

BUSINESS DIALOGUE



JULY - DECEMBER 2020

RESPONDING TO COVID-19: ADVANCEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY IN BUSINESS

2020

ISSUE 02

CONFRONTING COVID-19:
**A GLOBAL
CHALLENGE**

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“ To develop globally competitive and responsible graduates that businesses demand, working in synergy with all our stakeholders and contributing to our society ”

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VICE-CHANCELLOR'S MESSAGE

NSBM Business Dialogue magazine on its successful seventh publication, has proven to be a valuable source which documents the business topics integrating the current socio-economic themes. The present issue encapsulates the socio-economic aspects and the routine of the business world in the new normal, which is impacted by existing pandemic. NSBM often attempts to create innovative, potential leaders who are able to address the contemporary global issues; understand the ground realities of the world.

Thus, I extend my heartiest congratulations to the Business Dialogue magazine team on the success of the novel issue embedded with great value. This special endeavor will pave the pathway to reach the goals and objectives of the business world, breaking down the barriers and obstacles created by a pandemic.

It has always been the motive of NSBM to offer self-motivated, innovative, skillful products to the society as sophisticated leaders with its sole purpose to boom the economy, by nourishing the roots of the undergraduates. We facilitate the students; the future consumers of the society, with technology equipped classrooms, extra-curricular opportunities, and global exposure & knowledge along with the guidance and leadership of a skillful academic panel. Moreover, by working simultaneously with the external business parties, NSBM ensures employability of its undergraduates.

Thus, carrying forward this vision, NSBM will sustainably be engaged in endeavors to provide correct exposure to its undergraduates making them iconic individuals. I would like to wish all the very best and extend my heartiest gratitude to everyone involved in this endeavor for their great commitment.

Prof. E. A. Weerasinghe
Vice Chancellor
NSBM Green University

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



With immense delight and great satisfaction, I express my thoughts about the new issue of the Business Dialogue magazine, which marks another milestone in the university's academic journey. In a period with a heap of challenges, the latest issue of the Business magazine addresses the concerns and challenges, which have arisen due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, faced by the Sri Lankan business sector. As a university which has turned a new chapter in the university education, our ultimate purpose is to produce skillful intellectuals to the business world. As an academic institution it is our responsibility to disseminate knowledge and optimize the current business flow.

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has had a great impact on the business sector throughout the world. However, it has also been able to light on new realities, new strategies, and new potencies. This issue of the Business magazine manifests how the business sector can succeed, being in such a difficult background, therefore this will be a remarkable exposure to business practitioners to optimize their business strategies as this unfolds stories of success and victory of the iconic business personalities in Sri Lanka.

This is a great work; a commitment of a group who offered their immense contribution to launch the seventh publication of the Business Dialogue magazine. I extend my heartiest gratitude and appreciate their great contribution. Further, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the great business leaders who contributed their valuable time for making the new issue of the Business Dialogue magazine a success.

Prof. J. Baratha Dodankotuwa
Editor-in- Chief

The professional opinions and views expressed by the Business Dialogue Magazine are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the NSBM Green University.

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BUSINESS DIALOGUE

RESPONDING TO COVID-19: ADVANCEMENT
OF TECHNOLOGY IN BUSINESS

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Prof. J. Baratha Dodankotuwa

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CONFRONTING COVID-19: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

C OVID-19 is an on-going epidemic that made the World Health Organization declare it a pandemic. This infection is so contagious that it is spreading every single day and the governments and the health authorities are striving hard to

recuperate every infected individual around the globe and to take preventive measures to control further spread of this pandemic. So far, we know from the statistics available that it has a very high rate of spread from human to human through direct contact or by indirect contact. Elderly people with health complications and those having low immunity are also susceptible to this infection.

Due to the fact that COVID-19 spreads among people who are in close proximity, it has caused a global, social, and economic disruption that has led to the cancelation or deferment of many operations. It has become a global crisis forcing governments to lockdown regions and sometimes even countries when the spread of the virus goes beyond their control. During this period of uncertainties



“ DURING THIS PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTIES AMIDST THE SPREAD OF COVID-19, WE HAVE OBSERVED THAT THE DIVERSE SECTORS IN OUR COUNTRY LIKE HEALTH, TOURISM, APPAREL, EDUCATION, BANKING, INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, SOFTWARE, RETAIL, HOTELS, SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES ETC., HAVE BEEN EXPERIENCING GREAT CHALLENGES THAT HAD NOT BEEN FORESEEN BEFORE. IT HAS BEEN OBSERVED WORLDWIDE THAT THIS PANDEMIC HAS CAUSED BUSINESSES TO SUFFER AND MADE THE STAKEHOLDERS ADJUST THEIR STRATEGIES AND OPERATIONS TO COPE WITH THE SITUATION ”

amidst the spread of COVID-19, we have observed that the diverse sectors in our country like health, tourism, apparel, education, banking, information and communication technology, software, retail, hotels, small and medium enterprises etc., have been experiencing great challenges that had not been foreseen before. It has been observed worldwide that this pandemic has caused businesses to suffer and made the stakeholders adjust their strategies and operations to cope with the situation. This has led some people to lose their jobs and their

livelihood. Moreover, we have observed how the industries have evolved, identified new business opportunities and faced the challenges of COVID-19 despite its adverse impact.

Thus, the second issue of the “Business Dialogue 2020” magazine focuses on how the different sectors of the country responded to COVID-19. The articles in this magazine reflect the deliberations of the leading professionals representing leading schools and universities, government regulatory bodies like Information

and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA), Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRC) focusing the regulatory response to business infrastructure and sectors like hospital, apparel, software, finance and retail. The readers will be enlightened with the challenges these luminaries had faced, how they had been mitigated, the success stories and the lessons learnt from each case study. I believe this magazine will elucidate the readers on the way forward of the Industries in Sri Lanka despite the present calamity.

BREAKING THROUGH THE CONVENTIONS

THE POSITIVITY OF GENERATION Z TOWARDS E-LEARNING

SENIOR PROF. SUDANTHA LIYANAGE

THE VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SRI JAYEWARDENEPURA


The global pandemic affected the entire world in a negative manner. When considering your university what are the challenges you faced during the lockdown?

As a person with a background in Chemistry, I have analyzed the situation since the beginning. Most of the viruses have a common feature; once people get infected, the antibodies will be developed by our own bodies and therefore the second attack to the same person is minimum. However, one of the main features of this Covid-19 virus is that according to scientific experiments this is a viral with RNAs. These RNAs can get mutations and because of mutations there may



be a risk of a second attack. As a result, may be another strain is going to develop and that can be slightly different of the initial one. That makes this COVID-19 a dangerous virus compared to others. Nevertheless, when considering the population in the Asian region, they normally have a

decent resistance against these kinds of viral infected diseases. But then if an elderly person, above the age of 50 who are more vulnerable to non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease get infected by this COVID-19, there can be complications and it may cause a threat to life. Although the youngsters, who study in the university are considered to be at a low risk, 40 to 50 percent of the academic staff in the university system is over 50 years. As we need to carefully handle the situation UGC decided to close all the universities to maintain minimum interference between academic and non-academic staff. When the scientific evidence was on the surface, the usage of soap and detergents being recognized as a germ killer, we knew how to stop the spreading of this virus. With all the good habits of



“ AS A PERSON WITH A BACKGROUND IN CHEMISTRY, I HAVE ANALYZED THE SITUATION SINCE THE BEGINNING. MOST OF THE VIRUSES WHICH ARE COMMON EVERYWHERE HAS A COMMON FEATURE ”

washing hands and be clean at all times and by using private transportation when coming to the university for essential duties, I can happily say that none of the staff members got affected by this COVID-19.

The other advantage we had, compared to the other universities except University of Peradeniya is that our medical faculty is situated in the same premises. The advice we receive from the professionals in the medical faculty is much influential, an advantage many other universities do not have. We have a very strong scientific communication process established among medical scientists, social scientists, and other non-medical communities in this university, so I believe that we are in a much safer and a better position at this situation.

SENIOR PROFESSOR SUDANTHA LIYANAGE IS THE CURRENT VICE-CHANCELLOR OF UNIVERSITY OF SRI JAYWARDENEPURA. BEING A SCHOLAR IN THE FIELD OF CHEMISTRY, HIS INTERESTS LIE IN THE AREAS OF SYNTHESIS OF TRIPHOSPHAMACROCYCLES, IMPROVEMENT OF QUALITY OF NATURAL RUBBER LATEX, STUDY ON DEGRADATION PATTERNS OF POLYMER BASED PRODUCTS, EFFECTS ON NANO-SCALE ADDITIVES IN RUBBER COMPOUNDING.

What about the academic activities during this period?

With this COVID-19 pandemic most of the universities around the world have started distance learning as opposed to the traditional in-house teaching. However, the use of distance learning in our universities had been at a very minimum level except in Open University and a few IT, computer science and medical faculties before the emergence of COVID-19. However, with this COVID-19 situation we had to switch to online teaching, google classrooms etc. Specially our younger generation is well equipped with these technologies but, unfortunately there is a lack of good devices and better internet connection with them. Though we have never used these methods in teaching before, because of lockdown we were forced to use them for teaching and our success



rate is around 70%. Along with this experience and provided our students are equipped with better devices and connectivity, we can deliver this distance education in a better fashion. Unfortunately, once the university was re-opened in this last July the staff and students preferred one-to-one teaching and learning so we had to switch back to the traditional mode.

However, I believe that there should be 30- 40% of distance education to the students except our Management faculty, which is open till 9.00 pm, for the normal situation in Sri Lanka is that our universities are open at 8.00 am and closed by 6.00 pm. As students remain at the university premises even after 6.00 pm, if lectures can be delivered online from 6.00 pm- 9.00 pm, it will be very helpful. I firmly believe that these methods should be re-activated. We cannot forget that the new generation

“ THIS GENERATION IS MUCH DIFFERENT TO OUR OWN AND THE SYSTEMS ARE ALSO DIFFERENT. UNLIKE THOSE DAYS, THE STUDENTS NOWADAYS CANNOT CONCENTRATE VERY MUCH AS THEY HAVE MANY OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT THEY ARE INVOLVED IN. THOSE DAYS WE WERE VERY COMMITTED TO OUR STUDIES AND FOCUSED ONLY ON GAINING GOOD RESULTS AND BETTER JOB OPPORTUNITIES ”

is much different to our own and the systems are also different. Unlike those days, the students nowadays cannot concentrate very much as they have many other activities that they are involved in. Those days we were very committed to our studies and focused only on gaining good results and better job opportunities. This generation would like to be occupied with many activities among which they allocate some time and space for education. Since they have no extracurricular activities to be engaged in at the moment due to the

prevailing situation of the country, if we can deliver the lectures that will be very effective. Having said that, we cannot consider our students to be in the same context as in developed countries like Australia or New Zealand since our students are brought up under different circumstances than those countries and they have many issues to tackle while engaging in studies. Therefore I believe, we should have a Sri Lankan model of innovative teaching methodologies and as university academics we need to re-formulate strategies in education to fit the Sri Lankan student population.

What is the perception of academic staff and their reaction towards online teaching?

Mostly the younger staff who are below 35 – 45 age who have a

sufficient amount of experiences and knowledge in virtual learning/teaching were happier to follow these novel methods. However, we had a challenge within our university system as there are 20- 30% of academics who prefer face-to-face teaching. They showcased a certain resistance towards these online teaching methods. So it was a bit challenging to convince them and provide them with the necessary knowledge. Regardless of these challenges almost all of the staff used the online-teaching methodologies successfully.



Do you think that the institution has transformed into a novel form during this COVID-19?

It has transformed, however, it has come to a standstill not solely owing to the teachers but the students who had been exposed to a highly teacher centered education system for the longest time from grade 1 to 13 in Sri Lanka. Within the university there is about 20 -30% of student-centered teaching but most of the lecturers’ passion and methods are highly teacher centered. In many other countries students can learn while they work, but we still believe that attendance is compulsory, and students should always be in the classrooms. One of the old-fashioned thinking is that we should teach the undergraduates with the fundamental knowledge of arts, science, or management etc., and students can develop and deliver the requirements of the industry; therefore, it is a very insignificant portion of our research work as lecturers we are sharing with our undergraduates. While being busy with giving them the foundation knowledge, the industry is in a hurry as they require tailor-made graduates who can serve the

“ IF THE INDUSTRY CAN EMPLOY OUR GRADUATES AND GIVE THEM SOME ‘CURE’ TIME, THEY WILL DO WONDERS. UNFORTUNATELY, OUR INDUSTRY SECTOR HAS NO WAITING TIME AND TO A CERTAIN EXTENT IT IS FAIR, AS THE MODERN WORLD IS VERY COMPETITIVE. SOMETIMES IT TAKES A YEAR OR TWO TO SEE A POSSIBLE CHANGE IN A UNIVERSITY GRADUATE TO PERFORM AS EXPECTED IN THE INDUSTRY. THIS MAY BE THE REASON WHY NON-STATE SECTOR GRADUATES ARE MUCH PREFERRED IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR AS THEY ARE MORE EQUIPPED WITH COMMUNICATION AND PRESENTATION SKILLS. I BELIEVE IF THE STATE SECTOR GRADUATES ARE GIVEN TIME, THEY CAN PERFORM BETTER. HOWEVER WE NEED TO DO NECESSARY CHANGES IN THE SYSTEM AND PRODUCE A CERTAIN PERCENTAGE OF OUR GRADUATES FOR THE INDUSTRY DEMANDS AFTER ANALYZING EMPLOYABILITY OPPORTUNITIES ”

industry requirements. That has created a mismatch between our old-fashioned thinking and the industry requirements. That is why it is said that the graduates produced by the conventional universities are obsolete.

However, as I believe, if the industry can employ our graduates and give them some ‘cure’ time, they can do

wonders. Unfortunately, our industry sector has no waiting time and to a certain extent it is fair, as the modern world is very competitive. Sometimes it takes a year or two to see a possible change in a university graduate to perform as expected in the industry. This may be the reason why non-state sector graduates are much preferred in the private sector as



they are more equipped with communication and presentation skills. I believe if the state sector graduates are given time, they can perform better. However we need to do necessary changes in the system and produce a certain percentage of our graduates for the industry demands after analyzing employability opportunities.

Do you think this mismatch could be resolved using these distance learning methodologies?

Yes of course, these new technologies and devices should be given to students as they can learn from them. Without simply asking the students to read after providing all the learning materials to them, we should encourage them to refer by themselves. To do this I think the

education system needs to be changed. Recent actions towards allowing students to use calculators in GCE Advanced Level for certain subjects is a good initiative and I think it should be implemented across all subjects. As I believe when the education is more device or computer based, students will have more knowledge about using these kinds of equipment and improve their knowledge in technology. In terms of examinations also in some of the foreign degrees offered in Sri Lanka as well as in countries like Singapore, they allow students to bring one sheet to the examination hall call 'help sheet' and teachers call it 'cheat sheet'. This practice has been initiated since many students are stressed since they find it difficult to memorize the entire content, on the contrary one word written on a sheet may aid to memorize the entire content. These changes to the examination system will help effectively minimize

examination misconducts as well. We can think of more open book examinations than closed book exams, more presentations, viva, and more than one assessment rather than semester end papers which require the students to memorize everything. The old-fashioned examination strategies should be changed as students will also simultaneously re-think of changing their strategies as well in terms of using new technologies and new learning approaches. These are big steps but when changing the examination methods, alternately a change of delivery methods will also be required in the system.

How about training staff members to use these technologies?

Most of the lecturers in state universities have the required

knowledge as most of them have their PhD's earned in foreign universities and have the expertise. However, when there is a change even for the betterment of society, there is always a resistance. When there is a resistance, I believe, under a proper leadership we need to accept the changes and look forward to the challenges rather than going back to the comfort zone.

How did you manage the expectations of the stakeholder groups such as student unions and students' groups during this time?

Working with the student union is very different. It is up to the academic community to earn the respect of the students and if they can trust the person; the Vice Chancellor, the Dean or the academic staff, it is easier to work with them. When operating in the state sector there are restrictions to fulfilling their demand as well. During this situation unfortunately 5-10% of students did not have good devices and poor internet connections. Some of the students do not have the ability to have any of these facilities at all. As a result we are planning on a project where we can give every student a laptop when entering the university. For those who do not have the financial means to pay for the laptop we have arranged a loan granted by a bank which they can pay back once they are employed.

What are the future plans for accommodating distance learning to students?

In every faculty there will be studios dedicated to online teaching for external degrees and

“ AS A RESULT WE ARE PLANNING ON A PROJECT WHERE WE CAN GIVE EVERY STUDENT A LAPTOP WHEN ENTERING THE UNIVERSITY. FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT HAVE THE FINANCIAL MEANS TO PAY FOR THE LAPTOP WE HAVE ARRANGED A LOAN GRANTED BY A BANK THROUGH WHICH THEY CAN PAY BACK ONCE THEY ARE EMPLOYED ”

extended diploma programs. Currently all these programs are conducted online. However, there will be a certain percentage of students who may prefer physical classes while others would have the right skills to learn through online delivery. Therefore by using the dual mode delivery method we can support both of these parties, ensuring quality education and therefore the delivery will be effective rather than the implementation of 100% online study in Sri Lanka.

What is your opinion about the technology infrastructure in the university system?

Other than the space issues we have, the government has set aside a decent amount of money for these developments and up to a certain extent we have already established the required equipment. For a better-quality delivery of lectures, currently the university is setting up a studio. The World Bank support is also extended to almost all the state universities to develop these facilities.

What is your message to the industry during this COVID-19 situation as a university vice chancellor?

Industries should trust the capabilities of the best students we provide from the university and give them opportunities while there can be sectors which are subjected to rapid changes which require quick adjustments. Currently we are revising syllabi and delivery methods to enhance the skills of graduates in order to best suit the industry, within two to three years the graduates who are going out from the conventional universities will certainly be more suited to the industry requirements. Our students get the best knowledge available, and they are flying to other countries for higher studies and employment since they are sometimes far ahead of those graduates produced by other countries with compared to their academic qualifications. This skilled labor migration is healthy and should be promoted. As a country we also should develop our brand as other countries, for an example Indians are all over the world, especially in the IT sector. Similarly, Philippines are in the front-line providing nurses and bio medical professionals. I believe our graduates are well suited for the industry-oriented jobs and will be demanded by the global job market if we could instill few modern skills in them.

**By Sashini Gayanika,
Sulakshana De Alwis &
Dileepa Jayamanne**

BEING RESILIENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

A SUCCESSFUL JOURNEY THROUGH A VOLATILE NATURE

MR. SUREN FERNANDO
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER – MAS HOLDINGS



As a leading organization in the apparel industry of the country, what challenges did you encounter during COVID-19?

One of the challenges we faced as an apparel manufacturer was the uncertainty and unpredictability of the market, which

continues to date. If you consider apparel exports in Sri Lanka, approximately 40% head to the US, Europe being the second largest market. We had to operate during a time where many physical stores around the world were closed. There were order cancellations and push-backs, requests for discounts and extended credit terms. Consumers moved towards different buying patterns, adapting different behavioral trends within the fashion

and apparel space which also impacted us in a big way.

Managing the supply chain and our manufacturing operations due to lockdowns in the rapidly evolving pandemic situation was challenging. There was also a conversion into new products like masks and PPE orders which we took on in order to ensure interim income generation; this was accompanied by a steep learning curve for our people and adaptation of our machinery to accommodate this new product requirement.

The most critical amongst all, and the biggest challenge was ensuring the safety of our people. We are in the middle of the second wave and given our industry is labor-intensive and relies on large groups of employees being physically present on site, it was paramount to ensure that adequate Health & Safety protocols were in place.

Although at lower levels than pre-COVID-19, we have seen demand stabilizing during the last couple of



MR. SUREN FERNANDO IS CURRENTLY THE CEO OF MAS HOLDINGS PVT. LTD. HE WAS PREVIOUSLY THE CEO OF MAS INTIMATES - THE GROUP'S LARGEST CLUSTER THAT GREW INTO A USD 800 MILLION BUSINESS UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP, ONE OF THE MANY HIGHLIGHTS OF HIS FORMIDABLE TRACK RECORD SPANNING OVER 20 YEARS AT MAS. WITH THE CREDIBILITY AND RESPECT GAINED FROM INDUSTRY PEERS, HE IS SET TO RENEW THE FOCUS ON MAS CORE APPAREL BUSINESS IN HIS ROLE AS CEO, TAKING ON NEW CHALLENGES AND CAPITALIZING ON OPPORTUNITIES IN THE NEW ERA.

months, with consumers shifting towards omnichannel purchases. However, with the second wave of the pandemic affecting the country, as a manufacturing organization, the challenge now is on the supply side – having a robust system within the organization to be able to scale up and scale down as required, ensuring there is business continuity and

minimal disruption to our customers in terms of order fulfillment.

We had to strike a fine balance between what was best for the company, protecting our employees, and still deliver on the commitments made to our strategic customers and stakeholders. Nevertheless, I must say MAS' teams worked persistently to

manage this crisis, keeping the wellbeing of our employees, families and communities at heart.

What was the impact of COVID-19 to your organization?

As there still prevails uncertainty



about the market in the fashion and lifestyle sector globally, and given the economic situation is still in flux even after a couple of months since COVID-19 first hit, assessing impact and the gravity of COVID-19 is still a tough task.

MAS had to halt local production on 16th March when the first wave hit, while also having to suspend operations in India, Bangladesh, Jordan, Indonesia, Haiti and Honduras afterwards. Logistic chains were disrupted, and our shipments of finished goods impeded as movement of goods or people between locations was restricted.

What was the role of technology in your organization during COVID-19?

Technology platforms, automation and IT solutions were well integrated into MAS' operating model, mainly from communications, design, and innovation perspectives. With

COVID-19, this was accelerated and almost mainstreamed into every aspect of our operations, especially into the way people interacted and worked, forcing both our company and our employees to adapt to a more digital and virtual workplace almost overnight.

MAS proactively leveraged on the tools and investments already available within the organization to support our employees who work seamlessly although in a middle of a pandemic, to adapt to 'work from home' which was a first for many.

MAS established an Employee Risk Assessment tool, which could assess employee risk, location and exposure risk which enabled proactive decision-making regarding factory closures etc. An updated data base of our employees was also in place, helping contact tracing in a significant way.

Technology adoption by our customers increased as a result of worldwide travel bans and remote working protocols. MAS had tools

TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS, AUTONOMATION AND IT SOLUTIONS WERE WELL INTEGRATED INTO MAS OPERATING MODEL, MAINLY FROM COMMUNICATIONS, DESIGN, AND INNOVATION PERSPECTIVES. WITH COVID-19, THIS WAS ACCELERATED AND ALMOST MAINSTREAMED INTO EVERY ASPECT OF OUR OPERATIONS, ESPECIALLY INTO THE WAY PEOPLE INTERACTED AND WORKED, FORCING BOTH OUR COMPANY AND OUR EMPLOYEES TO ADAPT TO A MORE DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL WORKPLACE ALMOST OVERNIGHT

such as 3D virtual design and fit and virtual prototyping and sampling within the company which helped increase the trust that our customers bestowed upon us, especially during such unprecedented times. Our digital technologies enabled MAS to work on designs, carry out virtual fit reviews and approvals, 3D visualization of garments - all in real time, removing some of the bottlenecks that would have hindered the product development process at the time.

These practices I believe have set a new norm, where co-creation through collaboration, using more

dynamic and agile networks within the organizations will be the new 'business as usual'.

Were the measures taken successful?

Yes, absolutely. Even in times of crisis and urgency, deliberate planning with intent, leveraging on existing technology and know-how of our teams helped MAS navigate through the storm.

How did COVID-19 accelerate digital transformation in your workplace?

Digital adoption has taken a quantum leap at both the organizational and industry levels. Just like for MAS, for most businesses, one consequence of COVID-19 has been a dramatic uptick in the use of digital technologies, reducing face-to-face interactions while promoting a way of work that safeguards both the customer's and employee's health and well-being – at least until the pandemic is eradicated.

MAS continuously looked at how to implement physical distancing and remote working better to minimize human touch points in our factories and offices, making enhanced use of digital technologies from e-mail, enterprise social media tools to HR applications and virtual meeting tools, thereby, transforming the employee work experience accordingly.

The abrupt shift to virtual interactions, both inside and outside MAS, also provided an opportunity for the company and our employees to accelerate the pace of learning about, and adoption of, technologies.

The pandemic only pushed us to speed up this process. And I believe that times of crisis are the best



times to evolve and transform!

What was the reaction of the employees for the increased use of modern technology?

I would say our entire workplace adapted to the new workplace of today quite fast, embracing working from home, communicating and collaborating in creative ways.

By being thrust into new challenges and circumstances, even employees who were not as tech

savvy pre-COVID-19 continued learning on the job while understanding that digital disruption, is not just a bump on the road before things go back to 'normal,' but a fundamental change in the business world that transports us to a 'new normal.'

However, part of the workplace experience is also the social interactions with teams and engagements that we have at office. Our HR teams have devised initiatives to keep all employees engaged and connected by taking some of these 'experiential' activities to virtual platforms.

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

As over 11,000 executive and management staff rapidly adapted to 'work from home,' MAS has been keeping all possible communication channels open for employees.

Email/mobile messaging - which provided a faster way to communicate with the teams, web conferencing via applications like Microsoft Teams, Blue Jeans, intranet portal, cloud sharing etc. enabled employees to collaborate and work with each other, supporting information sharing and internal publications, enabling access to information even when away from the physical workplace.

There were virtual town halls conducted, providing an opportunity for teams to engage with their leadership and to keep teams informed of national regulations, company policies and protocols and business plans. Our shared services teams have been collaborating remotely to power the business and keep the core administrative operations functional.

When it comes to our team members, communications happen through text messages, and through direct calls from the Employee Relations teams. This helped continue regular touch-bases, whether the team member is at the factory floor or at home, and of course access to emotional support and counseling services.

MAS has continued to stay connected, exerting consistent efforts to compensate for the ambiguity, doubt and anxiety created amongst our employees as a result of the situation.

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

With the easing of curfew in certain areas, we were gradually bringing staff back to our factories and offices but not in the same way as before COVID-19. We were committed to the emphasis of health and safety at the workplace, implementing stringent SOPs to enable physical distancing and increased sanitization, so that employees can be confident about their safety at work.

While some employees returned to work on site, some continued to work remotely, where in most instances the employee had to manage taking care of their children at home or elderly family members simultaneously. The 'Flexible working policy' that MAS was trialing out before COVID-19 hit, was accelerated as a result. MAS was able to support our employees' expectations by providing the flexibility that's needed and from a company perspective, gain access to a wider employee base (e.g. hire part time employees for certain roles) etc.

In addition to above, we ensured all our teams/employees felt engaged and connected to the journey towards recovery. Our HR leaders on ground were positioned to support and engage our teams, starting from the team members at our factories, preparing them to be more resilient to face the post COVID realities.

Was there a performance gap?

Imagine a crisis that forces your company's employees to change the way they work almost overnight! There was a performance gap, but it has been well within control and manageable.

How did you manage the post and present COVID-19 performance gap?

To ensure we thrive after the crisis, our leaders and their teams continue to take measures to build workforce skills, enhancing technical competencies and creating awareness so employees can still be productive within the company's ecosystem; when operating in the new working environment on site or even if they are working remotely.

What are the lessons learnt during the crisis?

End-to-end business stabilization during a crisis is primarily based on risk mitigation and risk management. Managing risks from all perspectives equally; people, manufacturing, sourcing, financing, cash, customers etc. is critically important.

Don't let the pandemic weaken your company culture! Continue to build trusting work relationships amongst your employees and the company. Employees value openness and transparency during these trying times. Back it up by employee experiences that commit them to be in this for the long-haul.

Finally, to be a 'resilient' organization, be ready to shift from conventional organizational mindsets and operational processes. Proactively plan to navigate through uncertainties, exerting all efforts to be able to transform. Build the attitudes, beliefs, agility, and structures into your DNA and take good care of the heart of your business - your people! This will serve as a solid foundation to win in your journey towards recovery.

■ *By Jayani Perera*

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BEING STRATEGIC WHILE ATTAINING SUCCESS BY OPTIMIZATION

MR. CHRISTOPHER JOSHUA
CO-FOUNDER / MANAGING DIRECTOR
ACCESS ENGINEERING PLC

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



One of the founder Directors of the Access Group of Companies, he was instrumental in heading some of the most successful business units within the Group. A founder shareholder, he was the Joint Managing Director/CEO of the Company. It was under his leadership that Access Engineering achieved significant milestones in growth. He also functions as the Joint Managing Director of the Access Group since 1997. Companies under his purview include Access Realities (Private) Limited, Access Energy (Private) Limited, Access Natural Water (Private) Limited, Eco Friendly Power Developers (Private) Limited, and business units of Access International (Private) Limited.

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.

How did the impact of



“ 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 so many lock downs and curfews imposed ”

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



“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. The fact that irrespective of the place one is located at a given, he or she can join to the meeting thanks to the modern technology”

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*

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BEING ADAPTIVE AND INNOVATIVE

THE KEY TO SUCCEED DURING A CRISIS

MR. M. P. ROSHAN RASSOOL

DIRECTOR/CEO - SOFTLOGIC INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES (PVT) LTD



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

Any organization, whether it's local or international didn't predict such an impact from a pandemic of this nature. So the first challenge we faced with this unpredicted pandemic was keeping the employees and their families safe, while keeping them productive. Because, shutting down the organization for three to four months was not possible for us as an organization. So, first we had to look in to safety integrated productivity.

MR. M. P. ROSHAN RASSOOL IS A DIRECTOR AT SOFTLOGIC HOLDINGS PLC. HE IS ALSO THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER-COMPUTING SYSTEMS AT SOFTLOGIC INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES (PVT) LTD., MEMBER OF CYPRUS INSTITUTE OF MARKETING AND ASSOCIATE MEMBER AT ASSOCIATION OF BUSINESS EXECUTIVES AND ON THE BOARD OF 5 OTHER COMPANIES. BEFORE JOINING SOFTLOGIC, MR. RASSOOL HAS HELD SIGNIFICANT POSITIONS AS; CHAIRMAN AT FEDERATION OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY SRI LANKA, CHAIRMAN AT INFOTEL LANKA SOCIETY LTD. AND PRESIDENT FOR SRI LANKA COMPUTER VENDORS ASSOCIATION.

The second challenge for us arose with our commitment towards the customers. Most of customers who use our equipment were doing necessary services in the country: such as hospitals, military and banking. They were actually working through the pandemic.

Therefore, we had to seriously look into ways to support our customers through the pandemic. We faced the challenge of catering the needs of the market while ensuring the safety of everyone around us.



How did you analyze the issues of the existing situation during the COVID-19?

It was tough in a situation like this; which was unpredicted. Nobody knew what to do, because we have never experienced such a condition before. It was like driving a car in the night. You can only see what you see from the car light. Our employees obviously became our major responsibility, but at the same time we had to make sure that our promise is delivered to the customers uninterrupted. That was one thing that we always focused. As an organization, there are few key aspects that you have to ensure. First of all- when you

make a promise to the market you make sure that you deliver that promise. Because, we cannot break our commitment to the customers.

Second- we have to make sure that our collections are strong enough to have our cash flows, inventories, and sales on point. In fact, during the pandemic we had over 100 million sales, and we collected over 100 million payments. Simply because there were lots of customers who were not prepared for this. Suddenly when the lockdown came in there were lots of gaps in the IT structures of lots of organizations. They were not ready to work from home. So, they had to buy equipment from us. Consequently there were times we actually had

to do deliveries during the lockdown to ensure that the customers are continuing.

As soft logic information technologies, we are a B to B company. Our Unique proposition is that we ensure our customers are always productive. If we are not there at the time that they need us, then we are not doing what we are supposed to do. So in order to do that, we rapidly analyzed the situation. We actually forecasted the impacts of the situation. Therefore, we made sure that we support our customers on time. This has been anyway a two way process. While we support the customers, they also had to support us. When we sent the equipment by due time, they sent us money. So the

relationship between us and the customers got stronger.

How did you harness the power of technology during COVID-19 to cope with the unexpected crisis?

We were anyway a digitally transforming organization. From the group we had a very strong back end. Our ERP systems and documentation systems were going to places even by that time. So we were actually at a big advantage when this happened. Our infra-structure was in place, like most of the sales guys and engineers are on the notch. So there was no necessity for us to be confused about what needs to be done next. Because we were already using technology. Therefore we harnessed technology adaptively during this situation. One was on work collaboration and communication, as it was a key important aspect. Our senior management and the key staff met virtually in every week. Not only that, we harnessed technology to keep in touch with the customers as well.

Did you try out any innovative approaches using modern technology?

From the business perspective, yes we had to be innovative. We provided our customers with innovative and humane solutions. We provided our customers the technology to survive in this pandemic situation. If they had not enough computing power to run, we agreed to provide them computers on the rent basis. Also, we restructured the payment plans to make it easier for the customers. Sometimes we had to go into extent of accepting losses to make sure



that the customers are surviving. We looked at the situation humanely as possible rather than looking at it in a business perspective. So we did not take advantage of the situation which is given. During the Covid, we coming out with these types of approaches actually helped our customers a lot.

Also, I should mention that, during this period we helped many organizations with their remote work place development. Because there were lots of IT companies, BPO companies that started working remotely fulltime. So the solutions we introduced to them such as remote work place, remote management, and also the education solutions really worked well.

Different industries had different impacts. According to my point of view, the education sector which you (NSBM) represent had a huge impact. Because education sector came into a grinding halt with Covid. Over 80% to 90% in the education sector didn't progress during the highly impacted pandemic period.

We received number of calls from schools and universities. The distance learning had to be geared right away with the situation. We had actually done lots of learning distance solutions long before. And we spoke to them about digital education, but then we had no live examples. The pandemic actually geared the distance learning concept. These are actually the positives of Covid. Also, we introduced education solutions like digital class rooms. Student devices, teacher devices, charging cards, content access points, e- boards and lot more. We introduced them to use technology to teach and learn in a collaborative way. Lots of private educational institutes started using zoom and teams. But most students could not afford them with the cost of data and devices. Some schools could not continue, because not every student had the capacity and capability to afford them. So we introduced devices, for less than 50 000 rupees.

Health industry transformation is another aspect which actually



innovated with Covid. We actually have a new paradigm to look at, to see how we can overcome these situations in the future with the technology, experience and knowledge.

What communication methods did you use to communicate with your employees during this period? How did the participants react to your methods of communication?

As a management and business philosophy we work as teams, and every team knows their profit and loss accounts. They have ownership of the way they run the business. So there's nothing cloudy as to where the team was going. The middle managers know what exactly to be done. That was the first good thing of the way that we handled the pandemic influenced situation. We had to ensure that the fundamentals are right. Our

“ DURING THIS PERIOD WE HELPED MANY ORGANIZATIONS WITH THEIR REMOTE WORK PLACE DEVELOPMENT. BECAUSE THERE WERE LOTS OF IT COMPANIES, BPO COMPANIES THAT STARTED WORKING REMOTELY FULLTIME. SO THE SOLUTIONS WE INTRODUCED TO THEM SUCH AS REMOTE WORK PLACE, REMOTE MANAGEMENT, AND ALSO THE EDUCATION SOLUTIONS REALLY WORKED WELL ”

team continued to talk with the customers. They made sure that the customers were happy, the collections and inventories were done.

Our delivery got impacted vastly during this period. Infact we had seven shipments stuck at the port by that time. There were employees who came here to make sure that the shipments and the delivery were cleared. So that was a total team work. They enjoyed the level of leadership that came along with the technology entwined work management. Thus, they were actually able to display that leadership. We used technology to ensure that the business was in operation, even when the team did not report to the office physically.

Was there a performance gap? How did you manage the post and present COVID-19 performance gap?

Good news is we were doing very

good last year. When the lockdown happened in mid of March, we had actually grown by about 40% from the topline, and 50% from the bottom line. But there was an impact because of the exchange rates. Year on year when we plan our work, we look at a 20% year on year growth.

From the main lockdown to as of now we are very profitable, but not the usual 20 % growth. However we are doing a lot better than most of our competitors.

We came out with lots of solutions that are relevant for the future even before Covid. One of them is a concept called Industry 4.0. We are gearing ourselves, as an organization, to be able to give these solutions to Srilanka. Because we see that industry 4 is going to be revolutionized. Asia has a growth model. The world sees Asia as a place for cheap labor. But industry 4 is about automation. Now in the future, when the western world starts automating, we'll lose the edge that we have. So it is time, whatever size our organizations are, small or big, that we start looking for these new technologies, and build new organizations. We see that organizations like Uber, Air BNB, and Pick me, has grown from nothing to where they are today. Hybrid companies which have evolved use technology innovations. So our job as technology specialists is to help them build those organizations. Therefore we are bringing these technologies. Whether it is AI or IOT, there is a lot that we can do. We are actually looking at bringing these to the market.

We are always trying to stay one step ahead .That is how we survived for 27 years successfully, by being ahead of competitors. Beyond the fact that we are a commercial entity, we also have a community obligation. It is that we try to meet with the quality of peoples' life through technology. Technology is accepted now even

“FIRST THING THAT WE LEARNT FROM THIS ENTIRE EXPERIENCE IS, DISEASES HAVE NO BOUNDARIES, LOCALLY OR INTERNATIONALLY, THIS DISEASE IS ONE. EVERYBODY WENT THROUGH IT AT THE SAME TIME. SO HELPING EACH OTHER IS THE KEY, AS AN INDIVIDUAL OR A COMMUNITY THAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF BUSINESS, EVERYBODY TRIES TO LOOK AT THE RISKS. BUT THERE ARE SOME RISKS THAT WE CAN NEVER MITIGATE. EVEN IN SITUATIONS LIKE THIS, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE ORGANIZATIONS ARE ABSOLUTELY AGILE, AND THAT THEY HAVE A FANTASTIC WORKFORCE”

from the vegetable vendor. Options like selling vegetables through whatsapp, they themselves have become companies with the technology. Those people use technology successfully. Technology can be used in every industry. There's so much that is available, whether it is farming, fishing, this will be the future, and we want to play a part in it.

Any comments on your business organization's journey to recovery and reinvention?

First thing that we learnt from this entire experience is, diseases have no boundaries, locally or internationally, this disease is one. Everybody went through it at the same time. So helping each other is the key, as an individual or a community that is the most important thing. From the perspective of business, everybody tries to look at the risks. But there are some risks that we can never mitigate. Even in situations like this, it is important that the organizations are absolutely agile, and that they have a fantastic workforce. A workforce that support and trust the organization.

My team has been absolutely fantastic, we had open discussions as to how we can mitigate this situation. We did not send anybody home. We tried to check how we can improve. There are engineers who repaired the items we sent to them, while being at home. So as a team we tried to come up through good time and bad time.

What are the lessons learned at the pace of crisis?

We are thankful that into some level that we got out of Covid. There are some countries who are still going through it severely. We have to thank the proactive actions taken by the government. But what is more important is thinking of "what we can do more", "In my expertise area, what I can do?/what we can do?". This is what we have to take to the heart. As organizations or individuals, we have to develop this kind of a thought set, so we can fight this together, contributing as we can to stand tall as one.

By *Hasini Gunasekara & Jinandi Chathurya*

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ADVANCEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY A CRUSADE DURING THE PANDEMIC

MR. ROHANA KUMARA
DIRECTOR /CEO
LOLC DEVELOPMENT FINANCE PLC



Can you give us a brief introduction about the business model of your organization?

In 2005, BRAC, an international NGO commenced its operations in Sri Lanka targeting the micro clients in the Tsunami affected areas by providing

access to finance.

In 2013, the company planned to avail their services in mainstream financing which resulted in acquiring a small finance company together with LOLC PLC, a leading financial conglomerate in the country under the name of Brac Lanka Finance PLC. Brac International had the major shareholding and they were involved in the management. This venture was

unique in terms of broader technical capabilities the two partners brought in, LOLC as a leasing specialist and Brac as an internationally renowned Microfinance player. In 2014 Brac International sold its entire stake to LOLC PLC under the Central Bank's consolidation plan making LOLC the major shareholder. In 2018, the Company was rebranded as LOLC Development Finance PLC (LODF).



LODF has developed a unique business model targeting micro and micro SME female borrowers by deploying a capable and committed team of female staff. This female to female approach has helped the entity to understand the client's needs better, thereby being able to reshape and remodel the methodology.

How does your approach to customers stand out in the competitive finance industry?

By the time LOLC acquired Brac in 2014, we had various challenges in MIS, limited product offering, inadequate branch infrastructure and the higher cost of operation which impacted the bottom line adversely. Having recognized these limitations, a new IT platform was introduced, the branch network was revamped, and the product offerings were expanded.

Today, LODF has a portfolio of LKR 17bn with an active customer base of

MR. ROHANA KUMARA IS THE CEO/ DIRECTOR OF BRAC LANKA FINANCE. HE BEGAN HIS CAREER AT A REPUTED BANK IN 1994. HE JOINED LANKA ORIX LEASING COMPANY PLC IN 1998 AND SINCE THEN HAS HELD SEVERAL POSITIONS WITHIN THE LOLC GROUP. DURING THE COURSE OF HIS CAREER, HE HAS OBTAINED EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELDS OF CREDIT, OPERATIONS, DEPOSIT MOBILISATION, MARKETING, BRANCH MANAGEMENT AND MICRO FINANCE. HE SERVED AS CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER OF LOLC MICRO CREDIT LTD FOR TWO YEARS PRIOR TO THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE CURRENT POSITION

170,000.

We have expanded our product portfolio by introducing leasing, micro housing and entrepreneur loans.

Our target clientele is predominantly female, who could take a loan and repay it by engaging in an economic activity. Our role doesn't just end by issuing them a financial facility. We support them to climb up the ladder by providing different product offerings as well as financial and business know-how. We assist them to master what they are good at, for example, it can be from selling carpets, making handicrafts to engaging in dairy farming. We have established our branches in semi-urban and rural areas to provide easy access to our clients located across the island. At LODF, we recruit our staff from the same regions, as they are the ones who would best understand the local setup which enables a smooth service delivery.

We tailor-make some of our solutions targeting the existing good clients who seek for a faster and a better



customer service. The centralized data processing unit and our investments on developing human capital have given us the desired edge over the competition. Those visionary approaches have reinforced our foundation in the competitive finance industry.

Was LOLC using any technological platforms prior to the emergence of COVID-19?

When considering the operational procedure, we were mainly extending our financial support to the low and lower middle-income categories to strengthen their economic situation through small scale businesses. Since most of these clients do not have active bank accounts, the major challenge for us was to bring them in to the formal banking system. We encourage our customers to save for the future and accordingly we have developed a deposit module to cater to this need.

So, it is imperative that our officers visit the clients' doorstep for collections and this practice is required to take place on a monthly basis. At LOLC, the organizational structure is such that we empower our staff with the correct attitude, so they are very much familiar with the customers and their livelihood. This continues to be a huge impetus to our business. However, this monthly collection procedure came with its many practical issues. For example, deploying female staff in the field at certain times was difficult. We even started to face issues like cash robberies. This cumbersome situation led us to initiate a technology driven mechanism to obtain these collections. However, a new problem arose since our customers were not tech-savvy. Therefore, we started to educate them on the usage of novel technologies. Most of our customers did not own smart devices and did not have access to internet or online banking facilities. So, applying a technology driven solution was quite challenging at the initial stage.

“ WE WERE MAINLY EXTENDING OUR FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO THE LOW AND LOWER MIDDLE-INCOME CATEGORIES TO STRENGTHEN THEIR ECONOMIC SITUATION THROUGH SMALL SCALE BUSINESSES. SINCE MOST OF THESE CLIENTS DO NOT HAVE ACTIVE BANK ACCOUNTS, THE MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR US WAS TO BRING THEM IN TO THE FORMAL BANKING SYSTEM. WE ENCOURAGE OUR CUSTOMERS TO SAVE FOR THE FUTURE AND ACCORDINGLY WE HAVE DEVELOPED A DEPOSIT MODULE TO CATER TO THIS NEED. SO, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT OUR OFFICERS VISIT THE CLIENTS' DOORSTEP FOR COLLECTIONS AND THIS PRACTICE IS REQUIRED TO TAKE PLACE ON A MONTHLY BASIS. AT LOLC, THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IS SUCH THAT WE EMPOWER OUR STAFF WITH THE CORRECT ATTITUDE, SO THEY ARE VERY MUCH FAMILIAR WITH THE CUSTOMERS AND THEIR LIVELIHOOD. THIS CONTINUES TO BE A HUGE IMPETUS TO OUR BUSINESS ”



However, we knew that most of our customers were familiar with the mode of mobile reload facility and the easy cash mechanism. Hence, we saw the potential in implementing a system similar to the easy cash application to collect our payments. Thus, after discussing with the telecommunication company, 'Mobitel' we were able to introduce a similar facility and we immediately transferred into the cash transfer system using the mobile phone. We conducted several awareness campaigns to make the users familiar with this cash transfer method and it was very successful.

We have also modified our lending strategy by moving from group loans to individual lending which have helped us to experience a smooth operation during the pandemic situation. A mobile collection solution too has been provided to the field staff thus all our loan officers are now able to transact through mobile devices.

We have our own internet banking app which will facilitate the

transactions digitally for which we are creating awareness and trainings at present.

How have the advancements of technology supported your business, especially during this pandemic period?

The outbreak of COVID-19 has minimized the inter-human

interaction. Since we had already taken the necessary precautions prior to the pandemic, our collection system did not collapse. If we had to maintain the same monthly collection system through staff members, our situation could have gone from bad to worse in no time. However, being able to introduce suitable and timely solutions has been the secret to our success. The pandemic did not impact much on our collection system, because we had properly trained our customers to use technology for payment





of empowerment and post monitoring have strengthened the consumers' payback ability and thus has minimized our financial loss. We have trained our employees to be empathetic and professional when approaching the customers at any given time. These good practices have helped us to survive in this pandemic period.

You are handling foreign branches in some Asian countries. How did they implement technology in this situation?

In addition to the assignment here in Sri Lanka, I am heading LOLC's Investments in Pakistan and Indonesia. There are many distinct cultural and social differences in these countries. Therefore, we have customized our solutions and methodology to suit the context of those individual countries.

While our collection frequency in Indonesia is on a weekly basis, we emphasize on a monthly collection in both Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The average loan amount in Indonesia is around USD 250, where in Sri Lanka it is around USD 750. The data usage is higher in those countries and WhatsApp is the only mode that can be used to contact a person; that is because they keep changing their mobile connections. Therefore, we switched our call center completely to WhatsApp mode and that mechanism supported to maintain a strong line of communication. Finally, I must note that COVID 19 has been a truly challenging situation for it has completely changed the lifestyles of people. So we are keeping our eyes open and adapting ourselves to the new changes to make our business resilient even during severe disasters.

By Archt. Upeksha Hettithanthri & Gayanthi Mendis

procedures. I believe that it was a very good and wise initiative taken by us towards strengthening our capacities in a competitive financial industry.

What are the strategies you applied to withstand the challenges in this distressed situation?

At LOLC, our main strength is our agility to manage the business. We have established best practices focusing on our operational costs to provide the best customer experiences. We have trained our staff and clientele to use technology driven approaches as much as possible. This supported us in maintaining the financial transparency and accuracy. By introducing innovative Technology driven approaches, we are able to know exactly how much one branch or an officer has collected immediately after the collection. We are able to experience this real time information, thanks to the technology usage and a systematic

methodology that we have now implemented in our all our operations. This has noticeably minimized the operational cost plus the room for fraudulent activities.

In addition, during this period, our staff helped each other and they closely monitored the financial and social conditions of the customers. We have developed a system to empower our customers and educate them beyond the financial aid they expect from a financial company. We have linked them with leading industry experts, and we have empowered them through a solid form of knowledge transfer mechanism. Our service has further expanded on educating our customers on how to utilize the loan they have obtained from us effectively. For this task, we have linked our team with leading knowledge providers and we educate our customers on the current trends and demands to utilize and manage the loans in the most effective way. We believe that post monitoring is a practice that is crucial after granting a loan. The processes

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PROSPERING IN THE PANDEMIC WITH STRATEGY: THE TOP 10 COMPANIES

01



ECOMMERCE SECTOR: ECOMMERCE

Amazon.com, Inc. is an American multinational technology company based in Seattle, Washington, which focuses on e-commerce, cloud computing, digital streaming, and artificial intelligence. As world leaders ordered their citizens to stay indoors, Amazon became the emergency port of call for those desperate to stock up on vital household goods; a rush that led the company to temporarily shut its warehouses to “non-essential” products. Though Amazon has remarkable revenues, the costs have also been soaring. Still, the accelerated shift to online shopping and the increased importance of its cloud computing business in the remote work era drove Amazon’s stock to all-time highs.

MICROSOFT SECTOR: TECHNOLOGY

Microsoft Corporation is an American multinational technology company with headquarters in Redmond, Washington. It develops, manufactures, licenses, supports, and sells computer software, consumer electronics, personal computers, and related services. During the pandemic, 75 million people have used the Teams communication app in a single day, which is a huge rise from 20 million users they had in 2019. Microsoft’s shift to the cloud under the leadership of Satya Nadella has also made it well-placed for a world where large numbers of people are working remotely. The Teams communication app has become a way for workers to stay in touch.

02



COVID-19 is not only a global pandemic and public health crisis; it has also severely affected the global economy and financial markets. Significant reductions in income, a rise in unemployment, and disruptions in the transportation, service, and manufacturing industries are among the consequences of the disease mitigation measures that have been implemented in many countries. However, amongst the crisis, there are a few companies that managed to thrive by being innovative, strategic and creative.

03



APPLE SECTOR: TECHNOLOGY

Apple Inc. is an American multinational technology company headquartered in Cupertino, California, that designs, develops, and sells consumer electronics, computer software, and online services. Even though Apple Inc. had to close some of the retail stores, the organization managed to increase their income to \$58.3 billions and was able to be resilient in the face of the pandemic. The resilience was mainly due to the higher rate of online sales done during the pandemic. Moreover, Apple managed to release a new iPhone, iMac and MacBook Air, drawing more users into an ever-expanding ecosystem of wearables and services.

TESLA SECTOR: AUTOMOBILE

Tesla, Inc. is an American electric vehicle and clean energy company based in Palo Alto, California. Tesla's current products include electric cars, battery energy storage from home to grid scale, solar panels and solar roof tiles, as well as other related products and services. Being one of the leading automobile manufacturers, Tesla, being the clear technology leader for batter-powered cars, has managed to survive the pandemic with a great success. For example, the range of Tesla's latest Model S, has become one of the most prominent products, underscoring its technological lead. Tesla is outpacing other competitors as they struggle to retool factories and perfect software. Meanwhile, chief executive Elon Musk is promising to upend the entire model of car ownership with fleets of self-driving robotaxis that would charge by the mile.

04



05



FACEBOOK SECTOR: TECHNOLOGY

Facebook, Inc. is an American technology conglomerate based in Menlo Park, California. It was founded by Mark Zuckerberg, along with his fellow roommates and students at Harvard College. Although Facebook was having a negative impact owing to the pandemic; small business advertisers stopped advertising in Facebook due to their tight budget, it was able to thrive their business by 2.6 billion dollars thanks to the increased number of users more on the platform. Facebook has also worked on improving the engagement levels with the users while increasing its advertising impressions.

ALPHABET INC. SECTOR: TECHNOLOGY

an American multinational conglomerate headquartered in Mountain View, California which was created through a restructuring of Google and became the parent company of Google and several former Google subsidiaries.

Despite the sharp decline in online advertising, YouTube managed to grow its income by 10%. Further, with the economy being strongly challenged, Alphabet Inc. has been showing surprising resilience. It has also been noted that the Google cloud computing platform, Meet video app and Play app store have benefited from the shift of work and entertainment online.

06



PAYPAL HOLDINGS INC. SECTOR: PAYMENTS

PayPal Holdings Inc. is an American company operating an online payments system in majority of countries that supports online money transfers and serves as an electronic alternative to traditional paper methods like checks and money orders. Known to be the pioneer of online payments has found increased relevance in the real-world pandemic with the fresh 4 million users joined during the pandemic, rolling out new capabilities for merchants to handle contactless payments in physical stores. PayPal has facilitated the transfer of more than \$1 billion in loans as part of the US Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program.

07



08



NETFLIX SECTOR: MEDIA

Netflix, Inc. is an American over-the-top content platform and production company headquartered in Los Gatos, California. Netflix was founded in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph in Scotts Valley, California. The emergence of COVID19 has positively influenced Netflix; the number of subscribers for Netflix has increased up to 183 million which is 23% increase compared to the previous year. Netflix has managed to add twice as many subscribers as it forecasted in the first three months of the year, as the largest paid streaming service entertained global lockdown audiences with shows such as Tiger King, La Casa de Papel and Love is Blind.

ADOBE SECTOR: SOFTWARE

Adobe Inc. is an American multinational computer software company. Incorporated in Delaware and headquartered in San Jose, California, it has historically focused upon the creation of multimedia and creativity software products, with a more recent foray into digital marketing software. The number of PDF documents shared using Adobe's software during the pandemic has risen 50% compared with same quarter a year ago. After becoming the first big software company to shift its business to the cloud, switching one-off product sales for more reliable subscription income, Adobe has experienced barely any interruption from the pandemic. It has also been well-positioned for the world of remote work.

09



ROCHE SECTOR: PHARMACEUTICALS & DIANOSTICS

F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG is a Swiss multinational healthcare company that operates worldwide under two divisions: Pharmaceuticals and Diagnostics. Its holding company, Roche Holding AG, has bearer shares listed on the SIX Swiss Exchange. The company headquarters are located in Basel. Roche claims its own antibody test, 100 per cent sensitivity and that they can detect 14 days after a positive PCR test. Roche, which is one of the diagnostics "Big Four", has also benefited from the rollout of its tests for coronavirus, which check for current and recent signs of infection through a process known as PCR and by checking for antibodies.

10



DEFYING THE CHALLENGES AND TRIALS MOVING FORWARD WITH THE DIGITALIZATION

MR. SHANAKA ABEYWICKRAMA

HEAD OF MARKETING AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS
LONDON STOCK EXCHANGE GROUP



Shanaka Abeywickrama is currently performing as the Head of Marketing and Corporate Communications - Sri Lanka and Group Technology at London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG). He is a result-oriented marketing professional with a comprehensive understanding of marketing, brand and channel management, and modern trade strategies. He possesses 8 years experience in the telecommunications industry, 8 years in the FMCG and consumer durables industries, and 4 years in the technology industry. He has experienced in formulating product strategies from the introduction to all stages of the product lifecycle. Mr. Abeywickrama specializes in areas such as marketing and communications, public relations, telecommunication product management, mobile communication terminal device management, modern trade / channel management, blackberry solution implementation, product development, and mobile financial services management and pricing

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

As most organisations have done during this period, our primary concern was the safety of our staff members. We went to significant lengths to ensure each staff

member was safe, and that they are in a secure environment. This was a challenge given that we have 1400 staff members in Sri Lanka, but we were able to implement this quite swiftly given the protocols and procedures were already in place. Our next challenge was to ensure that we could continue to deliver the mission-critical services to ensure the seamless continuity of global capital markets – any outage or

downtime on our end would impact to economies across the world amounting to billions of dollars, so it was imperative that we continue to operate. Managing these two elements successfully in a very turbulent and dynamic environment was by far the biggest challenge that we experienced.

How did you manage to cope with the unexpected crisis of COVID-19 using Technology? Were the measures taken became successful?

At LSEG, we have very strong processes in place to mitigate and manage crises. A strong communication network was fundamental to ensure that we were understanding what employees were going through, whilst also getting input on the challenges they were facing in continuing to deliver on their responsibilities. LSEG shifted to a 100% working-from-home model very early; this was paramount in ensuring that our employees and their families remained safe.

As a global organisation, our staff interact and engage with clients and teams around the world every day, so we had good infrastructure in place to ensure that we were able to continue to interact and engage with colleagues whilst working from home. We also wanted to make sure our teams were comfortable and that they were able to function productively. To that end, we provided all staff with the necessary infrastructure to do so – this included providing tools such as additional laptops, external monitors, ergonomic chairs, desks/workstations, Wi-Fi routers and dongles to all staff.

How did COVID-19 accelerate digital transformation in your workplace?

I would say that Covid-19 necessarily accelerated it – LSEG was moving towards practices such as working-from-home from before the crisis, so we had already begun the technological journey towards shifting to a digital workspace. The crisis necessitated that we jump right in to this fully-digital model, but I expect it was an easier shift for us than





most. We are continuing to work remotely in a 100% digital environment to this day, so having that infrastructure in place was a critical factor in LSEG successfully meeting the challenges brought on by the crisis.

How about the reaction of the employees for the increased use of modern technology?

As I mentioned in my previous response, LSEG was already shifting towards a digital work environment. As part of this process, we had begun to roll-out a series of training programmes preparing employees for this shift. Being a technology-based organisation, our employees are all highly capable technologists and quite familiar with modern digital tools. As with any technology, there certainly were teething issues, but that is where the can-do attitude of the staff makes all the difference. Apart from the direct challenges with technology, there are the obvious peripheral challenges – lack of a proper

workspace and other similar issues when working from home also pose challenges. Again, by providing our teams with the necessary infrastructure, and having highly motivated and adaptable colleagues, we were able to successfully navigate this challenge.

Did you try out any innovations using modern technology? Were they successful?

We did a number of ‘firsts’ during the period – we launched a number of new platforms to global clients, all virtually. Some of these platforms have experienced record breaking traffic as a result of volatility in global financial markets, but the solutions functioned without a hitch – a testament to the adaptability of the team. We are also currently working on many new deliveries, all of which are being analysed, scoped, and worked on remotely/virtually – it is truly amazing to think that technological deployments of this scale, with this much impact on global economies, can be

successfully delivered in a virtual environment through the use of technology.

What are the lessons learnt at the pace of crisis?

Prepare ahead – I cannot stress on this fact enough. At the beginning of the year, I wouldn’t have expected anyone or any organisation to predict the events that unfolded, but this is the nature of crisis – it is often unexpected and necessitate adjustment. LSEG was fortunate enough to navigate through this uncertainty due to having extremely strong processes in place to deal with crises of this nature. I say ‘fortunate’, but as the saying goes ‘you make your own luck’. Being prepared for drastic scenarios, disasters, and other situations of this nature was of paramount importance in allowing us to quickly adapt and continue operations with zero impact to our organisational output or productivity.

By Chalani Oruthotaarachchi & Pramudya Thilakarantne

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HEADING TO SCHOOL AMIDST CHALLENGE ADVANCEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL SECTOR

MR. DAMPIYA WANASINGHE

PRINCIPAL-DHARAMARAJA COLLEGE



The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in at least one positive aspect: a much greater appreciation for the importance of the service of schools. As parents struggle to work with their children at home due to school closures, public recognition of the essential caretaking role that schools play in society has skyrocketed. It is hard to imagine there will be another moment in history when the central role of education in the economic, social and political prosperity and stability of nations is so obvious and well understood by the general population. Decision makers of Sri Lankan educational sector have devised new mechanisms for delivering essential services for the students as soon as the pandemic broke out. Schools immediately got used to the new normal found strategies to ensure the continuation of curriculums.

A prominent educational institute in

the country that successfully navigates the situation is Dharamraja College, Kandy. Over the decades, Dharmajara College has left golden milestones within the legacy of Sri Lankan education, being one of the premier Buddhist schools in the country with a history of more than 125 years founded by Sir Henry Steel Olcott in 1887 as Kandy Buddhist High School. Currently it is one of the most prominent school in the island with a student population of around 4100 students, 192 staff members. It is a mammoth task to ensure the safety, health and education of thousands of students during these challenging times. It was the principal of Dharamaraja College who steered the teachers and students to make the best out of the prevailing circumstances.

Mr. Dampiya Wanasinghe started his career as a teacher of Mathematics & Science after earning his Bachelor's Degree in Bio – Science from University of Peradeniya. After years of teaching experience and being the Additional Director of Education in many zonal and divisional education office he was appointed as the ADE of Provincial Education Department-Kandy. He served as the principal of St. Thomas's College, Matale for ten years. Mr. Wansinghe became the principal of Dharmaraja College, Kandy in 2016 and currently he is providing a remarkable service to the nation by shaping up the future of the next generation. Amidst of his busy schedule, the principal of Dharamaraja College, Mr. Dampiya Wanasinghe, shared his views and experiences on navigating the current situation of the country with the best interest of students at heart.

As a leading educational institute in Sri Lanka what challenges did you encounter during the COVID-19? What was



the impact of COVID-19 on your school?

When the schools were closed on the 13th of March 2020 due to COVID-19, our main challenges was to guarantee the continuation of the syllabus of each subject. We were also concerned with ways to ensure the safety of the students once the schools are re-open.

How did you analyze the issues of the existing situation during the COVID-19?

As we feel that COVID-19 was going to hinder the Teaching -Learning Process seriously, we at once took very effective steps to fight against this pandemic. In order to combat with the situation we firstly convened a meeting with the Board of Management and grade co-ordinators to discuss about the health issues imposed by the Ministry of Health & Ministry of Education. We also thought of the possible solutions which should be taken to mitigate the impact on the teaching -learning process.

What is the role of technology in your school during COVID-19?

I feel that the measures implemented by our school were really successful. Firstly, a system of administration was created. Then official Whatsapp groups for each grade were created in order to make the communication process easier. Later we switched on to Microsoft Teams in collaboration with 'Dharmaraja Navodaya', the Old Boys' Association which consists of professionals of our college with the purpose of empowering Rajans through a professional approach. Each teacher and the student were given a password and a user name. After this set up was put into place it was easy for us to work according to a time table ensuring the continuous teaching – learning process.

How did Covid-19 accelerated digital transformation in your institute?

According to what I feel, the digital



transformation in our college accelerated gradually at the beginning of the lockdown and then considerably faster as the island wide lockdown lasted longer. The teachers became more confident with the new technology as well.

How about the reaction of both the teachers and students for the increased use of modern technology?

I'm proud to say that all the teachers and the students responded to this new teaching methods positively. Due to the technical issues in personal devices and the lack of internet connectivity 25% of the student population of the school couldn't join the classes. However, I believe that over all we received a positive feedback from the student

community towards the use of technology for teaching.

Did you try out any new innovations using modern technology? Were they successful?

We did. After signing an agreement with the Ministry of Education and Microsoft Cooperation, Dharmaraja College was the first ever school in Sri Lanka which deployed Microsoft Teams Platform from year 1-13 for the teaching – learning process. All the facilities regarding the technology were handled through the 'Evis' Institute.

Have you identified new opportunities during this period of crisis?

Of course. Despite being new to the situation, both teachers and students were open to try the new technology. I believe that new generation is equipped and familiar with the new technological methods which made the process easier. So this was a prime opportunity for them to display their talents and improve them. On the other hand teacher who had a very limited knowledge about the new technology, were compelled to use the new methods. They learnt about the new devices with the help of the others and within a very short period, they stood on their own feet and carry out the teaching process. I believe that our ability adapt to new conditions as humans are always rewarding when we consider these scenarios.

What communication methods did you use to

“ *DESPITE BEING NEW TO THE SITUATION, BOTH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WERE OPEN TO TRY THE NEW TECHNOLOGY. I BELIEVE THAT NEW GENERATION IS EQUIPPED AND FAMILIAR WITH THE NEW TECHNOLOGICAL METHODS WHICH MADE THE PROCESS EASIER. SO THIS WAS A PRIME OPPORTUNITY FOR THEM TO DISPLAY THEIR TALENTS AND IMPROVE THEM. ON THE OTHER HAND TEACHER WHO HAD A VERY LIMITED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE NEW TECHNOLOGY, WERE COMPELLED TO USE THE NEW METHODS. THEY LEARNT ABOUT THE NEW DEVICES WITH THE HELP OF THE OTHERS AND WITHIN A VERY SHORT PERIOD, THEY STOOD ON THEIR OWN FEET AND CARRY OUT THE TEACHING PROCESS. I BELIEVE THAT OUR ABILITY ADAPT TO NEW CONDITIONS AS HUMANS ARE ALWAYS REWARDING WHEN WE CONSIDER THESE SCENARIOS* ”

communicate with the teachers and students during this period?

Prior to the pandemic we used to have meetings regularly and I wanted to make sure that we continue along the same path in order to assure the quality. I was able to conduct staff meetings as well meetings with the Old Boys' union via virtual platforms. The responses were positive as the majority were present at all the meetings.

What teaching strategies your school adopted during COVID-19 situation?

Regarding the teaching strategies as mentioned earlier, we could implement them very effectively. We conducted on-line lessons, discussed question papers, organized competitions and video lessons. Each lesson was also observed and evaluated gradually in a manner the students receive constructive feedback. We were even able to conduct Dhamma

programme for vesak using virtual platforms.

Any insights on your education institute as a journey to recovery and reinvention?

At a time where the entire world is working hard to beat Covid-19, I believe we were able to focus on the positives and face the challenges we faced during the time. We gained positive feedback from both parents and students for our efforts to ensure continues learning of our students during these difficult times. I think it provides evidence that we were able to successfully manage the situation despite the numerous difficulties.

What are the lessons learnt at the pace of crisis?

We are thankful to the President, Tri Forces, and Ministry of Health for implementing very successful methods to combat this crisis. It



was our president who insisted on the implementation of online virtual lessons. Accordingly the universities in Sri Lanka and most of the schools tried out this method which became a success.

In my point of view, I think it's our duty to implement new methods during any crisis of the country, for the betterment of the students. Further, I believe that each citizen has a responsibility to contribute to the safety of the country.

By Kasun Dissanayake & Jinandi Chathurya

TECHNOLOGY WAS ALWAYS THERE, TRANSFORMATION HAPPENED IN THE HUMAN MINDSET



MR. HILMY CADER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
MTI CONSULTING

The corona virus while being a health and humanitarian calamity has also triggered a major global business and economic crisis. Drastic changes are happening at global level within business organizations to minimize the negativities the crisis can create. While some organizations use a short-term focus, the smarter organizations are having a long-term approach in facing the crisis.

Extensive Research and MTI's own international experience across 47 countries in 23 years show that how businesses respond to the crisis, is what separates those that 'survive and thrive' from the 'departed'. Mr. Hilmy Cader, the CEO of MTI Consulting, an internationally-networked, boutique management consultancy, shares his thoughts on strategizing the new normal and looking beyond the corona pandemic.

Mr. Hilmy Cader is the CEO of MTI Consulting and under his leadership, MTI, founded in 1997, has carried out assignments in 47 countries across 5 continents, covering a diverse range of industries and organizations. He has developed several strategy models, columnist for regional business publications and a sought-after international speaker, recognized for his ground-zero thinking and strategic reflections. He is a Chartered Marketer and Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (UK), had his executive education at the Harvard Business School (USA) and holds an MBA and EDDBA from the University of Colombo.



What do you identify as the “Chop and Cripple” approach when facing the crisis?

When, everything is going well most organizations do not think about efficiency, for it is easy to hide a lot of inefficiencies within organizations and people really do not challenge them until they hit a crisis. Once they hit a crisis, there are two ways the organizations can react. Most organizations panic and they start reducing the headcount and salaries which is not going to be productive in the long run, although it might save a little bit of money in the short run. This approach affects the long-term productivity of organizations because when you let go of 10% of the organization without any transparency, you are creating a huge doubt in the minds of the remaining 90%. So, it is important to get back and have a more strategic look at it.

Could you give us few insights on MTI’s “Trim and Fit” approach of

facing the crisis?

The previously discussed chop and cripple approach was similar to cutting an organ from the body without knowing the real impact of it.

“ONCE THEY HIT A CRISIS, THERE ARE TWO WAYS THE ORGANIZATIONS CAN REACT. MOST ORGANIZATIONS PANIC AND THEY START CUTTING HEADCOUNT AND CUTTING SALARIES WHICH IS NOT GOING TO BE PRODUCTIVE IN THE LONG RUN ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT SAVE A LITTLE BIT OF MONEY IN THE SHORT RUN. THIS APPROACH AFFECTS THE LONG-TERM PRODUCTIVITY OF ORGANIZATIONS”

We should never say excess people, what there is excess jobs and excess activities inside organizations. First, look at the strategy of the organizations and take off all the slack from the strategy. If COVID is going to be there forever, that is a different story. But it is not going to

be the case. In another few months’ time, we are going to come back because this is not the first crisis the world has faced. If you do not look at it in that way, the problem is you would let good people go. You would have gotten into a shell. It is like an aircraft which is very rusty. Whereas smarter organizations, even though they cannot take off immediately, they are gradually getting ready for it.

What’s your perception towards the Digital Transformation happened in many organizations during this time?

Lot of positivity came out of this and one such is digitalization that happened in industries. It could have happened anyway. One thing the crisis has done is to drive organizations to really look at digital transformation. Not just in customer even within businesses. In consulting we are able to do projects completely online now. We finished a project in Bhutan and 90% of the work was done online



It has to come from leadership level. There has to be conscious efforts to lock in these healthy habits once things turn back to normal.

MTI always had flexible work practices even before COVID-19. What is the role of flexibility and adaptability in a crisis like this, specially relating to practices such as 'work from home'?

Flexibility is very much needed. Ideally it shouldn't be only working from home but it should be working from anywhere. Flexibility means the employee should be able to decide the way of carrying out the work. Especially if you are a knowledge worker, you need to realize that there is nothing auspicious from eight to five. That is the kind of mentality that exists there after the industrial revolution; to get workers to the production floor from sun rise to sunset to get the work done. But today, we are knowledge workers. There is a huge upside from offering flexibility to workers. There is no need to monitor closely what time and where they work, provided they deliver results and there is a system to monitor results.

giving interviews to media, final presentation to the board, the workshops, which one year ago would have been impossible to believe. Not because of the technology but because of the mindset. Technology has always been there. Transformation really happened in the human mindset.

How did COVID-19 accelerated the digital transformation in Sri Lankan organizations?

Digital transformation has been in the agenda for a quite a long time, but the problem was in execution. COVID forced to execute what they were postponing. It has also reinvented the business models; they are challenging their channels. These kinds of changes were also

supported by consumer adoption to these channels. This quick customer adaptation further motivated companies to go into these kinds of reinventions and challenge their existing channels.

What organizations can do during this pandemic to maintain the safety ?

The crisis has done something positive but it can be temporary. It is in the hands of people to lock in the positives of the change, because particularly in a market like Sri Lanka, people have very short-term memory so they can easily go back to old ways of doing things. So, it is in the hands of people to lock in these healthy habits, before getting back to the old ways.

What benefits does organizations receive by offering flexible work practices powered through digitalization to employees?

Organizations need to offer flexibility to employees for two reasons. The first is that, you can get more out of employees. Second, there is a huge workforce, particularly females, who are not in the workforce because we have only one model where it is required to work from 8 to 5.30 every day. That is why even in the top management of

most organizations, female participation is less. Not because they don't like to join the workforce, but the option is either come and work at office or stay at home and manage the household, whereas, if you offer flexibility, you can tap in to quite a lot of talent which benefits the organization in so many ways.

How do you ensure employee commitment while offering flexible work practices?

That transition is not easy. Particularly if your culture is one of extremely high commands and controls, if the jobs are activity centric not deliverable centric, that is something you have to spend a lot of energy to train people and get people ready to work from home, but if people are given deliverables and if there is a proper way of capacity management, it can be done without a major challenge. However, equally important is the culture that you have within the organization.

What are the remedies available to minimize social issues that arise with 'work from home' practices ?

Another important thing is something like working from home needs lot of orientation. Proper lighting, proper seating, and ways to manage disturbances- all that is important. Since now the concept is forced into organizations who were not ready, there are attached social challenges as well. That is where the importance of options comes. If organizations can set up very cost-effective service offices, may be one in Battaramulla, one in Kiribathgoda, then people don't have to come to Colombo office to work, for two three days. They can go to these nearby service offices



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and work. So, these options are available as well.

What are impacts of digitalization in organizations to employee stress levels?

Even before COVID, if looked at the surveys done, two things are noticeably clear. On one hand, technology has improved the material quality of life. But on the other hand, stress levels have significantly gone up, employee engagement levels have significantly come down. Many reasons are there for this, such as, organizations have grown in size, sometimes organizations are only driven by stock market valuations. Half of that is inevitable because the world

that we are living in today is driven by consumption and that brings in a lot of pressure to the organizations and to the employees.

How did you manage employee stress level during this process?

To manage this, you need to look at what creates employee stress. Employees stress arise when the employees are unable to match their demand with supply. Their supply is the amount of time and the focus they can give. The second source of stress is, the constant feeling of inadequacy because of the material world we live in. So, what we are seeing in the corporate world is not a corporate issue but it is a wider social issue. The organizations have a lot to do with providing the necessary support system to help employees to cope with stress, but as individuals you need to have an understanding on what is happening around you as well.

What are your concluding thoughts on new opportunities the crisis has created at national level?

Yes, because of COVID there will be new opportunities, particularly in technology and health care. But we need to really focus on internal improvements to seize these opportunities because all our exports are very basic commodities and all our export income generation is from very basic resources. How do we get out of this? It can be done only if those people get better education, better enlightenment, and improvement of their skills. Otherwise, there will be many opportunities available outside but who is going to get the use of them. So disproportionately you must invest yourself in education and skill development.

By Daupadee Gamage

STAYING STRONG WITHIN CHAOS ACCELERATION OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS

MR. MADU RATNAYAKE
CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER - VIRTUSA



As a leading business organization in Sri Lanka what was the impact of COVID-19 on your business organization?

As you know we serve customers globally; we cater to more than twenty countries around

the world. Many businesses are impacted with COVID 19 such as businesses that are involved in travel and hospitality. Thankfully, a large part of our business is on the banking financial services which have not been impacted as the same way compared to other industries. From our customers perspective, they are observing

the manner we instantaneously accelerate their digital facilities where they can remotely work with their customers without having any contact under this prevailing situation. I think the biggest impact obviously is that everybody had to completely shift their way of working to a new model, as you know we have

moved 25,000 people to work from home. That is a big change for Asian countries because we are not used to it, but in European countries they have been practicing that working from home model. Many Sri Lankans on the contrary do not have all the facilities to achieve that under our infrastructure. For us it was not a big issue because we have been practicing this model since few years by moving our systems to cloud databases where the employees can access the data from anywhere and it was like a natural switch since majority of our work has been done remotely. Hence our business model is a lot more resilient during this crisis and we did not face major issues.

How did you analyze the issues of the existing situation during the COVID-19?

It was really about changing and adopting to the situation. I don't think we can ever come back to where we were before. So it's all about how quickly you can transfer and adopt to the remote and digital working environment. In the meantime we must make sure that your income is consistent, so that it will help to sustain your business while you are recalibrating your business model.

How did you harness the power of technology to cope with the unexpected crisis?

I think with every crisis brings a new set of heroes where some people go to the extent of risking their lives to save another's life. With COVID I think there are three sets of groups that I can consider as heroes. The first group is the medical professionals that act as



MR. MADU RATNAYAKE IS THE CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER AT VIRTUSA CORPORATION. HE IS ALSO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON IT/BPM FOR THE EXPORT DEVELOPMENT BOARD. MR.MADU RATNAYAKE IS A FOUNDER DIRECTOR AND FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE SRI LANKA ASSOCIATION FOR SOFTWARE AND SERVICES COMPANIES (SLASSCOM), THE INDUSTRY BODY FOR IT AND BPM IN SRI LANKA, AND THE FORMER CHAIRMAN OF SARVODAYA FUSION, THE ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT ARM OF SARVODAYA, THE LARGEST NGO IN SRI LANKA.

the front-line heroes. The second group is the people who deliver goods such as food, essentials etc. all the way from farmers to our doorstep. And the third is technological people where they come and save the livelihood by providing facilities to continue your job, reaching your customers and providing all the digital support people need. Thus, technology plays a huge role in this pandemic situation where everything happens online. So, every individual involved in business has now realized the importance of technology to run

the business. What COVID has done is that it accelerated the change and transformation of all business models.

How did COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation in your workplace?

As I mentioned earlier there has been a few initiatives such as moving to cloud, working remotely of which the implementation was accelerated due to COVID. Along with that we have switched to the



mobile as well. Due to the implementation of new platform, the work is so efficient that 90% tasks can be done via the mobile application. It really helped people since they could manage their other work efficiently as well. Also, we took measures to increase the information security; when everything gets digitalized more vulnerabilities can occur. It has been found that during the epidemic cyber-attacks have been increased significantly since many people are online and are using digitalized platforms to run their day to day lives.

What was the reaction of the employees towards the increased use of technology?

I think we've received more positive feedbacks and comments from employees and we had used these models thankfully even prior to this pandemic situation. Hence people were able to adopt very quickly for these technological strategies. For example, most of the people started

“ AS I MENTIONED EARLIER, MOVING TO CLOUD & WORKING REMOTELY WAS ACCELERATED DUE TO THE PANDEMIC. ALONG WITH THAT WE HAVE SWITCHED TO THE MOBILE AS WELL. THOUGH YOU MAY HAVE A MACHINE AT HOME, STILL YOU MIGHT HAVE TO GO AND HELP SOMEBODY ELSE SINCE WE ALL ARE UNDER LOCKDOWN PERIOD SO YOU CANNOT BE STUCK WITH A MACHINE. DUE TO THAT THE NEW PLATFORM IS SO EFFICIENT WHERE 90% TASKS CAN BE DONE VIA THE MOBILE APPLICATION ”

using MS Teams with the emergence of this pandemic but we started using Teams 3 years ago. Thanks to those features and facilities anybody could work from anywhere, where you can chat, use whiteboards and conduct meetings and do whatever the collaboration you want to do in a productive manner. Our mantra has been working from home or work from anywhere with these features and facilities and our team members and employees are utilizing the online platforms quite efficiently.

Did you try any new innovative strategies using modern technology? Were they successful?

We wanted to initiate completely paperless work. During this pandemic situation we did not stop hiring people and due to that reason, we had to go for paperless process with e- signatures etc. And the other thing was we developed AI bots for tech supports. There are a bunch of bots we were able to



deploy during this period and one of the bots we deployed was for billing process; it has taken care of more than 76% of work by itself with a high user satisfaction rate. If I brief again, going paperless, increasing information security and deploying AI bots are the things we mainly focused during this time period.

What communication methods did you use to communicate with your employees during this period? How did the participants react to your methods of communication?

I think it's very important to improve process of communication during this situation because majority of people at home don't have anybody to talk to. Therefore, we had to boost the communication a lot. In fact, we increased monthly meetings with our team to stay connected with them and to identify their ideas and

challenges. When considering about technologies we used MS Teams a lot for voice and video conferencing. Also, we used secured WhatsApp groups to chat with our members. In early days we had only emails to communicate and that was not very successful because people are not able to collaborate more in those platforms. But nowadays with the evolving new technological platforms, people can interact more with each other and do collaborative work efficiently specially with modern social media platforms. We have acquired two companies in this period fully remotely with the help of those technologies and also, we worked with them 100% via MS Teams and electronic platforms. So the digitalization process was very helpful and very effective during this prevailing situation.

Was there a performance gap? How did you manage the post and present

COVID-19 performance gap?

we observed a huge increase in productivity immediately after COVID because people are at home not going anywhere and they have more time to focus on their work. I think most people in the technological space have the tools and the ability to work with those technologies. Hence I don't see a huge gap in performance. We had noticed that the office atmosphere was a bit inefficient, however, when working remotely was initiated, everything gets arranged well; meetings are properly planned, and nobody disturbs you when you are working. These changes increased the productivity. There are some persistent issues such as internet connection issues, power outages etc. which result in decreasing the productivity. So, as I mentioned there are both positives and challenges as well.

What are the lessons learnt at the pace of crisis?

I think the pandemic has been strongly influential specially in the case of digital acceleration. The second factor is the increased awareness about the damage done to the environment; when people are away from the environment the air quality is improved so each and every business needs to be environment friendly because we all already noticed the strong impact. The final lesson is the self-realization of the significance of one's personal wellbeing. I think it's a good awakening for most of the people and now they are a lot more concerned about these factors because they have identified the importance.

■ *By Pramudya Thilakaratne*

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REVAMPING THE CONVENTIONS TAKING EDUCATION TO THE VIRTUAL WORLD

MR. KASUN GUNARATNE

PRINCIPAL-MAHINDA RAJAPAKSHA COLLEGE



Life with Covid -19 has now become the new normal. From the homemaker to the busy professional, life has changed dramatically for everyone. The impact of the pandemic has rippled through almost every aspect of human life. Professionals and corporates have

learned their way around running their businesses and work online, homemakers have got used to having everyone at home for the most part of the day, academics have figured out how to create and disseminate knowledge via online platforms, and everyone else has either already used to or getting used to this new normal. Here we

present the thoughts of our closest neighbor on how Covid-19 has impacted their life.

"Covid-19 is a blessing in disguise" says Mr. Kasun Gunarathna- The Principal of Mahinda Rajapaksha College, Homagama sharing his thoughts on life with Covid-19. Mr.Gunarathne has served the school for five years as the Head.



Being the closest neighbor, Mr. Gunarathne is no stranger to NSBM Green University and being in the same sector we were interested in knowing how Covid-19 impacted the lives of staff, students and their operations.

How do you think this pandemic situation impacted the whole education sector?

To begin with we did not have any prior experience on this kind of a situation whatsoever. Conventional education system was limited to the class room where there was a direct face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the student. Hence, the education system required a significant amount of time and effort to adapt to this novel experience.

When talking about how the system adapted, I think it was mainly due to the need that surfaced - the need was very strong at that point in time. The need was to keep the system

“ WE ALREADY HAD A LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (LMS) AND AN E-LIBRARY IN PLACE WHICH CAME IN HANDY DURING THIS SITUATION. THESE WERE NOT VERY ACTIVE BEFORE. BUT WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION WE ARE MAKING THE BEST USE OF THOSE PLATFORMS FOR EDUCATION PURPOSES. WE ALSO HAD TO MAKE CERTAIN FACILITIES AVAILABLE AND IN EXECUTING THIS PROCESS, COORDINATION BETWEEN US AND PARENTS WAS VITAL ”

going and to keep the students engaged in productive learning activities. In Sri Lanka, we already had the technical know-how, software and tools to bring this change but we were a bit backward

in embracing these technologies prior to Covid-19. Hence, I could say that this pandemic came out as a blessing in disguise for the whole system to force us embrace the new technology and a novel approach to education.

As a leading school in Sri Lanka, what was your approach to facing this situation?

We already had a learning management system (LMS) and an E-Library in place which turned out to be useful during this situation. These tools were not very active before. But with the current situation we are making the best use of those platforms for education purpose. We also had to make certain facilities available and in executing this process, the coordination between us and parents was vital. Therefore, we made use of social media applications such as WhatsApp and Viber to maintain a proper network of such coordination.



As a starting point for this new e-learning approach we created a formal structure for the lecture delivery first. That is, we made sure that a proper introduction was given to the students through the social media groups using a recorded voice clip regarding the lesson, the content to be covered and also we made it a practice to send certain take home assignments via WhatsApp groups. So, through this initial approach, we were able to keep the teacher-student relationship intact to a greater extent. From what we observed, this approach was found to be very effective.

Gradually we shifted to the existing LMS as the next step to make all the learning material available to students. We also made use of video conferencing applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to conduct online live lectures as the next step. However, this stage was a bit challenging for some students due to the lack of infrastructure such as mobile data issues and absence of required devices. Thus we devised a plan to facilitate such students with the help of our alumni and parents who could afford or lend devices to them. Currently we are operating as a 'virtual school' during the usual school hours with the participation of around 6,800 students with the aid of Microsoft Teams platform. From the latest investigation we carried out regarding the effectiveness of our initiatives, we noted that our efforts have been fruitful.

Gradually we shifted to the existing LMS as the next step to make all the learning material available to students.

We also made use of video conferencing applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to conduct online live lectures as the next step. However, this stage was a bit challenging for

As you said before this was pandemic situation was a whole new experience to us, so in that light how would you describe the attitudinal preparedness of your school?

I think this is the most important question. In terms of attitude, we had to dwell with a number of challenges with regard to students and their families. With the pandemic and the consequent island-wide curfew, people got the chance to spend more time at home. This had both positive and negative outcomes for certain families. The negatives being the constant conflicts at home due to frequent interactions and stress. Fortunately, we were able to come up with our own initiatives to reduce the negative impact of such incidents on the student and resort such problems to a greater extent. One such program was the home gardening competition. We also

wanted our students to make use of our blog to showcase their creative thoughts and sharpen their writing skills by encouraging them to write books. We also took initiatives to improve reading by sharing useful e-books via WhatsApp groups.

How would you describe the attitudinal preparedness of your students and the staff in terms of using technology?

We were already familiar with the technology, especially majority of our staff were well equipped in terms of handling the technology. We had conducted several SBTDs prior to this unprecedented situation. So, our staff were used to conducting lectures in a smart classroom. The transition from a physical classroom to a digital classroom was a challenging task but not a very difficult one since the staff were very supportive and cooperative in the process.

We had also conducted training and development programs on smart teaching and smart learning with the help of experienced South Korean Professionals to all the staff members, and I could say this initiative has become a significant advantage to all the staff members across all ages and maturities during this pandemic situation.

Were there significant performance gaps in teaching online compared to a face-to-face learning atmosphere?

We can't deny the fact that there was no gap, in fact there were. Managing the physical classroom is much different to managing a digital classroom, because the teacher has less or no control over the environment of their student. But

what we understood as a school was, if the teacher or the facilitator knows what he or she is doing and the technicalities of the online platform, then classroom management will not be a difficult task. So, from both ends -the student and the teacher- technical know-how and familiarity with the tools were vital aspects in providing an effective learning experience.

Also, we understood that the effectiveness of online teaching varies depending on certain factors of the students. For instance, it would be difficult to manage a class of students in grade 8 or 9 via an online platform owing to their behavioral and thinking patterns. So, on a separate note, I would say there are numerous benefits of having a teacher physically present in a classroom rather than online. In that light, online teaching and use of technology could be used as a last resort in this kind of situations instead of using it as a complete substitute for physical classroom education.

We also had a proper monitoring system in place where the management of the school including myself monitored the ongoing lectures where proper feedback was provided to the teachers for further improvement. Hence, the performance gap was kept at bay to a greater extent.

With the use of technology for the most part of their day, we could observe several positives and negatives in terms of student behavior. What are your thoughts on that?

What I believe is that technology should be closely and abundantly available to all students. Instead of focusing on restricting the use of technology by them for entertainment, we should focus on

increasing the use of technology for educational activities so that they would have to make use of it for education for the majority of their time. We could also look into the possibility of replacing the heavy textbooks with e-books. Policies should be formulated to create a smart learner in a smart environment. For this we should increase the use of technology in education to a much higher level. This revolutionary change will not be a walk in the park, it requires some fundamental changes in the attitudes of several generations.

What are your final thoughts on the future of education with technology?

The generation of students in front of us right now belongs to the alpha generation. This alpha generation is quite different from all the other generations - they would not believe anything without real and verifiable facts and technology is at their fingertips. So, it is obvious that we cannot use the conventional means of teaching and learning now. The teacher should be a guide and a facilitator who has up to date knowledge of the content they are sharing.

With the technological advancement that we are experiencing today, a person is exposed to technology while they are in their mother's womb. So, there is obviously no future for education without technology. At the same time what we should understand as Sri Lankans is that we have a deep-rooted value system where the role of a teacher or a lecturer goes beyond the role of a mere professional. So, we have to think of a way to blend the technology with our education system while keeping true to our cultural values.

By Narmada Balasuriya & Dinusha Sathsarani

PERSEVERANCE THROUGH CALAMITY

LESSONS LEARNT AT THE PACE OF CRISIS

MR. NILUSH COORAY
HEAD OF OPERATIONS - KEELLS SUPERMARKETS



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

Most businesses were prepared to some extent to handle an emergency situation, however the complications brought about in 2020 due to the pandemic were

unpredictable. There were many challenges we faced. The abrupt changes in day-to-day life due to curfew imposed or lifted, created havoc for our stores and supply chains, the shifts in customer buying patterns were unpredictable due to panic buying. We had to take sudden decisions to shift from a brick and mortar operations to a completely online operation. It was also challenging to retain team

members and ensure their safety during a time like this, yet, it was achievable. The disruptions caused to supply chains due to factory closedowns, lack of manpower, lack of permission for vehicles to run during curfew was also a very big challenge.

How did you analyze the issues of the existing situation during the COVID-19?

We had very little time to understand the impact during the first lockdown, but we broadly looked at how each of our stakeholders are affected and what steps we needed to take to mitigate the impact. For example the supply chains are disrupted with lack of curfew passes, factory closures and sudden curfew and customers were buying 2-3 times more than usually do. So we had to take some decisions on the run and plan for stocks so customers had access to what they needed.



MR. NILUSH COORAY IS A VICE PRESIDENT OF THE JOHN KEELLS GROUP AND THE HEAD OF OPERATIONS BEING IN CHARGE OF THE 116 SUPERMARKETS ACROSS THE ISLAND. HE HAS BEEN WITH THE JOHN KEELLS GROUP SINCE 2003. HE WAS THE HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES OF THE RETAIL SECTOR, BEFORE BEING APPOINTED AS THE HEAD OF OPERATIONS IN JULY 2011. HE WAS ALSO EMPLOYED AT THE CARSONS GROUP OF COMPANIES FOR FOUR YEARS IN THE HUMAN RESOURCES FUNCTION.

HE WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN BRINGING MANY INNOVATIVE PROJECTS THAT RESULTED IN SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS TO THE SUPERMARKET OPERATIONS.

What is the role of technology in your organization during COVID-19?

Technology, in my view, was the biggest enabler for us during COVID-19. We had robust work from home methods with the right technology so, the business can continue to run the chain of supermarkets. We also enabled regular team briefings and increased communications to ensure the team's awareness. Technology enabled us to provide customers with access to their day-to-day needs. Technology and social media enabled us to keep customers updated on dynamic changes taking place and important announcements too. However, there are instances technology cannot replace human intervention at the moment. Whilst orders can be placed remotely, we still do need teams to process and deliver the orders.

How did COVID-19 accelerate digital transformation in your workplace?

We do agree with the fact that COVID-19 has indeed accelerated

the digital transformation of business bringing about 1 years' worth of change within a 3-6-month horizon. The biggest shift was how fast customers adopted digital means when necessitated. The priority and pace for digital related work has no doubt changed within our business and many others as it is evident.

How about the reaction of the employees for the increased use of modern technology?

One of our core values is "Innovation". We have always embraced technology and been driving change within the business using technology. Therefore, adoption was not an issue for us. Some of the challenges were adopted to suit a volatile situation compared to business as usual.



Did you try out any innovations using modern technology? Were they successful?

Yes, we have introduced new services and features using digital to improve the customer experience with the brand. For instance, we provided a facility to pay utility bills online, improved and revamped the website to cater to customers who wish to order from the comfort of their home, and we have enhanced our customer support service with the right technology to handle customer queries. Further, we

improved our digital and social communication channels sharing important information and inspiration for customers during these challenging times.

What are the new business opportunities and threats that you identified during this period of crisis? What actions did you take in implementing your business ideas?

Since consumer behavior, lifestyles and macro-economic conditions were changing in

unforeseen ways there were many circumstances that we as a business had to be prepared for. One of the biggest challenges were ensuring our 4,500+ employees were aware of the safety processes, were safe and we had processes in place to handle any contingencies. On the other hand, the import ban and control price revisions impact the availability of products. However, the growth and adoption of online was an opportunity that we built on by revamping our website to what it is today. We noted that customer spending power was reducing, so we took the opportunity to provide customers with a timely proposition by making sure our own label products were priced 10% lower than comparable brands giving customers the right price and quality.

What communication methods did you use to communicate with your employees during this period? How did the participants react to your methods of communication?

Communication was identified as a key component to handle a crisis and to enable remote working. Whilst our Head Office teams worked remotely our store teams were still working at the respective outlets. So, we had to have 2 different ways to communicate with 2 different groups. If I brief out some of the things we rolled out, we had bi-weekly employee gatherings virtually to disseminate key information and updates, and to celebrate success. We had launched an employee newsletter to keep the team engaged. We communicated via emails any key information and voice recordings



and videos where necessary. We also increased the frequency of team meetings, tracked attendance and conducted regular survey to understand employee sentiments

What workforce strategies your organization adopted during COVID-19 situation?

Well, we adopted many strategies. We had timely and frequent communication. We established new policies and processes on safety and awareness of them. We also implemented business continuity plans in case of an emergency. We ensured that all employees had access to the resources they needed to work from and went through sentiment checks through regular surveys

What are the lessons learnt at the pace of crisis?

We learnt many lessons and



identified many requirements. For example, we identified the sentiments and needs of employees and became quick in responding them whilst communicating the decisions made. There can be never enough communication with stakeholders too. Likewise, we identified how important effective communication was. We saw the need for quick decision making with the information at hand and iterative improvements. The need

to understand consumer sentiments during such a volatile period and basing strategies on this, the need for right meetings, meeting practices and frequency to ensure work gets done, and the need for the brand to play a role in the communities to get through this pandemic together were also special requirements we identified.

By Lakruwani Wimalaratna & Chalani Oruthotaarachchi



DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE PANDEMIC

MR. OSHADA SENANAYAKE

DIRECTOR GENERAL - TELECOMMUNICATIONS REGULATORY COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA

What was the impact on technology and telecommunication as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Sri Lanka?

There was an overnight change in home fronts, business fronts and school fronts with the declaration of a lockdown state of the country and

MR. OSHADA SENANAYAKE A VISIONARY BUSINESS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROFESSIONAL WITH OVER 15+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN CORPORATE MANAGEMENT, STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION, BUSINESS ANALYSIS, PROCESS OPTIMIZATION, SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY MANAGEMENT WITH EXPOSURE IN WORKING ACROSS MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND COUNTRIES (INCLUDING SRI LANKA, US AND UK). HE IS CURRENTLY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF TRCSL-TELECOMMUNICATIONS REGULATORY COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA.

people were compelled to move to online platforms in order to continue with their daily lifestyles.

There was an overnight spike in the use of mobile and other computing devices and telecommunication as majority companies declared work from home and educational institutes introduced online teaching. On the other hand, with the increase in usage of telecommunication, the risks of threats to cyber security and cybercrimes increased.

Therefore, we can see that there was an overnight digital transformation in Sri Lanka due to COVID-19. With this unplanned digital transformation as the TRCSL our main concerns were on how to monitor the increased usage of devices, to protect the users from cybercrimes, to facilitate the demand for telecommunication, to remove infrastructural barriers in accessing telecommunication and, to provide concessions to the users who were going through difficult times due to COVID-19.

As the main facilitator of telecommunication what were the actions taken by the TRCSL during this digital transformation amidst the COVID-19 lockdown period?

The actions taken by the TRCSL in a short span of time to ensure continuous connectivity of Sri Lankans scattered island wide includes provision of e-learning solutions to school children (eg: E- Thakshalawa), introduction of special work from home and study from home connection packages at concessionary rates in collaboration with leading telecommunication service,



“The TRCSL managed to respond COVID-19 successfully mainly due to the digital transformation that took place within the organization since the staff of TRCSL started to work online from 19th March 2020, immediately after the impose of lockdown in Sri Lanka”

network mapping and improvement of telecommunication infrastructure and not barring connections due to non-payment during the lockdown period.

On the other hand, the TRCSL staff was dedicated to ensure that the contact fronts of the government COVID-19 response units and COVID-19 fighters were

kept intact without any technical disruptions to smoothen the COVID-19 response of the government.

The TRCSL managed to respond COVID-19 successfully mainly due to the digital transformation that took place within the organization since the staff of TRCSL started to work online from 19th March 2020 which is immediately since the impose of lockdown status in Sri Lanka.

A sudden digital transformation within an organization is generally resisted by the employees. What was the reaction of the staff members of TRCSL with regard to this digital transformation?

The TRCSL was on the verge of digitalization since December 2019 and the COVID-19 accelerated the process of digital transformation.

The staff members reacted to the digital transformation that took place within the organization in a positive note and adopted quickly to the changes that occurred around them. The enthusiasm and the cohesion of the employees were notably high.

Despite some staff members not having mobile devices and accessibility to telecommunication facilities at the initial stages of online working, the TRCSL managed to get all employees on board through provision of infrastructure.

The dedication, commitment and the enthusiasm of the staff members with regard to the digital transformation resulted in an increase in productivity which led to the TRCSL manage the digital transformation successfully exceeding expectations.



What are the lessons that the TRCSL learnt from COVID -19 as an organization?

Digitalization improves cohesion between members of the organization, telecommuting improves productivity (productivity does not depend on physical presence), changes should be welcomed and accepted and, the importance of work-life balance are important key lessons learnt by TRCSL during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

What are your key insights of COVID-19 that would help to boost the telecommunication industry?

The TRCSL identified changes that should be done in the industry to further boost the industry.

Firstly, the telecommunication service providers should facilitate the mobile agility of the users which improves the competitiveness of the

“ Digitalization improves cohesion between members of the organization, telecommuting improves productivity (productivity does not depend on physical presence), changes should be welcome and acknowledged and, the importance of work-life balance are important key lessons learnt during the COVID-19 lockdown period ”

service providers.

Secondly, the laws regarding telecommunication and cyber-crimes should be updated continuously.

What are your key insights of COVID-19 that would help to boost the Sri Lankan economy?

Firstly, I believe that COVID-19 should not be used as an excuse but as an opportunity to implement changes by individuals, organization, the government and the entire

community.

Secondly, the business models of enterprises should be revisited and amended to address the modern needs in the world and to move ahead with the technological developments that are being taken place.

The government organizations should make this an opportunity to embrace change and transform themselves for the betterment of everyone.

By Tharani Sooriyaarachchi and Hasini Gunasekera

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ADAPTATION OF E-LEARNING IN RETROSPECT

PROFESSOR K. P. HEWAGAMAGE

DIRECTOR - THE UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO
SCHOOL OF COMPUTING (UCSC)

Professor K. P. Hewagamage obtained his B.Sc. in Computer Science (First Class Honors) from the University of Colombo and a Ph.D. in Information Engineering from Hiroshima University in Japan. Among the awards of academic excellence that he had received, Professor Mohan Award for the outstanding computer science graduate 1994, the Best Paper award at IEEE International Conference of Visual Languages in 1999, and the award for the excellence in research by the University of Colombo in 2004, 2006 and 2012, are his outstanding achievements. He has more than 100 publications in International peer reviewed journals and conference proceedings. He is a senior member of IEEE,

a member of ACM, and an academic advocate of ISACA. He was a chair of IEEE Computer Society Chapter in Sri Lanka. Dr. K. P. Hewagamage is a Professor in Computer Science at the University of Colombo School of Computing (UCSC) and the Head of Department of Information Systems Engineering, of UCSC. He was the former coordinator of e-Learning Centre of UCSC. He is a visiting researcher of Stockholm University, Sweden and Shimane University, Japan. Prof. K P Hewagamage is the Director of the University of Colombo School of Computing (UCSC) which is a higher educational institute affiliated to the University of Colombo which provides Computer Science, Information Systems and Information and Communication Technology education in Sri Lanka.



As a leading government university in Sri Lanka what challenges did you encounter during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We encountered several challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The biggest challenge was to continue with the smooth flow of our academic programmes and other related activities without any disruption. The only alternative was to use online educational practices as much as possible.

As we have been using the online learning environment with

“ WE ENCOUNTERED SEVERAL CHALLENGES WITH THE EMERGENCE OF COVID-19. THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WAS TO CONTINUE WITH THE SMOOTH FLOW OF OUR ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES AND OTHER RELATED ACTIVITIES WITHOUT ANY DISRUPTION. THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE WAS TO USE ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ”

blended learning practices, the use of online media was not a

new thing when implementing most of our activities in the university.

But the problem the students had to face, was to find access to the internet from their own devices. Some students didn't have adequate resources to access the online environment whereas some others didn't have the possibility of reaching their own computers, laptops and mobile phones as they had left them in their boarding places and had no way to access them due to the lockdown in the COVID-19 period.

We use Learning Management System (LMS) for learning and teaching at the moment. However, when it comes to assessment, very limited practices are used through the LMS. In the case of continuous assessments, assessing through LMS has been possible to some extent. So, we had a major challenge in conducting final semester exams. Although the technology is available, we cannot use it for the final assessment online because of our heterogeneous student community as they do not have adequate resources, particularly to access the internet.

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

In order to communicate with all the students, the availability of smart phones to access the online environment was used. Students being a part of the Computing Faculty are familiar with the technology in communication. In addition to that, we were able to get the support of the University Grants Commission (UGC) using the Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN network) to get a free data access to our LMS through Telecommunications and Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRC). So as a result, we were able to start the academic activities just one month after the lockdown.

Were the measures taken successful?

I'm very happy to say that we were able to manage the situation and keep the activities moving forward amidst a lot of concerns. Even though the university is closed physically,



“STUDENTS BEING A PART OF THE COMPUTING FACULTY ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE TECHNOLOGY IN COMMUNICATION. IN ADDITION TO THAT, WE WERE ABLE TO GET THE SUPPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION (UGC) USING THE LANKA EDUCATION AND RESEARCH NETWORK (LEARN NETWORK) TO GET A FREE DATA ACCESS TO OUR LMS THROUGH TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND REGULATORY COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA (TRC)”

academic activities are taking place because of the virtual environment. However, we still have many challenges to overcome in providing education through online media.

Did COVID-19 accelerate digital transformation in your university?

Yes, I believe so. COVID-19 is a social crisis which provides a good

opportunity for digital transformation despite having lots of issues and challenges. The biggest challenge is to change the mindset of the people to a new digital culture. It has given us an opportunity to definitely practice things in our education, administration, communication, and all other aspects in the university system via technology because there is no other alternative.

Things are happening through



the online environment now, for example, sending messages and submitting reports etc.

Non-academic and administrative people who were not familiar with the online setting are now engaged in using the online facility as much as possible to interact and work from home. So digital transformation is on the way. The COVID-19 has given us an opportunity to practice a lot of things that we wanted to do.

We are using electronic communication now. We use the e-signature approach whenever we want to sign some important documents. It's not just signing, attaching and e-mailing. When sensitive documents are signed out and sent, we use a secure standard operating procedure for communication. So, all these things could be tracked, printed and kept, even for audit purposes if required.

Did you try any innovative teaching strategies using modern

technology? Were they successful?

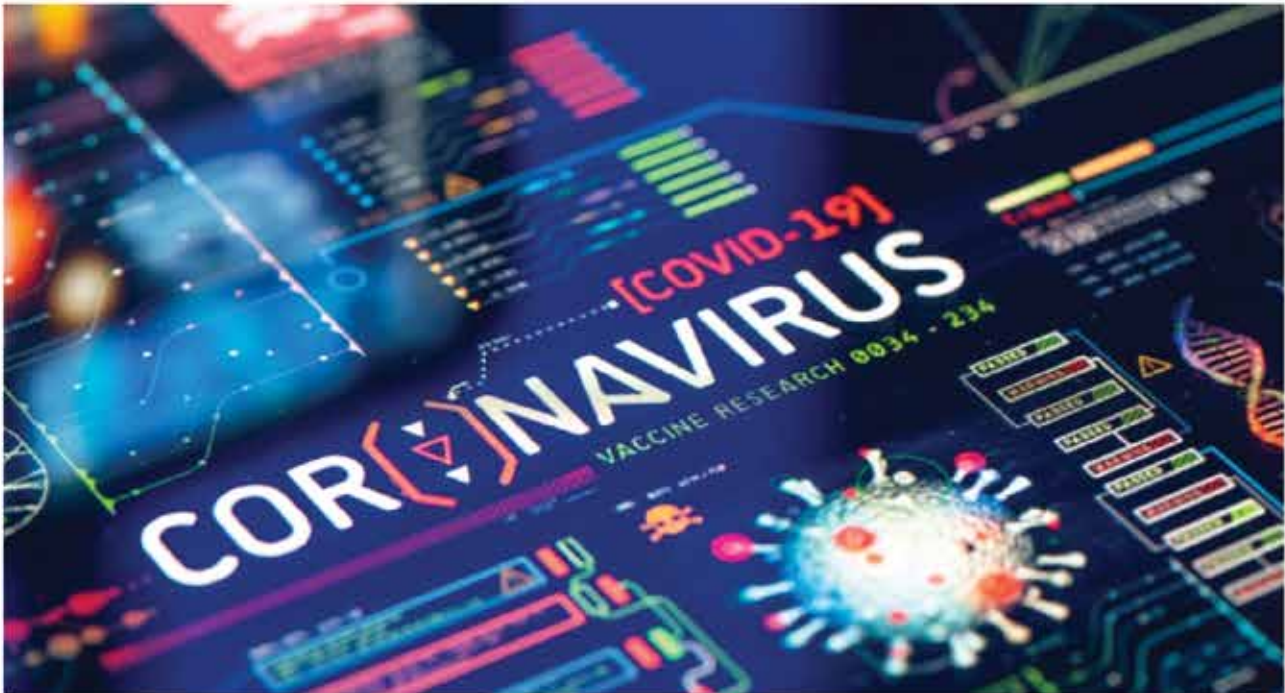
Yes of course. We had the LMS in UCSC during the last 16 years and I remember that it was first established in 2004. We used Moodle 1.19 in the first version I experimented. But, during this period, we were able to try out lots of video conferencing tools such as Zoom, the Google Classroom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams to promote the innovative teaching practices in the university and it was successful.

UCSC conducts an annual International Conference called ICTer, advances in ICT for emerging regions which is usually conducted in our auditorium. During the COVID-19 period, we initially decided to conduct it using a blended approach. But finally, we were forced to do the entire conference online using Microsoft Teams. In addition to that, we were able to webcast all the events, including the Keynote address, other presentations and everything through YouTube

giving a very good opportunity for anybody to watch the whole conference. Even right now the people have access to it; therefore, it has become an open educational event. I can mention that it was a success.

Was there any significant resistance from the staff for the increased use of modern technology?

Well, since we have a Faculty of Computing, there wasn't any big opposition as such. But I don't want to say that everybody accepted the situation. Different people have different opinions, perceptions, and different interpretations about the situation. Some teachers think this online teaching, learning and assessment is not a good way to practice and they are not very efficient compared to a face-to-face scenario. In spite of some resistance from some of the employees, we were able to convince them to use the modern



technology at work. I noticed a positive change in non-academic staff also in communicating through the e-mail, Whatsapp groups, and different channels which is a good thing.

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

E-mail communication is the most popular method of communication within the faculty. There are different email groups that I have created such as academic staff, supporting staff, administrative staff and non-academic staff to convey different messages to specific groups when needed. In addition to that, I have asked all divisions to maintain a WhatsApp group to have consistent communication.

Could you please comment on the strategies that you

adopted to handle the academic, non-academic and supporting staffs of UCSC during COVID-19 period?

Well, the most important strategy used was to establish strong communication methods among the members of the staff. Having dialogue is very important. Academic staff members were asked to conduct the lectures online and communicate those activities to their respective heads or coordinators while non-academic staff members who worked from home were requested to submit a daily report of work online.

When someone was sick, or was going through certain issues, we encouraged people to keep others informed through dialogue. In such instances we have managed to provide financial aids and have helped them along with the support given by our welfare association.

I gathered a lot of information using dialogue about the social

problems of all those who were involved in carrying out their supporting roles in the administration of UCSC. I remember one example where we helped a cleaning staff member of UCSC financially. Although cleaning staff is not a part of the UCSC staff, we understand their financial difficulties. So, during that period we were able to collect some money from the other staff because of this continuous dialogue that we had.

How did you make use of the opportunities that came your way as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak?

We had to take necessary steps to move to the online mode of teaching, learning and assessing. We managed to do online teaching and learning without any difficulty but in terms of assessment, we still have a lot of things to process. student-centered learning could be easily practiced if the lecturers could record the

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE HARDLY THINK IN THIS KIND OF A CATASTROPHIC SITUATION IS THE RISK MANAGEMENT. PEOPLE HARDLY BELIEVE THAT THIS KIND OF SITUATION WILL ARISE. BUT WHAT IS SURPRISING IS THAT PEOPLE DIDN'T PREPARE FOR IT UNTIL THE LAST MOMENT, KNOWING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN OTHER COUNTRIES AND ITS POSSIBILITY OF REACHING US. SO, WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THAT WE NEED TO PLAN WHAT PREVENTIVE MEASURES COULD BE TAKEN IN ADVANCE AND MINIMIZE THE RISK OF FAILURE. IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO ASSESS RISK IN HANDLING THIS KIND OF A PROBLEM TO IDENTIFY THE ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF MOVING FORWARD ”

lectures in advance, upload the material to LMS and ask the students to watch them and then discuss the relevant issues.

When it comes to organizing official meetings I, used Zoom to conduct meetings and I am happy to say that only few meetings were canceled. In addition to that, we had meetings late in the evening which was not possible even during the normal office hours.

However, if the current situation persists, we will have to see whether it is possible to have an online examination at least for some students who have adequate facilities and we are also planning to provide the facility for students who don't have adequate facilities in some regional universities to do the exams.

Would you like to make any comments on the journey to recovery and reinvention?

We'll have to understand the concept of a new normal. In a new normal situation, we really need to have a better understanding about the individual practices, protecting the personnel health as well as the society. So, everyone has an

important serious responsibility. If one person makes a mistake, the whole organization will have a problem because he/she will be isolated and locked down and therefore it is very important that everyone needs to understand their role and act accordingly. I personally believe that if we can practice these things, we will have more opportunities in the coming year. Although COVID is a threat, it has also given us an opportunity for reinvention.

What are the lessons learnt from this pandemic?

The most important thing people hardly think in this crisis is the risk management. People hardly believe that this kind of situation will arise. But what is surprising is that people didn't prepare for it until the last moment, knowing the spread of COVID in other countries and its possibility of reaching us. So, what is important is that we need to plan what preventive measures could be taken in advance and minimize the risk of failure. It is also important to assess risk in handling this kind of a problem to identify the alternative ways of moving forward.

Now, in many places, people find it easy to use the technology in the

teaching and learning but not in the assessment. The main issue is if online assessment is promoted, there is a strong chance at the occurrence of malpractices. If there is no validity in the form of assessment, that will badly affect the reputation of the organization. But if we really want to use the technology in the future for assessment, it is very important to have a new pedagogy, a new pedagogy for teaching, learning and assessment. We cannot expect that all the problems will be solved immediately as the entire process is time consuming. And if we can really practice this student-centered learning as much as possible, then we can come up with a methodology for assessment. So, pedagogy for the assessment depends on the pedagogy for

Now, for example, if a student has written the answer and submitted from home, you can conduct a VIVA to verify the credibility of the student performance easily. Introducing such teaching, learning and assessment pedagogies are required to bring in credibility to the online evaluation system in the future.

■ By Dileepa Jayamana


LIVE AND LET LIVE




This has always been the motto of his life. Being a role model to thousands of young leaders at the university, Prof. Chaminda Rathnayake plays a salient role as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in optimizing NSBM Green University services. Prof. Rathnayake is an avid motivator who has become an inspiration for the community both in and outside the university. His knowledge in Management and IT and his vast experience in the Sri Lankan higher education sector in both academic and operational aspects have made him a mastermind behind NSBM Green University's success story. In this interview with us, he reflects on the recent past where the Covid-19 pandemic hit our nation so hard and shares their success story with us and their lessons.

PROF. CHAMINDA
RATHNAYAKE

DEPUTY VICE CHANCELLOR
NSBM GREEN UNIVERSITY



NSBM Green University, academic staff and the students are familiar with all the online platforms such as the Learning Management Systems (LMS). Therefore, shifting from physical education to a virtual platform and getting accustomed to it was not a challenge. But as a university, we too are looking forward to moving back to physical lectures as soon as the situation eases



How has Covid-19 pandemic affected the higher education system in the country?

There are two aspects to consider how the Covid-19 pandemic affected higher education. First, the impact we all can see is on the surface. It is visible that the pandemic has changed the teaching and learning experience and mode. Almost all the schools and universities were compelled to adopt online-based platforms. All-natural interactions between students and the teachers are mostly seized at the moment, at least in urban and vulnerable areas. At one stage, all these institutions were closed down. Parents brought down their children who were studying overseas to the motherland. So, it is evident that the pandemic has affected the higher education sector as with all the other sectors.

The other aspect is how it has affected the students' knowledge levels, especially on the cognitive side. This

aspect, I think, would take time to measure as it is impossible or too early to predict the impact of this large-scale social issue in the short term.

Has the pandemic shifted the education to entirely a virtual platform?

Well, it has shifted education to a distance learning mode at least for a limited period. In many parts of the country, it was internet-based learning, but even postal or paper-based remote strategies were used in some schools. We should remember that turning into a virtual platform didn't happen naturally; it was a forced change due to the pandemic. Most education system stakeholders are not trained for this, yet since they have no option, they had to adapt. So, we can say that things have moved to virtual based learning but will move back once the situation becomes normal. Some educational institutions might use the positive side of them and continue

new business models.

In the case of NSBM Green University, academic staff and the students are familiar with all the online platforms such as the Learning Management Systems (LMS). Therefore, shifting from physical education to a virtual platform and getting accustomed to it was not a challenge. But as a university, we too are looking forward to moving back to physical lectures as soon as the situation eases. We thoroughly believe education is a much more comprehensive experience than sharing knowledge via the internet remotely.

Do we, as a country, have the required infrastructure and the administrative support for this change? Are we ready for this change?

As I mentioned, this system is an adaptation that takes place as an option. Hence, we need to look at all



these developments and changes in a more positive manner. We need to remember that we are a developing country, and the distribution of the resources such as digital infrastructure on the island varies. There's a considerable gap in the technical knowledge of teaching staff and students. But most of them coped with the change by learning the tools and using whatever devices they have. These processors took place without training as gatherings were not authorized. All the network providers came up with data packages to make learning affordable. Companies like Microsoft provided free platforms such as MS Teams to schools at the request of the Ministry.

There may be limitations, but I think we as a country supported each other well in the crisis and adopted to change.

As a leading university in Sri Lanka, what challenges are you facing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The first and the foremost challenge is, we couldn't allow the students into the campus. Although we have already used the online resources to make the teaching-learning process efficient, we didn't depend entirely on it before the pandemic. We wanted

the students to come to the university and engage in academic and extra-curricular activities. As academics, we want to interact with them converting them systematically to globally competitive graduates. This online phase supports us to proceed with the routine of education, but it is always a challenge to make real team players, leaders, or personalities the industry needs.

The other challenge we faced was the process of student enrollment. In normal condition, parents and students visit the university and see our facilities and work process to get an idea about their children's future higher education environment. This time we had to give online base counselling and virtual tours instead. The entire registration process, including the payment, was done online.

How do you cope with the unexpected crisis of COVID-19 using Technology? Were the measures taken successful?

In terms of new enrollments and academic work, we reached our targets successfully. We enrolled a new batch, conducted an online inauguration. Further, lectures are being conducted and no any

interruption to the assignments and exams. All these were done on online platforms. So, we are within the schedule with no drawbacks. Both parties, the lecturers and the students, rapidly adjusted themselves to the new normal. Thus, although the crisis arose unexpectedly, we, as a university, reached our pursuit successfully.

How did COVID-19 accelerate digital transformation in your university?

The entire process of the university was transformed into a virtual nature. We had all these systems in place, and we utilized them to the maximum capacity. We added new software such as Turnitin to check plagiarism in online exams and assignments. The staff members were provided with all the required facilities to work from home and inside the university.

Our website, student portal, and University Management Information System (UMIS) were updated whenever necessary to support the total virtual higher education experience. We even invested in the latest surveillance system, which we installed at the gate to measure the visitors' body temperatures automatically.



What communication methods do you use to communicate with your students during this period? How do they react to your methods of communication?

Currently, we are using communication methods such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle, and N-Learn.

One important thing to mention here is that we surveyed the online learning experience of NSBM students. The findings revealed that students have already been accustomed to this virtual platform and are satisfied with their learning. However, it showed that the majority prefer to come to the university because of the conducive learning environment they have at the university.

Are the students using technology effectively for their studies? Could all the students (backbenchers / slow learners) be facilitated in this approach?

So far, we haven't received any major complaints regarding the digital infrastructure. In case anyone was unable to attend lectures, the video recording of the lecture is also uploaded in LMS. And in most of the classes, we see students are using interactive features of these apps such as chats to communicate with the

lecturer effectively. Overall, it has been positive, but we all can presume that the effectiveness is questionable in some practical subjects such as engineering. We have shifted theoretical topics to earlier parts of the semester and added simulators to address this.

Did you try out any innovations using modern technology? Were they successful?

When the country partially opened, we used the hybrid model of teaching, which involves both virtual and physical platforms. The students who are willing to attend lectures in the physical classroom may do so while those who are unable to come due to this pandemic situation are allowed to join the class online. Likewise, we conducted this hybrid model, which was very new. This model was very successful, and the students also responded to it positively.

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

The pandemic and subsequent digital transformation have opened up us to see the possibility of conducting online courses for some selected parts, mainly the postgraduate studies. I think we can think of a limited number of programmes that we may introduce



in this regard. If such an initiative takes place, I can mention it as an opportunity. The pandemic has also made the parents think about higher education options in Sri Lanka rather than in other countries. And NSBM is a university with international facilities. It will be a good opportunity for parents to send their children to us and groom them with Sri Lankan values with the international university experience.

I don't see any imminent major threat. We need to move on as the situation eases. But before the epidemic, we brought down foreign flying faculty to Sri Lanka to deliver final year lectures of NSBM's foreign degrees. With the pandemic, we couldn't materialize it and don't see a breakthrough in the immediate future, even if the university opens. I deem this as a very negative outcome.

What are the lessons learnt at the pace of crisis?

The best lesson I learned was to be ready. We should be able to foresee the risks, and it's better to have alternatives.

By Piyumi Wickramasinghe & Sachinthana Manthirathna

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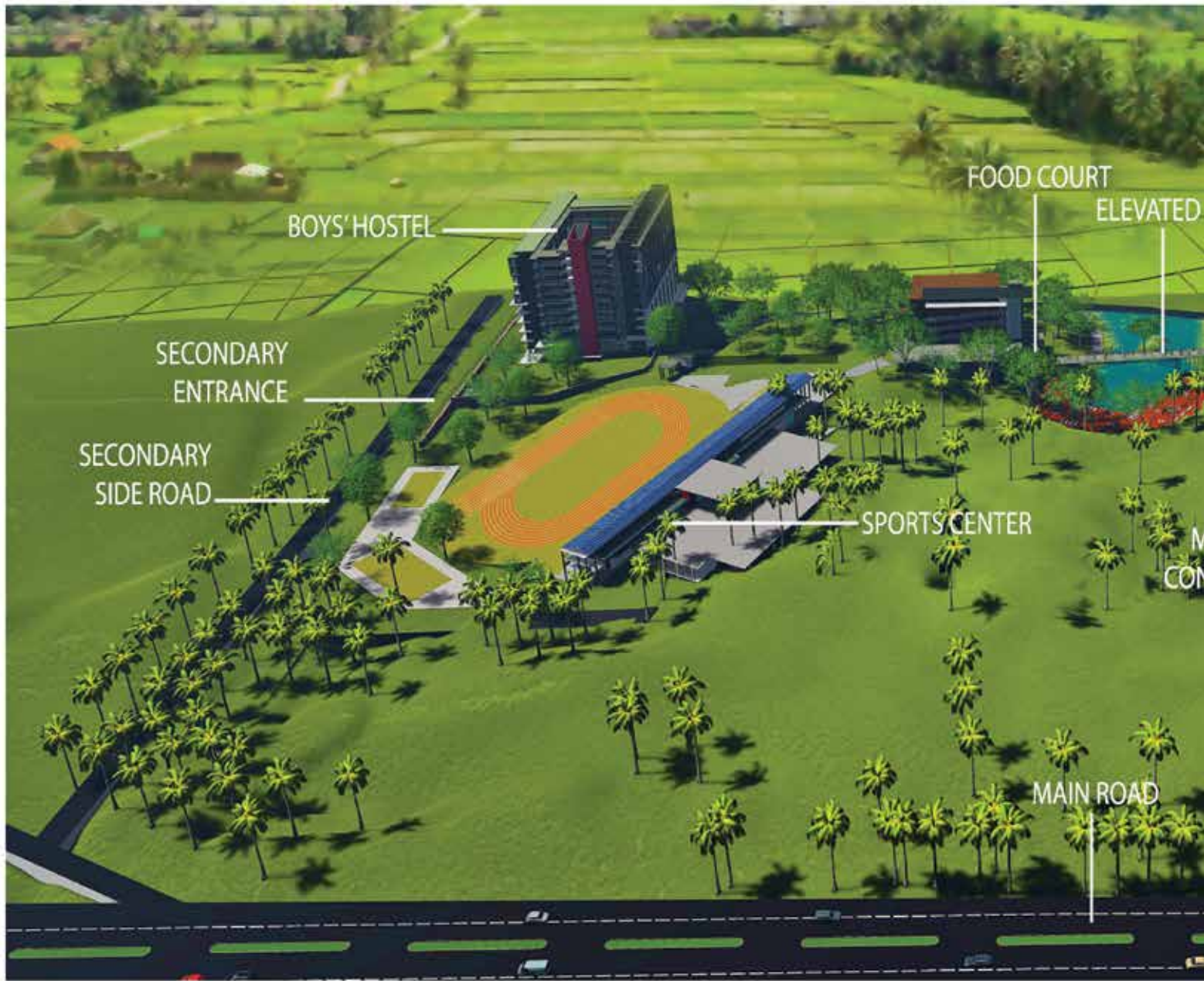
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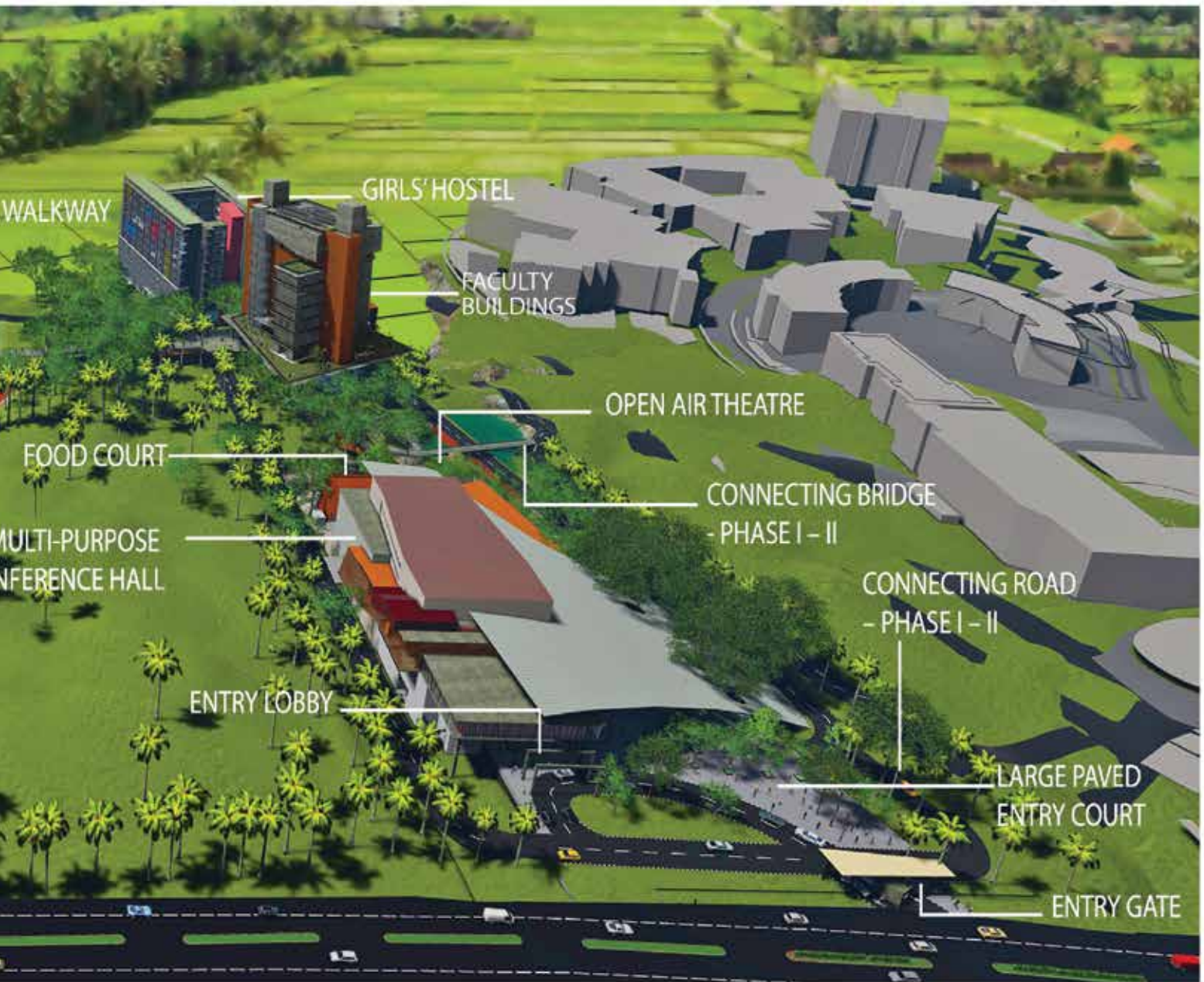


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