

Sicily Hub: Sparkle's disruptive ecosystem *in the heart of the Mediterranean*

Alessandro Talotta, chairman and CEO, Sparkle, has been busy implementing its state of the art data centre - the Sicily Hub. Bill Boyle talks to him about strategy



Sicily Hub is Sparkle's next generation data centre in Palermo and is one of the organisation's key projects. Located closer to North Africa and the Middle East than any other European peering point, and connected to all the cable landing stations in Sicily, it is served by Sparkle's tier 1 grade IP transit service, Seabone. Inaugurated in May 2015, Sicily Hub is rapidly becoming not only the leading IP centre of gravity in the Mediterranean basin but also a rich ecosystem and market place, of multi-breed interconnected players, catering to the needs of players in Africa and the Middle East.

Talotta said: "The positioning of the Sicily Hub was not accidental. We have opened a new point-of-presence (PoP) in Iran and this region of the world is of great business significance. At the moment we provide 20% of the total IP presence in Iran. We have been preparing for a long time and locally our PoP will have a redundant connection from the North and from the South through submarine cables landing in Chabahar."

"We have an open approach in order to give our partners as many options as possible. The goal of our partners is to increase their broadband markets. In Iran

our vision is to be a stable presence and to support our partner in becoming a strong hub and the centre of strong relationships for the whole region of Iraq, Afghanistan, Aszerbaijan and Pakistan. We have a strategic advantage in the area over many newcomers and we have been partnering for longer."

"So we are also taking our first steps from the Sicily Hub towards the African continent. Ideally I would like to have some of our other services ready to install, such as our cloud platform, however, we are ready to partner and expect growth to be steady," he says.

Driving open standards

Sicily Hub's open configuration supports Carriers and ISPs that want to improve the efficiency and enhance the redundancy of their networks while enjoying a rich ecosystem and marketplace of multi-breed interconnected players.

Sparkle has always held open standards to be important. Talotta says: "We are a driving force in MEF - we are on the board of directors. MEF has over 210 members, vendors, and operators helping this \$80 billion Carrier Ethernet market produce practical solutions. The most important part of network improvement is making sure that service-delivery becomes easier

and that standards in multi-domain networks are strongly enforced. For example - when we are building a network from Italy to South America as long as they have MEF certifications we should theoretically be able to do it with fewer problems, that is the goal at the moment."

Proofs of concept

Sparkle is working within the MEF on implementing software defined networking (SDN) and network functions virtualisation (NFV), specifically the convergence of these into one interface that will allow the easy orchestration of services such as BSS and OSS which will finally converge and interoperate.

The next MEF event in November this year will see Comcast, ECI, Tata Communications, Sparkle and Viavi demonstrate proof-of-concept delivery on automated delivery of dynamic, bandwidth-on-demand services via an orchestrated multi-carrier, multi-platform solution enabling cloud-based applications and connectivity. Sparkle will have a multi-carrier proof of concept ready to launch in the first quarter of next year.

Talotta says that research and development are imperative to allow the company to plan its next-generation network well-ahead, this is why the TIM

Talotta. DE-CIX operates carrier-neutral and data center-neutral internet exchanges around the world, including its flagship exchange in Frankfurt.

The Sicily Hub exchange, for example, is based on DE-CIX's leading APOLLON platform which provides "unrivaled scalability and performance."

DE-CIX's new exchange at Sicily Hub has been designed to allow carriers that land their IP backbones in Sicily to directly interconnect with each other and to other providers that have a presence in the facility. These providers include some of the world's best-known and largest content players.

The partnership with DE-CIX and their new IX node in Sicily Hub allows Sparkle to better serve ISPs in the area, including Africa and the Middle East, by bringing worldwide content directly to their doorsteps. The presence of DE-CIX's global carrier-neutral internet exchange - as well as the most relevant global content providers that deliver media, gaming, e-commerce, social networks and video platforms - make Sicily Hub the best location for top-quality and cost-efficient public and private peering in the region, Talotta says.

Namex and TopIX, have placed themselves in the Sicily Hub providing alternative public peering solutions.

Talotta says: "This partnership between Sparkle and DE-CIX in Palermo has been very successfully replicated in Istanbul, Turkey, where global content is made available through public peering, a major turning point for the local and adjacent markets."

Major content providers

Talotta says: "Another major milestone is the landing in Sicily Hub of some of the world's most prominent content providers. Sicily Hub customers can now interconnect and directly peer with these major CPs in Palermo gaining access to the world's best content."

"Global Cloud Xchange has expanded its footprint with a multiservice PoP in the Palermo facility. Like many, GCX sees the Mediterranean port as a growing nexus between the networks of Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East."

Sparkle was the first to introduce the 100 Gbps IP transit connectivity in the Middle East. The new technology, adopted first by Saudi Telecom in 2015 out of the Sicily Hub, represents an unequalled throughput capability and effectively increases the number of Saudi Telecom's eyeballs in the Kingdom as they are experiencing an accelerating demand for top quality IP services and digital content.

"The introduction of the 100Gbps technology to the Middle East and Africa supports the growth of Sicily Hub as a strategic IP center in the middle of the

Mediterranean. Sparkle's objectives are to serve ISPs in the Middle East and Africa by bringing worldwide content directly to their doorsteps with cutting-edge connectivity technology. And it makes Sparkle a pioneer in providing top quality and advanced cost efficient connectivity solutions to customers in the region experiencing a growth of advanced IP services and demand for digital content in their home markets," Telotta says.

SMW5

He continued: "The SEA-ME-WE-5 will be operational in late 2016 and will land in Sicily. Recently, we have driven SEA-ME-WE-5 to adopt the 'open pop strategy' and Palermo, together with Marseille and Singapore, will be the only open and competitive termination point - a disruptive strategy in the world of international consortia cables."


"The SEA-ME-WE-5 will be operational in 2016 and lands in Sicily"

Alessandro Talotta, Sparkle

As a result of all the above, today customers of Sicily Hub benefit from increased Quality: Sicily Hub interconnections configuration saves up to 35ms in latency with an overall quality improvement from 50% to 80% for customers from Africa, Mediterranean and Middle East

The Sicily Hub proximity to customers lowers the impact of fibre breaks. connection to all landing stations in Sicily makes recovery from cable failure faster and less expensive. In the middle of the Mediterranean with a rich ecosystem of 19 other cables, it offers up to 35ms reduced latency versus more northern locations.

Seabras

"Last but not least we are heavily investing in the Americas with the new Seabras cable, the first to directly connect São Paulo, Brazil, to New York. We own half of the 6-fibre pair system which will be operational in 2017. As we are a top player in the region and we have been ranked the best IP route between North and South America we keep investing in our backbone to ensure our customers continue to receive best service quality and standards, and we remain positioned as the main reference point in the market for specific high quality demanding segments like finance and gaming industries." 

test laboratories employ over 1,000 engineers. Talotta has an interesting view on the way the enterprise is changing to accommodate the huge disruption which is approaching. He says: "We are finding that security for enterprises is only a barrier for the older style chief information officer (CIO). The new company is adopting a new approach with the rise of the new chief revenue officer (CRO) who has to manage not just the operations side of the business but also match the applications and all processes and the evolution of the processes internally and as they emerge into the market place. This shows the convergence of the vision for the business and the technology planning to take the vision to market."

Talotta gives me an example in the transport market: "With all their apps running, let's say, in London, a CIO in Italy often has to guarantee real-time connectivity for ticketing online. He needs to understand all of the problems in real-time - for example, if there is a sudden huge surge for capacity and he has to deliver the application and the whole service end to end. These are real-time management problems."

Sparkle's partnership with the world's leading internet exchange provider, DE-CIX, is very important to them, says