Developing nations

Communications networks have the power to bring about radical cultural change in the developing world, as CEO for Digicel Asia Pacific Michael Murphy has seen during his time at the helm.

Fifteen years since its commercial launch into the global market in 2001, Digicel Group has propelled itself in the telecommunications arena as a leading service provider with growing IT businesses in 31 markets across the Caribbean, Central America, and Oceania (Asia-Pacific) regions. Today, Digicel has more than 13 million users spanning diverse geographies and cultures.

Michael Murphy is the CEO of Digicel Asia Pacific, comprising the vibrant island nations of Fiji, Nauru, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Michael, originally from County Limerick in Ireland, now moves between offices in these tropical isles from hilly PNG, with a population of more than six million, to the coral atolls of Nauru with 9,000 people. However, he is strategically based in the hub of the Pacific, Singapore.

“It was just coincidence that a previous mentor of mine whom I had worked for in the past got in touch about an opportunity in Fiji, working with Digicel,” Michael says. “That was in 2008, and I’d only just become engaged a few months before the call, but I knew of the company and its approach to changing the communications landscapes in previously underserved markets.” It was an approach that seemed appealing enough to Michael, so much so that a quick decision was not difficult to make. He said yes in June, married his fiancé in October, and arrived in Fiji two weeks later. “It was a big change for us at the >>
Digicel Fiji was launched the month Michael arrived, the same year the company established the Digicel PNG Foundation. Based on operational strategies implemented since 2001 and replicated successfully in several other markets, Digicel's mobile subscriber base has grown from 0.4 million as of 31 March 2002 to 13.6 million subscribers as of 31 March 2015.

Digicel CEOs, in accordance with company values, are resolvedly committed to active marketplace engagements, as opposed to office desk undertakings. Michael spends a significant amount of time island-hopping, with countless trips to each of his six markets. “The regional head office is in Singapore,” he says, “but my role as CEO for the Pacific means that I spend most of my time travelling. I spend three weeks of every month in the marketplace; of that, about two weeks are in Papua New Guinea. We are a company that believes it has to experience its customers’ service and network connections, and understand their perception of the brand. It’s really important to us, from the chairman right down to our front line agents. We like to connect with the customer every day to better our understanding of their needs and requirements and to also ensure our network maintains a high standard.”

One of Digicel’s key mechanisms in ensuring a strong connection with its customers is the employment of a large proportion of local talent in all of its centres in the Pacific and beyond. “At least 98 per cent of our employees are from the country,” Michael explains. “We both select and help develop a strong base of good local talent. From a communications perspective, for countries where English is not the main language we use the local language at most customer touch points. PNG is more challenging, as it is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world. With over 800 active languages in the nation, it’s tricky, but we communicate with our customers through SMS in both English and also Tok Pisin—a common local dialect. In Tonga, the call centre agents converse in Tongan; in Fiji, it’s mainly English but we do offer Hindi and Fijian language options. In Nauru we provide service in English and Nauruan, and for Samoa our agents speak in Samoan. Our brand is global but we act local by adapting and tailoring our communications for each country.”

It sounds complex—a logistical nightmare—but Michael views embracing local culture as essential to success, and takes it all in his stride. “It’s hard to explain,” he says, “but I don’t feel it’s onerous. Sure, they are all individual nations with unique cultures and challenges but when you put management structures in place, with people who know the market, and you’ve got good, strong, local teams, then you become very confident in their ability to deliver. Really, it’s just about being able to ensure that we can support our staff in a way which both allows and empowers them to make a policy decision locally, but with support from a central function in Singapore where we ensure that they have the ability and capability. We also invest our capex in a way that allows for very efficient delivery.”

When questioned about a fascinating aspect of his work, Michael reveals in the fact that the majority of Asia-Pacific countries are relative newcomers to mobile technology, let alone social media and on-demand entertainment. “The thing about some of our countries,” he adds, “is that the technology we are bringing to customers is new. People have had the internet in Australia for around 20 years, so it’s been used for some time there across all age groups. However, if you take PNG, for example, in 2007 there were limited communications in the capital Port Moresby and extremely limited communications outside of that. Move forward to 2015–16, and more than 90 per cent of the population have access to voice calls and SMS, and 50 per cent have access to data, which means the internet has really only been accessible for many people in PNG for five years. For these newcomers, Facebook and social media are simply other methods of communication—so when they get a smart phone with pre-installed apps it gives them more ways to communicate with their family and friends locally and abroad. It is very different here—because many past technologies have been leapfrogged and instead our customers learn and embrace the technology of today.”

In describing the set-up of services in remote areas, Michael explains, “We begin with meeting the head man or chief from the local tribe and explaining what it will mean to him and his people. In some cases, it’s the first time he has ever seen a mobile phone. Once approval is granted, we basically have to install equipment using helicopters, traverse up and down rivers, using all sorts of forms of transport. To do that, you have to work with all of the tribes in the area, plus on every one of our sites there is a local person that communicates with the local landowners and the local tribes, making sure that they generally understand what we are trying to do and the effects for the community. They also make sure that we work with their local beliefs and local traditions. It is often the case that you have to wear their local dress. PNG is a very traditional country and they have very deep traditions, and we make every effort to respect these.”

“We are successful at Digicel because we are very adaptable as a company; we see things from the perspective of a newcomer and we can change the way we do things. When questioned about a fascinating aspect of his work, Michael reveals in the fact that the majority of Asia-Pacific countries are relative newcomers to mobile technology, let alone social media and on-demand entertainment. “The thing about some of our countries,” he adds, “is that the technology we are bringing to customers is new. People have had the internet in Australia for around 20 years, so it’s been used for some time there across all age groups. However, if you take PNG, for example, in 2007 there were limited communications in the capital Port Moresby and extremely limited communications outside of that. Move forward to 2015–16, and more than 90 per cent of the population have access to voice calls and SMS, and 50 per cent have access to data, which means the internet has really only been accessible for many people in PNG for five years. For these newcomers, Facebook and social media are simply other methods of communication—so when they get a smart phone with pre-installed apps it gives them more ways to communicate with their family and friends locally and abroad. It is very different here—because many past technologies have been leapfrogged and instead our customers learn and embrace the technology of today.”

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Recognising that not one approach works with every single island within the Pacific. For example, in PNG, the highlands are very different to the coastal areas, so you have to approach each differently, but one thing is consistent: by using local insight and continually learning and evolving we can keep moving forward.

Another key to Digicel’s success in the region is due to its long-term partnerships with suppliers like Redknee, Huawei, and Ericsson. “Our overall network suppliers are key to our business, we are dependent on them,” Michael says. “Not just for providing technology, but also providing innovation. We have evolved our organisation from just being a mobile services operator to becoming a total communications and entertainment provider, and obviously our vendors have come with us on this journey; they’ve grown and changed with us. We have very agile relationships. There is a lot of pressure to make sure delivery occurs and so we need to work closely together to ensure all goals are met.”

“We are, in effect, a sales and marketing company. We need to be focused on both the external environment and also make sure that we have partners who can ensure that our internal environment works as well. That’s why we work with vendors that we have developed long-term relationships with.”

Innovations have also had the added bonus of assisting with high staff retention. “We have made Digicel a vibrant and exciting place to work by using the innovations offered by our suppliers and by constantly evolving,” Michael explains. “The company is completely different now from five years ago. We are now well on our path of evolution from a telecommunications company to a total communication and entertainment provider. In addition to a diverse range of consumer and business products and services, we now offer top-quality content: customers can affordably purchase a TV service—including HBO, have access to the very best sports, and also enjoy the best movies from around the globe.

Customers can also purchase health insurance and life insurance from their phone. From a customer’s perspective, we are expanding to help provide more services to make life easier.”

Michael adds: “From an employee’s perspective, our evolution means that they have the opportunity to embrace new businesses and challenges, and to learn and adapt their skills on an ongoing basis. Some employees join us to work on one area, and if they display the appetite and skills, their portfolio and knowledge soon expands. On many occasions, I’ve heard employees positively reflect on their journey and growth within our company—it really is a place of endless opportunities.”

“The vibrancy of the Pacific region with a yearning for development comes with incredible opportunities and also with challenges. Digicel operates across cultures, time zones and terrains. The geographic dispersion of islands and isolation is in some cases an issue, as access to subsea cabling and faster access to the web is limited. We are, however, working with partners and investors to bridge the digital divide and bring about the death of distance.”

Michael relishes the challenges of working in the developing world, and it is a key strategy of Digicel—having started in the Caribbean—to take risks and open up new markets. So far, the Pacific nations to benefit directly from this are Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Nauru, and Papua New Guinea. “Better communications networks are better for all business—not just the Digicel bottom line. Greater access to affordable communications in turn leads to further investment, and communities start to flourish,” he says. Moreover, Digicel is committed to giving back to the communities in which we operate. We sponsor many sports teams and education programs, among other projects. As a company, we really believe in giving back when we grow our business, and we have a large foundation in PNG that supports the nation by investing in the development of schools, community programs, and health services. We have built hundreds of schools in rural locations and have invested in medical centres and roving medical service vans across the country. We also have a fantastic program called ‘Men of Honour’, which aims to help promote positive masculine behaviours towards women by elevating the men in the community that do an outstanding job. In each country, we engage at a really local level with a diverse range of social and community activities.

“There has been an explosion of smart phone usage in the last two or three years and alongside this is an increase in data usage. While this is in line with global trends, in our countries, some customers are both transitioning to their first phone and to data usage at the same time. But the benefits of the adoption of communication and data services are far and wide. Access to the internet makes a massive difference to people’s lives; for people at work, for kids and educational purposes, for parents being able to check prices, for people running micro businesses, for making it easier for families and friends to communicate or to simply provide a little entertainment. The initial roll-out of services can be testing—making sure that the services maintain quality and customer satisfaction is an ongoing challenge—but Digicel makes it possible by having the right local teams and the right relationship with our partners.”