Connecting Digital Ecosystems for Smart City Success

Carl Piva, VP of Strategic Programs for TM Forum, talks to InterComms

Carl Piva, VP Strategic Programs, TM Forum

Carl Piva is serving as VP Strategic Programs at TM Forum. Carl is passionate about market and technology disruptions, and about helping TM Forum's members to transform into successful digital service providers in the emerging digital economy.

Q: Could you explain where The TM Forum are with Smart Cities technology and the importance that you see with this going forward?

A: City officials and policy makers are often viewing the urban innovation area as a means of unlocking a city's potential, both from a financial growth and from a citizen engagement perspective. But remember, the smart city space is still in its infancy. Some cities have a holistic smart city program in place while others are deploying solutions that are only smart within contained silos. Smart city technology is only a means to an end; the key success criteria are defined by how this technology is deployed and used.

A smart city is a city that has a focus on liveability for citizens, workability for businesses and sustainability for the city. This translates to a relentless focus on citizen value and community engagement, making it easy for businesses to be successful, and exploring the sharing economy and new technology to drive city sustainability. A smart city is horizontally integrated and has a common way of sharing its data with third parties to unleash innovation and citizen benefits.

Imagine two groups of cities. Cities in the first group teams up in relevant forums to identify how it should expose and use data in an open way, while cities in the other group try to solve the challenge in isolation from everybody else. Down the road, cities in the first group can start share innovation that has been created on top of this data, while cities in the second group will have limited their innovation potential. Unlocking innovation will clearly be easier for the first group of cities.

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▶ One of the key achievements within our program so far has been the development of a comprehensive, end-to-end Smart City Maturity and Benchmark Model. This model captures all the hard and soft dimensions of what it means to transform into a smarter city, and offers city leaders the possibility to define a wanted position based on this information. Each dimension in the model also includes references to global repositories of best practice not only from TM Forum but also from other relevant industry or standards organizations. This makes it easy for a city to not only to understand its as-is situation and model a wanted position, but also to get very clear and concise recommendations on how to transform itself in areas where it is weak. We are very proud of this model and are working with other leading industry groups and research institutions across the world to ensure that it will become broadly adopted.

Q: We know that for major telcos, such as BT, this is a key area for them in developing new revenue streams, how easy is this going to be for the telcos and where can they leverage the most revenue?
A: In many respects, telcos have had to deal with many of the same challenges that cities are dealing with today. Both groups need to serve millions of customers (or citizens), both groups have to manage a vast array of disparate pieces of technology (now becoming a mesh of connected devices also in cities) and both groups have to deal with challenges in large organizations where departments are not very well connected to each other. Many cities don't have one view of the citizen as this data is spread across multiple systems and agencies. Many cities don't have a mature way of addressing Internet-of-Things and the connected devices challenge. Many cities don't have a natural way of horizontally integrating the city.

Service providers have a natural role to play as they in many cases already manage and operate a portion of the communications infrastructure. They have a role to play in the public-private partnerships that are emerging. Some are aiming for pure connectivity plays while others have vertical offerings in the smart city space.

While the connectivity business is a commodity business that relies on scale advantages, some of the smart city areas offer higher margins provided that you can partner effectively in a digital world.

Q: There are going to be several catalysts on this subject at TM Forum Live in Nice, what are the highlights of these?
A: To us, a Catalyst is a proof of concept project where a number of ecosystem partners come together to solve a challenge posed by a Champion, in this case a city.

We have a roadmap of challenges perspective for Catalysts. What are the challenges faced by cities where they need input from the broader industry? What type of challenges can be uniquely addressed by TM Forum members?

One of the Smart City Forum's primary targets is to create joint assets and best practices that drive livability for citizens focused on utilizing data from the city and its citizens. This translates to creating an open and de-facto standards-driven city platform that fosters smart city ecosystems, drives digital citizen engagement through the right use of big data analytics, defines an operations center of the future for the city, while outlining an end-to-end IoT approach. We will be demonstrating Catalysts championed by cities from both Europe and Asia in Nice, and have lined up almost a dozen international cities who are ready to champion even more initiatives going forward.

One of the interesting approaches will be in collaboration with the City of Bristol, where we will invite future Catalyst participants to create their Catalyst projects in the city's advanced lab using the city network of assets and people.

Q: With digitization and smart city programmes do you feel the telco industry is moving forward fast enough in these areas or waiting to see what the larger companies do?
A: I sometimes think of telcos as supertankers. It takes a long time for a supertanker to gain speed or change direction, but once its picked up speed it is virtually unstoppable. Having that said, the telco industry is in the early to middle part of a huge redefinition, and smart city initiatives are good examples of this. Smart X initiatives are high on the agenda; service providers and suppliers are working on providing value to the market and are polishing these types of offerings. There are so many adjacent areas that are being digitized at a high speed, ranging from agriculture to smart health solutions.

The Forum has a vision to drive the next wave of digital business growth – the digitization of every industry – by providing the collaborative innovation platform to connect digital ecosystems. The microcosm of a city is a very good example of this, as you will find such a multitude of connected (or disconnected!) ecosystems.

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