

MTN SA, Huawei launch the first LTE LAA network in Africa

MTN and Huawei have partnered to bring the first LTE Licensed Assisted Access (LAA) network in Africa. LTE LAA is an evolution of the LTE-Unlicensed mobile technology, which enables LTE to utilise unlicensed spectrum to significantly enhance network capacity.



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The LTE LAA trial was completed by aggregating 15MHz of MTN's licensed 2100MHz spectrum with 40M of spectrum located within the unlicensed 5GHz band. This achieved a peak downlink throughput of over 400Mbps as measured by Ookla Speedtest application.

Giovanni Chiarelli, chief technology and information officer for MTN SA, says LTE LAA will be a game changer for the industry and will provide customers with an enhanced network experience.

“We have been hamstrung by the lack of access to certain bands of spectrum, but we are pleased with what we can achieve within the limitations we are working under. MTN has committed substantial capital expenditure which will help us to augment our network, and we are looking forward to provide our customers with a world-class network that will vault them into the digital age and enable them to undertake demanding applications,” says Chiarelli.

The lack of critical high-value spectrum has compelled MTN to refarm existing spectrum and combine existing licensed mobile spectrum with unlicensed 5GHz spectrum to increase mobile broadband data speeds.

Due to the use of the unlicensed 5GHz band, which has a very short-range determined by regulated transmit power limits, LTE LAA will be used for in-building LTE deployments.

“Quality indoor coverage has always been a challenge for operators, and we hope that this LTE LAA will considerably address this challenge and ensure that our customers remain connected regardless of their location. This is one of the ways that MTN leads the delivery of a bold, new digital world to its customers,” says Chiarelli.

LTE LAA uses the Listen Before Talk (LBT) functionality to enable it to coexist in the same area as Wi-Fi networks without degrading their performance. This functionality is the key difference between LTE LAA and the previous LTE-Unlicensed mobile technology, and is considered critical to ensuring optimal co-existence between Wi-Fi and mobile networks.

Currently, all tests have been conducted on a non-commercial prototype device, as commercial handsets are not widely available. MTN expects that commercial devices that support LTE LAA will be available in the market later this year.

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