IAMT STUDIO | VISUAL PODCAST SERIES

Telstra's Vision for the New Architecture of Live Sports Production

Matt Stagg in conversation with Phil Goulden, COO, Telstra Broadcast Services

IAMT Studio Visual Podcast Series
Duration: 13:02

Hi, welcome back to the IAMT podcast studio with me, Matt Stagg. This is the last one, and last but by no means least, as we say, we've got Phil Goulden, who is the COO of Telstra. You know, for anyone who doesn't know Telstra, if you've been, I don't know, hiding under a rock: it's not just the media and entertainment you might have seen. Telstra's the biggest mobile operator in Australia, and I've worked with them previously. Great bunch of people. Phil, can you give us an introduction of you, where you sit, what your company is doing, in terms of your COO role?

Sure. Yeah. So as you just said, COO, so Chief Operations Officer for Telstra Broadcast Services. I'm based out of London, but I cover the international spread for TBS, so that includes the domestic market in Australia, but also the international group, so covering EMEA and the US, and also APAC as well. Ultimately this job is to ensure that what we've committed to deliver is delivered. So I operate the NOC and the MCRs globally, but also the major events teams that we have as well that travel globally, supporting the biggest live events in media. So yeah, it's a really exciting role for me to be in. I'm fairly new to it. I've only started in the last couple of months into this role, so it's been a challenge for me to kind of transition from a technology role into an operational role, but that's ultimately my background from previous roles. So yeah, that's me.

And it's quite interesting there, because that role change actually goes with where we're going as an industry in general. We all hear agile. We're moving to platforms and software, kicking and screaming as a broadcast industry because we still want to plug that last cable in out of the OB. But can you help some of our viewers with agility? Because you live and breathe it and lots of people hear it, and they don't even know what it means. I wonder if you could expand a little bit on what it means to your customers.

Yeah. So I think agility isn't just about speed now. I think what we try to achieve is an ability to deliver but in a safe way. Most of the time trying to deliver while being live so that agile approach to a customer challenge is definitely there. We all know in broadcast there is a live date that is immovable, but ultimately the ability to ensure we're delivering safely is key. From a Telstra Broadcast Services perspective, our ability to be agile on the delivery methods, utilising a hybrid network, whether it be satellite, fibre, SRT for how we deliver from a connectivity perspective, but also utilising new cloud workflows and even something simplistic, I say simplistic, but something as simple as standards conversion. You know, if we're doing an event which is only going to last for four days, but we need to do 20 standards conversions, not having to purchase a physical piece of kit and utilising cloud-based solutions instead is really useful. So that kind of agility is extremely useful for us.

And it's interesting you said that, because with cloud-based and software-based, the CFOs of broadcasters have finally cottoned on to running an Opex model. Before, it was always: this tin costs this much, and you go and make a case and say, "We need it." We're putting in a new workflow and we need this box. But what technologies do you now see as crucial for agility?

Well, I think, as you say there, there is a definite kind of evaluation being done between the hardware and cloud based. It's horses for courses, is what I see. It doesn't always make sense to go for cloud-based if you're doing something which is much more permanent or long-term. But then in the same vein, we've seen compute prices go through the roof recently. So there's a constant evaluation happening, I would say. It's hard just to say to you, "This is the technology to go for," because it very much is customer driven, it's event driven, it's outcome driven, that you need to be able to be, going back to agile, agile to the outcome that's required.

Really interesting there. We said earlier about people getting their heads around Opex, and what I hadn't thought about is the fluctuation in prices. We all talk about elasticity and, you know, you only pay for what you use. However, there is still a price for that, and that changes, whereas you buy some tin and it doesn't. But you just-

Depends when you buy it.

Well, yeah. But in terms of when you're on the sheet... We're all moving to IP, cloud and SaaS, some of the rear guard kicking and screaming, but it's very difficult. How do you see the sort of key metrics for trying to understand the value in that technology?

So for me personally, I focus on the purpose, the outcome. Any transformation that we're making needs to serve a purpose. So the return on investment is going to be based on what that outcome is. So if we're trying to deliver something for a customer, we need to not over-engineer it. Especially at a show like NAB, we get excited by technology and we say, "Look what this tech can do," and we try and implement it into a solution, but that isn't necessarily what the initial requirement was. And we need to be focused on what that outcome needs to look like, and that's how you're going to get the value. If you try and do too much, you over-engineer it, you get to a point where it becomes too complex. And then you're actually losing some of the value because you're over-delivering, which is good in some ways, but from a value perspective, not always good for the balance sheet.

It was interesting what you said there about over-engineering, because in the tech world, we all get excited. And one of the key things I talk about with broadcasters is get the creative and the editorial in the room when you're talking about technology, otherwise you'll walk into the MCR and go, "Here's a really amazing solution for a problem you didn't have." But that's it. You've walked round the show and you go, "This would be great." But what matters is the output, what's on screen. And I think you should bring in creatives a lot more. You know, I sort of coin the phrase of a creative technologist who understands technology and the creative. And that brings us on to the excitement around AI. We've been hearing a lot about trust. It's come out loads. It doesn't matter what we've been talking about in here. And I certainly know from rights holders about trust in AI and their customers, which are ultimately the fans. Have you seen a change in priorities around trust as we sort of move into this AI area?

Yes, we have, and I think we need to have that conversation early with customers. We've coined a phrase around engineering for trust. I think we start early, engineering our solutions to allow us

to talk about trust and to try and give as much confidence as we possibly can do to the end customer. I mean, we tend to be B2B with the TBS. And I think just being open and honest on where we potentially are using intelligence and automation so that they're aware of that and taking accountability when something doesn't go according to plan, and being quick and open and honest. Hands up, you know. We take ownership of that area. And I think it's just key to be clear when we are not using a human to make a decision. We just need to make sure that the customer is comfortable with that. We'll obviously include customer conversations through a solution, and then when it comes to operation, that everyone's clear on where AI is.

Well, and the benefit to them. I always say, think about AI as a thousand interns that allow you to do other stuff, including not taking people who come into the industry, when we have a skills gap, and saying, "Right, you're in, you're tagging metadata." And they come out of university, they have a creative degree, and they're sat in that room. Give AI the jobs that no one wants to do, because it doesn't complain.

Yeah, no, it's interesting you say that because I heard that from the different side actually this week as well. Saying that if we target AI to take all of those tasks, then we run the risk of not being able to attract the entry levels into the industry. So even that conversation we're having there, you know, there's two sides to it. I think we've got to keep the conversation going on this.

Yeah, that's interesting, that's really good for me, because there's a disconnect in the pipeline. People come in as a runner, and then they become an assistant producer. If there were no runners because that was done by AI, how do you go into a broadcaster as an AP? So we'll chat on, and we can go on because it's, it's really interesting. But to finish, and everybody has a crystal ball: what would you like to see next year here as an industry and as Telstra?

Look, I think walking the show floor this year, and from the conversation we just had, AI is definitely starting to enhance our industry. I think AI delivered in the right way is definitely something I want to see. I guess a few points on that then. So one really interesting feature I saw was using AI to solve a problem. So not just a chatbot in terms of when you've got an issue. It was much more, "My platform is not performing in the way it should be," or, "There's an outage. Can you find what's happened?" And then it will display what's actually happened, and then gives you options to fix. So that's really useful. Also the ability to go back in historical data, historical outages, historical issues, and present you with a facts-based outcome.

That's like employing a consultant for months to go through that. I like that. Well, anyway, we will continue talking, but Phil, thank you so much. And if you don't know Telstra, you'll find them, and it'd be good to speak to Phil and his team to understand more about this. And as you can see, he's the guy. So thank you. This is our last one, so I hope you have a good NAB, and it's a goodbye from me. Oh, and a goodbye from Phil.

Transcript produced automatically from the episode audio and lightly edited for readability. Minor wording may differ from the recording. © IAMT — theiamt.org/studio