

Telescope array will boost South Africa's tech economy

Neotel CEO says Square Kilometre Array will lay new infrastructure foundations for SA's tech and data center industry

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Neotel's Sunil Joshi

South Africa's win of the EU-funded Square Kilometre array – a giant radio telescope project which will be shared between Australia and the African country – will provide a massive boost to the country's telecommunications and data center sectors, according to Neotel MD and CEO Sunil Joshi.

Speaking at NetEvents in the Algarve, Portugal, last week, Joshi said the project will help boost infrastructure in the country, which is already moving forward with a number of new and significant subsea fiber connections and communications projects.

He said more subsea connections will be required, however, to connect South Africa to Australia and possibly other locations to transport the huge amount of data the telescopes will collect in their search for Planck epoch – the earliest time in the history of the universe.

“This project will force collaboration across geographies,” Joshi said.

“Once it is built, we will have significant infrastructure and new skills, then it will be up to South African businesses to ask how we can use this project to benefit the region.”

Neotel, which is majority owned by Tata Communications, has been involved in all subsea cable projects entering South Africa and is expanding its network across the continent.

Joshi said while the region may be behind with its infrastructure and skills it has the benefit of being able to roll out new technologies instead of relying on traditional architectures like those seen in many more established markets.

“With fiber that exists in Europe, in some cases, they are working with a legacy they can’t change. It is not the fiber that is the legacy, it is the electronics and these can be expensive to replace. So this gives us a significant technological advantage.”

Joshi said, however, despite recent investments, the industry still has a long way to go before it reaches a state of maturity.

“There is still a lot more investment to be done,” Joshi said.

“Every year I invest in about 0.5bn ZAR in Capex of which 80% goes towards expanding my fiber footprint and 20% goes towards IT and automation and processes. And we will continue to do so.”

As well as acting as a national network operator, connecting through parent company Tata’s worldwide communication links, Neotel has two data centers, one in Johannesburg and another in Cape Town.