



WORK FROM HOME MYTH OR REALITY?

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected several businesses around the world and Mauritius was not impervious to the consequences of the lockdown. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some businesses companies found it difficult to continue their business operations or to provide their services. The country is known to be very conservative and has always relied on office attendance and paperwork. However, the pandemic proved that the “old-fashioned” ways of doing business may not survive in this new world order.

In today's issue of Let's talk about, we will answer the question of whether work from home is a myth or a reality. Since the Chambers of Urmila Boolell SC is still favouring work from home for its employees, we have decided to interview Mr Willem van Rensburg, the Director of Operations, who will answer some of our questions regarding the work from home approach.

How was Work from Home implemented in the Chambers?

Work from Home (“WFH”) was implemented out of necessity because of the lockdown. Nobody expected this, and therefore it was hard at first. But, along with the rest of the world, we have adapted quickly. Nowadays technology that was not well known before COVID-19 is widely used internationally.

Why is the Chambers still keeping its employees on a Work from Home Schedule?

We have decided to maintain WFH after the lockdown to maintain social distancing which was a requirement under the law. Later on we kept a limited WFH schedule for our team to stay acquainted with the WFH in the event of another lockdown. Moreover, I have also noticed that it has increased productivity substantially if done correctly and monitored properly.



Is Work from Home really working? Or is it just a myth?

Work from home, in line with international practice, is a reality for our business. There are three considerations to make it a reality:

- Firstly, the employee's work must not be of such a nature that office attendance is a necessity, for instance, admin and support personnel.
- Secondly, their home environment must be conducive to WFH, for instance connectivity and privacy.
- Thirdly, a lot will depend on the person themselves. Some people are just not organised enough to work outside the office environment, while others are more productive when they are outside the hustle and bustle of the office.

Moreover, an employee must also know when it is best to attend office on a particular day, even if it is not on their WFH schedule. In short, WFH works if the person is at least as productive, but preferably more so, than they would have been at the office.

How are schedules arranged?

Teamwork is very important, and care is taken not to isolate people from one another. For this reason, the schedule is compiled in such a way that the same people are not always working together, but that everyone gets a turn to work with everyone else. Outside factors like teamwork on specific projects, court appearances, meetings and so on are also factored in.

Are there any benefits you saw in terms of business operations?

Yes! There is better productivity especially where the nature of the work requires concentration. Psychologically the relief of not sitting in traffic once or twice a week increases productivity in itself. But when working from home, personnel are also required to work longer hours, for instance from 8 instead of 9.



What are the drawbacks (if any)?

Drawbacks occur when people lack self-discipline and use the WFH as an “off” day. This is a general drawback which is easily eliminated by proper monitoring. Also, sometimes work requires that everyone is there, but the WFH is conditional on the fact that it will not apply whenever office attendance is required, and this is easily managed.

What about employee performance? Better or worse?

The employees currently on the WFH programme are all more productive on this system. So, I can say that their performance is “better” than it used to be prior to the implementation of the flexible work from home schedule.

What if an employee cannot meet the expected performance threshold?

WFH is not a right and people who cannot perform without direct supervision are simply removed from the schedule and placed back on full-time office attendance.

How are you managing attendance and travel allowances?

Attendance is managed on a monthly roster, circulated in advance.

What about sick leaves? Are there fewer sick leaves and more productivity?

It’s too soon to measure the impact that WFH has on sick leave in general, but we hope that the program will have a positive influence as a stress reliever.



How do you monitor the employees?

By measuring if deadlines are met, and they also report on what they will be doing from home. There is a lot of pressure to complete work and therefore they will fall behind if they neglect to work on their WFH days. The whole idea is to give them the opportunity to focus better and spend more time so that they can be more productive. Since I am also involved in much of the work, we also have regular conversations during the day on the progress regarding the work-related matters.

How did your clients react to this avantgarde method of work?

Everybody was in the same position at first, and in that sense, it was not an avantgarde method. Everyone had to use it out of necessity. The circumstances that forced this on us applied across the globe and now Zoom and other platforms are commonly used.

Are your clients favouring e-meetings or they still prefer the traditional in-office meetings?

In Mauritius, it is a mix but many clients still prefer traditional in-office meetings over e-meetings. However, some of our international clients who were previously calling us are now having a preference for zoom meetings. I personally prefer e-meetings as well as they are more personal.

Do you think the Chambers is COVID-proof enough in the event of a second lockdown?

Yes, I believe we are COVID-proof enough. As mentioned earlier, our employees are by now used to the WFH system and it will not be difficult for them to “adapt” again for a transition between work from office to work from home. Moreover, our systems are now in place so the transition will be swift and fluid.



Did the Chambers achieve anything during the Lockdown?

We were amongst the first law firms to have resumed business continuity on the first working day during the lockdown. Our valued partners and clients were informed immediately of the new arrangements and the phone lines were re-directed. Our meetings were held online, and clients were also able to reach us on WhatsApp.

Moreover, the Chambers has also been the first law firm on the island to deliver Webinars on the then legal developments that happened during the lockdown. Furthermore, we were also updating our social media subscribers on the latest developments.

Based on our web analytics, we have reached a milestone in terms of subscription and audience and I personally wish to thank all our subscribers for their support.

Final Thoughts

In the event of the re-opening of borders, there is the uncertainty of whether the island will remain COVID-19 free and there is always the possibility of a second lockdown. We have adequate time to prepare for that and though a second wave may be disastrous for the economy, businesses should not be caught unawares again. Those who are geared for it should have minimal business interruption and will reap the benefits of having a good WFH system in place.

Interview of Willem Jansen Van Rensburg



Willem is the Director of Operations at the Chambers of Urmila Boolell SC. He co-ordinates the legal team whilst also complementing the commercial offering given his strategic, solutions driven approach to the client offering for the Chambers.

Willem has gathered vast experience exceeding 15 years as Head of his own law firm based in South Africa. Willem is a qualified attorney, notary and conveyancer in South Africa, and holds a degree in Commercial Law as well as LLB from the University of Pretoria.