



INTERVIEW WITH THUSHERA KAWDAWATTA

CEO, Axiata Digital Labs

Working with leaders in the telecom industry, Axiata Group provides world-class communication services using the most advanced technology available, advancing digital life around the world. Axiata Digital Labs (ADL) works with the latest developments and advancements in technology to constantly innovate and provide solutions that enhance their service offerings. Their professional, yet warm, team has a rich heritage of telco experience and is dedicated to advancing telcos in the digital age. In our interview with Thushera, the CEO, he discusses the ADL and the company's recent initiatives.

How would you describe 'Axiata Digital Labs' and its product and service offerings?

Axiata Digital Labs primarily focuses on digital transformation solutions, which include both products and services. The products are thoroughly tested for their resiliency, high volume and innovative nature, which can improve quality, productivity and customer experience. The services we offer are intended for any enterprise that wishes to move into a digital transformation or digital platforms. We have the capability to shift even a non-digital organisation to a complete digital organisation at an accelerated phase. We employ over 1200 people across three regions and have one of the best engineering teams working with us. Our expertise and capabilities have been tried and tested in a larger Telco group, Axiata, in the South Asian region. So we are primarily a provider of digital transformation services with a focus on R&D and innovative innovation through larger R&D.

What makes 'Axiata Digital Labs' comparatively unique compared to other similar IT companies in Sri Lanka?

There are a few distinctions. The first is our culture of innovation, and the second is our people. We have the best people working for us, who have graduated from local and global premier universities. The third is our culture of learning. We have made a significant investment in learning - particularly engineering learning. We have a learning culture that we fostered last year by delivering an average of 50 hours of learning per person, despite the fact that in our sector, even 20 hours is difficult to achieve. We have more than doubled the number of learning hours delivered to our teams, which encourages innovation and new learning while avoiding stagnation. Our culture of innovation, collaboration, and support for one another has enabled us to deliver the best to our clientele. This is usually aided by some of the innovative products and platforms that we have to accelerate engineering delivery, which is what sets ADL apart from the competition.

Who would you consider as your competitors on the global scale and what needs to be done in order to increase your global competitiveness?

Our global competitors would be anyone involved in digital transformation; however, we would not explicitly consider them competitors because, even with our 'competitors', we follow a collaborative effort. However, in a global context, anyone involved in larger fintech solutions, telco solutions, or innovative digital transformation solutions could be considered a competitor.

Tell us about your new product suite 'Axonect' and its offerings? Are there more similar exciting initiatives for ADL coming up in the future?

'Axonect' is an umbrella brand that encompasses all of our innovative products. Axonect offers a suite of enterprise products that seamlessly connect northbound and southbound systems and enables enterprises to be agile

digital service providers while changing the footprint of the enterprise to meet evolving business needs. Axonect is built on open source technology and uses a microservices architecture that allows enterprises to implement it quickly and easily at minimal cost and gives them the flexibility and agility they need to meet the demands of today's consumers.

The Axonect Product Suite is now equipped with fifteen customizable products designed to fast track digital transformation and allow enterprises to capitalize on new market opportunities. The Axonect Product Suite includes the Application Programming Interface (API) Manager, API Monetizer, Enterprise API Aggregator, Developer Portal, Enterprise Marketplace, Adaptors, Multi-Cloud Orchestrator, and Enterprise Enabler. This entire product suite is aligned with digital transformation and the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' technology stack.

Our newest focus area is the Artificial Intelligence (AI) factory which has already been built and is in operation to get any AI models out in about 2-3 days, whereas a typical AI model to market will take a few months. Similarly, we are looking at the fifth industrial revolution and how mass customisation, mass collaboration and cyber-physical systems are coming together on top of the fourth industrial revolution.

What do you consider are the main challenges faced by the IT industry in Sri Lanka today and what are the barriers to the sector's growth?

Human capital capacity is the main bottleneck today in Sri Lanka. The country produces a small number of graduates each year, despite massive global industry demand. But when we consider our people's abilities such as innovation, creativity, and professionalism, it all adds up to a competitive advantage. However, we are unable to move on fast due to the lack of capacity which is one of the major issues confronting the IT industry in Sri Lanka.

Infrastructure is another impediment. Although we have better infrastructure in some areas, we lack adequate infrastructure in the majority of remote areas. In this situation, deploying our staff or allowing them to work from home or elsewhere is a bit of a challenge. Hence, improving the country's infrastructure is critical to the growth of the IT sector.

Governance in the country could be considered another barrier. Governance in terms of encouraging more people to come and work in Sri Lanka and contribute to our country's economy has been poorly managed. IT is an industry with the potential to significantly boost Sri Lanka's economy. There are some technology companies in the world that are even bigger than Sri Lanka's GDP. We believe that Sri Lanka's IT sector has the ability to deliver the same as our people are unique in that they have the creativity, innovation and innovative capabilities as well as the technology and engineering capabilities, to deliver that. If the aforementioned barriers are removed, Sri Lanka's main economy could be IT-driven or technology-driven.

What is the impact of the current economic and political crisis on the IT industry in Sri Lanka? How will you, your company and the IT industry as a whole, provide leadership to the economic recovery of the country?

The current political and economic situation has numerous ramifications for the IT sector. The infrastructure required to start and run an IT company are very minimal, as is the capital expenditure. The burden on any resource to start an IT company is extremely light and what you need is data connection and electricity. However, both these essentials are currently impacted. There is no continuous power for people to work, so access to the internet or data connections is limited. At the same time, the ability to commute freely has been hampered. As a result of these, the industry in which we can generate more actual foreign income has been impacted. It now has a ripple effect or has become

an avalanche in some ways. Also, there is a chain of people who rely on these industries to survive such as the person who supplies food, transportation, etc., who are all affected and thereby, have created a significant economic and social impact.

We have implemented a few things within our control to support our team to get through these difficult times. One example is allowing people to work from anywhere. As a result, one does not need to physically come to the office and can work from any place that is convenient. Furthermore, we have provided our employees with scheduling flexibility. In addition to these two changes, we have provided assistance in terms of data connectivity, financial assistance, and the rest of the hygiene factors are being considered.

Finally, how do you see ADL contributing to the digital transformation of Sri Lanka?

We contribute in various ways. We are bringing innovation to the country as the region's leading provider of telco and fintech solutions. By providing that we get solutions from other countries where we can bring the same solution and innovation to the country. Secondly, by collaborating with our teams, we are generating a significant amount of engineering capability in the country, which has aided in the acceleration and improvement of many engineers' engineering capabilities. Thirdly, we offer internship opportunities to approximately 80 interns at a time as part of our Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative, ensuring that university students have the opportunity to learn from the best people in order to excel themselves so that they can either get a better job or join ADL and continue their careers with us. Furthermore, we are directly supporting some of the CSR initiatives run by the Information and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) and government organisations.