being, social support for the vulnerable, and increased risk for crime. In many ways, it is a herculean task of managing competing objectives whilst being constrained by limited resources.

Our Government must feel as though it is an impossible task and challenge to carry that which feels it cannot be carried – but carry it we must.

False choice

It is a false choice to think that we must choose either public health or economic well-being in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. There is a wide spectrum of options in between to accommodate both imperatives. Barbados, which had been on track with making progress in implementing its economic recovery programme under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund, can ill afford to lose the precious ground that we had gained. At present, economic considerations are at the periphery of our COVID-19 discourse locally as we focus on completing our quarantine facility, securing ventilators, health equipment and personal protective gear, and importing additional specialist health care workers amongst other things.

This is understandable. However, the reality is that we are at least 12 to 18 months away from a vaccine and there is no cure in sight. What this means therefore is that lockdowns are our new normal. At best, we can expect a series of lockdowns punctuated by one- to two-week periods of curtailed freedom of movement while observing social distancing and appropriate health protocols.

Lockdowns cannot therefore mean standstill. Public services and private enterprises must therefore continue in an alternate universe manned by armies of decentralised, agile and

accountable remote workers.

At present, there has been a mandated cessation of all businesses except for specified operators (for example food retailers, fuel distributors, pharmacies) and specified Government essential services related to public health, safety and sanitation. Certain other Government agencies have thankfully implemented some measures to retain some semblance of operational activity. Private businesses are permitted to continue to operate, provided that employees can work exclusively from home.

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In the face of the utter collapse of our tourism industry, it will be critical for those parts of our economy which lend themselves to the remote delivery of services to be prioritised and the supporting Government services to remain fully operational.

By way of example, the international business sector – Barbados' second biggest source of foreign exchange after tourism – not only can remain operative but is ideally suited to do so, notwithstanding COVID-19, as it is predicated off the export of weightless knowledge services to an international clientele which largely does not need to touch our shores, yet predictably generates a dependable stream of foreign currency for the country.

What does choosing public health and the economy at this time mean? It means we must rapidly embark on an accelerated programme of functional (not optimal) digitisation of key Government agencies required for aspects of the economy which can continue at this time. Functional digitisation during the COVID-19 crisis includes:

- Identifying Government agencies required for critical pillars of domestic and international industry and commerce to remain functional.
- Identifying key staff required for such Government agencies to remain functional.
- Procuring laptops and related equipment for such Government staff and enabling at home internet access.



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- Utilising appropriate hardware and software for remote working (team collaboration, online cloud storage, scanning, electronic signature of documents).
- Establishing operational email addresses and implementation of a 24- to 48-hour response time to all initial emails from the public.
- Permitting online payments for all key Government services through EZ Pay or other portal.
- Permitting copies of required documents to be submitted by email with originals following by post or delivery to a dropbox.
- Launching online training and management sessions, for example by Zoom or other video conferencing software to provide required technical and mentoring support to staff, as well as discharge management functions and build a culture of accountability.

Economic free fall

If our economy stands still, Barbados will be in economic free fall in very short order with the expected consequences of insolvencies and closures of business, redundancies of employees, erosion of the tax base, spiralling crime to name a few consequences. We cannot console ourselves in thinking that other countries in the world will suffer this fate too.

Other islands in the region are similarly labouring under a lockdown but have effective business continuity measures in place which permit them to remain open for business. We will all be affected, but not equally so.

We have all experienced the seamless efficiencies of effective digitised experiences and can all preach the value of this virtue. No doubt all Government agencies will be fully digitised in the future, but this will not happen in the short term. In the interim, all Government agencies which support key drivers of our economy must be empowered to work remotely.

If we do not fall by COVID-19, we risk falling from the fallout of COVID-19. We must confront the coronavirus in a sustainable manner. Let's lockdown in a smart way.

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