



BT SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

GETTING NATIONS TALKING



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BT is making a mark in Africa with a large expansion in its headcount, its footprint and its support for a communications network that will unite the continent

WRITTEN BY: JOHN O'HANLON
RESEARCH BY: JAMES BOYLE



BT's MeetMe service
is a new offering to
African clients

Imagine you are a mining company employing a few hundred people at a remote station close to Pofadder or Springbok, two of the remotest towns in the Northern Cape, two hours' drive from the nearest large town of Upington. It is no simple matter to keep connected to the office in Johannesburg, let alone your global HQ in Toronto. You probably wouldn't put it this way but you need someone to manage an SLA (service level agreement) that will bring together elements of GPS, phone lines and fibre to keep you in touch—and provide the maintenance for those networks and all the specialised switching equipment. Your business depends on having a partner with enough clout to keep the lines open, and not many providers can deliver on that sort of SLA.

The single big remaining brake on Africa's development is its need for better infrastructure. Typically the situation is not too bad in the coastal ports through which it has traded with the rest of the world for centuries but communication between African states still lags. Roads and railway networks are receiving a vast amount of overseas investment as well as support from governments waking up to the fact that having got rid of colonial control they have an opportunity to cash in, not only on their natural resources but their vast human potential.

And Africa deserves the best. It is in a position to choose the most effective

solutions available globally. China has possibly seen the potential for partnership in Africa better than Europe or America but in the field of communications it is a British-based company that is leading today. BT established its Sub-Saharan Africa headquarters in South Africa in 1992. As a world leader in the design and operation of mission-critical networked IT services that support the core processes of the world's leading companies, telecommunications providers and governments, it has been able to bring network and telecoms services to global

companies operating in Africa, such as Sasol, the world's biggest maker of motor fuel from coal, and Anglo American, which controls the world's biggest platinum producer.

Take an example. Business leaders down to the humblest office workers all

read about how advances in technology can save them cost and make their work easier. But they are rarely IT specialists, says BT's general manager for Sub-Saharan Africa, Keith Matthews. Video conferencing can save any company significant amounts of money especially if it has multiple sites, and BT's MeetMe service, a new offering to BT's African clients, can be bundled with other services from BT, like Telepresence, in a way that makes no technical demands on the user. "This is video conferencing for dummies! You open up the link, search the person you want to speak to, click on

1992

Year BT established its
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their name to set up a session, type them a message to say, ‘Let’s have a quick video call’, then if they have a camera on their PC they switch that on, connect and off you go.”

In South Africa, conducting a two-hour meeting for up to 40 people spread between Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town takes two hours, whereas travelling between these centres would take at least a day out of the schedule of the people, not to mention the cost of air fares or the stress on individuals.

And all BT’s voice solutions are ‘carrier grade’, he adds. Simply, that means they are not subject to internet connectivity interruptions but connect through BT’s MPLS (multiprotocol label switching)

system using standard networks. So the MeetMe service incorporates Microsoft’s Lync Communicator as well as BT-developed systems so that participants can show presentations or pass the chairmanship to someone else and behave just as they would in a physical meeting. “There are lots of bits of technology out there and what

I think we do very well at BT is to pull it all into a unified communications approach,” says Matthews.

BT started life as a network company, and the network is the core, because however smart the systems you put out over it, keeping the connection open is the primary concern. “We start from the physical network of global and regional

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solutions, so we can provide customers with the core network they need to run their business. Maybe other people can say that as well but because BT has been active so long we have evolved from being just a pure network player into being able to layer a complete package of additional services onto it. There is a lot of cost efficiency in this model where we take the network that we own, add the services we have built and offer that as a one-stop-shop to our clients.”

With more than 100,000 people around the world, BT has the opportunity to refine these services within its own organisation, he points out. With the network in place, it becomes possible to add the voice environment, video services, and then give access to people accessing the network using the iPad, Android devices and smart phones that are booming in Africa. However for business clients there has to be a measure of control: “We help customers manage who is on their network, what access rights they have and what applications they can use and what they can see inside the internal networks of the company.”

BT’s Prosperity growth plan has seen the company feed resources into the areas where its clients are expanding.

Phases 1 and 2 saw it moving into Asia and Latin America, and phase 3, announced in February 2012, will see the number of BT employees in Sub-Saharan Africa grow from 130 to 200. That counts as organic growth, though with a good dose of fertiliser: even more exciting is the decision to buy into South Africa’s FibreCo network, the country’s first

BT has bought into South Africa’s largest open access, long distance, managed fibre network

open access fibre network, by taking up what is an ‘anchor tenant’ status.

FibreCo is building what will be South Africa’s largest open access, long distance, managed fibre network that will span in excess of 12,000 kilometres, starting with Phase 1 linking Johannesburg and Cape Town with international undersea cable landing stations in Melkbosstrand and Yzerfontein. It coincides with the government’s goal of universal broadband access by 2020. Traditionally BT has not invested heavily into domestic networks,



and this move represents a high level of commitment to the regional market.

With his eye constantly on developments to the north, Matthews sees—at last—growing cooperation between the countries of central Africa, especially the

landlocked countries with no direct access to the WACS, Seacom, SAFE and EASSy system that now loops round the continent. “Regional operators along the coastline are beginning to talk to their inland counterparts—countries that used to be entirely dependent on satellites. For example there is a lot of collaboration between regional operators

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to see how they can work together to build terrestrial networks and gain access to the subsea cables that are available.”

One of the features of this market is mutually beneficial collaboration between companies that might be seen as fierce rivals. As an example, in 2011 BT announced an NNI (network to network interconnect) with Internet Solutions, one of the partners in FibreCo, to add more African countries to its delivery footprint. Business advantage always has to be balanced against social growth, Matthews believes. His division employs just one expatriate, and is very active in supporting social programmes; and in Sekunjalo Investments, BT has a local partner generally considered to be among the most successful and progressive of all black-owned groups.

BT encourages its employees to volunteer and allows them time to do this. As part of its portfolio it supports Nkosi's Haven near Johannesburg, a charity for children who are underprivileged or living with Aids, by building a nursery school. It has also provided an IT centre for Infinite Family, a charity that runs a mentorship programme for such children to interact over video conferencing with mentors in any part of the world—an initiative of which Matthews is particularly proud, since it uses technology to promote transnationalism in a way that chimes with BT's values as a business. **BE**

For more information about
BT Sub-Saharan Africa visit:
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BT SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Private Bag X203,
Bryanston 2021,
Culross Court 1st Floor Block B
16 Culross Road Cnr Ealing Crescent
Bryanston
South Africa

T +27 11 709 0900

www.bt.com

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