

## Africa focused on a connected future

The increase in available bandwidth and lowering of costs makes for a far more competitive connectivity services marketplace. ICT experts suggest that as companies continue to try to establish their offerings and differentiate themselves, the relevance and practicality of certain technologies will come to the fore.

There are those who suggest that the disparate state of the connectivity services market in South Africa is due, in part, to the various business models that exist and the need to make technology work.

Riaan Janse van Rensburg is the chief technology officer (CTO) of ATEC Systems and Technologies (ATEC), a national specialist ICT and software company focused on telecommunications, security and property management systems.

ATEC meets an increasing need for technology services to clients within gated residential communities, as well as commercial clients including business parks, hotels, corporate offices and mines.

The company is experienced in the delivery of various key technologies including: Fibre to the Home (FTTH), Fibre to the Business (FTTB) telecommunication networks, managed security networks, IP Based Video Surveillance systems, Integrated Access Control systems and Telecommunications Billing Systems, amongst others.

"One of the biggest issues within the market today is the movement of bandwidth - there are no routes available for fibre and companies in the business are really doing their own thing. In Cape Town there is a law now which dictates that trenches can only be opened once, and this is very difficult for a competing business. It is not practical, because everybody wants to have the edge on delivering a unique service and with this it is not possible. Fibre is still very expensive and does not suit all business models," van Rensburg explains.

The challenge for businesses wanting to invest in connectivity is what option to choose? According to van Rensburg mobile phone networks are overloaded and mobile data prices are not competitive. "Businesses opt for ADSL because of its availability. The fact is that fibre is faster, consequent and stable, but, unfortunately, the investment to get fibre in the ground is extremely expensive - and a return can take up to a decade, which means it is not viable for small businesses."

The company believes that fibre is the future, but acknowledges that, realistically, it is costly to get the infrastructure in place and access to sleeves is also a challenge.

But the continent is focused on acquiring the means to connect. As van Rensburg suggests, mobility is fuelling the demand, as is social networking and the desire by users to stream and exchange video.

"In South Africa it is not legitimate to download movies or videos, but people do it illegally, and it will one day be legal, and

in the meantime it is happening. Especially in households where there is uncapped connectivity, people download TV-series and movies. As soon as we get AppleTV and Netflix, the demand to more bandwidth will become higher," he says.

## **West African Cable System**

In May 2012, the ICT space was abuzz with talk of the relevance and impact of the official arrival of the West African Cable System - linking coastal regions along West Africa to Europe.

ATEC management suggest that whilst the undersea cable system has reduced the bulk costs for Internet, the challenge remains on distribution of the system nationally.

"Profit margins are so low, that companies selling bandwidth don't make a profit - it is a good thing for consumers, but not for businesses," says van Rensburg.

In general, cable routes, trenching, civils (physical work to install fibre cables in the ground) and access to the routes remain the most significant challenges to widespread and cost-effective connectivity in Africa.

ATEC believes that focussing on these issues is the first point of departure in making progress towards a vastly more connected continent.

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