How we deliver **our strategy**

Inside IBL's Head Office



Thierry Labat has spent 25 years at the heart of IBL, from his time as Company Secretary at GML, through the merger, to his current role overseeing Corporate Services. He has seen the Head Office move from supporting a largely Mauritian operating group to connecting expertise and capabilities across East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Here, Thierry tells us how he sees the Head Office's role evolving as IBL builds regional platforms for growth.

What does your role as Group Head of Corporate Services involve?

I oversee Legal, Risk & Compliance, Communications, Corporate Affairs, Human Capital, Technology & Transformation (T&T), and Trademarks & Consulates, working closely with the businesses and their leadership teams. My role is to ensure these functions have the right resources, deliver against their objectives and remain aligned with what the Group needs. I'm also responsible for all departmental budgets at the Head Office and coordinating major cross-functional projects. Since early 2026, the Réunion office has also fallen under my remit.

What do the Head Office's Corporate Services bring to the businesses?

We're not a service provider; we bring solutions, capabilities and connections that individual businesses may not be able - or need - to build alone. For instance, Legal supports mergers and acquisitions, and advises CEOs on specific matters; Communications support businesses on strategic positioning, crisis management and issues requiring Group-level coordination; Risk & Compliance and Internal Audit provide governance that businesses can't always build alone; and Human Capital helps businesses strengthen leadership, develop and mobilise talent across the Group, and build a shared culture, while keeping them responsive to local workforce realities.

We also provide the shared infrastructure and standards that allow IBL to operate as one Group rather than as a collection of separate businesses. These include common expectations around governance, operating discipline, sustainability, people and risk. Some apply across the Group, while other support is mobilised according to the needs of a business or market. The important thing is to remain close enough to the businesses to understand what they need, while using the Group's wider perspective to identify connections and opportunities that individual businesses may not see.

You joined IBL in 2001. What did the Head Office look like then?

IBL and GML had separate head offices, so I can only speak for GML, where I was Group Company Secretary. The Head Office largely looked after GML's own needs rather than serving the businesses. Company Secretarial was the exception: we managed board meetings, statutory filings and compliance for the Group's companies. Beyond that, there was little shared support, decisions were taken from the centre, and the businesses ran themselves day to day. That model worked for the Group we were at the time.

I saw the transformation from the inside when the two organisations came together in 2016. The merger changed things structurally and culturally, combining two different ways of working. We grew from 30 people to 200 overnight. It took three or four years of deliberate alignment work before anyone stopped talking about the two legacy companies. Today, that distinction has disappeared. We are simply IBL.

What changed as the Group grew?

All of the Corporate Services have fundamentally transformed. We've built capabilities that weren't needed ten years ago. Internal Audit is now in-house. IT has become Technology & Transformation. Cybersecurity and Data Governance are established capabilities, and AI is the latest area we are developing. As the Group enters new markets and takes on new challenges, the centre must continue building the expertise required to support them.

But the bigger shift is how we work with the businesses. As they have grown, built their own teams and taken on greater autonomy and complexity, many now have their own support capabilities, almost like local head offices. Expertise is increasingly distributed across the Group rather than concentrated at Head Office.

So our role is to create consistency without imposing uniformity: connecting systems, standards and expertise across Nairobi, Antananarivo, Saint-Denis and Port Louis, while keeping operating decisions close to the market. We focus on what only the Group platform can provide: governance, specialist capabilities, strategic coordination and a higher-altitude view of the Group across geographies.

How do you create consistency while keeping the businesses locally anchored?

We do that by developing expertise within the Group and making it available where it can add the most value. Where a business hasn't built a capability yet, it can draw on people, knowledge and systems that already exist elsewhere within IBL rather than starting from scratch.

We've seen this with the Naivas ERP rollout and at Harley's, where colleagues from T&T and People provided hands-on support and worked alongside local teams in East Africa. The objective is not to transfer decision-making back to Mauritius. It is to combine local knowledge and accountability with capabilities that can be shared across the Group. That's a much closer and more productive relationship than the one we had a decade ago.

What hasn't changed?

The human connection, and I'd argue it's gotten stronger since the launch of our Beyond Borders strategy in 2021. As the Group becomes more regional, we have had to build better feedback loops between the Head Office, regional teams and our businesses. The iBelong survey is part of that: not a box-ticking exercise, but a genuine indication of how our people experience the Group and where we need to improve. Town halls give us another direct line into what is happening across the businesses, from performance and projects to people.

And that applies internally too. We've continued to develop and move our own people as the Group has changed. Some of the longest-serving people at Head Office have been here for 25 years, but many have moved into different roles or taken on new responsibilities across IBL. That gives us something valuable: the ability to build new expertise without losing the institutional knowledge of how IBL works.

What will the Head Office look like ten years from now?

It will be less defined by where people sit and more by what they contribute. The same functions will increasingly operate across more markets, with people joining IBL from Nairobi, Réunion or elsewhere. The challenge will be to maintain a common way of working without bringing decisions back to Mauritius. We need strong Group expertise where it adds value, and people close enough to our markets to understand and act on them. That is the balance we need to get right.