Africa leads the way with mobile data

There has been a significant shift in the telecommunications landscape over the last 15 years, and the fast evolution of connectivity has brought us from the screeching tones of a dial up connection to ADSL, fibre, Wi-Fi and 2,3 and 4G connections.

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This progression has impacted both business and our personal lives, bringing the world to our fingertips almost faster than we can blink. In South Africa, fibre is taking us to the next level of this evolution, bringing about exciting change and with it, faster connectivity than ever before.

Fibre is the current buzzword in South Africa and trenches are being dug and filled with fibre cable across the globe, barring much of the rest of Africa. Many African countries are bucking the trend towards fibre access for everyone, opting instead for the plentiful benefits of mobile connectivity. But why is mobile connectivity winning out over fibre in Africa?

The mobile advantage

"Countries such as Kenya are seeing a massive uptake of smartphones and mobile connectivity," says Danny Ross, executive head: Africa at Jasco Enterprise. "Not only are smartphones readily available, but the demand for data has driven mobile service providers to offer very competitive data packages. So mobile data can be purchased and used relatively cheaply compared to other data service offerings."

Data streaming has also become faster and coverage has become wider. Even people in remote locations can often access the internet with a smartphone. Over and above the reasonable data costs, this is where the benefits of mobile connectivity become most evident: mobile service provisioning is quicker and easier than fibre to deploy to remote areas. Service providers need simply erect a base station and they will be able to immediately provide services to multiple customers.

"We are also seeing a profusion of applications becoming available, designed specifically for the African market," continues Ross. "There are applications such as Mocality, a Kenyan business directory, and SlimTrader, an app that enables small businesses, like street vendors, to process payments on their mobile phones."

Applications that make life easier are one of the key drivers behind mobile connectivity's success in Africa. Many people choose to interact with each other and with businesses online, and smartphone applications that centralise and simplify this process offer the best platforms to do so.

But what about the businesses?

According to Ross, individuals aren't the only subscribers of mobile data. Despite fibre making inroads into the African market, many African businesses are still choosing to use mobile data. With data prices in the rest of Africa being considerably cheaper than in South Africa, and without needing to wait for months to get connected as is often the case with fibre, businesses are seeing the benefits of cost effective, fast connectivity. There is also the added benefit that mobile data can reach almost anywhere, so businesses outside of urban areas can usually get connected.

Organisations are also cashing in on the application trend. Many companies are developing their own applications in order to connect with – and sell to – their customer base. This is especially true of financial institutions who are enabling branchless banking for their customers. Companies are also using mobile applications themselves to fulfil many business functions, such as online banking, payment facilitation and route planning.

So what's the downside? Ross admits that there are a few possible disadvantages. While mobile data coverage is extensive, it isn't omnipresent and there are areas where coverage could be scarce or non-existent. Additionally, companies who have very large bandwidth requirements may elect to use an alternative method of connectivity, as mobile data may not always offer the speeds required for efficiency in such cases.

"The benefits far outweigh the disadvantages," finishes Ross, emphasising exactly why Africa chooses mobile data over any other technology. Although there is still a market for technologies such as fibre and Wi-Fi, Africa's innovative use of mobile data and applications to make life simpler and better is lightyears ahead of anywhere else.