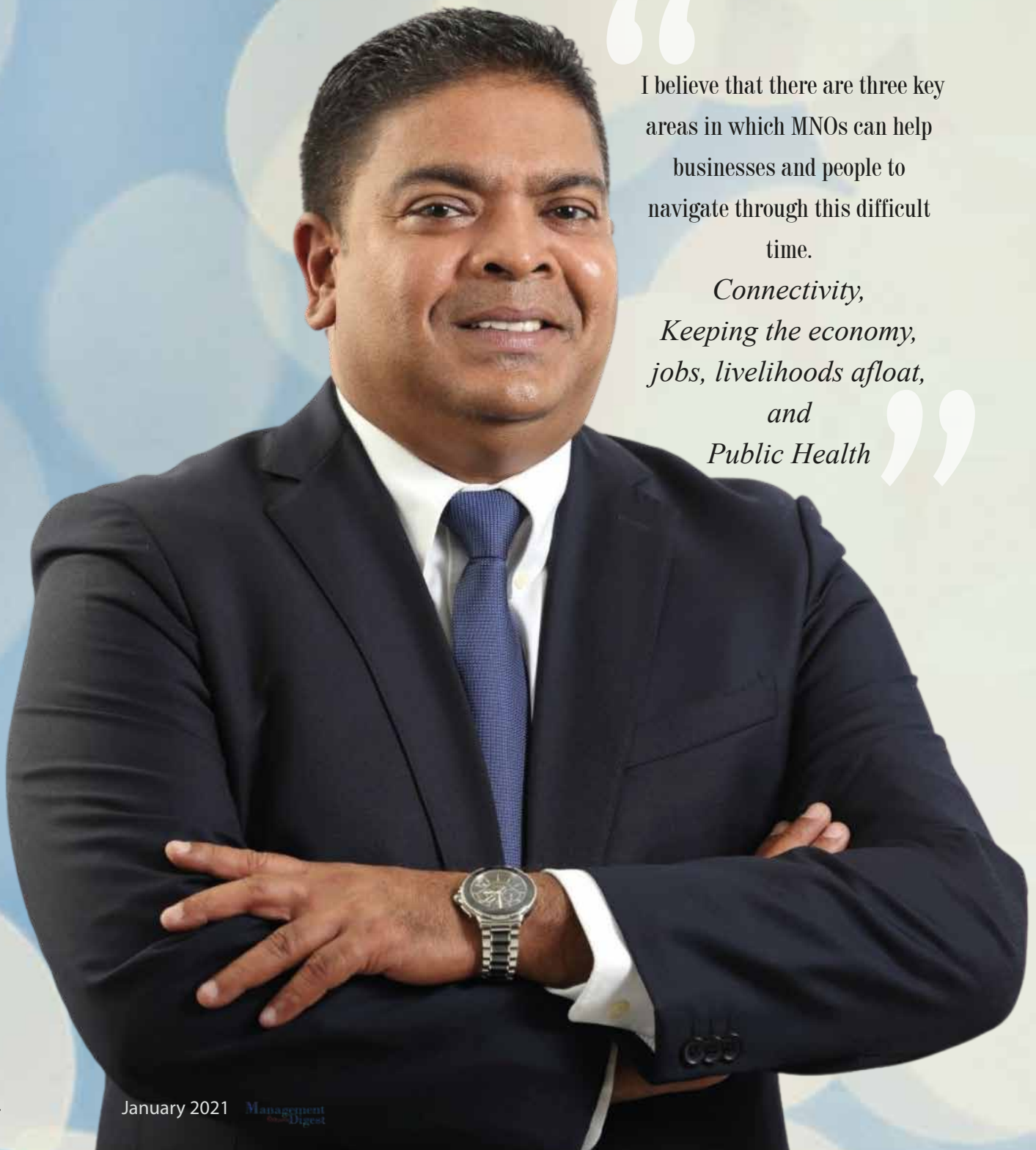


Forging through the Storm

The role of Telcos in helping the nation to sail through the COVID-19 pandemic



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*Connectivity,
Keeping the economy,
jobs, livelihoods afloat,
and
Public Health*

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As COVID 19 continues to cripple the world, Communication providers have found themselves at the heart of a fast changing world; to help businesses to continue the day-to-day operations and connect people with their loved ones. Whilst the industries work around the clock to navigate through the global pandemic, Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) have an essential role to play by empowering businesses and people to stay connected during these unprecedented times using cutting-edge technologies.

Though the term “social distancing” has, regrettably, become the new phrase of 2020, remaining socially connected through virtual means has become acute for our safety, sanity and our best efforts to keep the global economy moving. It is in this backdrop, the role of Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) have become vital to provide the critical infrastructure that enables social connectivity in a physical distancing world.

Dr. Jayantha Dewasiri, a well-known researcher and Senior

Lecturer at the Faculty of Management Studies had the opportunity to meet Mr. Nalin Perera, CEO, SLT Mobitel Limited to talk about the role of MNOs and how Mobitel has positioned itself to facilitate businesses and people to stay connected during this difficult time.



*Dr. Jayantha Dewasiri
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Following are the excerpts of the interview;

In your view, what ways can Telcos help the world to sail through this storm?

I believe that there are three key areas in which MNOs can help businesses and people to navigate through this difficult time.

Connectivity becomes key: It is important that businesses and people remain connected during this difficult time to communicate and look after each other. For businesses, it may be communicating their new services or announcing new operation tactics to employees and stakeholder whilst for the general public it's about caring for their loved ones. At the end of the day connectivity becomes crucial to keep the world connected especially during challenging times such as Covid.

Keeping the economy, jobs and livelihoods afloat. When operations of the business world is interrupted, it has a direct impact on a country's economy, jobs and people's livelihoods. Understanding the Covid impact on key

business sectors, we as MNOs increased our focus towards promoting digitalization for businesses and for the public. This included equipping and helping businesses to embrace digitalization, enabling them to carry out their services through digital means and conclude transactions using digital payment channels.

For instance, digital payment channels enable businesses & people to top-up their accounts and conveniently facilitate to fulfill their needs. With the world is moving towards a cashless economy and digital payment modes becoming mainstream, adoption of such digital payment channels by businesses and people will not only help Sri Lanka to stay afloat during this difficult time but will also catapult the nation towards a new digital era.

Public Health, a top priority. Caring for people and for their health becomes crucial as survival and wellbeing of people become key at this point in time. The most important thing MNOs can do is to keep people away from public places by providing services at their fingertips.

By encouraging businesses and people to embrace digital channels, telcos have the ability to maintain operations intact and help businesses and people to live through the new normal. Be it a business selling FMCG item, messaging with friends, video calling your grandmother, or being able to get money from government institutions, mobile phones can facilitate all these needs whilst keeping us healthy and sane.

Further, with the vast reach and network infrastructure, telcos have the ability to keep the public informed about health updates, lockdowns from local or national government that ensure people are following public safety guidelines. If we look at from a broader point of view, today, telcos have gone beyond their call of duty to not only provide connectivity, but also gear the world towards embracing the new digital wave.

What is the role of Telcos in uplifting the education in a pandemic period?



As Covid brought the education sector to a complete standstill, we as connectivity providers immediately worked around-the-clock in providing the necessary infrastructure and connectivity solutions to help the undergraduates, students and institutes to carry out their day to day learning activities in a hassle free manner.

The very first challenge MNOs faced were how we can get students and teachers online? Because, if you look at Sri Lanka we have a digital divide where people in urban areas are more savvy with the latest technologies and the others are not so familiar with digital literacy. We knew it was challenging, but we partnered with the Ministry of Education and online learning platforms to integrate and support the younger generation to carry out their learnings without any difficulties.

Further, at Mobitel, we conceptualized exclusive product packages

such as 'Learn from Home' with a host of value added features to support students from different categories and teachers to continue their services. For example, a university student does a lot of collaborative work hence they spend a lot of time on research, team video conferencing whilst on the other hand a student who is in grade 5 only needs either voice or messaging facility to connect with their teacher. Understanding this deviancy, we crafted exclusive packages to support all these segments whilst offering enhanced benefits such as extended data usage, Value added packages for WhatsApp, Viber, and Zoom platforms. As MNOs, we are not only privileged of helping the nation's younger generation during this difficult time but we also take pride in driving the future generation towards embracing digital literacy and transforming Sri Lanka towards a knowledge rich society.

At Mobitel, what are the key steps you have taken to facilitate businesses and people during this crisis?

As the Caring Network, we always place our stakeholders at the heart of our core business functions. So, aligning ourselves to serve our valued stakeholders during this difficult time was no greater task for us. However, the rise of Covid across the globe was unexpected for any industry and as a result we had done the following to help businesses and people to remain connected during the national hardship.

New Product Propositions:

As connectivity became crucial during lockdowns, we conceptualized new product propositions for businesses and people to offer value added services, helping them to remain connected. For businesses our products focused on providing businesses continuity offerings whilst the consumer segment products were centralized towards offerings value added services such as relief packages, extended data offerings bonus talk time for people under lockdown areas and quarantine centres to stay connected with their loved ones.

Strategized Businesses Operations to offer uninterrupted Services:

Whilst we help the nation to sail through this storm, it is also important that our work force remain safe, well and efficient to offer uninterrupted services to the enterprise and retail sectors. Understanding the essential role of telecommunication and Mobitel's active part in maintaining the Socio economic activity of the country during this challenging time, we strategized our

operations to operate in clusters, keeping in mind in an event if one of our employees identified COVID positive, we are able to isolate that unit and continue to offer uninterrupted services to our valued stakeholders. Further, we also deployed a state-of-the-art software to promptly support our employees to work from home without any difficulties. Further, this also helped us to identify and strengthen our business operation and consolidate the strength of different units to offer differentiated and efficient service offerings.

Supporting national level efforts to combat against COVID:

As the National Mobile Service Provider, we have partnered with several local and international organizations such as the Health Promotion Bureau, World Health Organisation and UNICEF to fight against Covid. The prime focus of these tieups targeted promoting awareness on a national level and using Mobitel platforms to help people to connect with the government authorities to seek help in case of an emergency. As the country endures the hit of Covid, we are continuing to extend this facility to all Sri Lankans and trying our best to keep the country's economy, jobs and livelihoods of people afloat.

Improved infrastructure for resilient Service Offerings:

When lockdowns started across the country, we saw an immense increase in network traffic as businesses were operating from home and people got immersed in entertainment. Understanding the sudden spike, we made swift improvements

to the network infrastructure to bare the load and offer seamless experience whether it's a business operating from Jaffna or a person who's watching YouTube from Galle.

Finally, helping SMEs and businesses to embrace digital and become more resilient and innovative:

Though the pandemic has resulted some businesses to collapse, it has also helped another segment to thrive. By embracing 'digital' businesses have managed to stay afloat during troublesome water, it was clear that businesses were compelled to embrace digital as the entire generation shifted towards digital to fulfill their needs through virtual means. Understanding this shift, we helped SMEs and MSMEs to go digital by helping them with necessary digital infrastructure and connectivity solutions. Whilst the impact of Covid stands colossal across the world, I think it has also tested humanity, the resilience, flexibility of business, and the courage for businesses and people to sail through this severe storm.

Interview

