

COVER INTERVIEW

unity of action

Acting MD of Telkom Business, Johann Henning, explains why convergence is the catalyst that will drive African businesses to prosper on a global scale. By KERRY DIMMER

Every few years new terminology creeps into daily language. This is especially true in the world of technology. Convergence is one such concept and is used to describe unified communication between data, fixed-line data as well as voice, mobile and IT services. Seemingly impossible five years ago, concepts such as convergence have become critical in enabling African business growth and key to efficiently linking the continent to global markets.

In the past few years, growth on the continent as well as an increasing demand for reliable telecoms and IT services means the transition from voice to data has dramatically changed the way business operates.

Combined with the booming mobile market, it has seen more mobile phones in the sub-Saharan region than North America and Europe combined. This demonstrates the demand that individuals – and more importantly businesses and governments – have to ensure they are globally competitive.

Convergence is one of the primary focus areas of South Africa's fixed and wireless operator Telkom. For the past three years, under its business banner, it has quietly yet steadily been mobilising South African businesses to embrace convergence as seamlessly as possible.

Johann Henning, acting MD of Telkom Business, says despite the obvious motivation

to find areas that show revenue growth (given the decline in demand for fixed-line voice communication) Telkom Business is committed foremost to helping businesses thrive in a highly competitive environment.

'African businesses are increasingly competing in a global market where telecoms technology is extremely advanced. Combining the requirement for mobility and dependency on the core fixed-data backbone, it is almost impossible to imagine a business thriving without fixed mobile convergence (FMC) and why Telkom, with a proven track record as Africa's largest integrated communications company, is able to provide a comprehensive business telecoms solution.' Henning says Telkom is best-positioned to provide converged services to business.

A deep-pocketed investment placing 147 000 km of fibre underground across South Africa alone (significantly more than its competitors combined) suggests that Telkom is serious about providing cross-over ICT services in the form of unified communications and cloud services. It's not merely providing connectivity because it has the fibre infrastructure in place.

'We've been very successful in taking broadband to the people rather than expecting people to go to where broadband exists. That does not mean, however, that it is practical or financially viable to lay fibre

optic cables extensively across Africa to reach sparsely populated areas,' says Henning.

'What makes far more sense – and is a reality – is the integration of wireless and satellite architecture with existing terrestrial telecoms infrastructure.

'This obviously puts us in a strong position to offer integrated communication services, which is exactly what convergence is all about. The technology we deploy puts us on a par with international standards,' he says.

Telkom Business has proven it can compete with the world's best. The 2010 World Cup was the most technologically advanced event of its kind at the time, and Telkom was able to successfully support it.

To keep up with trends means adopting global advances yet adapting them to suit the African market. This is an extremely competitive field and also unusual.

Henning says: 'In some areas we vie with our competitors for business, but in others we partner, like we do with MTN where we have a mobile roaming agreement so that we can deploy a full IT converged ICT solution.'

It made sense for Telkom Business to first establish its IP-based virtual private network (VPN) services to support its business customers in South Africa before expanding its offerings to the rest of the continent.

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Africa and the growing infrastructure on the continent, Telkom is now in a position to extend its reliable IP VPN across the entire region.

'There are innumerable models that we can look at adopting in terms of effectiveness, particularly to ensure we remain current, but there's a catch.

'When you look at the density of customers in European and Asian countries, it's relatively easy to provide high bandwidth. However, in Africa we need a different model to ensure we not only reach the rural areas but also cater to a range of business and government requirements.' The South African government interfaces with Telkom as shareholder, regulator and customer.

Henning says: 'Telkom Business is in a position to provide the government with a range of services that enables the expansion of social and police services and other specifics in areas such as education and health, as well as promoting the concept of e-government.

The provision of integrated communications and cloud services to customers and how we help them digitise their world, as well as mobility and application support, are all vital to ensure the viability of African

businesses to compete globally. Telkom Business offerings are vast and include voice services, data networks, mobile, hosting and cloud, broadband access to managed data networks, internet and global services. It also has the necessary supply of the equipment and devices that support this range.

Small businesses are targeted with packages described as 'business in a box'. Telkom Business provides converged and end-to-end solutions so that SMEs can have a 'connected business'.

Henning describes the Telkom convergence offerings as a journey, a concept that constantly expands and delivers increasingly sophisticated solutions.

For instance, the convenience of transporting voice, data and video across one network. Another would be towards FMC.

Henning believes that Telkom can provide the combination of the three essential components of convergence in South Africa: national landline broadband network, an all-IP mobile network and world-class data centre capability.

Not everyone needs a pre-packaged setup, albeit very inclusive. Telkom Business also offers tailor-made fixed-mobile and cloud deals so that businesses can create personalised solutions. 'All our business

offerings are designed to support our customers' business needs,' says Henning.

'We've had very good feedback in terms of our efforts to improve customer satisfaction and this highlights the trust businesses have in our ability to support them in their business ventures.'

Secure that its South African operations are working successfully, Telkom is expanding its IP network further into the African continent and has identified 15 key countries where its multinational customers require services.

The parastatal is currently signing service agreements to support its deployed IP network. 'The changing way we consume technology and the increasing demands on business has made the concept of convergence of fixed, mobile and IT services – and the underlying road maps to unified communications and cloud services – key considerations of business operations,' he says.

'African business cannot expect to continue exploring its growth potential and effectively compete globally without it. If African businesses want to do all the things that convergence offers, then Telkom Business is without doubt the right partner.' **AD**