

THE ROLE OF "CONNECTIONS" IN THE EXPANSION OF TELECOMMUNICATION

In conversation with Christo Erasmus

by Katucia Moussong



Technology is a field that humans have managed to control and use for practical purposes. Because of the tools and methods that technology brings to the telecommunications sector, these two fields cannot be separated.

In my quest to learn more about "People behind Technology", I met with Christo Erasmus – Account Executive at Adapt IT Telecoms. With more than 24 years of experience in the telecommunications industry, he remains a key player in the expansion of telecommunications in Africa and the world.

Tell us a bit about your background and how you got into the Telecommunication sector?

Born and raised in Pretoria, I studied BCom Marketing at the University of Pretoria (UP). After completing my course I was looking for something exciting within the technology space as I enjoyed new technology and industries that were the trendsetters. After a few interviews and I landed a sales job at a subsidiary of Telkom called "Swiftnet". This was where my telecoms journey really took off. Not only was it an integral part of Telkom at the time but it was also at the forefront of rolling out a data network across South Africa. At the time I was not sure how this will play out as part of my corporate dream was to work for a large firm and then start my own business; actually to be a businessman with a nice suit and tie. And yet there I was starting at a small-medium company within the telecommunication sector.

During my stint as a sales representative, I looked after the northern region of the country. It was a big responsibility at the time as I was still fresh out of school, but it gave me the chance to develop my skills and be mentored by our CEO. My then CEO was a good mentor who gave a lot of the staff the opportunity to grow and unlock their entrepreneurship which was quite empowering.

What helped me is being an extrovert, I love working with people and this helped me to meet some incredible people and create some lasting relationships.

For me, relationships with people are the foundation of many things in life and are important for selling and marketing. Understanding how to reap more benefits from these relationships can help your business flourish. Hence I believe people are key to any company's success, especially if you want to consistently create a win-win environment with your clients. I've seen over and over again the value such connections to ones work environment. You must interact with people not just because you are simply selling a technology or a service; you are also selling trust, friendship, and respect. I firmly believe that people buy from people.

In my journey, I had the opportunity to work in different managerial positions in the Telecom industry. It's an industry offering many products and services, and one that is continuously moving forward. At that time Vodacom, MTN and some of the big corporations we know today were in their infancy, and it was exciting to be around a lot of technology and watch these businesses grow. I benefitted from the knowledge in the different companies I worked for and tried to use this knowledge to help uplift others.

Another milestone of my career was joining a French company call Gemalto (today part of the Thales Group), a big international company that was the mayor supplier of sim cards and other network solutions across all MNO at that time. It was amazing because, for the first time, I was exposed to the international market. I enjoyed traveling across the globe and meeting people across many countries while being the Global Account Manager, for the Vodacom and MTN Africa operations with Gemalto. However, I can say that Africa is where I had the most fun because people are welcoming. People in Africa are always open to all businesses, they love personal engagement, and often enjoy connecting on personal level, that is why I love Africa.

After my stint with Gemalto, I was fortunate to work for other great companies like HP Enterprise, and Nokia where I gained new knowledge on different segments of the industry.

What attracted you to Adapt IT?

I chose Adapt IT Telecom because I felt connected to the vision of the company. They have had success in many areas, bringing all kinds of solutions to the market. The company and I speak the same language. Also, much lies in the way my Telecoms division welcomed me and made me feel comfortable. From day one they value my input and pull me into the strategic discussions. What further impressed me is the culture and how people are open to engagement in a variety of ways. People can exchange ideas with those in positions of leadership thanks to the organisation's flat structure.

Moreover, the people are open to engagement in a variety of ways. People can exchange ideas with those in positions of leadership thanks to the organisation's flat structure.

Recently Adapt IT Telecoms hosted an innovation day with Vodacom in Tanzania and South Africa, what was the purpose behind such event?

One of the keys to the success of a company is regular and meaningful engagement with your customers. It's less about joining big events where you have limited engagement with your customers. The focus should be more the one-on-one connections. It involves organising a joint strategic workshop where you invite key stakeholders to discuss your shared vision and objective. In these events you rely on existing connections and adding new ones, so the purpose of the event goes beyond just sharing to the converted customer. Sharing and aligning on innovative ideas which can help us improve our working relationships. So it's not only discussing current solutions but also about dreaming together.

The main challenge this time was trying to fit the event into everyone's busy schedule as we only had a month to plan and execute. This project enjoyed the full support of the entire Telecom division. It was a first-of-its-kind event in the company and had a clear benefit for our relationship with Vodacom.

There was a great level of participation in Tanzania as well as South Africa during the events.

Africans, in my opinion, are quite receptive to being led into the future. They'll be willing to walk the route with you if your visions are inspiring and concrete. That's what happened and I believe we successfully accomplished our objective with that first initiative.

How can Adapt IT Telecoms leverage this type of event to improve relationships with its clients? Do you plan to replicate this event with other business partners?

Such events need to be repeated and became a regular occurrence. These events are key to breaking down any potential boundaries we could have with any of our customers. It's a simple way to build relationships with our customers. The plan is to expand it to all our customers in some shape or form. This could be an annual event followed by a series of smaller strategic engagements. It is crucial to us that our clients view us as more than just "another vendor," but rather as an extension of themselves.

We want to maintain the ease of doing business with us and make it easy for customers to pick up the phone and talk to us. When a customer or business partner considers a new service or product, we need to be the first firm that comes to mind.

In addition, it is an opportunity to showcase our team to particular people in person and establish a more meaningful connection.

How would you describe "People behind technology?"

The people who make technology are reflected in it. It shows the intent of the person behind it. You can analyse a device and see if it was made to help or harm humankind.

Even when individuals purchase a piece of technology, they are actually purchasing the experience it offers rather than the actual product. So, we need people who will create the type of technology that will bring value to our daily lives.

Taking humans out of technology can also make it destructive. And

it is a danger because the day it is no longer addressing the needs of humans, it is going to control or drive humans. That is not what we want, we don't want to become obsolete. Therefore, people should stay behind technology, that's my view.

As Account Executive what is your plan to improve the relationships between Adapt IT Telecoms and its business partners in the future?

My plan is to understand Adapt IT. I want to invest time internally to learn more about the organisation's employees as well as its strengths and limitations. People collectively is what the organisation is all about. It may be driven by policies and visions, but ultimately it is driven by people that execute that vision. We can't do it without people. You need people to be with you when you are trying to change something. Understanding people, what they do, their strengths and weaknesses are important to me. I will need them for the creation and maintenance of relationships with our customers. Whatever they do in the company contributes to the company's reputation, even if they don't necessarily have to be a salesperson. Improving internal relationships will help us improve our external connections.

Second, following this internal work, we can contact our customers regularly. I think we can meet with them on a weekly or monthly basis. Engage with them face-to-face, either at their office or ours, rather than relying on Microsoft Teams or any other technology. People buy from people, as I frequently comment. There is a certain level of mutual respect and trust when a client, supplier, partner, etc. gets to know you better.

We may also introduce social gatherings to our clients. It can be over lunch or coffee, with a large group or just a small group of people. It will also be beneficial to participate in their events, request inclusion, and continue to be relevant.

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I believe that people buy from people. You are not just selling a technology, you are also selling relationships, consistency, and trustworthiness.
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What message will you send to the next talented generation of Software Engineers who are looking for work opportunities?

To the new generation, I would say, create tools that will help humanity function better. Create a tool that will benefit society. Additionally, society needs all the skills unrelated to software development. Don't be too hard on yourself if you don't fit the software box because we need people with HR, communication, and other abilities.

If you want to be valued, you need to know your value. What can you do to make the environment a better place? It can be simple, such as making someone smile, or more complex, such as bringing a solution. If you do it on a small scale, you will make the people want you more not only because of your hard work but because you bring life into their team or project.

If you're already in the industry, do something to make people feel appreciated. It's necessary to give value to your team in order for people to want to be a part of it.