



AQUIVA WIRELESS

HARD DATA: FAST GROWTH



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Zimbabwe's telecommunications industry can only be described as frenetic, as its economy makes up for lost time. Harare-based internet access provider Aquiva Wireless is grasping the nettle of 4G technology to push that growth forward

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Aquiva men installing a mast

Aquiva Wireless is a company on the move, appropriately since its core competency is to provide Zimbabwe with the high speed communications it needs to compete internationally and grow its domestic infrastructure. That infrastructure is coming along well, with 90 percent of the country now having mobile coverage and with a functioning fixed line network linking the country's main business centres.

But the take-up of these services is lagging. Only three percent of households are connected to the fixed line network, and twelve percent to the internet via broadband. The growth of business outside of the capital Harare has been limited by difficulties in getting connected to the internet and advanced data transfer services via fibre optic cable, ADSL or ISDN. Harare is now connected to the rest of the world by fibre via the EASSy and SEACOM link that serves the whole of eastern and Southern Africa, but even here the technical expertise needed to get the most out of the existing infrastructure has been thin on the ground.

Enter Aquiva Wireless. The company founded in 2007 by three Zimbabwean entrepreneurs, CEO Brian Maphosa, COO Artwell Mataranyika and CTO Blessing Mutenga, is above all an internet access provider (IAP) pledged to bringing faster online, satellite and fixed line

communications to the entire population. By 2010 Aquiva had secured its licence to operate from the regulator POTRAZ and today is able to offer services over all platforms including VoIP, VSAT, WiMax and fibre optic. "Right now the majority of our customers are businesses," says Maphosa, "but over the next five years we believe there will be a significant consumer market in Zimbabwe for value-added internet services like e-commerce and other services that rely on high volume data transfer whether for games, banking, social networking or music. We are keen to capture that market too."

Of its business customers, the majority will be found among Zimbabwe's small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Global companies tend to have global networking solutions, but growing businesses are set to be the backbone of Zimbabwe's economic recovery

2007

Aquiva Wireless founded

following 'dollarisation' in 2009. It's a competitive environment, he admits, with fourteen licensed IAPs and many players entering the market including the major telcos such as Econet, TelOne and Telecel. However, Aquiva is not biting off more than it can chew. "Where we come out strongly is in customer service: we offer a highly personalised service, and it's an advantage that we are not too big to do that." And Aquiva has taken great pains to ensure its licence is comprehensive, allowing it to give an end-to-end service from infrastructure installation of base stations or 'last mile'



Aquiva Wireless men at work

\$80 MILLION

Investment planned by Aquiva over the next three years

fibre to retail and the provision of custom built exchanges.

For a new company it has achieved an impressive track record in a short time. It is already offering fibre optic connection to businesses in Harare, Bulawayo, Kwekwe, Gweru and Mutare and installed 4G WiMax and VSAT base stations across the country from BeitBridge on the border with South Africa to the south to Chirundu on the northern border with Zambia and from Mutare in the east to Victoria Falls in the west.

Telecoms technology can be hard to keep up with but Africa, which has never had the luxury of reliable fixed line networks, has enthusiastically adopted the newest alternatives, in many cases leapfrogging through demand the imported technologies. VoIP (voice over internet protocol) is a case in point, and in April this year Aquiva launched its service following protracted negotiations with the mobile operator, Econet and the fixed line provider TelOne. Using VoIP services enables business to cut their phone bills by as much as a half, claims Maphosa, while ensuring a much clearer and more dependable connection. And VoIP has taken Aquiva into the global market by



Training and development plays a pivotal role

enabling companies doing business with Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans living abroad to contact their associates or family member using a number provided by Aquiva. Once you have bought a single number, calls within the network in Zimbabwe are free.

This industry is all about change and innovation says Maphosa. “One really has to keep at the forefront of technical development, and that is what we are looking at over the next three years. We

do not intend to be just another African telecoms brand; rather we want to be recognised as one of the leaders in virtual private networks and enterprise solutions for business and high speed high volume connectivity for families and individuals as well as the dominant player in VoIP.”

He is already looking forward beyond WiMax, sometimes described as Wi-Fi on steroids and enabled by 4G technology now being rolled out by the mobile networks

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in Zimbabwe with the encouragement of POTRAZ. The next enabling technology will be LTE – long term evolution, a new standard for wireless data communications technology that is only available across 4G radio wavelengths, but offers much greater speed and capacity. Data rather than voice will undoubtedly dominate the way people and businesses conduct their affairs, says Maphosa: “I don’t think we have a choice about going for LTE in this country, which is why Aquiva proposes to make an impact in that space.” The speed of LTE rollout will depend on the realities of this market, the level of broadband penetration and last mile connectivity – as soon as the infrastructure limitations have been overcome Aquiva will be ready to bring LTE services to its customers, he promises.

Meanwhile the 30-plus staff are busy installing metro fibre, a rapidly expanding network in all major business centres. Metro fibre is a term for networking a number of buildings or separate business parks in a city, analogous to the network within a modern office block. With speeds up to 1,000 Mbps it enables faster access to internet and data transfer for clients who, once they have experienced it, can’t imagine how they ever managed on traditional bandwidth.



Harare is hungry for data solutions

For more remote businesses where a fibre connection is not available satellite technology is advancing rapidly. Aquiva has signed an agreement to be able to connect its clients to the Broadband Global Area Network (BGAN) using Immarsat to provide global coverage. BGAN offers cheaper satellite connection in the more remote areas and has the advantage of being portable and cheaper than the traditional

VSAT connection and unlike other satellite internet services which require bulky and heavy satellite dishes to connect, a BGAN terminal is no bigger than a laptop and so can be carried easily.

BGAN, WiMax and LTE are in the future while Aquiva focuses on its priority task of satisfying demand in the high population density areas like Harare and Bulawayo, but the future of communications in Zimbabwe will soon depend heavily on these technologies, he believes. “There are opportunities in every sector. Energy, infrastructure, health, retail, manufacturing are all poised to expand and they all face the same challenges. In this country we have barely scratched the surface with e-commerce, let alone e-tourism, e-banking,

e-health, e-education and e- everything else! If you look at the statistics Zimbabwe is one of the top ten countries in Africa in terms of data penetration, but only a small percentage of the population is using the internet at the moment.”

Aquiva has customers in all these sectors, all keen to expand. Over the next three years it will be investing up to \$80 million in establishing a truly nationwide presence, expanding its service and leveraging new technology. By then, Brian Maphosa hints, the company may be ready for an IPO. **BE**

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For more information about Aquiva Wireless visit: www.aquiva.co.zw



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