

Airtel

A lot to learn, a lot to gain



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The world's third largest telco, Bharti Airtel, has started digitizing its operations in the regions where it's active: Asia and Africa. In some ways, the company is walking a different path than others by making it changes strategic and focused. The company's global CIO Harmeem Mehta took us along on this journey.

By Mi Xueping





Making the right plays

Historically, the tech-driven telecom industry has evolved faster than other verticals, with telcos transforming services every few years to move quickly up the ladder from 2G to 3G to 4G, and now to 4.5G and 5G pilots.

However, in what's touted as the fourth industry revolution, consumers have emerged as the main drivers of digital transformation. According to Mehta, "Their lives are getting far more digital, and they expect service providers to keep pace." That's why the telecom industry has tuned in to customer experience – a consistent E2E experience is the best way for a telco to differentiate itself.

Airtel has divided itself into different tracks based on themes of the customer journey, like awareness, consideration, purchase, retention, and advocacy. "In our digitization

strategy, Airtel is dividing itself based on these themes," explains Mehta, "So we're led by the customer journey and consumer behavior, not our historical behavior like organizational structure or business segments."

Designed and deployed in-house, Decision Tree works for customers by setting call center agents on the quickest path to resolving customer issues, which is complemented by a field app that automatically processes customer requests for SIM delivery at home or for new connections.

On the flip side of its customer facing strategies, Airtel has bypassed making sweeping internal changes, "We don't need to. What we've done is to take key people out of each vertical who head each theme and bring them together to do the digitization for us," says Mehta. In this regard, Airtel is picking the right people for the job across its operational chain, maximizing changes while minimizing organizational disruption.

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Lessons from Africa

Airtel knows that its African and Asian customers are different, which Mehta believes opens up a new way for telcos to “disrupt a lot of things in this world.” She feels these continents as not only mobile first, but are becoming mobile only economies, particularly Africa.

African consumers are clearly on the ball digitally. In Nigeria, for example, 65 percent of the population is below 24, so the nation has come of age in a digital world. This fact is reflected in the nation’s tremendous social media use, which accounts for 78 percent of all its Internet use, according to Pew Research.

Africa is also the fastest adopter of mobile money in the world. A joint survey by the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and Gallup World Poll shows that 15 of the top 20 mobile money using nations can be found in Africa.

To Mehta this means there’s a “tremendous amount to learn.” When Airtel was granted the payment bank license by the Indian government in 2015, “the margins for mobile money were very low,” she says. “[But], it’s a mass business where the mark of success is

to keep the money circulating.” She believes that’s why the model needs extensive penetration and adoption before it can really become successful, and “that’s where India can learn from Africa.”

Fixing the engine while the car’s still running

The tech needs to keep up with changing consumer expectations by giving a better customer experience, which in large part means simplifying it. But the journey’s not easy. When telcos transform their networks and IT architecture, they need to keep applications running smoothly. “NFV is a little harder than everything else, because when you’re transforming the network, it’s like you’re fixing the engine of a car while it’s still running,” concedes Mehta. “But those are the kind of the problems that engineers love. They thrive on them. They’re having a ball.”

The marketing buzz in every vertical is around customers; but, Airtel shows us there’s more to it than that. It’s about making the right changes internally, it’s about learning from the right plays externally, and it’s about knowing who you’re transforming to serve. 