

16.18 COMMUNICATION FACILITIES

- 16.18.1 The use of communication technologies is an important means for an officer in delivering more effectively. They enable a better interaction among staff and other stakeholders, while offering high customer service that meets desired expectations.
- 16.18.2 To keep abreast, the Bureau provides for the grant of different types of communication facilities to eligible officers of the public sector. Over successive Reports, the recommendations have been improved in line with advancements in communication technologies.
- 16.18.3 The different forms of communication facilities provided in the public sector with regard to mobile phone and fixed telephone include: fixed telephone at residence along with free rental and unlimited/limited call entitlement; free use of mobile phone; mobile phone with unlimited/limited call entitlement; prepaid cards; free rental on mobile phones; and roaming facilities on mobile phones.
- 16.18.4 A few senior officers are equally eligible for fax facilities at their residence owing to their posting or specific nature of their responsibilities. As regards internet facilities, more and more officers are being provided access to same at their place of work, while in addition, a certain category of officers is being paid a monthly internet allowance of Rs 500 to access the internet at their residence, subject to satisfying a few criteria.
- 16.18.5 The grant of the abovementioned facilities rests upon the Responsible Officer of the Ministry/Department/Organisation, based on the officers' status, nature of work and posting.

Survey on Communication Facilities

- 16.18.6 The Bureau conducted a survey on the grant of communication facilities in the public sector with a view to taking cognizance of the implementation of our recommendations made in this respect and identifying any related shortcomings.
- 16.18.7 An overall response rate of 57.9% was recorded. We observed that: almost all organisations avail of communication facilities to ensure an effective service delivery in the Public Sector; many officers make use of their own mobile phone in the course of their duties against payment of prepaid mobile phone cards ranging from Rs 100 to Rs 2800 per month; mostly officers forming part of Directorate or top management or those at senior/principal professional levels are granted mobile phone by virtue of their status; and given that provision of communication facilities devolves upon Management, the ceiling of refund of calls varies both organisationwise and gradewise, whereas in some cases, no ceiling is applicable.
- 16.18.8 As regards fax facilities at residence, we noted that a few officers, mostly at Directorate level, take advantage of fixed telephone and fax facilities at their residence.

- 16.18.9 Around 5.4% of officers are being paid a monthly internet allowance and it is observed that most officers are being paid Rs 500, as approved by the Ministry of Public Service, Administrative and Institutional Reforms (MPSAIR). However, in certain quarters, some officers are being paid a higher quantum based on their status, the maximum being Rs 3600, whereas a few are subject to a lower quantum than that approved by the MPSAIR.
- 16.18.10 Postpaid and prepaid cards for use of mobile phones are allocated to officers who are required to remain available after office hours for official work. In cases where expenses related to mobile phone calls are paid on a monthly basis, users are requested to confirm whether calls have been restricted to professional use so as to limit any abuse, or otherwise, they are required to reimburse calls made on a personal basis.
- 16.18.11 Among the comments inserted in the survey questionnaires, the Bureau has been requested to provide clear guidelines for determining the eligibility criteria for the grant of communication facilities as well as stipulating the obligations of users having been granted telecommunication equipment. Moreover, we have been apprised that in various instances, despite that the Responsible and Accounting Officer of Departments/Organisations are regularly called upon to continuously attend to correspondence/queries after normal working hours as well as undertaking research work at home, they are not eligible for internet allowance as per the existing criteria.
- 16.18.12 We deem it relevant to underline that we have taken on board the results of the survey prior to arriving at the recommendations.

Representations Made and Observations of the Bureau

- 16.18.13 For this Report, the main representations made by the Federations/Unions consisted in: enabling all officers, including Educators, to have access to free Wi-Fi at their place of work; granting interest free loans to employees to purchase a computer or laptop; and providing IT/communication facilities to all employees, irrespective of their positions in the organisation. The MPSAIR on its side, viewed that there was no longer the need to grant fax facilities at the place of residence of officers concerned on the ground that new technologies are available and related allowances are being paid to senior public officials.
- 16.18.14 The Bureau has equally been requested to look into the provision of communication facilities anew, following claims received from several quarters, regarding the quantum payable as internet allowance and its extension to officers operating at lower levels; and the payment of a mobile data allowance for accessing the internet when the eligible officers are far from the office and their residence.

- 16.18.15 After careful examination of the requests made by the different stakeholders, we are making the following observations:
- (i) while the Bureau does not dispute the fact that officers should have access to the internet at their place of work, the mode of access that is, either by cable or Wi-Fi, however, depends on the policy of the Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation and is at the discretion of Management. We have been informed that access to internet facilities depends on the accessibility policy of each organisation, based on the nature of its activities and need for internet access.
 - (ii) granting IT/communication facilities to all employees, irrespective of their positions in the organisation, would not be sensible as the provision of these facilities are linked to the nature of duties performed and at times according to the level of responsibilities being shouldered;
 - (iii) concerning the payment of a "mobile data" allowance to access the internet while being outside the office or far from residence, we opine that there is some merit in the request; and
 - (iv) the present recommendation regarding provision of fax facilities to senior public officers is being maintained as according to our survey findings, there are still a few officers who are availing of this facility.
- 16.18.16 We also consider that most of the existing provisions still hold good, while those governing the grant of internet facilities and payment of internet allowance warrant a review. We have recommended in that direction.

Mobile Phone and Fixed Telephone Facilities

Recommendation 1

16.18.17 We recommend that the grant of facilities with respect to the provision of a mobile phone and fixed telephone, as hereunder, should continue to be devolved on Management of Ministries/Departments/Organisations, based on the officers' status, nature of work and posting:

- **Fixed telephone at residence along with free rental and unlimited/limited call entitlement;**
- **Free use of mobile phone;**
- **Mobile phone with unlimited/limited call entitlement;**
- **Prepaid cards**
- **Free rental on mobile phones**
- **Roaming facilities on mobile phones**

Fax Facilities

Recommendation 2

16.18.18 We recommend that:

- (i) fax facilities should continue to be provided at the workplace; and**
- (ii) senior public officers at the level of Permanent Secretary and above should be eligible for the grant of fax facilities at their residence based on the nature of their duties and by virtue of their posting, subject to the approval of the MPSAIR.**

Internet Facilities and Internet Allowance

16.18.19 Internet facilities are provided to a significant number of employees at their workplace. In addition, a monthly internet allowance of Rs 500 is payable to a certain category of officers, whose grades are listed in the MPSAIR's Circular Note No. 5 of 2009 for accessing the internet, subject to satisfying a few conditions as provided in our last Report. Further to requests made to the High Powered Committee (HPC) for rendering other grades eligible for the allowance, the Committee decided that the Bureau should look into the whole issue of communication facilities and examine proposals with respect to the grant of an allowance for accessing the internet through mobile phones.

16.18.20 Pursuant to the above, we carried out a fresh study on the subject and equally took into account the findings of the survey on the issue of internet allowance as well as any shortcoming arising out of the implementation of the related recommendation made in our last Report. We observed that a certain category of officers who effectively make use of the internet on a regular basis for official purposes, after office hours, were not included in the list attached to the Circular Note of the MPSAIR.

16.18.21 The Bureau also considered the evolution in the rates charged by the different companies for accessing the internet and the increasing reliance/dependence on mobile telephones to carry out official work, while being away from the workplace. In the light of these findings, we are revising the quantum of internet allowance whereby a component for "mobile data" has been included.

Internet Facilities

Recommendation 3

16.18.22 We recommend that internet facilities should continue to be provided at the workplace with the prior authority of the MPSAIR.

16.18.23 We also recommend that a monthly internet allowance should continue to be paid to officers, as per the MPSAIR's Circular Note, as subsequently amended, at a revised rate of Rs 800.

16.18.24 We further recommend that the MPSAIR should look into any request pertaining to the inclusion of additional grades in the list of eligible officers for the payment of the internet allowance.

16.18.25 In the context of this Report, Federations and union members pointed out that the list of officers eligible for the internet allowance as per the Circular Note of the MPSAIR is too restrictive, thereby debarring many officers operating at lower levels who effectively use the internet for official purpose after normal working hours, to avail of this benefit. After taking into account the grievances expressed by our different stakeholders and the findings of the study carried out on this subject, as mentioned earlier, we are reviewing the eligibility criteria for the payment of the internet allowance.

Recommendation 4

16.18.26 We recommend that the monthly internet allowance of Rs 800 may be paid, depending on the availability of funds and upon recommendation of their Management, to officers in grades requiring a degree or higher and whose nature of duties require them to regularly interact with international organisations, after normal working hours OR carry out meaningful research away from the office according to an established programme of work OR access a server located at the office outside normal working hours while being away from their workplace, for meeting deadlines/tight schedules, subject to prior authority being obtained from the MPSAIR.

16.18.27 For an effective implementation of the above recommendation, Management should ensure, from the officers concerned, the production of outputs/results and their accomplishments in respect of the work carried out while being away from the office.

16.18.28 The Bureau has taken cognizance that in the wake of the Work from Home Scheme set up by the MPSAIR, officers who are required to work from home are eligible to the payment of a monthly Cell Phone Allowance and/or Internet Allowance at a rate of Rs 300 for each allowance. Hence, it would not be appropriate for an officer to be paid both an allowance as per the Work from Home Scheme and at the same time an Internet Allowance as recommended by the Bureau.

Recommendation 5

16.18.29 We recommend that an officer who is eligible for the payment of an internet allowance and also for payment of a cell phone allowance and/or internet allowance under the Work from Home Scheme as provided under the Chapter Working Week, Flexitime, Workers on Shift/Roster/Staggered Hours and Overtime, should be paid the higher allowance under one regime only.

Consistent Implementation of our Recommendation

16.18.30 The Bureau has equally been apprised during the consultative meetings held with different stakeholders, that in certain organisations a few officers are being paid internet allowance at a higher rate than that approved by the MPSAIR as per its Circular Note. This information has also been captured in our survey. **We wish to point out that this is an implementation issue which should be dealt with by the MPSAIR. The latter should, therefore, ensure the adoption of a consistent course of action across the public sector.**

Parastatal Bodies and Local Authorities

Recommendation 6

16.18.31 We recommend that policies and guidelines adopted in the Public Sector for the grant of communication facilities should equally be applicable in the Parastatal Bodies and Local Authorities.

Control Mechanism

16.18.32 The provision of communication facilities to public officers is to allow them to use information and communication technologies in the performance of their duties, for an improved service delivery. The real challenge, however, rests in how effectively these facilities are being used. It is, therefore, of central importance that adequate control measures be put in place by the organisation to ensure that these facilities are being used efficiently, effectively and responsibly so as to prevent any misuse or abusive use.

16.18.33 We deem it equally pertinent to point out that officers should be responsible and cautious in the proper utilisation of the various communication facilities during the performance of their duties with a view to carrying out Government's responsibilities diligently, as public funds are being disbursed in that respect.

Recommendation 7

16.18.34 We recommend that Management should continue to maintain and update their control measures with respect to the use of communication facilities so as to limit/prevent cases of misuse/ abusive use.

Effective Implementation of Recommendations

16.18.35 During consultations, the Bureau was apprised that in many quarters, Management was reluctant to implement the recommendations made in respect of communication facilities, thereby leading to frustration among employees and causing impediments in the smooth running of activities. **We are, therefore, urging Management to take remedial measures.**

16.18.36 We also view that Management and the MPSAIR should ensure that recommendations are being implemented in a uniform and consistent manner in all quarters on grounds of fairness and equity.

