

ENABLING THE DIGITAL FUTURE

IRFAN WAHAB KHAN

Today a vast majority of Pakistanis accesses the internet through their mobile phones. This device has become their gateway to the entire world, connecting families, businesses, students and so many more to one another. I believe true digitalisation is where everyone benefits from technology and solutions, and not just a select few. We have been focusing our digitalisation efforts on the same principle and made a lot of progress in the past few years in terms of policies, processes and business practices

This year and the last came with its own set of challenges for economies and businesses around the world. The onset of this pandemic severely affected national and global economies and enterprises on a diverse scale. Pakistan being an emerging economy and having a large blue-collar workforce that depends on day-to-day wages, may come to face an economic contraction. However, this year has also been a catalyst for digital adoption in the country along with many developments in the way of work in enterprises that has given a jumpstart in the right direction.

Pakistan is rightly known as the land of opportunity as it has tremendous and unmatched potential. We witnessed a surge in data usage and digital payments during the pandemic and there has been an increase in fin-techs, startups and banking institutions marching towards digitalisation; hence, signalling a boost for economy and society. The recent months following the coronavirus outbreak came as a reminder to transform businesses, innovate new operating models, bridge the digital divide, and build a digitally and financially inclusive society.

Telecom is integral for Pakistan's progression towards a digital society path. The industry is playing its role of bridging connectivity gaps, promoting inclusion and transforming several sectors. A true representation of a digital society is digital citizenship, which the GSMA defines as, interaction between government, businesses and citizens specifically in the provision and use of public services over digital channels. This is where mobile technology has been and will continue to be a vital contributor. Transforming the way individuals, businesses and governments interact. Another aspect is sectoral digitisation. In Pakistan, mobile connectivity is redefining the digital transformation of industries and facilitating the development of new solutions. We have witnessed revolutionary solutions in agriculture and banking through fintech solutions such as Easypaisa. Mobile connectivity has also been leveraged to give children their right to identity through Digital Birth Registration. The potential is insurmountable.

Technology-enabled innovation is the major spur to productive growth. Rapid advances in technology are enabling new business opportunities and disrupting current business models. For Pakistan to continue on this digital growth path, it is crucial to invest in people and prepare them for the skillset our future demands. According to an estimate, 70 per cent of new value created in the economy over the next decade will rely on digital platforms and business models e.g. digital payments and e-commerce alone are forecast to add \$45 billion over the next five years to the country's GDP. This is bound to elevate the level of exports and create new jobs for the youth of the country. However, the youth needs to be prepared to embrace the new and upcoming opportunities by being equipped with skillset of the future. With digital means of education taking off in popularity, this trend should continue for our youth to keep exploring new avenues to expand and enrich their areas of expertise.

COVID allowed us to fast pace the digital adoption in a few months for plans that were made for the next five years. To keep driving such growth in the country, new technological solutions will have to be brought in to support and develop smart solutions such as integration of Internet of Things (IoT) to real-time monitoring, computing, and establishment of smart factories. The digital world continues to evolve and grow. The digital future is built on collaborative efforts to nurture strong and strategic partnerships to co-create and develop innovative solutions. When the organisations and institutions offer solutions collectively, they benefit the masses exponentially by bridging the digital divide and offering solutions to current problems.

A fundamental pillar of our responsible business approach is the inclusion of the digitally excluded and our commitment to ensuring digital access for all. The pandemic has heightened the importance of reducing inequalities when it comes to mobile services and connectivity. The ability of people to access essential services, stay safe online, and acquire the skills necessary to succeed in the new normal are more imperative than ever before. We have a wide range of initiatives aimed at reducing the connectivity gap, building digital skills, and promoting diversity and inclusion. We have invested our efforts in creating more impact, enterprising innovation led possibilities and empowering Pakistanis. I believe our key services – mobile connectivity and internet – are the great equalisers of our day. Widespread and affordable access to digital services and skills is a game-changer for millions.