

Connectivity is key to building a progressive nation

 By [Eckart Zollner](#)

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The discussion around connectivity in South Africa has to evolve. It's no longer just about infrastructure and the advantages broadband delivers, it's about the country's participation and progress on a global level in a digital era. For South Africa to reach past its current limitations, a new mindset is needed - one focused on South Africa becoming a progressive nation and society.



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Businesses today are increasingly reliant on technology and as such, broadband has become ever-more important. The benefits of cloud computing and fast broadband include increases in efficiency, growth of productivity and cost savings. Companies no longer have to own infrastructure or software – it's available in the cloud as pay per use and hosted offerings.

Backend tasks like backups and storage are also easier with broadband throughput and cloud storage. However, the challenge for companies outside South Africa's metro's where there is little broadband connectivity is not just lowering cost of business and increasing efficiencies to compete. The arrival of the digital era means South African businesses and their service models are facing competition from unexpected places.

Digital changes the game

Traditional models are being replaced, with new players with digital business models taking market share away from incumbents. Digital adoption also means that businesses need to engage with clients and partners differently. To participate, companies need to be connected, and they need to digitilise their offerings and operations end to end.

Digital erases borders' and opens up markets. That's good for business. It's also good for people looking abroad for jobs and income as a connected, digital world makes the work ideal of 'anywhere, anytime' a reality. This brings us to the challenge of education in South Africa. In rural areas, people are being left behind in terms of education. It's one of the many reasons they are migrating to commercial centres.

The mindset shift should be towards how do we build a progressive nation, one that can compete on a global level?

Government's progress in terms of digitisation and transformation sets the pace for the country. As the various departments begin the process of digitilising to serve a digital citizen they have the opportunity to review and revitalise their processes, engaging more meaningfully and effectively with them. Across sectors, fear of job losses to technology advances can hold progress back. The answer is upskilling – it will address skills gaps and skills shortages, and enable us to compete on a global stage.

Competing globally

We live in a global society so we must compete globally. Foreign direct investment will only come when investors rate the enabling services they need to do business as satisfactory. South Africa has the platform to do it – we are the leading light on the continent, but we lack a progressive mindset. We need a new vision. The answer is not more control or regulation to manage this dizzying change we are seeing in every direction.

Today, technology and with it, the way we do business and live our lives, changes so often that regulatory authorities simply cannot keep up. That can slow us down. It is perhaps important that South Africa as a country reviews and revises its policies and rethinks what it is trying to protect.

We can take our lead from other countries. The EU for example, understands the need to protect privacy. It also understands that long and drawn out licensing processes are not needed to implement that. Quite simply, market forces will dictate change faster than any regulatory body. In this context, the state needs to relook what it needs to control and what it can leave to the open market to manage. While limited resources like radio spectrum need to be carefully managed, we are living in a period of great and rapid change – we cannot be afraid to explore.

At the same time, if progress is our goal, we need to change how we allocate scarce resources and opportunities related to communications and connectivity to realise the full potential of the economy. Services are as, if not more important, than financial gain if we want to find a way to reach 100% penetration of broadband in three to four years.

The shift is from earning to growing. For example, rather than selling off spectrum to the highest paying operator, let's consider how we will ensure we can provide connectivity to all LSMs – whether that allocation comes with a service obligation or other instruments that ensure the operator's commitment to increase penetration. This means government has to commit too. It needs to be clear about its policies – it is difficult to be a regulator and a player, and hope to attract investment in those areas.

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