VIEWPOINT

Navigating the Continuum: Driving the UN Sustainable Development Goals through Digital Leadership and Purpose-Led Talent Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: The aim of this paper is to show how adopting a digital mindset is the key for organisations and governments to close the gap on sustainability targets and support efforts to meet each of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: New strategies, ways of working and business models are discussed. Also ways to help people understand the new landscape, and equip leaders and their teams with the digital mindset, skills, and knowledge to deliver these new business outcomes.

FINDINGS: The paper found that for these business outcomes to be successful, people need support to embrace the digital transformation. It is only with the right balance of push and pull strategy that meaningful transformation succeeds.

KEYWORDS: *Digital Leadership; Human Capital; Purpose-Led Talent; Sustainable Development; Organisational Sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has a reputation for being over-used but the meaning is still important for modern organisations and governments. The phrase "digital transformation" has expanded from functional improvements in the way organisations operate to more aspirational goals, such as meeting sustainability targets. And yet, despite recognising the value in digital transformation, without the right development and deployment of digital technologies, countries will continue to fall short of achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While substantial progress had been made towards the SDGs since they were launched in 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the reversal of progress on several of the SDGs; for example, over 100 million additional people have been pushed into extreme poverty (Mahler *et al.*, 2021). At Vodafone, however, we believe we can accelerate delivery across a wide number of SDGs through leveraging our technology and services, digital innovations and through partnering. Examples of this can be found in our key initiatives such as M-PESA, everyone.connected, our V-Hub portal for small business and our 2030 commitment to become carbon neutral across the Vodafone footprint.

It is a challenge we are familiar with at Vodafone, where we have undertaken a digital transformation project to optimise the energy efficiency of our network that accounts for around 95% of the company's total energy consumption (Flaherty, 2023). By using a big data analytics platform, developed in-house, we are driving energy efficiencies across our 11,500 owned radio base stations. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning help energy specialists identify 'consumption anomalies' and parts of the network using more energy than expected. Targeted actions can be then delivered to make the sites more energy efficient. Another initiative uses the Internet of Things (IoT) and AI on Vodafone's highest energy consuming radio base stations, enabling the management of sites remotely and reducing the need for engineer visits. As of March 2023, 1,300 sites have been connected. The success of this project would not have been possible with digital technology alone; we need the digital leadership to invest in the project and the knowledge, abilities, skills and buy-in from our people

to deliver the objective of decarbonising our network and encouraging responsible consumption. This paper will investigate this requirement, and the connection between the need for digital leadership, whilst also supporting the attraction and retention of purpose-led talent in order to achieve the SDGs.

DISCUSSION
How can Digital Transformation Lead to Success in Achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals?

Digital transformation has frequently been seen as a buzzword—an overused ideal that is nearly impossible to ever achieve as new technologies and methodologies become widely available (Gong and Ribiere, 2021). However, in 2023, with a backdrop of the world coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, an ever-increasing focus on sustainability within society and increasing focus on the applications of AI tools in society, the fundamentals of digital transformation are as important as ever.

'Digital transformation' is often confused with the term 'digitalisation', which is the "the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; it is the process of moving to a digital business" (Gartner, 2023). However, as noted by Larjovouri, Bordi and Heikkilä-Tammi, digital transformation is wider; it is "organisation change that arises from the development and application of digital technology in business" (Larjovuori *et al*., 2018).

The idea that digital transformation is organisational rather than simply utilising digital technologies is the basis for this writer's hypothesis that a key way to driving sustainability within a business setting is by strong digital leadership. Businesses are fundamentally a collection of resources, an enterprise built upon the skills of its people, and in order to maximise the output of those people, businesses need strong leaders who are able to lead that digital transformation.

What is Digital Leadership and What is its Importance in Achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals?
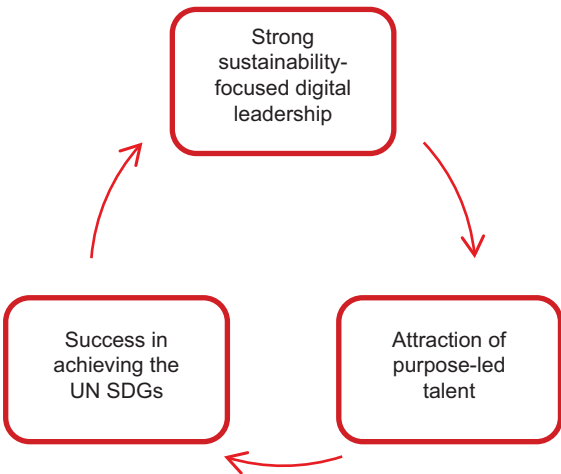
We value digital transformation for one important goal, making our customer experience the best ever. That is indeed at the centre of our portfolio delivery where we aim to have a mirror image of our customer data made available to customers through unassisted interfaces and to the employee via our employee integrated front end. This seamless omni-channel experience is enabled by a focus on digital first, modernisation by design, and continuous improvement and development. We can only achieve this with the right digital leadership.

The concept of digital leadership is one that becomes very important as technology, automation, data, and AI are driving most businesses today. Unless you are a small digital native business that has grown being systematically led by clear vision and strategic architecture, you will be in a state of defining and evolving your digital transformation strategy, execution plans and usage of best talent. Digital leadership is important to ensure that there is a good balance between vision and futurology, whilst prioritising against the important capabilities that will bring best benefits first from a customer experience; all of this coupled tightly with any modernisation roadmap that is in flight.

There is evidence that the new generation joining the workforce is more likely to join a company with a clear link in their strategy to sustainable development (Orrell *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, there is an increasing trend in employer sustainable development activities to branding as part of employee value proposition in the last decade, and whilst we have five generations in the workforce, the importance increases as generation Z shifts to a majority.

By implementing strong digital leadership throughout the organisation, balancing innovation and the need to deliver important time-bound capabilities, businesses will be in the best possible position to attract talent who will be capable of supporting sustainability initiatives that help achieve the UN's SDGs, creating an aura around that business and restarting the cycle.

How can You Build and Engage a Digital Savvy Team and Workforce to Perpetuate Success?

Through digital leadership that creates a sustainability focused culture within their organisation, leaders will be able to invoke a continuum by attracting the right workforce to an organisation that will engage and bring more talent as they spread the awareness of the wonderful organisation and environment in which they work. That workforce will then grow and flourish within the environment set up by their leaders, moving towards leadership positions themselves and creating SDG-enabling initiatives in the process.

Building a digitally savvy team starts by being very clear on the vision and execution plans that consider all complexities, and primarily favour innovation. Evolving the strategy should be built into the organisation's governance to deliver as a programme and communicated to ensure change management is optimal.

As described, exciting innovative initiatives in an agile environment will be a key enticing factor in attracting the best talent and should be planned as part of the organisation's talent acquisition strategy; this should remain the case as they join and grow through clear progression and career paths. Offering cross-functional opportunities will be key to gaining further learning and experience; for example, moving data teams to transformation and digital to data where transferrable skills permit.

Diversity and inclusion remain of the highest importance, providing multiple viewpoints and opinions on key initiatives. Both factors support talent retention but also in bringing diversity in digital thinking, problem solving and execution; building solutions that are representative of the society. We believe this is key for achieving and perpetuating success.

Finally, strong coaching and mentoring programmes, both hierarchical and reciprocal, can prove worthwhile in adding value to drive a top talent digital workforce.

How are We Implementing a Digital Purpose-led Mindset at Vodafone?

We are keen to find the best talent to drive the right outcomes and promote a digital purpose-led mindset; first, by being clear on our purpose-led strategy top down but also by executing against and highlighting benefits of our initiatives linked to this. Some examples of Vodafone as a company enabling the SDGs include:

Extreme E—SDG 13—Vodafone has partnered with Extreme E and the River Nith Fishery Board to use data collected from Vodafone Internet of Things (IoT) technology in and around the River Nith in Scotland. This will help protect Atlantic

salmon from the effects of rising water temperatures and changing rainfall patterns (Vodafone, 2023).

Schools.connected—SDG 4—Vodafone has given free connectivity to 250,000 children across the UK to help them access schoolwork from home, catch up on lost learning during school holidays, and continue with their education if they were required to isolate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme has since been extended to include an additional 100,000 children and young people due to astonishing demand. The Vodafone schools.connected support—in the form of data SIMs—is available to primary and secondary schoolchildren in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Vodafone, 2020).

Everyone.connected—SDG 9—Around 1.5 million households in the UK do not have Internet access—either mobile or fixed line—and around 12 million lack the digital skills necessary to make the most of our online, connected world. This digital exclusion exacerbates poverty and sees people slipping further behind. So in response to this, Vodafone launched our everyone.connected campaign, with the ambitious aim to connect a million digitally excluded people by the end of 2022 (Vodafone, 2022b).

mPESA—SDG 1—We created the M-Pesa mobile money service and launched it with Safaricom in 2007. M-Pesa is available in 8 countries and now has more than 20 million active users who use it to send, receive and store money electronically. It enables people excluded from conventional banking to access a wide range of financial services via their mobile phone. M-Pesa continues to evolve with new services, including M-Tiba, a mobile health wallet that enables people to save money for medical treatment and benefit from health insurance; this now has 2.8 million users. A study has shown that M-Pesa has lifted 2% of Kenyan households out of poverty, helping to contribute to the UN's SDGs, in particular Goal 1 (Vodafone, 2022a).

V-Hub—SDG 8—V-Hub is a service created by Vodafone to help small businesses access digital skills expertise, providing free one-on-one support and access to an up-to-date online knowledge centre. Since its launch during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 300,000 small and medium-sized businesses have been helped by the resource (Vodafone, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst the continuum can be invoked by strong digital leadership, it is vital to acknowledge that organisations must embrace sustainability by design; whilst the continuum above is built upon the foundation of strong digital leadership, organisations are able to invoke the continuum at any point. For example, should an organisation

already have purpose-led talent, this will naturally drive success in achieving the UN SDGs, up to a point at which the organisation will acknowledge that better digital leadership is required, restarting the continuum.

To conclude, human capital is vital in sustainable development, and throughout this paper we have highlighted the importance of digital leadership in the success of building and operating a sustainable digital transformation. Therefore, our recommendation is to focus on first establishing a clear vision and strategy and executing upon that to motivate leaders; also, however, an engaging environment where teams feel they can create the future whilst collaborating with peers should be provided. Attracting and retaining a diverse talent pool is key for building success within businesses and perpetuating the culture that drives the continuum, leading to success in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

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BIOGRAPHY

Miryem Salah is the Chief Data Officer and Head of Digital & Transformation at Vodafone Business UK. She is responsible for engaging teams across the business on the value of data to offer Vodafone's customers a best-in-class total experience with digital platforms at the heart. In this role, she oversees AI strategy, portfolio planning, delivery, and operations. In addition, driving the use of digital transformation to meet business sustainability goals is a passion that drives Miryem and she is an advocate for the effective use of data to address pressing global challenges, such as climate change, inclusive and equitable development and digital inclusion. Since joining Vodafone in 2013, Miryem has held various leadership roles managing global teams across retail, digital transformation and AI technology. She also founded the Vodafone Women in Data network that encourages women to pursue a career in data and believes that a truly inclusive culture is vital for business performance.

Jack Clarke is the Business Manager for Digital, Data & Transformation at Vodafone Business UK. A dynamic professional, he brings a passion for sustainability to the forefront. Notably recognised for winning the Warwick Business School for the Future prize for his proposal to tackle three UN Sustainable Development Goals with an initiative to improve education in Guinea, Jack's commitment extends to his impactful tenure at Vodafone. There, he has

played a pivotal role in fostering innovation and operational excellence with a specific focus on driving benefit for Vodafone's customers, society and the planet. With a keen eye for strategic opportunities, Jack embodies a forward-thinking approach to sustainability and his journey reflects not just professional prowess but a genuine dedication to shaping a greener, more sustainable future.

 Alex Carter is a communications specialist who is passionate about how tech can support people to drive digital transformation and the capacity for new ideas and innovation. Having spent over 10 years in Vodafone, she has delivered both UK and global communications plans and worked with a wide range of senior leaders and their teams to enable customers to explore and benefit from new business technologies in the areas of the Internet-of-Things (IoT), cloud, networking, mobility and more.