

# PUTTING THE PEOPLE BACK INTO IT

South African IT company, First Technology Western Cape, are keeping their staff and their customers happy by doing things a little differently.



**Johan de Villiers**, CEO, First Technology Western Cape

In 2007, the scale of disruption that took place was unlike anything the world had ever experienced before. Driven by three key factors – exponential growth (Moore’s Law), the rise of cloud storage and big data analytics (enabled by Hadoop) – it was around this time that we were introduced to innovations like the first iPhone, Android, Facebook and VMWare. This has led to the rise of what is commonly referred to as the 4th Industrial Revolution. Since then many businesses have struggled to keep up with the accelerated rate of change in technology.

For Johan de Villiers, CEO of First Technology in the Western Cape, new technologies demand that businesses change their strategies and do things differently in order to really stand out. They aim to do so by offering great experiences. A fitting strategy in

a market where offering a positive customer experience has become a critical competitive differentiator. This focus on “experiences” is just as much about their clients as it is about their employees.

## Power to the people

When people start out with us, we consider them to be “version 1.0”, he says. Moreover, over the course of their career, we invest in helping them develop and upgrade into better versions of themselves. Continual education is vital according to de Villiers, but another way they is by holding monthly strategy sessions where employees are tasked with sharing any Motivational, Disruptive Innovation and Personal Growth (“MIG”) opportunities they’ve experienced during that month.

In addition to this, the company also host monthly military strategy presentations. During this training, employees must present about a historical military leader or battle, explains de Villiers. As part of the presentation, they must outline what made this individual successful/unsuccessful or explore why the famous battle was won or lost. “These military strategy sessions teach people to use tactics from the battlefield in the boardroom. This makes our sales guys far more effective than anyone else out there.”

First Technology also sponsors monthly life coaching sessions where employees have the freedom to discuss any issues where mentoring or balance is required in their personal life. When you actively invest in your employees’ growth, you see results, asserts de Villiers. This also fosters trust and low staff turn-over, which are critical for quick decision-making”, he continues. When a member of the First Technology team has to make a decision, they are encouraged to ask themselves three questions: is it

ethical, is it legal and is it profitable? If they can answer: “Yes” to all of these questions there really is no need for them to seek authorisation from management before taking action.

## Enter the Jack Russell

First Technology’s business structure is another differentiator. While many national IT companies have a head office in Johannesburg and a star topology of smaller branches spread out across the country, First Technology has no head office. Their Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban offices run as completely autonomous companies, under the broader First Technology Group. This removes the need for continual head office communication and authorisation before a critical decision needs to be made.

“A long time ago, we realised that if we want to compete against our larger counterparts, we can’t duplicate what they’re doing. This would just make us a smaller Rottweiler going up against a much bigger Rottweiler,” he notes. “We needed to do something different. So, we decided to be a Jack Russell. Smaller, more nimble and much more agile against our listed competitors.”

Where other IT firms have a single sales team to sell all products and services, First Technology Western Cape has different sales teams to handle different niches. According to de Villiers, they aren’t generalists who can tell you a little bit about most things, they’re experts in the specific solutions and technologies they’re trying to sell and can develop more tailored client relationships.

“When you look at it, we’re not actually an IT business, we’re a people business,” concludes de Villiers. “When you get the people side of business right, the bottom line will take care of itself.” ■