


# The Role of Telecommunications in Digital Transformation

An interview with Steven Sutherland

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Many businesses have worked hard during Covid to stay relevant by altering or adjusting how they conduct business. In that process, telecommunications became integral in how business achieved this.

In seeking to understand how communication plays a part and influences digital transformation, I met with Steven Sutherland, Executive Divisional of Adapt IT. With an emphasis on Africa's southern region, Steven has years of experience working in the African telecommunications sector.



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## What is the role of telecommunication in digital transformation?

The whole point of digital transformation is that it is impossible to achieve without the most crucial element, connectivity. Digital transformation cannot happen without connectivity, and telecommunications is the channel that makes connectivity feasible.

Covid accelerated digital transformation. For example, businesses needed to maintain the level of engagement with both their workers and their customers. Connectivity wasn't a problem. Everyone used to show up for work in the past. It was a case of walking from one floor to the next or from one department to the next. But during Covid, it was something we had to learn to deal with more effectively and very quickly, and for a business to continue to run successfully and efficiently, we had to maintain connectivity.

Today, you must use a smartphone to do most of your daily duties, like checking your calendar to know when your next appointment is or ordering your shopping online. Another example would be banking. Take a look at how closely related banking and telecommunications are. They weren't before. Not too long ago, banks prohibited mobile phone use whilst inside a bank. Today, you can and the two worlds have become so entwined. It is almost impossible to transact without using our mobile phones, and it is likely to become the same across all businesses.

Telecommunication and connectivity are the components that enable the entire process, and they go hand in hand. If you remove telecommunication from the picture we may not have had digital transformation.

## Can we separate connectivity and telecommunication and still have digital transformation?

You can separate them, but you generally find that the more you separate them, the more likely you are to start moving into an unsecured environment. Whereas, if you pull them all together, you're assured of operating within a secure place. Additionally, the telecommunications sector now understands that they offer more than plain connectivity. They now create platforms, applications, and technology needed to improve connectivity or enable digital transformation using connectivity.

In the past, communication usually took place in a private space. We didn't care about it. We picked up the phone and didn't care about the connection between us. After the call, all I wanted to do was either connect with someone or send a message.

But in today's world, we must ensure that everything we do, we do safely and securely. I now need to verify your identity. If you use the banking example again. Given the financial nature of the transaction, I need to confirm that you are the authorised party handling the transaction. This highlights the interdependence between connectivity and telecommunication.

## How is Adapt IT Telecoms empowering the telecommunication industry today?

With the help of the telecom giants, we provided mobile network operators (MNOs) with the tools they needed to effectively engage with businesses that had no telecom expertise. We discovered a need and filled it.

In the old telecommunications industry, we offered telephone management platforms or services to corporates and developed an excellent grasp of what they required.

For example, operators of mobile networks were not designed to handle multiple associations. They were designed to communicate only with one customer, and that being one person. When it came to their interactions with a business, they interacted the same way they did with individuals. As a result, they would send these corporates hundreds of statements and invoices. The fact that these components were difficult to process for corporate entities led us to realise that we could place ourselves halfway between corporate entities and mobile network operators.

Using our knowledge and expertise, we found ways to absorb the information from the mobile network operators and present it in simple ways for a corporate to handle. Our actualised platforms are another way that we add value. In the past, everything was sold in such a way that the buyer was practically tethered to the seller. Every time there was a new development, he/she had to get in touch with the seller. Thus, we decided to go open with our platforms.

This means, that if you provide your consumer with the tools they need, they can make the changes themselves. You, as the provider, can then concentrate on constantly improving your platform. Thus, we made an effort to incorporate many of the concepts from this phase of digital transformation into the way we market and sell our goods.

The 3rd and most important way we empower this market sector is through skills development. In the recent past, people may not have viewed telecommunications as an exciting field. Few people would venture to create software for the telecommunications industry. As digital transformation accelerated, we began to search for and recruit individuals with expertise in this field. Part of this drive was to choose the top graduates from leading institutions. We then enroll them in a year-long graduate program and introduce them to the telecommunications sector.

### **What are your plans for the future as a company?**

All companies want to grow, so this is a simple answer. The real question deals with how the company grows and in what direction.

So the first thing to consider is international expansion; if we want to grow, we need to grow beyond South Africa. Now that we are part of the Volaris Group, it gives us many more contact areas. It also allows us to be part of a much larger organisation where we can grow.

The other thing will be to supply a lot more than a platform. It means we need to shift from being seen as telecommunications people to being recognised and identified as industry enablers. I no longer want to sell platforms alone, but to sell and provide the services related to such platforms.

### **Can you tell us one success story with a mobile network operator?**

When we began, the only thing we had was customers using our telephony management systems. We quickly identified that they were already seeking a more mobile solution. So, we set up a comprehensive platform, but we didn't know its true potential. That platform went on to support more than 1.5 million subscribers and more than half a thousand corporate customers in South Africa. In addition, the client was able to make the platform work themselves. This is a brief success story but one from which everybody involved gained great benefit. It generated revenue for the mobile network operator and created a revenue stream for us as the service providers.

### **Why is Adapt IT the right place to work in?**

I'll start with why I joined Adapt IT because it might answer everything. When you join an organisation, you don't want it to be a stepping stone which helps you jump somewhere else, nor do you want it to be a place where you go to sit for years.

When I looked at Adapt IT, I saw a business focused on each of its segments. But it's not only one segment, it's multifaceted. In other words, many opportunities exist within Adapt IT - if I get tired of Telecommunications, I can go into Energy or Education.

More so, there's no fence between you and the senior executives. You can meet them and talk to them. As far as their offerings go, they had already developed impressive products and platforms. Not to forget, they had already developed a good international footprint. I saw it as a sign of growth. Today, we are well established in the South African market and entrenched in many global markets.

But the possibilities don't stop there. Our company is part of the Volaris Constellation Group, which is valued at over \$25 billion. Its made up of over 600 different companies worldwide. This presents even more opportunities to learn, expand our international footprint, and diversify and evolve our business.

### **What's the meaning of Adapt IT?**

Adapt IT was always a highly IT-driven company. If we look at technology from a networking perspective and more so now from a very segmentally defined software development business, it's a place that's continually adapting.

So not only do we have to adapt because of the digital transformation, but we must help our customers adapt to the change. We must allow them to adapt to new technologies and shape their worlds according to their customer's demands.

When people visit the website, the whole IT part starts becoming quite rich in terms of what we can help them to adapt to. I believe it's also about adapting things, so we can continually return value. So when a client buys something, it's not going to stagnate. It's always going to be changing and we will be the ones that will be adapting it for our clients, allowing them to benefit from it.