

## COVID-19: A LESSON IN BUSINESS AGILITY TSEBO CATERING SOLUTIONS



Food plays a vital role in health and wellbeing, so when businesses shut down their canteens, restaurants and coffee shops as a result of lockdown restrictions, Wynand Louw, CEO Catering for the Tsebo Solutions Group and his team applied innovation, commitment and communication to ensure business continuity.

From the Bubonic plague to Ebola, pandemics have had massive historical impact on how societies function. COVID-19 is no different and as corporates attempt to stabilise business in the aftershock of the first and second waves of infection, we are only now getting a glimpse of the more permanent changes this pandemic will bring about.

While many companies and individuals who were able to work and connect digitally adapted quickly to work-from-home, it has raised questions around the function of the physical workplace in a post-pandemic future.

What is the role of the office in terms of creating a business culture and offering a place of belonging? How does it enhance productivity? In terms of catering, how do we continue to share and enjoy coffee and meals while social distancing? And, with an increased emphasis on safety how do we ensure that best practice around preparation and presentation of food is transparent?

These are all questions that weigh on the mind of Wynand Louw, CEO Catering for the Tsebo Solutions Group, as the multinational organisation considers the protocols and practicality of returning its workforce to a more 'normalised' work environment.

On the one hand, the office provides a space that supports an organisation's culture by allowing people to come together to collaborate and build relationships. It fosters mentorship, learning, development and creativity and provides a productive environment for staff to work in. Eating and or having a coffee together in canteens or pause areas and celebrating at work functions is an important and enjoyable part of workplace culture. In many cases these environments also foster innovative free thinking and discussion.

On the other hand, lockdown has proved that it is possible to create collaborative and productive online environments that reduce commute time and offer staff increased flexibility to work around their personal and family obligations. Many businesses have, however, experienced the downside of not collaborating in an office environment

"The one thing we have done from the start is to be pedantic about staying up to date with changing Government Regulations. How and at what rate we return to work is very much dictated by these Regulations," Louw says.

The task now is to manage productivity across multiple operations and determine how best to schedule teams at home and in the office.

## INCREASED FLEXIBILITY

According to Louw, it's a matter of adopting a different organisational approach that allows more flexibility.

The likelihood of staff becoming infected with the coronavirus or having to self-isolate after coming into contact with an infected person is a reality that Louw and his team have managed by training up a pool of replacement staff who can be reallocated if an employee becomes unavailable. The same applies to staff with co-morbidities which place them at high risk and should therefore rather work from home. Social distancing at meetings can be achieved by establishing protocols, such as who needs to be physically present and who can attend online.

"As organisations seek to maintain productivity and reduce illness among staff, we have to ensure that the office is a safe environment through regular cleaning and disinfecting. Communal kitchen areas need to be managed and food and beverages should be individually packaged to prevent cross contamination," says Louw.

## COMMUNICATION

Key to creating an anxiety-free environment is regular communication around the measures the organisation is taking to minimise the impact and potential spread of COVID-19. In fact, good communication has been essential to ensuring continuity across all aspects of the business, both internally and externally.

"At Tsebo we hold multiple 'communication tea sessions' among small groups of staff to maintain and enhance the culture, but also to ensure that they are getting the correct messaging around best global practises to keep themselves and their loved ones healthy and safe," says Louw.

As CEO of a sector that was immediately and dramatically affected by closures as a result of the Level 5 lockdown, Louw and his team had to be quick on their feet to mitigate losses and ensure business continuity. This included establishing open communication with clients as well as with the suppliers of goods and services to ensure best practices were shared and implemented.

"We found that many of our practises were adopted by clients, and we communicated to find better solutions for them. All of which has actually strengthened our partnerships and relationships – we are all in this together," says Louw.

## INNOVATION

Aside from providing nourishment to maintain physical health, food can have a positive impact on mental health. Enjoying a tasty and well-presented meal is one of life's simple pleasures and 'breaking bread' together has long been a symbol of togetherness and community.

So, at a time when many companies closed their canteens and postponed live events as a result of lockdown restrictions, the Tsebo Catering division had to flex its creative muscle to ensure everyone could still enjoy good food that was safely prepared with love whether they were at home, in hospital or at a formal place of work.

Among these were the rapid implementation of an App ordering and delivery service; the provision of take-home meals; as well as home replacement meals. The latter can be delivered to individual customers and team members at our client sites.

They even created It's Boxed and Pack'd – a pre-packed meal function solution for companies to enjoy a socially distanced meal at meetings and events.

While Covid-19 has wreaked havoc across businesses' landscapes and our economy, Louw believes it has also provided a valuable lesson in agility and the need to work together.

"Let's develop, share and learn from each other in collaboration," he says. "Our chefs, marketing team, dietitians, health and safety specialists and operations teams have done ground-breaking research and developed world-class solutions to keep our customers nourished and uplift our economy. We have learnt a lot in the past 12 months and I believe we will continue to learn if we stay open to it."

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