

Request for specific skills to Support COVID19 Special Grant initiatives

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to re-assess traditional business processes in order to respond adequately to a very fluid and rapidly changing environment. The critical role of adequate investment in comprehensive social protection programmes has been highlighted. SASSA is taking measures to adhere to the United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which notes that states are under an obligation, within a human rights framework, to take measures to prevent or mitigate negative impacts by reducing the suffering of the most marginalised groups.

The need to respond differently has been highlighted by this pandemic. This has resulted in gaps being identified in the current skills pool within the organization which should be filled urgently. It is essential that the current skills gap be addressed through in-sourcing knowledgeable people in the short term, and that skills transfer be part of the development agenda for existing staff within the organization.

In order to assist SASSA to be responsive, agile and meet the mounting needs as a result of the [pandemic, the following are considered to be the minimum critical skills required:

- Public relations; Communications and reputation management consultant
- Project management
- Banking expertise focusing on payment platforms

Discussion

Prior to the measures taken by government to limit the spread of the virus, South Africa was acknowledged as one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a sharp divide between the haves and the have-nots. This has been brought into sharp by the lockdown, with an increase in food insecurity, poverty and malnutrition over a very short space of time.

The current social assistance safety net caters for children, older persons and persons with disabilities. The unemployed of working age are not catered for at all. In order to address this gap, government has implemented a short term special relief cash grant of R350 per month to provide income support to those most adversely impacted by the lockdown. These are in the majority workers in the informal sector who have lost the ability to generate an income, as they mostly depended on passing traffic to be able to either sell goods or their services on a piece job basis.

The emergency economic and social relief measures to alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been given to SASSA to implement. The roll out of this short term COVID-19 relief grant, to those who have no income and do not benefit from other social assistance programmes or the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), is a significant intervention by government to ensure food security to all those in need.

Development of a bespoke system which can accept and process electronic applications received through multiple channels, including Whatsapp, Email, Website and USSD is well underway. In addition the processes of validating information against various databases, as well as payment through multiple channels has been developed. This has been done over a very short period – the Directions were only published on 9 May 2020.

To date more than 6,5 million applications have been received and processed, while approximately 500 000 payments have already been effected. The rand value of the payments made to date is more than R170 million – money which is going into a very depressed economy.

The implementation of this project has, however, identified significant skills gaps within the organization, which we are now trying to address.

These are discussed further below:

Public relations, communications; brand, and reputation management

The expectations on SASSA to deliver on promises made by government are extremely high and often unrealistic time frames are set. The reputational damage has the potential to undo significant gains made by the Agency in promoting a sense of trust and dependability amongst South Africans. Statements such as SASSA being a “comedy of errors”; not having the ability to deliver, not having the capacity to manage a project as large as this and even being accused of inciting civil war because of the delays have caused significant harm to both the SASSA reputation and brand.

The skills required is for someone or a company to assist with sharing the positive stories – what the R350 means to someone who has had nothing for years, and relied on his wits to survive; the difference between going to sleep with an empty stomach and having food

on the table; a father who can stand proudly in front of his family because he can at least buy some very basic necessities.

However, more than just sharing the positive stories, SASSA needs to be assisted to be pro-active in communication – to ensure that stories (good or bad) are shared by SASSA before they are taken out of context and posted on social media and other platforms as facts. Having to be reactive in communication is a losing battle, as the organization comes across as defensive and opaque.

Project management

The project has been implemented by internal SASSA staff. However, various aspects of the project, including the development of an overall project plan, keeping track of achievement of the milestones, keeping track of all project documentation for audit purposes and providing regular reports has been neglected.

There is a need for support by a company and/or individual with specialised skills and expertise to manage the temporary COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress project. There are not sufficient resources within SASSA to provide the required service on a full time basis for a period of 6 months, hence the request for the appointment of a service provider.

The monitoring and evaluation of the project is another critical area which requires attention. This is closely linked to the regular reporting from the project which is essential to keep all stakeholders informed. When the project comes to an end, the close out report, which will also document the lessons learnt will be invaluable, especially since the development work undertaken is not intended for the short term only, but will continue to be used by SASSA to re-engineer the way in which social grant and social relief of distress applications are taken, processed and paid to ensure that it is more effective, responsive and auditable.

Banking expertise

With the implementation of the special relief grant, SASSA has used channels for both applications and payment which have not been utilized in the social assistance space before. The traditional EFT transfers for those with bank accounts has remained, but the development of a money transfer to mobile phones is a new process. While some banks have had this product in their product range, it has not before been used on this scale.

The difference with the way cash send is being used – even by the banks who offer this product is that, in the normal course of events, the sender of the cash knows the person to whom they are sending cash and this is done on a one-on-one relationship basis. The utilization of the cash send product for the purposes of this grant is that SASSA is sending cash to “unknown” or anonymous persons – all we have is the identify document and the virtual application. There are thus opportunities for fraud or misuse of the anonymity of

this process which could give rise to fraud. Risk mitigators must be put in place to minimize this risk as much as possible, to ensure accountability for tax payers' money.

To have banking and associated skills within the organization would be major boost – both for the negotiations with the banks, but also to identify and mitigate risks in the environment. This would also be extremely useful for the current contract SASSA has with the South African Post Office.

SASSA currently pays in excess of R20 billion per month through banking channels – both in commercial banks and with PostBank. The need to be able to confidently manage this space would greatly benefit the Agency.

The skills required will also assist SASSA to be forward looking – to identify processes which could be more effectively and cost efficiently implemented, reduce risk to government and improve services to grant beneficiaries. Knowledge of the entire process is required – from account creation and verification through payment and reconciliation.

Conclusion

SASSA has entered a new era where more emphasis is placed on electronic processes and the use of technology to improve business processes. This will position SASSA to expand services and improve service delivery without necessarily requiring a corresponding increase in the staff establishment. This is a critical consideration moving forward, where budgets for government departments will become increasingly constrained.

The sourcing of the skills noted above will certainly assist in thinking differently and adapting to the “new normal” which is expected to be with us over a long period of time post the acute COVID-19 measures.