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## Mauritius looks to BPO for economic boost

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The African island nation of Mauritius is positioning itself as a business process outsourcing destination, as it gets ready to officially launch a key component of its IT Park, the Ebene CyberCity project.

The Cyber Tower at the Ebene CyberCity has been successfully attracting tenants, according to Bilaal Salemohamed, assistant marketing manager of Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd. It is a 12-story building spread over 42,274 square meters and wired with fiber optics to provide high speed international bandwidth. A specific date for the official launch of the tower has not been set, but in practice, companies have already started setting up shop there.

"Our occupancy level has reached 75% (prior to inauguration). Fifteen companies have signed the lease. Eight of them are operational and seven others are conducting fit-out works. We have another seven in the pipeline," Salemohamed said via e-mail.

Mauritius decided to venture into high tech after trade in one of the pillars of its economy, textile manufacturing, was deregulated internationally.

"We were successful in textiles manufacturing primarily because we had preferential trade agreement with the U.S. and the E.U. Now with liberalization, we can no more rely on these quotas," Salemohamed said.

"Mauritius has no yarn or cotton as raw materials. Hence, we will not be able to compete with giants like India, China, Brazil, etc. Hence, the government thought of a fifth pillar to hold the economy: the K-economy, making Mauritius a knowledge-based, high-tech Cyber island," Salemohamed said.

Project originators hope the island's bilingual work force (French and English), the country's stability - far from war and relatively free from risk of terror attacks - and its robust telecommunications networks will make it a competitive BPO destination. Mauritius is linked to the fiber optic cable SAFE, which connects North America and Europe to Asia through India.

Initial feedback from new entrants into Mauritius' BPO market is enthusiastic.

"We are currently working for some French clients, receiving scanned images of their documents, capturing data from those images, processing them to varied degrees and sending (them) back as a usable database to the clients," said Thierry Adolphe, financial manager of Batch Image Processing Indian Ocean Ltd., which has been operating its 50-workstation facility since April this year.

Adolphe believes the island possesses attractive attributes. Mauritius is situated in a very convenient time zone between Europe and Asia, its population is bilingual and educated, labour is quite easily available, and the telecommunications infrastructure is well developed, very advanced and reliable, he said.

In addition, the government developed a fiscal policy for information and communication technology enterprises that encourages business development, Adolphe said, "We then examined more in detail the possibility of setting up office there (Mauritius) in comparison with other destinations such as Vietnam and Tunisia and decided that the infrastructure, the availability of labor and generally the costs of it all made it a sensible move." Batch was founded in France.

Astek (Mauritius) Ltd. also engages in BPO and shares almost the same script on why it located a facility on the island.

According to the managing director of Astek, Paula Lew-Fai, the close cultural links between France and Mauritius, a qualified pool of young professionals exposed to two languages and with a flexible attitude to other cultures and conventions and standards of professionalism, made Mauritius a destination worth considering.

"These qualities, combined with skills and techniques (at least readiness to learn them), are the main assets that have prompted our decision to locate in Mauritius," said Lew-Fai, in an e-mail exchange.

It is not just foreign companies involved in the BPO sector that have set up facilities at the Cyber Tower. Indian Ocean Asset Management Ltd. is involved in personal wealth management and 100% of the company assets are Mauritius-based.

According to Lester Petch, CEO of the Indian Ocean, two factors - the time zone of Mauritius and a high-quality, educated labour force - influenced the company's decision to set up shop in the country. Most of their clientele is either of Asian or European.

"Cyber Tower was chosen as it was likely to be one of the most prestigious buildings on the island and was catering for high technology business specifically," Petch said.

The Ebene CyberCity Spreads over an area of about 172 acres, and consists of several components, such as the Business Zone, with 50 acres of land leased to

companies for setting up of their own buildings. Each plot is serviced with power, water and telecom connectivity.

The Knowledge Center hosts institutions specializing in ICT human resource training. Other facilities include a hotel complex, a commercial area and a cyber village with a modern residential complex - luxury apartments and bungalows with a private jogging track.