



Nalin Perera, CEO, Mobitel

# KEEP MOVING

Nalin Perera has been in the mobile telecommunication industry since its inception and has journeyed with the sector, side by side. He led many initiatives such as Pre-Paid, Value Added Services and Enterprise Business Solutions, thereby ensuring that the Sri Lankan industry was as progressive as its counterparts internationally. He says he will always ensure that the industry is protected, having seen it grow from the very beginning. Appointed as the CEO of Mobitel, Nalin Perera continues to make strides, ensuring that Mobitel will be the selected choice of the people. Having proved his ability to deliver, he practices the simple principle that you have to keep moving.

By Udeshi Amarasingha | Photography Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam

#### Who is Nalin Perera?

I am a very simple and task oriented person. This is something that I learnt from my young days. I was not a great academic when I was in school but, I was involved in extra-curricular activities where I excelled in sports. I played rugby for college and then clubs. One important lesson that I learnt from the game is, since rugby is a short game, you have to make quick decisions. The aim for a rugby player is that you fly and you score, if you can't fly then you run, if you can't run you walk and if you can't walk you crawl. But you have to keep moving. The challenge is to keep moving towards your opponent's territory. That is something that I have learnt.

I am a simple easy going person. I enjoy pressure, if not we become complacent and the work will not be interesting. I have faced many challenges in this industry, which has given me strength. It makes me proud to be part of the mobile telecommunication sector.

#### Can you tell us about your experience in the mobile telecommunication industry?

I entered this industry in 1989, as a Market Development Executive, at Celltel – the pioneering mobile network. Subsequently I was in Customer Care and then was the Sales and Marketing Manager. Before leaving Celltel I was General Manager of Sales and Marketing. Thereafter, I worked as the Country Manager for Bright Point, where I was in charge of the

South East Asian region for a period of three years. I joined Mobitel in 2001 as the General Manager Marketing, since then I have been here. I have been the Chief Marketing Officer, Chief Operating Officer and today I have come to this position as CEO.

I have worked for almost 14 CEOs in my 28-year career. They have been from different nationalities that include Sri Lankan, South African, Australian, Swedish, Belgian, Scottish and many more. I have learnt something from everyone. All of them have played a role in me being where I am today. Always learn the best from others and make sure that you move forward.

I would say that this is a dream come true as person who has started his career at the lowest level in the corporate ladder, to have reached this position to give leadership to Mobitel.

#### As a person who has been in this sector since its inception, can you tell us how the mobile telecommunication industry has evolved over the years?

In a high tech industry such as mobile telecommunication, evolution is quite dynamic. The good thing about this industry is that from the time it started the local market has been very adaptable. People have embraced mobile communication very fast. Initially it was only voice and may be SMS. However today the market has evolved into a data driven market.

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Sri Lankans are more tech savvy today when compared to a few years back. The ICT industry has been growing very fast during the last few years. I am sure the younger generation will adapt to new technologies and gadgets much faster than they have done in the past.

**You have led many initiatives in the mobile telecommunications such as Pre-Paid, Value Added Services and Enterprise Business Solutions, can you tell us about this experience?**

I am proud to have launched the Pre-Paid system to Sri Lanka in 1997. The only product available during the time was Post-Paid and it was more or less a saturated market. As such we needed to find ways to penetrate the lower end of the market with minimum credit exposure. We studied some of the European countries practicing the Pre-Paid system, and later I was selected by the parent company Millicom to head this project in Sri Lanka. It was something totally new and it became a tremendous success. It revolutionized the manner in which people use their mobile phones. Thus we were able to maintain the high penetration levels in the local market.

In terms of the Value Added Services, as people were offered only voice and SMS, it was important for operators to build and provide added services in order to maintain their customer base. This included ringing tones, games as well as other entertainment components. There are certain verticals that people will look at in addition to the basic services, which are health, entertainment and transportation. These products will enhance their day to day lives and provide improved convenience to them.

Enterprise Business Solutions is a large subject area. Initially corporates too were only requiring voice, data and SMS type of solutions. However, today as operators we need to identify and look at the broader requirements of corporates and address these requirements with a total solution rather than only looking at one particular segment. Mobitel has an enormous product portfolio in terms of enterprise business. We engage with corporates and identify their processes, and we also tailor make the solution depending on their requirement.

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**What can you tell us about the available human resources in the sector?**

In Mobitel for instance we have a great team. In terms of technical as well as on the consumer side the biggest asset that we have is human resources. Generally, in an organisation there are two scarce resources, which are the capital and human resources. Mobitel is doing well in both aspects. Our achievements over the past 24 years have been due to our staff.

Looking at the industry as whole, there has been a brain drain where many qualified and experienced people in this sector especially IT and Engineering have gone overseas for better employment. However, then that is how it goes. Today, there are many IT skilled people entering the industry in Sri Lanka. We will always ensure that Mobitel has the best human talent in this country.

**What are your thoughts on the industry as a whole? Are there too many players, can we create more synergies?**

For a small market such as ours five players are far too much and anyone will accept that. Therefore, moving forward consolidation and collaboration are very important. Gone are the days where all five operators should build five platforms for one particular service. Today, all the operators work very closely; a good example is the 365 transport and ticketing platform, which was built by Mobitel, and it is shared by all the operators. In that sense you do not have to re-invent the wheel all over again and re-invest. The industry is moving forward by engaging in more partnerships and collaborations.

I will always ensure that the industry is protected as a person who has been in this sector since day one. Support is extended to my colleagues of other mobile operators as well.

**You have been appointed as the CEO of Mobitel, can you tell us about your plans for the company?**

All over the world, the demand for voice is seeing a slight dip as a product. The challenge is to gear the network in order to meet the data demand. Currently, we are in a position to invest a fair portion of funds to upgrade the network and we will be looking mainly at moving into the 4G arena. This is the nature

of this industry, even before you recover from it you have to move on to the latest technology. Today, there are already discussions on 5G tests.

We will invest in 4G at this stage and our plan is to take our high speed data and internet right across the country. A large expansion programme will be implemented as fast as possible to meet customer requirements. All our decisions will be focused on the customer. Rather than being first to market, you need to be the best to market, which is important. Therefore, we will ensure that Mobitel fulfills that requirement.

**You have risen to this position through the company, can you elaborate on your journey?**

Nothing is easy in life. You always have ups and downs. I have had some great people around me during my journey, especially within Mobitel who have stood by me. It is extremely important not to forget your past. Always remember where you started and respect every individual, irrespective of what position they hold, because each one has contributed to the success of the organisation.

There have been many good people that I have come across professionally. People who have helped to move forward even when things were bad. I continuously look at everything positively. If you have a bad experience, you have to rise from it and face it as it comes.

**What can you tell us about the performance of Mobitel?**

I took over as Chief Operating Officer in November 2015. If you take 2016 as a full year, which I was in-charge of, we recorded the highest ever profits for Mobitel, in terms of net profit. In a saturated market to get a revenue growth of ten per cent is quite remarkable. I did not achieve this on my own, the credit should go to the entire Mobitel team. Our team always goes beyond what is expected so that we achieve the required results.

**What more can be done or what plans have been made to introduce more products and services to the customer?**

The industry is unfortunately seeing a dip, mainly due to the introduction of the new tax system. If you aim to drive society or a country towards a more technology driven transfor-



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mation, then you need to encourage people to use more. In order to do that we have to maintain the prices at an affordable level.

We will continue to invest and try to ensure growth in the mobile telecommunication sector, however authorities too need to look at this industry in a more favourable manner. Currently all the operators are experiencing a dip. In the short term we will have that effect, but in the long term we are confident that the relevant authorities will make the correct decisions so that people will be encouraged to use our services and products.

**How did you bring in your experiences in sports to your work?**

When you do a sport you learn to mix and move with people and society. That is one advantage. The other is how you make your decisions. Sometimes you do not know whether it is the right decision or the wrong decision, but you have to make it. When the ball is in your hand and your opponents are waiting to tackle you, you have to make a quick decision. You have to decide whether you want to kick or whether you want to pass. That is something that I learnt from the game. It is very relevant



to the industry that we are in today. If you do not make a decision quickly and move forward, you are history. Even the environment that you work in, if you create an environment where there is no red tape and when there is easy access for the people then that is a success of an organisation.

#### **Future plans for Mobitel?**

As far as the future is concerned it looks very bright for Mobitel. We have been looking at consolidation in addition to the immense expansion programme to be implemented in the future. We will always increase the breadth and width of our touch points and distribution channels. Because that is an area that you need flexibility as much as possible. It is important to bring in differentiation in your service, not only in terms of how you serve the customer but in how you ensure the quality of your network.

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We will benchmark those areas with other international networks. Sri Lankans are well exposed to international systems as our people travel much more. They will always benchmark our work with the rest of the world. We will make sure that the required investments are sourced in order for Sri Lankans to have the same opportunities as well.

#### **Message?**

Be Sri Lankan, buy Sri Lankan. The country is going through a very progressive period and things are moving in the correct direction in terms of the basic frameworks in most of the identified areas.

This can be considered as a tight period for a commercial organisation and I would say you need to tighten your belt and control costs and continue to grow your top line with strategies implemented. I believe we are heading towards a very good period. 