

PEOPLE BEHIND TECHNOLOGY ARE HUMANS WITH REAL EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS

An interview with Hannes Van Heerden – Project Delivery Manager at Adapt IT Telecoms

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In a world where many managers rule their team based on the ideology that “It’s all about business”, Hannes Van Heerden, Project Delivery Manager at Adapt IT Telecoms, makes a difference by introducing a more humanised managerial style. A style that values human ties and emphasises the work environment’s social aspect. In this interview, I welcome you to get to know him.

Tell us about your background and how you got into the Technology sector and Adapt IT?

I was born and raised in Vanderbijlpark, and I’ve always been fascinated with computers. Unfortunately, there wasn’t any in my home, and my parents lacked access to computers. As a result, I used to visit two friends who owned computers and spend a lot of time playing video games with them. In grade 11, I was fortunate to obtain a bursary from ISCOR, a steel company, to study towards my National Diploma in Computer Systems at VUT, also known as Vaal University of Technology. I was delighted to receive my first computer with that bursary, which marked the beginning of my journey. As part of my studies, I began coding and programming. My very first program was named “Hello World,” as I recall.

It served only as a general introduction to software development and fuelled my interest in computers. The only thing it did was display hello world on the screen. I was pleased because I couldn’t operate a computer before that. But at that very moment, I gave it a directive, and it responded by returning it to me. Then I completed my practical at ISCOR, where one of my responsibilities was to create “a round tracker” systems that would control the automated plant and provide information on its operations. At ISCOR, they have a large blast furnace where they melt steel; therefore, I created a model, a software program, that shows where the level of steel is since the furnace can’t reach a particular level and must be topped up again.

Following my internship, I relocated to Pretoria. I believed I fit the description of a company seeking a Junior Developer in the Agricultural industry. I was thrilled to be able to work on front-end development, gain some database knowledge, handle financial records, and plan and develop software for trading. There was indeed a lot of exposure at that company. Later, the organisation encouraged me to accept a different position, but I truly only wanted to be a Developer, because this is my passion. I was fortunate to have received the opportunity to join LGR in 2007 as a Delphi Developer. It was there that I actually began my career in the Telecom sector.

The entire Telecoms industry attracted me as soon as I started working with the data LGR was using (the mobile records, the raw files). I eventually progressed on to work as a Senior Developer. In 2015, I transitioned from a Developer to an Analyst in our Analytical department since I had a lot of expertise with how the data looks, how we get the data into the database, and how the data fits and correlates to one another. I expanded my analytics expertise by analysing the data, business requirements, and customer requirements and offering them data-driven solutions.

When LGR was acquired by Adapt IT, I later took the opportunity to head the Advanced Analytics team at Adapt IT Telecoms as a Project Delivery Manager. My first task in that position was to form one

Advanced Analytics team that had all the necessary expertise and I did this by combining the CDRlive and Insights team.

What does being a Project Delivery Manager at Adapt IT Telecoms entail?

I’m fortunate to work with a fantastic team. The team consists of some incredibly exceptional and fascinating individuals. A Project Delivery Manager has a lot of duties to take care of. One of the first things I do is assist the team with any technical challenges they may be experiencing. With the experience I’ve accumulated over the years, I can help them when they encounter technical difficulties, or when they are unsure of what to do. I also evaluate our current solution and suggest improvements when necessary for us to operate better.

I keep a close eye on the progress of all of the projects and hold regular meetings with the team to ensure that the final product is delivered to the clients in the requested and satisfied form (on time, on budget, and by the right resources). In addition, we are offering third-line support. As a result, if any production challenges arise, we occasionally halt project delivery in order to address the production issues. I make sure that everything runs smoothly with the production environment and the product delivery.

Taking responsibility for any incidents is a key part of my job. As a Delivery Manager, I strive to be the voice of the team. I act as a communication channel between the team and my managers. If any complications arise during the delivery, I accept full responsibility and ownership of the situation and report it upwards. Following that, I devise a strategy to address such challenges in the future.

I interact with clients to ensure that their needs and requirements are understood so that the solutions we develop and provide meet their requests. I make sure our solutions are also future-proof. We don’t want to create or build a lot of unique solutions when we can create one that will move us forward in time. I collaborate with other managers to ensure we are all working towards Adapt IT’s goals.

I strive to guarantee that we are viable in the long run and can offer effective solutions. Solutions that are both reliable and responding to the customer’s inquiries or request. Likewise, I help the team members have social discussions because there is a social component in addition to the actual work environment and work component.

Please elaborate more on your team’s social interaction and the social components?

I’m attempting to create a culture of friendship and support. We have a fantastic team where everyone helps out. When someone is struggling, someone else steps in to help. This is one of the advantages of facilitating that social component.

Because we are currently working from home most of the time, there is little physical interaction. The first thing we do is come into the office once a week, at minimum, every Thursday. We know that we need to be productive, however, we take the time to socialise, having lunch together and catching-up. Previously, every Friday, we used to gather for a half-hour meeting where we just spoke about life in general as part of our social engagement. We talk about what we're doing this weekend, what's happening with families, and other personal elements. We are looking to reintroduce this within our team.

In our Monday morning catch-up sessions on Teams, we talk about ourselves, our challenges, and our hobbies. On Teams, we have a personal goal board where everyone can post their goals. It can be walking, eating well, or exercising, and once a month, we look through the board and discuss them. I like to show complete interest in people as Human Beings. Life happens, and it isn't just about work. Yes, much work still needs to be done, but humanity also plays a significant role.

How do you empower your team to deliver projects that lead to positive results?

Because I know the individuals in the team and their capacities and experience, I assure team dynamics by ensuring that the right people are assigned to the right tasks.

I also encourage the team to work together so that they can learn from and help one another as this is the best way to grow. I can't assign the same task to the same individual every time because no one will grow or learn. As a result, I help and assist the team to collaborate and create a team-player spirit. In fact, enhancing and encouraging collaboration reduces the danger of being solely dependent on one individual. If one person consistently accomplishes one task and one day is unable to do it for any reason, the project can be compromised and we can be in trouble as Adapt IT. I encourage knowledge transfer from one team member to the next, which results in the entire team being uplifted and upskilled. Furthermore, I don't micromanage. I have faith in the team to deliver and work to the best of their abilities and experience. I attempt to offer them the freedom to express themselves through their work. I provide guidance and monitor to guarantee that we all progress in the same direction. It's crucial to me that everyone on the team understands where we are going. Everybody participates in our weekly meetings, and everyone is aware of what everyone is doing. Each team member is given a chance to discuss their difficulties and present workloads.

I feel that I must be completely open and inclusive with the team. People are open because we have fostered a culture of mutual respect and trust among our team. They come to me with health or family issues. Yes, it is business, but people are not computers or machines at the end of the day. In reality, they are Human Beings with a wide range of emotions, feelings and worries about the future and their homes. So many factors influence our day-to-day delivery.

Some people may go through events in their lives that make it difficult for them to focus on a specific task at the time. To help the client, I have no problem delegating the task to another person. Yes, it's business, and we need to deliver, but if I position someone who is now going through a difficult time, we might not have the best product because that individual wasn't in the best space.

I might shift that individual to a less stressful situation merely to give them some breathing room. It does not mean sitting and doing nothing but rather doing something different that might not be as critical. After a while, we ensure that the individual returns to the team and continues to provide high-quality products and services.

I am attempting to foster strong human relationships among team members since doing so fosters teamwork and, eventually, enables us to generate fantastic solutions because we prioritise people over work. The team typically knows when someone is not well. They encourage one another and send WhatsApp messages such as "good luck", "I'm thinking of you", and "all the best."

Finally, I uplift our team members through appraisals. When a team member does something outstanding, I encourage the entire team to nominate them for recognition. I personally call the person and leave a message to express my thanks for their job. I undertake these appraisals regularly, and we also have performance reviews and individual development plans. We incorporate those reviews into

the individual growth plan so they can use Udemy to further their education.

What was the biggest challenge you faced in a managing position, and how did you overcome it?

I've been a developer for more than 15 years. I am, therefore, quite technical. It was not easy for me to go from a technical to a management role. One of the things I did not want to be was a "boss" who shouts out instructions. Instead, I wanted to be a real leader for the team.

I use to engaged with computers—which have no emotion - now I am in leading a team where many personalities and emotions need to be dealt with. I have learned so much. I am of the opinion that there is a big difference between a "boss" and a leader. In a sports team, for example, there is a captain. But the captain doesn't watch from the side-lines. That captain also participates in the games. And our Advanced Analytics team operates in a similar way to this. Despite being the captain, I don't just stand on the side-lines and give orders. There are projects that the team completes, and there are tasks that I complete as well.

This is the mindset I had to acquire to overcome technical challenges. In light of the difficulty involving our team's diverse personalities and emotions, I decided to listen. Early on, I realised that if I listen and give people an opportunity to speak without interrupting or imposing my opinions, I can accomplish a lot. Then I can be more open-minded and learn things from a different angle.

Do you agree with the approach of "People Behind Technology"? If yes, please elaborate.

Absolutely, I do. We cannot have Technology without people. This is why, when people have personal challenges, it is critical to look after them, for without them, we would not have Technology. So, by demonstrating compassion, commitment, and passion for others, we can accomplish amazing things. When I look at how we operate in the team, I am amazed at what we accomplish and deliver. And that is the reason why our clients give us so much positive feedback. They don't hesitate to write great reviews about us. The secret is that we take care of our clients because we are taken care of as humans. And in my opinion, People Behind Technology refers to an entire team rather than a single individual. It is a group of people who work together to build a Technology for us.

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What advice can you give to the next generation interested in entering the Technology sector?

Open-mindedness is important to me. First try to be open-minded and put this practice into action. I did the same and it was very beneficial. There are several opportunities to grow, learn, and upskill in the technology sector. You can learn and gain experience if you are open-minded. If you are narrow-minded, you will limit yourself and therefore open-mindedness is important to me. Secondly, if you simply listen to individuals with experience, you will see that people have amazing visions because they are passionate about what they do. They have great ideas and concepts and much can be learnt from just listening to others.

Lastly, I will say avoid specialising. I chose not to focus in just one area because we're talking about Technology, which is a vast sector and much to learn about. If you only specialise in one area, that is all you will be doing. And Technology encompasses much more than the small area you are attempting to concentrate on.