AGL Magazine – September Issue – 2021

Closing the U.S. Digital Divide: Why We Should Think Small to Win Big

Overcoming obstacles to widespread 5G deployment depends on creating micro-efficiencies.

By Jeana Durst

If the U.S. continues to experience an ever-widening digital divide between urban and rural peoples, legions of citizens from sparsely populated areas will not have access to vital services. According to a recent report from BroadbandNow, at least 42 million people lack access to terrestrial broadband internet (an additional 6.5 percent of Americans beyond FCC estimates).

Let's be clear: If this problem is not solved, our nation will face the regret of missed opportunities in the future. It's hard to quantify what will be sacrificed if a large swath of the nation does not have equal access to the education, information, and opportunities that the digital era has ushered in. Unable to fully realize all the potential talent in our country, we could unintentionally sabotage our own growth.

Worse yet, these same individuals will not have the ability to participate in vital services like telemedicine and remote learning if utility and broadband providers don't find a viable path forward to deliver services in a reasonable amount of time. Michael Kleeman, senior fellow at the University of California and board member at the Institute for the Future, explains the gravity in a Pew Research Center report: "Because of the economic disparity, the new technologies will be used with those with access to more resources, financial and technical. The digital divide will not be one of access but of security, privacy, and autonomy."

On a global level, our nation's economy could suffer. As the pandemic demonstrated so clearly, no economy stands alone. Without pervasive high-speed internet, our top talent and businesses will be less effective on the world stage, without adequate access to the key supply chains and international providers.

Time for Change

John Sciarabba, CEO of Alden Systems, believes it's time for wireless and broadband companies to explore new and forward-thinking solutions to deliver on the 5G promise. Having been in the industry since 1995, he has the perspective that comes with a long view of the opportunities (and challenges) at hand.

Certainly, companies cannot be counted on to close the gap based purely on corporate conscience—naturally, business interests must also prevail. For providers, the cost to deploy in rural areas still stands as a major deterrent even with incentive funding from federal programs.

Add to that hurdle the fact that providers must operate in a labor market extremely thin on resources, and you've got quite the uphill climb. "The dollars alone aren't enough. It takes resources," Sciarabba says.

Then providers have to decide that those rural markets are important to the company's overall strategy. And all companies must navigate working with limited resources while overcoming a lack of precedent for collaboration among multiple stakeholders around unfamiliar processes. Meeting this challenge is going to require change from all involved.

Big Shifts, Small Steps

Sciarabba suggests that companies who will succeed will explore the answer to a single question: **"What is the one cost variable to 5G deployment that we can positively influence?"**

The answer lies with using good data to drive business process automation to create efficiency—specifically, micro-efficiencies. Without enough resources to do all the work that needs to take place, companies have to maximize the output of those resources, Sciarabba explains.

For example: did you know that, on average, a traditional landline fiber strand can take up to 180 days from the time a company selects a given utility pole to the time fiber is deployed on that structure?

What if companies could cut that time in half or more by introducing systems and tools that unite the various stakeholders and allow them to share data more efficiently?

Creating opportunity to build in "micro-efficiencies" into your workflow may seem like a small choice, but Sciarabba has seen first-hand how incremental shifts add up to real gains for providers. "It doesn't have to be huge because any savings is a big savings as long as the cost of implementing that change justifies it," Sciarabba says.

What he's observed is that companies must lay the foundation for efficiency by changing the way they think about the work itself. Rather than view jobs as only projects to be completed before the next one begins, innovative companies approach work from a process-based mindset and consider how the steps of their efforts could be repeated at scale to accommodate a volume of work similar to the job at hand.

Getting Started

Companies that want to drive efficiency must gain greater clarity and control of their processes. New technologies can deliver business process automation to do just that. Historically, companies have resisted broad-scale automation and sweeping change, especially in times of transition. But what if you could automate incrementally to create micro efficiencies that add up, Sciarabba posits.

This is where data plays a role. Think of the adage: garbage in, garbage out. Now consider the inverse. If companies can find ways to capture good data, it will only create efficiencies downstream. And by extension, “leveraging the latest technology for different parts of the data collection process will allow better data to be collected,” Sciarabba says.

Good data is the driver of all automation but managing increasing amounts of data shouldn’t require more human capital. As volume of work increases with the ramped-up demand for broadband deployment, companies can no longer afford to manually move data “from here to there.” Successful industry stakeholders need each individual working at their highest level of expertise. Your ultimate goal is to have humans spending their time on only the tasks that require a human touch. But that’s a lofty pursuit, so instead, Sciarabba suggests just taking a few steps toward automation.

"Just get better at blocking and tackling,” he says. For instance, look for ways to automate rote tasks like email or data entry.If you start removing the redundant steps that are time-consuming or outdated, you’ll drive efficiency with limited resources, Sciarabba explains. Henry Ford once said, “Nothing is particularly hard if you break it into small steps.” Creating micro-efficiencies is an often-overlooked part of the solution to the digital divide.

Ultimately, the role that collaboration and business process automation plays in helping our nation realize the goal of widespread interconnectivity cannot be underestimated. “The only answer there is to get more efficient about the tools and figure out how to make all the stakeholders more efficient—and you also need a champion that believes in that cause,” Sciarabba says. This means getting industry stakeholders to believe, not just at a high level, but also at a tactical level translating into actionable change.

How you use data to automate a process may be a slight efficiency gain for you, but if you apply the principle across all jobs, the benefits could be dramatic. And if all industry stakeholders can realize efficiency gains that would make the cost to deploy broadband more feasible, we could move the needle together. For our industry. For our communities. And there’s nothing “micro” about that.

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This article was published in the September issue of AGL (Above Ground Level) Magazine.
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