Technology Blog

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The COVID-19 Silver Lining – Learning to Adapt to the Unexpected

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This year has been one for the record books. I have spent my entire career in the tech industry and can vividly recall the impact of illnesses such as the Avian Flu and SARS as I traveled globally. COVID-19 has been decidedly different, given its highly contagious nature and how it changed all of our lives earlier this year. One thing is sure; many companies, especially in the mid-market, were unprepared with business continuity plans and the need for employees to work from home. As a networking analyst, it has been interesting to analyze the impact of the fallout on connectivity. I have the opportunity to speak to journalists from some of the most significant news outlets in the world, and a common question in the early days of March was, "Will the coronavirus break the Internet?" Suffice it to say that never happened, but undoubtedly the pandemic has put pressure on both enterprise and cellular networks such as AT&T's.

From my perspective, AT&T did an exceptional job in its proactive response to COVID-19. I would consequently like to spend some time analyzing one of its recent business whitepapers, draw some insights from one of my published research briefs and a Forbes article, as well as provide some anecdotal context.

Transformational DNA

COVID-19 has forced many businesses to adapt to a dynamic environment. To this end, AT&T Business recently published its leadership views towards becoming "adept at adapting." If interested, you can find the paper in its entirety [here](#). What I found most compelling was the definition of five "transformational DNA" pillars. I want to dive into each one and provide a personal anecdote based on my high tech and telco industries career.

The first is fostering a **customer success-oriented and obsessed culture**. Shortly after my college graduation from the University of Texas at Austin, I accepted a sales position with Dell Computer Corporation. I eagerly took a tele sales role in Dell Direct selling 286 based PCs at nearly $4K a pop! It was a crazy concept in 1991- selling computers over the telephone, and others quickly mimicked us. However, I will never forget coming to work early on Friday mornings with scores of employees as Michael Dell held a call with a selected customer asking them how we could improve as a supplier. We called it the Dell Voice of the Customer, and I believe it catalyzed success when others that tried to copy the same model failed. What I find compelling about AT&T's approach is its reimagination of the traditional project management

office into one of transformation that tracks not only project completion but also the value for customers. Continuously listening to customers and proactively adjusting to their needs within a closed loop process is key.

The second is an emphasis on **continuous learning and development**. I changed jobs reasonably early in my career, serving in both sales and marketing roles. Some moves were better than others, but as long as I was learning, I felt engaged and energized. One exception was taking a position with a software company on the west coast in the late 1990s. It was a harsh environment, and I took direction from some less interested individuals that were more into themselves. However, the lesson I learned there made me a kinder, empathetic manager of people. AT&T is managing this vector with a focus on people, process, technology, and culture through role simplification, skills training, automation, and employee empowerment.

The third is **a data-driven decision** process, and ironically this is where my career path first crossed with AT&T. Later in my tenure with Dell, I had an opportunity to take a business development role in its global procurement organization. At that time, as a company, we promoted the benefits of mobile broadband and cellular connectivity on the Dell Latitude line of business notebook PCs. I negotiated one of the initial agreements between the two companies for AT&T to reward Dell with compensation for new subscriber activations. Backing that work was hours of analyzing past and future shipment and expected attach rates of cellular modems. We could not simply guess and fly by the seat of our pants. AT&T is enabling this through its vision and implementation of an end-to-end platform that facilitates a borderless collaboration across shared IT groups and suppliers. This framework leverages artificial intelligence and machine learning to proactively respond to customers.

The fourth is **management that serves to enable the success of an organization**. The notion of servant leaders and managers comes to my mind. One of the best personal examples that I can recall from my career was working for an executive that led the commercial desktop PC business in North America at Compaq Computer Corporation. Not only did he serve as my mentor, but he always took a pragmatic approach to the market, finding opportunities for every team member to shine and realize future success and promotion. I am still friends with him to this day. AT&T is encouraging this mentality through the encouragement of personal introspection, individual connections that bolster morale and accelerate common goal achievement, and teamwork that encourages employees to "lean in" together to solve key challenges for the sake of customers and the organization.

The fifth and final is **recognition of team efforts**. As a people manager for many years, I am a big believer in recognition. Different things motivate different people, and great managers take the time to know what motivates them. Back in my early Dell days, your badge number was like a dog tag of sorts – the lower the number, the better. I recall the military themes in sales as we went head to head with IBM and others, and it dawned on me- what about stars for our badges in gold, silver, and bronze to designate the importance of contributions to the business? I lobbied the human resources team, presented a proposal, and the Dell Star program became a reality! AT&T delivered an astounding 200 technology innovations in only 8 weeks to support its COVID-19 response for its customers - a culmination of the hard work and tireless hours of its employees. In my book, that is a big gold star and recognition on its own! Many internally and

externally have recognized the impact and proactive leadership that AT&T exhibited during the peak of COVID-19 – something that I will soon address.

So why is AT&T's transformational DNA so novel? From my perspective it allows the telecommunications giant to pivot quickly to customer needs and facilitates an agility often found within much smaller enterprises and start-ups.

AT&T and its legacy of innovation

It was fun waxing nostalgia about my career. Still, shortly before the AT&T Business team published the aforementioned white paper, I had the privilege to travel to several of the company's R&D locations around the world in anticipation of a research paper that I was planning to write. It was a fantastic experience seeing how 5G, edge, IoT and other technology platforms come together to birth transformational consumer and enterprise use cases. I've written about my experiences, and if interested, you can read more [here](#).

In my paper, I analyzed how the deployment of 5G will revolutionize fixed and mobile services with its ultra-low latency, blazing-fast throughput, and ability to support a massive number of connected devices. In addition to higher speed and greater responsiveness, 5G will redefine connectivity and the subscriber experience by enabling a new era of network-based intelligence, virtualization, and computational power at the network edge. Tactile applications that require an instantaneous response and precise control - such as mobile gaming, mixed reality, smart factories, and cities, telesurgery, and autonomous driving - will benefit and come to fruition. As 5G networks deploy globally, many carriers are still focused on access. However, a handful of operators, such as AT&T, stand out for their efforts toward enabling compelling use cases.

5G also brings new software-defined networking (SDN) capabilities that optimize service performance through network slicing, enhanced network functions virtualization (NFV), white box hardware, open-source, and mobile edge computing (MEC). From my perspective, AT&T stands out as a leader in adopting all of these platforms that have the potential to reduce capital expenditure and operating expenses as well as accelerate new 5G service delivery. This approach leverages AT&T's rich legacy of innovation, deep collaborations with infrastructure providers, and leadership in consortia and shaping 5G standards, as well as its significant global investments in the AT&T Labs and past AT&T Foundry initiatives.

A proactive response to COVID-19

As a technology analyst, I am a frequent contributor to Forbes online. It is a compelling platform in that it lets me educate people on the many areas that I cover in networking. Several weeks ago, during the pandemic's height, I penned an article related to the telecommunications and networking infrastructure industry's proactive response. If interested, you can find it [here](#). Within the article, I highlighted AT&T as a leader among carriers globally. AT&T did not terminate the service of any wireless, home phone broadband, or video customer because of their inability to pay bills due to COVID-19 disruptions – they also waived late payment fees. To help keep our military and their families connected, AT&T worked with the Navy Exchange Command to allow military personnel stationed on selected Navy ships to make calls to their

loved ones at no cost to the Navy or its sailors for a set time. AT&T also offered no-cost 90-day licenses of its WebEx service, free call forwarding from office to home with AT&T IP Flexible Reach, and highly secure connectivity in the form of the company's AT&T Global Security Gateway and Network Enterprise Traffic Protector solutions. AT&T created a comprehensive COVID-19 resource website, and if interested, you can learn more here.

Final thoughts

COVID-19 has shined a light on the need for scalable connectivity and those companies at the forefront in delivering the required products and services. AT&T continues to impress me with a holistic approach to change management, a consistent investment to bring 5G and related services for consumers and businesses to market, and genuine leadership during a crisis. It is also worth noting that AT&T was delivering many of the business continuity products and services prior to the pandemic. It is an extremely competitive market within the cellular telecommunications industry, one measured by gigabytes of data, subscriber churn, and reliable performance. From my perspective, AT&T has proven that they are up to the task with not only the right set of solutions, but also their change management approach. Once COVID-19 is finally in the rearview mirror, I look forward to seeing how the company leverages 5G for the safe return to work and other disruptive services.

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