



# VOICE

Keeping Abreast with  
Human Resource Management



## Feature: Interview with Mr. Benoit Bardouille

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We thank you for your feedback, encouragement and support on Issue #3.

This week, we feature an interview with Mr. Benoit Bardouille, Chief Executive Officer of the Dominica Air and Sea Ports Authority (DASPA).

### Qu: Let us start off with an introduction of DASPA.

DASPA was formed in January 2007 by an Act of Parliament. It incorporates all the services of the air and seaports in Dominica. It administers the Woodbridge Bay Port, Cabrits Cruise Ship Berth in Portsmouth, Longhouse Port in Portsmouth, Ferry Terminal and Cruise Ship Berth in Roseau, Anse-de-Mai Port, Canefield Airport and the Douglas Charles Airport. There is a staff complement of 427.

### Qu: How has COVID-19 affected the operations of DASPA?

It has not affected our operation as much, except for the incoming passenger traffic at the airports and the Roseau Ferry Terminal that came to a standstill. Cargo operations at the air and seaports are fully functional. We are part of the local International Health Committee in Dominica, formed under the International Health Regulation in 2005. Early planning for COVID-19 started with the Ministry of Health along with other members of the

Committee. We were concerned about the protection of employees and citizens and reviewed early, the screening controls and procedures for persons entering and exiting the Ports. We dealt with H1N1 and SARS in the past, and installed certain systems, including hand sanitiser dispensers at the ports. We had some of the inventory left in stock and were able to start the sanitising process early. Passengers coming in were required to sanitise their hands before going to Immigration and Customs.

We started in March when PAHO, asked the Caribbean States to step up controls. We started screening in the last week in March. That helped as we were able to determine who were the people coming into Dominica during that week. In our screening process we were only screening Dominicans and utilized more skilful ways of doing the screening.

Throughout the curfew and lockdowns, we were not affected in the movement of cargo. We have been affected with respect to the movement of passengers. The Roseau Ferry Terminal was closed on March 23, 2020 and airline operations also stopped in March, when the government took the decision to close the airport to visitors. Our visitors' arrival has been close to zero except for the Cubans and other medical personnel arriving at the airport.

We have been affected in terms of passenger volume and with no passengers, the airlines have pulled back as well. We lost services of Seaborne, LIAT, Air Antilles, WinAir and InterCaribbean and all the ferry services from Guadeloupe and Martinique

Our cargo and export to some extent continued. Farmers were allowed to export produce to the northern islands. We continued shipping arrangements with our normal shipping container vessels that came in on a regular basis. We continued working during the curfews and lockdowns. The Law made special arrangements for DASPA and we could use our IDs to get to and from the Port for work.

### Qu: How has DASPA contributed in the fight against COVID-19?

While there may be a scramble for food in some countries, this did not happen in Dominica. Food, special services, critical machinery, medical supplies, FedEx and DHL have been coming in without any difficulty. ***We are here serving as the backbone, ensuring things can continue, while the doctors and nurses are upfront in the battle, so to speak. We are providing them with the resources they require by keeping the ports open. We are like the "wind beneath their wings."***

The local populace settled in when they realised that the Ports were still functioning. The anxiety and the fear that people would not get critical medicines and supplies went away very quickly as FedEx, DHL and the other airlines with Cargo were still coming in. People could still send supplies to their families which alleviated the dependence on government. This reduced the burden overall on government and its establishments which could focus on providing support to persons and agencies in need.

We did not operate along the normal business lines. We operated from 8am – 4pm which allowed persons, when they left work at 2pm, to come to the Port to clear their goods before the curfew at 6pm.

**Qu: - What has been the financial impact of COVID-19 on DASPA?**

The financial impact is severe. Provisions had to be made for the protection of our staff and action was taken, including social distancing. We had to immediately consider alternating teams, taking into account a staff complement of 427. We created teams to ensure we alternated them and gave staff days off. We had to look internally to ensure we could sustain operations. Some people got two days off. We changed the shifts of security to ensure 24 hours operation. DASPA had to bear the costs for these changes.

Staff with underlying issues were sent home for 14 days and some were advised to take vacation leave at the end of the 14 days. We bore the costs for the first 14 days. This was for the protection of our staff and this was worthwhile.

There was a major impact with the absence of calls made by the cruise lines. As a result, 30 cruise vessels that were scheduled from March – April did not materialize due to the pandemic. This resulted in a direct loss from the cruise sector of \$140,000 to \$150,000. This does not include the indirect revenue lost and the multiplier effect it had. Putting the indirect revenue at US \$50 per person and with 30 ships which did not arrive with an average of 3,000 persons, if one does the

math, the loss is US \$4.5 Million plus the multiplier effect of that amount.

In addition, the ferry service was not operational for two (2) months and counting, from Mid-March. One of the things we have seen is a cutback in the products people import - the personal barrels and boxes. The difficulty is not an issue of clearing the goods in Dominica. Instead, the difficulty is in getting them sent which has not been possible due to the lockdown and other things at the other end. Families have not been able to move. Importers have reduced orders of slow-moving goods, focusing on the fast-moving goods. We have seen a reduction in container volumes, compared to the previous two (2) years. Revenue has declined significantly.

We have not calculated all the numbers; we are working on them. However, we have suffered a significant loss in revenue. While operations were reduced, we still had to maintain the staff. Fixed costs are the same, but revenue has declined. This has impacted us negatively. We are committed to continuously operate the airport even if persons are not travelling. The security service cannot abandon the airport. The air traffic controllers have to work. There are cargo, medical supplies and people leaving on emergency flights.

**Qu: How do you see COVID-19 changing the operations at DASPA**

The comfort zone for us is if and when our doors are opened, there will be serious issues of how we screen passengers. Most of our concern is with asymptomatic persons. We may take their temperature and there may be no signs, and the results may be negative, but they may later test positive.

Given the type of diseases we are seeing, even with countries which had declared themselves COVID-19 free, they are now reporting new cases; St. Vincent and St. Lucia come to mind. One has to be so careful how one goes forward. The strategies have to be well thought out going forward with strict advice from the Ministry of Health.

I am happy we are twenty-two (22) days without a new case. However, if and when our doors are open, we have to screen our travellers. Our big issue is with the persons who are asymptomatic. The level of confidence is not here yet, to be able to do a rapid test and to determine with two or three negative COVID-19 results, a person is COVID-19 free when they go to another country and spend some time. It has not been proven that a person cannot get the disease twice. There are too many ifs going forward. We are beginning to plan to deal with screening at the airport both for entry and exit.

The new norms will affect how we do business. We are shaping up for that. We have hand sanitizing stations at the airport and seaports. We are putting in hand sanitising stations at the ferry terminal. We have to look at social distancing, as this is going to be here for a while. Our spaces are small, but we must accommodate the social distancing requirements.

Currently at the seaport, everybody coming to the Security checkpoint must undertake a handwashing exercise and this is going very well. Wearing a mask to cover the mouth and nose is mandatory. Airlines that are operating have adopted this measure. The air and seaports are going to adopt it. The new norms will increase our costs of operations, and given the square footage we operate, we are going to do some things differently.

We must facilitate trade and we are thinking of ways to avoid delaying the process as a plane cannot wait for 2 hours to leave. In terms of sanitisation, that is a whole new ball game. We cleaned the facilities in the morning and evening. This has to change; frequently touched surfaces have to be constantly sanitised. It is going down to the science of mixing of cleaning products. There are now legal obligations.

In business there is something called duty of care and we have obligations, which we cannot ignore as it may mean legal challenges for us going forward. We have to do things with the view that there are obligations we have to meet. We cannot be negligent in the service we provide, as

someone can turn around and say because we did not sanitise, they got sick. We have to be stringent when it comes to the things we are required to do or the standards to be met.

The cost of doing business is going to change; there is no two ways about it, but we cannot pass on the costs. Our rates are regulated by government. Government has its own pressures and may not be able to go to Parliament and regulate for us to increase rates.

From a management standpoint, we are taxed with more things to do and to come up with more skilful ways to work, though it may be more costly. We have to be smarter, use more of today's technology and the resources available so that we can continue what we do without the cost element rising too much.

"To reach a port we must sail, sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against it. But we must not drift or lie at anchor," **Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr**

**Qu: What other changes do you envisage post COVID-19?**

Greater use of IT systems to organise teleconferencing, interviews and in-house meetings. We are using Microsoft Teams for internal meetings between myself and other staff.

We have to come up with products to allow us to have less interaction with the public and ourselves. We have to re-engineer how we deal with the public, how we interact and how we communicate. We are utilising our digital screens to put out Health messages for public information. We have to do our part to help the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the public.

We have begun looking at changing equipment that requires lots of touching and moving to touchless operations, to minimize the spread of disease, example, pedal operated waste bins. The facilitation has to be, not to delay the passenger but at the same time, reduce the risk of exposure. What we are looking at is doing a better job but keeping the cost low.

There is one other thing we looked at, for the dock workers, but that one is troublesome. We have ships that are able to work without Stevedores. However, the union representative raised a concern that this may be to the detriment of the workers. The workers have indicated that once they have personal protective equipment (PPE), they can work. There are requirements that they have to observe to minimize contact with the crew as they are coming from a foreign port. That just points to the future. There are developments on-going relating to automation which would replace humans by technology. In a small economy, we have to watch this, for if you displace too many persons, then you may have social unrest, or the safety nets have to be reviewed and enhanced and other job opportunities provided.

**Qu: How has your staff responded?**

The staff are energised and are playing an important role, though not seen. They are keeping the economy going, despite reductions in cargo movement. They are providing critical support to the health professionals, supermarkets and the public with what they need by working cargo vessels and aircrafts bringing essential supplies. They are playing a major supporting role to vital entities.

The stress factor is not acute, as we are giving them time off to deal with their families, their children who are at home being home-schooled, and time to attend to personal matters, example, going to the bank. The fact that there is no fear of being stopped by the police also reduces anxiety. The ability to leave one's home, even during curfew and lockdown, to go to work for a day or half day, may also be seen as a stress reliever.

**Qu: Do you see Remote Work continuing after COVID-19?**

We need to seriously think in relation to how we utilize IT. A lot of work has to be done remotely and this has to be factored in the system. We have to look at staffing levels which may reduce our costs of operations. One can look at both the advantages and disadvantages.

From a business perspective, we can now begin to outsource some services and reduce our overall costs of operations. It is no longer necessary to have everybody in the office, so what you had to procure for an office setting can be shifted to the person working from home. We can have certain staff working from home a few days of the week. Clearly, that has to be well managed. You need to be able to assign tasks and determine the measuring and monitoring mechanism to ensure you get value for money.

We have to develop software applications to provide for management of remote work and to provide for more online services, including, payment for the clearing of containers, barrels and other services.

I do not think we have seen the last of COVID-19 and there may be more novel illnesses and we have to be able to adapt. We have to look at how we segregate our business, so we do not have everything in one basket. By segregating the business, if one side goes down, operations can continue from various and/or other avenues. An example is the airport. We have the Emergency Response Team, which will facilitate a quicker response.

We are a very small country but have to meet standards like other international bodies. We have to get creative with our finances. The direct revenue is one thing but not something we can rely on. We have to look at other sources of revenue. If we have no ships or ferries coming to our Ports, are there other services we can provide? It is going to call for new thinking.

**Qu: What is your attitude to COVID-19?**

There is an enthusiasm. It has challenged us to be innovative, creative and forward thinking; to look not just at the immediate future but at the distant future. This is a good thing. Training is going to benefit tremendously, and there is going to be greater access and flexibility with respect to training and the use of training. This will enable the strengthening of human capacity and development, thus increasing the competencies of employees.

***We thank and Bless you, Mr. Bardouille, for sharing so freely and willingly your experience.***

We will explore "Mental Health and COVID-19," in Issue # 5. We look forward to hearing from you with comments on this article, suggestions for topics to be covered and sharing of your HR experience, especially during the COVID-19 era. Please feel free to share this Newsletter with your contacts.

We also welcome guest authors, and we are pleased to have received our first article from a guest author, which will be published in Issue #6.

Until next week, May God continue to Keep us in the Palm of His Hands. Please send us your questions, comments and share your experience managing in the COVID-19- era at [info@vfinc.org](mailto:info@vfinc.org). You may also reach us by telephone: 1 767 275 0566/617 0566.

*"The number one thing is to focus on employees and customers. When it comes to taking care of employees, the goals should be to keep them well, keep them employed and keep them mentally healthy,"* **Brian Moynihan, CEO, Bank of America and Chair of the World Economic Forum's International Business Council**

*"Ultimately, the greatest lesson that COVID-19 can teach humanity is that we are all in this together,"* **Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Chairperson and Managing Director, Biocon Limited**

**World Economic Forum's Stakeholder Principles for COVID-19, endorsed on April 1, 2020:**

1. To keep employees safe
2. To secure shared business continuity with suppliers and customers
3. To ensure fair prices for essential supplies for end customers
4. To offer full support to governments and society
5. To maintain the long-term viability of companies for shareholders
6. To continue sustainability efforts, including to fight climate change