

Lite-speed: Agile Models for Reducing Time to Market

By: Tim Young

As I write this, the Olympic games are still upon us, and the communications analogies to choose from are seemingly endless.

We all can think of (and forgive my mostly USA-centric perspective here) carriers who are dominant like Michael Phelps, tiny and agile like Simone Biles, or lightning-fast like Usain Bolt (there! A non-U.S. example!).

We can also think of some that are incredibly strong, like Georgia's Lasha Talakhadze, who set a new world record in the over 105kg weightlifting division by hoisting a staggering 473 total kilos—215 on the snatch and 258 on the clean and jerk.

But in the current landscape, carriers need to be powerful like Lasha, dominant like Michael, fast like Usain, and, perhaps most importantly, capable of astounding feats of agility like Simone. They have to sell across numerous channels, respond to changing customer demands, and greatly reduce time-to-market on new offerings to remain relevant.

Tall order, but there are a few ways that carriers of every size are learning to exercise a little flexibility to befit the modern age of communications, media, and entertainment. They're all about traveling light: staying organized, being open, maintaining visibility, and leveraging partnerships.

Virtualization

Establishing a new service or adding a new service to an existing subscription wasn't always easy. But a good deal of the heavy lifting can be avoided thanks to virtualization: specifically network functions virtualization (NFV) and software defined networks (SDN).



One example given by Incognito Software is a commercial VPN, in which there is no need to deliver internet termination and routing on the premises served by the VPN. So the function can be virtualized and delivered on demand. "This basic NFV concept is actually an incredible benefit for both the subscriber and their service provider," said Chris Busch, CTO

of Incognito, in a recent blog post. "The subscriber is in control of their Internet services, not limited by the capacities or features of a physical box on their premises. Instead, they can customize their services from a self-care web page."

This is, of course, just one example, but service providers are quickly recognizing the agility that virtualization provides.

"Using virtualization technologies to build a programmable NFV platform that creates agility and automation can provide the competitive edge for service providers operating in an increasingly competitive market," Adrian Pickering, vice-president, Middle East and Africa at Juniper Networks, said in a statement.

Juniper has deployed its Contrail networking system to enable NFV efforts for several carriers, most recently Saudi Telecom Company (STC), the largest carrier in the Arab world.

"At STC, we have a 'customer-first' approach. We aim to earn our customers' trust and enrich society with comprehensive, innovative services and solutions," said



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Dr. Tarig M Enaya, senior vice-president for enterprise at Saudi Telecom Company, in a statement. "The network, underpinned by advanced NFV and automation capabilities, can deliver substantial value to our customers by providing the agility, speed and simplicity that today's businesses require."

And STC isn't alone in those efforts, even in that region. Computer Weekly notes that in the last year and a half, UAE-based Du claimed to be the first in the region to internally test NFV, UAE-based Etisalat deployed AlcaLu's NFV-based radio control, and Ooredoo Kuwait announced a unified cloud based on VMware's vCloud. And that's just in one part of the world. Businesses around the globe are relying on virtualization to help them run lean and capitalize on new opportunities.

Analytics

Being agile also means being self-aware. Cats wouldn't be nearly so able to deftly creep through darkened hallways without the aid of sharp eyes and a set of whiskers. Similarly, carriers must be aware of their current network performance and resource utilization before they can roll out new products and services. As ECI Telecom's Gali Malkiel noted in a blog post earlier this year, "from a project perspective, analytics can decrease much of the network planning work that needs to happen before the deployment phase can begin. Without this information, operators are often forced to overprovision to ensure that the new service delivers at customer expectations."

Better analytics enable carriers to right-size their networks and properly allocate their resources, making sure everyone is ready for a big move when it happens. In addition, robust analytics can help keep unnecessary truck rolls and tower climbs to a minimum, reducing overhead and keeping carriers lean.

Catalog

And just as it's important to know what your network is doing and where new resources are most necessary, it's also important to understand your current offerings, their component parts, and how to reconfigure these parts to create a new and exciting new product or bundle. And that boils down to having a catalog.

We've written on many occasions about the power of catalogs in the communications realm, but it bears repeating. Know your offerings. Stay organized. Build from component parts.

Catalog offerings from Amdocs, Ericsson, Sigma, goTransverse and many more offer carriers the ability

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to better understand and reconfigure their product and service offerings, speeding time-to-market up a great deal. And as was mentioned before, you can allow subscribers to manage their own offerings, to an extent, through self-care portals, and if the catalog, analytics, and other support systems are in place, the customer feels new ownership over their accounts while you spend less on provisioning a new service.

Open Source

And then there's the agility that can be obtained by taking advantage of work already being done by a community of standards bodies, vendors, and other aficionados and tinkerers from the world of open source. OpenStack has made strides as a reliable cloud platform, and carriers have an even more powerful tool at their disposal with the development of OPNFV, an open source platform for NFV products and services.

The OPNFV project integrates components of OpenStack, OpenDaylight, KVM, Linux and other open source projects to create a carrier-grade launchpad for virtualization. Project members include AT&T, Cisco, Dell, China Mobile, NTT Docomo, IBM and many other major carriers and vendors from around the world. It's a quick way to speed along new offerings while standing on the shoulders of a dynamic community.

Innovation framework

And if the allure of an open source framework speaks to you, you might be interested in some of the innovation frameworks available from ICE technology vendors. The Ericsson Service Innovation Framework, for instance, combines some of the components I've already mentioned (product catalog, customer self-care) with a comprehensive service delivery and OSS/BSS framework while also adding a crucial additional component I've yet to address: ecosystem management.

Collaboration is the key to speed, and a robust partner ecosystem can be a tremendous resource.

So what's your plan? How are you staying agile in this fast-moving world? Are you dashing like Usain? Hoisting like Lasha? Flipping like Simone? Or are you managing to do all of those things at the same time?

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