

Keeping promises - the glue holding the digital world together

Today, we take digital technology for granted. At the office or at home, we conduct business or keep in contact with friends and family in faraway places, with a light touch on a keyboard. We forget that behind the seamless, on-demand availability of these services are people who interact constantly to deliver the enabling networks and infrastructure. They place trust in each other and undertake their separate, but complementary, roles in delivering a single solution, even though they will almost always be invisible to the end users.

The truth is that digital services are only as good as the people that deliver them. The physical glue that holds people and businesses together relies primarily on a complex infrastructure of thousands of fibre optic cables that cross ocean floors, are routed through 'long-distance' land-based fibre optic networks, and on to data centres near the offices and homes they ultimately serve.

Keeping everything on track relies on high levels of expertise and technical competence.

But, as is the case with both large and small businesses, success and growth depends on promises made and delivered between companies working together on an unseen value chain. It is these providers that utilise key technical and innovative competencies that result in services being carried across the country, and who enable digital promises and service level agreements to be honoured, says Ethel Nyembe, Head of Small Enterprise at Standard Bank.

“Regardless of the kind of business you are in, its size, turnover and the number of people it employs, we have to realise that we are all running enterprises that are technically based. Computer and internet services deliver everything from payments to payroll

solutions to delivery schedules. It is by optimising these services that we can stretch our entrepreneurial knowledge and skills to benefit customers,” she says.

A prime example of this is illustrated in the relationship between FibreCo and BT Global Services, two companies recently featured on *The Growth Engines* series sponsored by Standard Bank and aired on Business Day TV. This particular episode pointed out just how dependent the nation’s big and small businesses, as well as the private and public sectors, are on the co-operation that exists between service providers and network operators in the digital space.

“Bringing the internet and other digital services to your door is about a quality service and absolute reliability. These are some of the core values that drive successful companies, and are used to differentiate one from the other to ensure that they can maintain and grow their market shares in competitive markets,” says Arif Hussain, when explaining the relationship between his company, FibreCo, and its major client BT Global Services.

“What is notable in the networking world is that each supplier along the value chain that crosses oceans, connecting continents, relies on other specialists in independent companies to faultlessly deliver in their specific areas of expertise to ensure that the service promise to the end customer is fulfilled.

Each supplier literally hands over control of services to others at vital switch-points. They then expect that, in line with back-to-back service agreements, their business-critical components are delivered to customers 24-hours-a-day, 365 days a year.”

His views are echoed by Oliver Fortuin of BT Global Services, a leading managed networked IT services and communications provider, who says that along the thousands of kilometres of ocean cables, and thousands of interlinking land-based fibre optic installations, are ‘five or six moving parts’.

“Typically, the infrastructure is stable. The weak link is usually found in management of the digital delivery environment. It is the end customer who expects to get information in seconds who suffers when expectations are not met.

“As suppliers, we must ensure that management is good so that the end-user experience is good. Traffic over the network must be optimised. If there is a bottleneck along the chain, we must know where it is occurring and take the appropriate action.”

Ultimately, says Mr Fortuin, the customer needs to know only one person - the specialist designated to solve their problems. The responsibility for identifying where problems are occurring, and taking steps to ensure that all moving parts play their roles, rests solely on this person’s shoulders.

“Selecting a partner to deliver on our promise is important as it this company that helps extend our span of control, and helps us deliver on the promises we have made to our customers.”

Adds Mr Hussain: “The emphasis on our section of the digital value chain is on understanding what exactly is required of us in order to support the promise made by BT Global Services to its customers. We have to assess where the potential failure points are and what steps are required to manage these risks, so that we can supply a reliable service along our 2 400km fibre optic network that complements the BT service offering.

“The difference is essentially about being able to create a competitive edge for both companies in a crowded digital market place. In any business that relies on the sum of various parts for value-added delivery, effective procurement and effective partnerships are critical.”

“Performance is reliant on building relationships that go far beyond a mere business transaction. A service level agreement is only as good as the performance of your partners and a shared vision,” concludes Ms Nyembe.

The Growth Engines can be viewed on Business Day TV (DSTV channel 412) on Tuesdays at 9:30pm, with repeats on Wednesdays at 10:00am and Thursdays at 2:00pm. For more information and to view in-depth articles on the key themes explored on the programme, log on at bizconnect.standardbank.co.za or bdlive.co.za/indepth/growthengines.