Future proof your telecommunications workforce today

Telecommunications of the future

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Introduction

The telecommunications landscape in Africa and South Africa sees telecommunication operators increasingly engaged in a campaign to win over the hearts and minds of consumers.

The field of telecommunications has developed rapidly in recent decades, leading to the widespread availability and adoption of advanced communication services and establishing strong consumer connections. These services have greatly shaped the way people interact and conduct business, making communication faster, more convenient, and more accessible than ever before.

From the introduction of mobile telephony in the 1990s, many parts of Africa essentially moved straight to wireless communications, leapfrogging the fixed line system. To the manner in which Telecommunications Company (Telco) operators on the continent are now transforming into technology powerhouses, the story for telecommunications in Africa is set to be slightly different from the rest of the world again.

Pioneering the way in mobile financial services has already created organisations that are the only type of its kind in the world where you analyse the revenue mix between Telco-based services and mobile financial services. This level of innovation is only set to continue, placing increasing demands on the workforce to create, market, sell and service the products of tomorrow.

The future of telecommunications is expected to bring significant advancements and improvements in terms of connectivity, speed, reliability, accessibility, and more recently bringing technology and digital solutions to the world. Is your workforce ready to deliver on this promise?
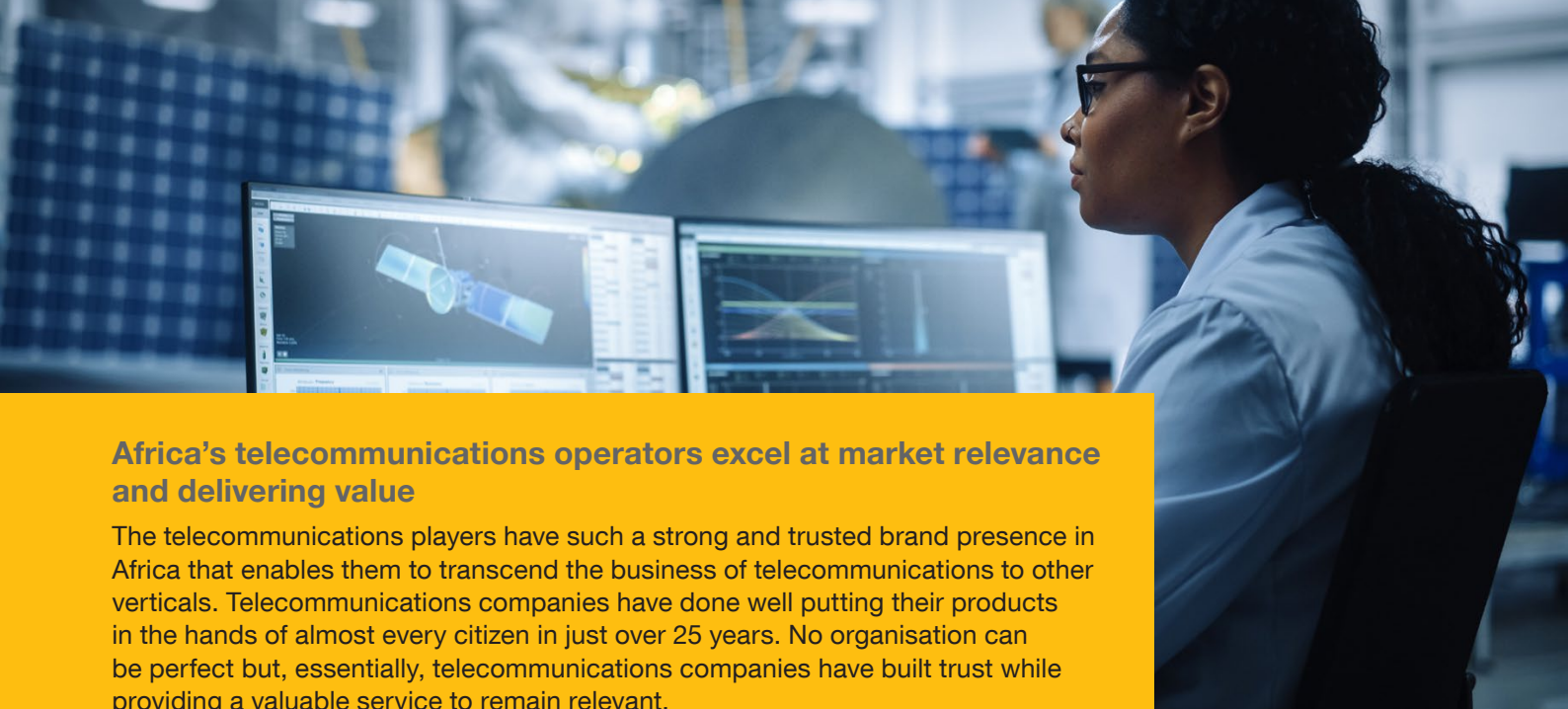
Africa's telecommunications operators excel at market relevance and delivering value

The telecommunications players have such a strong and trusted brand presence in Africa that enables them to transcend the business of telecommunications to other verticals. Telecommunications companies have done well putting their products in the hands of almost every citizen in just over 25 years. No organisation can be perfect but, essentially, telecommunications companies have built trust while providing a valuable service to remain relevant.

Where are we now?

Technology advances and trends are making an impact on the telecommunications industry.

The world of work has changed and continues to do so. Keeping up with the unknown realities of tomorrow means reshaping the traditional business conventions of today into flexible practices that can adapt and vacillate with the changing tides.

Trends impacting telecommunication organisations:

1. **Fifth-generation wireless mobile network (5G) and sixth-generation wireless mobile network (6G) technology:** 5G and 6G technology provides faster speeds, lower latency and improved network efficiency compared to previous generations of wireless technology. This enables new applications and services such as autonomous vehicles and virtual reality. Is your workforce equipped to deal with this shift in generations?

2. **Artificial intelligence (AI) and Machine learning (ML)** are playing major roles in optimising network performance, automating network management tasks, and revolutionising customer experiences. Is your workforce ready to co-exist with bots?

3. **Cybersecurity:** As the number of connected devices continues to grow, cybersecurity is becoming an increasingly critical issue in the telecommunications industry. Network operators need to invest in secure infrastructure and adopt measures to protect against cyber threats and fraud. Is your workforce equipped to protect your organisation?

4. **Network function virtualization and software defined networks** are becoming increasingly important as network operators seek to improve network efficiency, reduce costs and simplify network management. Is your workforce ready to embrace these technologies which imply a stronger emphasis on software development skills?

5. **Commoditization**, the inevitable diversification, and transformation of the Telco. Are you ready to build a brand new set of capabilities while at the same time allowing your workforce to transition into diversified areas of the business as revenue also shifts to new areas? How do you create a structure to ease this transition?

Victory in diversifying telecommunication businesses into technology powerhouses will require a monumental engineering effort with human experience at the centre, fuelled by innovation and agility; enabled by the latest technology. Skills and capabilities in the context of the workforce might just be the biggest challenge facing Telcos as they embark on this transformation.

According to PwC's *2023 Global CEO survey*, 46% of telecommunication companies' CEOs feel that their company will not be economically viable in the next decade if they continue on the same path. Technologically, 76% of organisations say they are investing in automating processes and systems, and implementing systems to upskill workforces in priority areas at (72%), and deploying technology such as the cloud, AI, and other advanced technology at (69%). CEOs say they are primarily consumed with driving current operating performance at (53%), rather than evolving the business and its strategy to meet future demands at (47%). If they could redesign their schedules, CEOs say they would spend more time on the latter at (57%).

What do telecommunications companies need to do to pivot?

Investing in your workforce is investing in your organisation's future. The secret lies in the inherent strengths that these industry players possess and their ability in playing to these strengths by prioritising the workforce and people risks as a business imperative. The hope is that by understanding what these strengths are, the leaders of these industries can manoeuvre and carve out a favourable outcome.

1   Align workforce capabilities to enable the new era of Telcos business strategies

Staying adaptable and resilient in the face of change is a key enabler for the future of work. For telecommunications organisations to thrive, they need to access their people's full potential and develop and execute new, dynamic strategies in the new paradigm shift they are making. The digital workforce is here – and the new possibilities that man and machine in collaboration bring us are endless. The infiltration of bots across many environments from customer care to campaign management to network planning in the Telco space has brought a rich vein of technical innovation. Many Telcos however have a challenge in the correlation of man and machine working together to achieve business objectives. By truly understanding the possibilities of automation within the Telco space, the changing ways Telcos can harness the potential of human skills, and the needs of the business in a changing global business landscape. Telcos can ensure they find, nurture and incentivise the right adaptable, innovative and skilled people they need for the digital age.

2   Solve skills gaps, organisational cultural mismatches and enable the Telco employee value proposition to prepare for the new era of telecommunications

The war for talent within the Telco space rages fiercely. Automation, data analysis, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies can deliver productivity. But technology is only as good as the leaders who identify its opportunities, the technologists who deliver it and the people who work with it every day. That's where some companies are coming up short: the right mix of skilled and adaptable people, aligned to the right culture and with the right mindset and behaviours can help power their Telco business.

It's imperative that telecommunications organisations make investments in systems that build and maintain an inventory of current skills and that support visualisation of gaps in future skills. Human resource analytics is gaining significant traction in the telecommunications space. It has the ability to highlight and encourage the organisation to work towards a long-term plan in a structured manner. Gaps identified can be mitigated with a range of measures, including general and targeted upskilling, targeted hiring and onboarding, enhanced on-the-job coaching, and the designing of career paths and succession plans that enable mobility and subsequently build new skills and experiences through a compelling employee value proposition, enabling retention.

3 Create an environment that supports new ways of working with the right locations, physical spaces, and technology

Consideration of your work environment from an overall workforce strategy perspective enables peak performance by increasing innovation, employee experience, and productivity while decreasing or re-allocating costs. Analysing Telcos location strategies together with labour market analytics, helps Telcos to understand future ways of working to unlock real estate opportunities, create appropriate remote environments, and embed technology and mobility requirements.

Telecommunication operators by design must consider regional offices, warehouses, distribution centres, retail stores, call centres, head offices, and base station sites. With multiple environments now overlaid with virtual working environments and the metaverse, there are many complexities and opportunities.

4 Get strategic business value from the people function:

Strong people leadership is critical to a Telco's ability not just to survive, but to thrive. More than ever, Telco business leaders need the people function to be proactive and creative partners, as they work together to address changing business strategies and ways of working in the workplace. A workplace that should enable flexibility and wellbeing while promoting innovation, collaboration, and productivity. In the world of telecommunications, the principles governing how and why Telcos operate are constantly changing due to technology disruptors, market conditions, competition and regulation. With Telcos people function now at the inflection point, it is uniquely positioned to reimagine workforce structures and enable capabilities that enable Telcos to deliver faster, smarter and more efficiently by leveraging real-time data.

Key questions to reflect upon:

- Does your organisation have the right workforce to meet your immediate and emerging business challenges?

- Have you planned for the skills you will need to enable the sustainability of the future of your business (in-house / outsourced through leveraging the 'gig economy')?

- Do you have an understanding of how today's complex global environment will impact where and how you deploy your talented people?

- Are you ready to invest in your workforce to take advantage of these trends in telecommunications?

- Do you have the necessary mechanisms in place to measure productivity, performance, return on experience (RoX) as well as return on investment (RoI)?
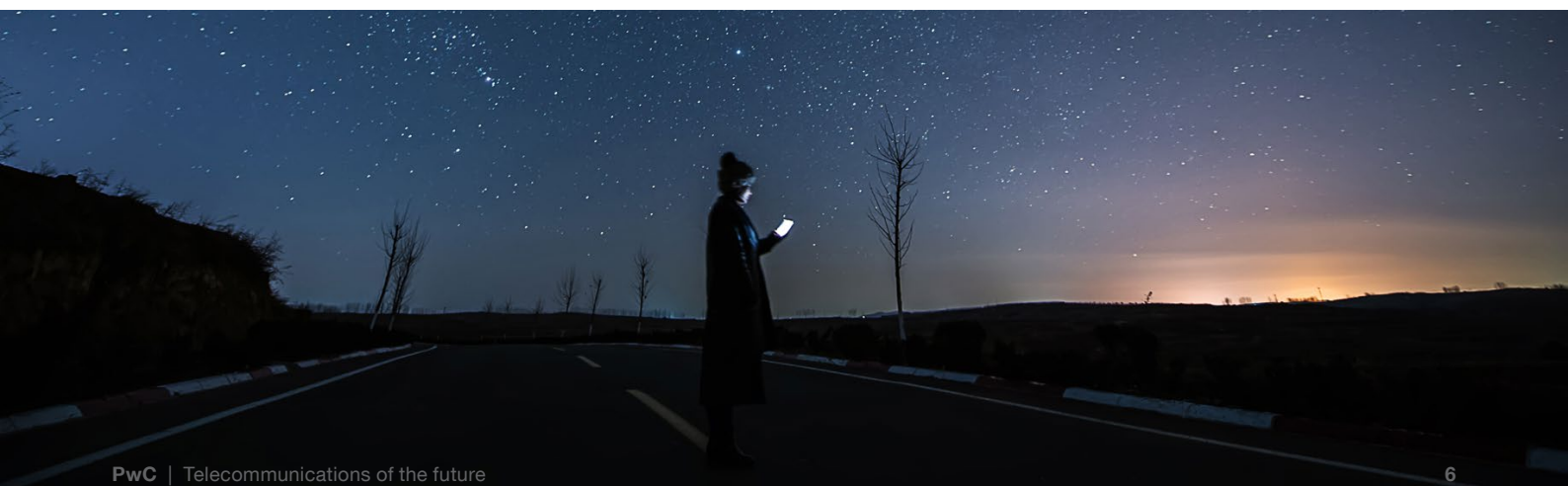
Conclusion:

A new world can emerge for the telecommunications industry, where Telcos have a future-proof workforce, aligned with their strategy, transforming their businesses into technology powerhouses. Bringing an exhilarating experience to their customers that differentiates each player's offering at every turn.

A culture of innovation and continuous improvement, where new ideas are always welcome, will direct the desired employee's performance, ensure a connected workforce, and drive key values and behaviours. Do you have the right skills in your company to embrace this change? PwC can journey with your company every step of the way – from upskilling your workforce to embracing this positive change productively, to transitioning onto an integrated digital platform. For more information on what digital tools to embrace and how to upskill your workforce, empower them through agile ways of working, and motivate your relationship managers, please contact:

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