

Outsourcing infrastructure management is the solution for Africa

According to Plessey, one of Africa's turnkey providers of full life-cycle telecommunications infrastructure solutions, there is more telecommunications infrastructure in Africa than ever before, but also progressively less capacity to optimise it through effective maintenance and management.

Speaking at the Plessey stand at the 2012 AfricaCom conference and exhibition which was recently held in Cape Town, Plessey COO Howard Earley, said that modern telecommunications and connectivity technologies require a more integrated and holistic approach to maintenance and management than was necessary when all countries had some copper cable and mobile base stations limited to major commercial centres.

"Today, telcos and Internet service providers are judged by an extremely fickle market on the speed and ubiquity of their network availability and the sophistication of the collaborative content and services they can deliver on those networks.

Outsourcing is cost-effective

"Guaranteeing these capabilities means that management and maintenance of the network has to be pre-emptive and pro-active. And most telcos and service providers just don't have the financial or technical resources to provide that for themselves across thousands of kilometres of fibre optical cable or for hundreds of base stations, many of which are in remote terrain that is difficult to access," Earley said.

"They're realising that the fastest and most affordable way to guarantee 99.9% network availability is to outsource the maintenance and management of their infrastructure, removing from their businesses the fiscal and executive strain of, for instance, identifying and fixing broken cables or malfunctioning air conditioners or power supplies in any one of hundreds of base stations.

"By handing responsibility for infrastructure management to an organisation like ours, a company saves time and money and massively boosts its ability to be agile in and responsive to its markets. The savings and increased agility directly benefit the bottom line. Infrastructure managed services can actually improve profitability."

Awareness is increasing

Plessey's own client base testifies to the increasing awareness among established African telcos and service providers, as well as start ups, of the need for managed services. At the beginning of 2012, the company was awarded the infrastructure managed services contract for MTN Uganda, and has six teams equipped with the vehicles and technology dedicated to

maintaining the 1 500km stretch of optical fibre that connects Uganda's capital Kampala with Rwanda in the south and Kenya in the east.

Plessey has also been awarded the managed services contract for Kenya Data Network's (KDN) operations in Kenya and Uganda. KDN is Kenya's largest private data carrier and infrastructure provider. In South Africa, Plessey provides managed services to a number of long distance and national network operators.

Earley says that operators and service providers are looking for a partner that can build their infrastructure and then deliver managed services for the infrastructure's full life cycle - in the same consistent, world class way, wherever the infrastructure partner touches their business in Africa and regardless of region-specific issues.

Trained and equipped teams

"That's possible only if the infrastructure solutions provider has deep enough pockets and human and management resources to be able to roll-out fully trained and equipped teams and state-of-the-art facilities, such as network operations centres, pretty much on demand - in any country. And that's possible only if the infrastructure solutions provider has in-country offices, relationships with local and global vendors, established local sub-contractors who take ownership of service level agreements, and a willingness to interact with local communities so as to provide ad hoc labour-based jobs wherever possible.

"In addition, where the solutions provider doesn't have such relationships or offices, then it must have a standardised mechanism in place that enables it to very quickly replicate in a new territory the capabilities it has proven elsewhere in Africa," Earley concluded.

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