

The time is now

Elisabetta Romano, the newly elected chair of the ITW Global Leaders' Forum, speaks to Natalie Bannerman on the change she plans to drive in the highly coveted role

Capacity

Our industry typifies change. From the latest generation of technologies to the ever-evolving list of use cases and innovations. At the heart of this is the people, where change also is a regular feature.

One of the most talked about new appointments, announced in May during International Telecoms Week 2022, was that of Elisabetta Romano, CEO of Sparkle and now chair of the ITW Global Leaders' Forum.

Speaking to *Capacity* on what this new role means to her, she said she was very excited by her appointment, not just to have been chosen but to have the opportunity to drive real growth.

"I'm excited because the industry has come to a stage where the relevance and complexity of our work is well recognised. Covid has contributed a lot to this awareness. Now the relevance of our industry is well known."

Driving transformation

Now the industry is getting the recognition it deserves, Romano says it's

all about using that as a vehicle to drive the digital transformation that has been spoken about for years.

"When we talk about transformation, we refer both to business and operations," she explains. "We need to be able to leverage the new technologies available, whether it's blockchain, AI, machine learning and so on. Even technologies that are not our core can help us in this business and operational transformation."

Business transformation, according to Romano, is pivotal because it will enable telcos to become easy to work with for its customers, giving them the kind of experience they receive in their everyday lives.

"Digital life is the norm," she says. "Nowadays customers buy and consume products in a different way, they interact differently. We have to drive this change, also making it easy to work with us."

The other part is operational transformation, which occurs internally within a company, comprised largely of automation.

"We still have a lot of manual activities within Sparkle, but this is reality not only for us but for the whole industry,"

Romano says. "We need to become faster and more agile internally, leveraging the data that we have to become more data-driven."

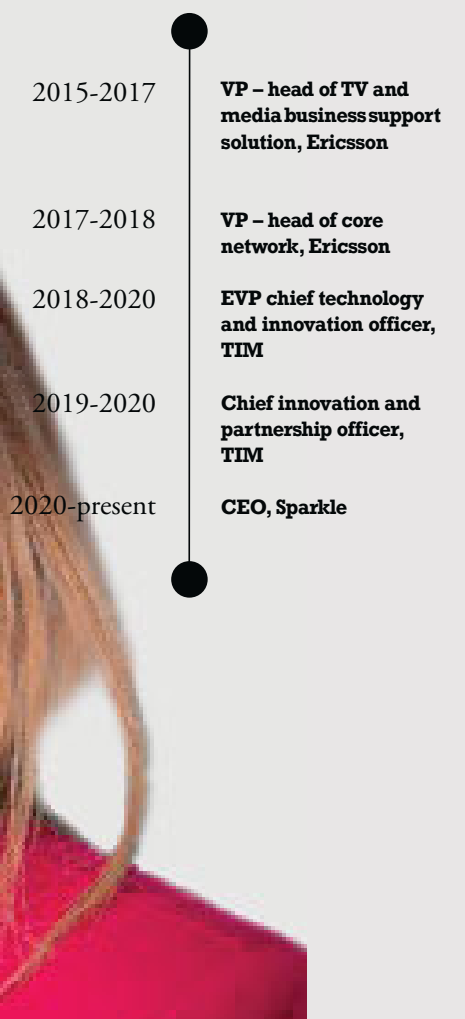
The ultimate dream, she says, is to have autonomous self-healing networks, adding that "we are still very much in reactive mode when it comes to [network] assurance".

Despite this, she says that industry was able to mobilise and automate much of its network in a matter of weeks during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, proving that "when there is an urgency, things can be done. So if we focus, we can do it."

So now, alongside the other distinguished members of the GLF board, Romano is ready to lead the organisation knowing that sense of urgency and what needs to be done to "make that transformation happen".

Balancing roles

Describing herself as an "action-oriented person", Romano says that her role as GLF chair is that of a facilitator, someone dedicated to "spelling out better the priorities of the industry and facilitating the execution of these accordingly".



2015-2017

VP – head of TV and media business support solution, Ericsson

2017-2018

VP – head of core network, Ericsson

2018-2020

EVP chief technology and innovation officer, TIM

2019-2020

Chief innovation and partnership officer, TIM

2020-present

CEO, Sparkle

ubiquitous global network that the digital world needs”.

ITW 2022 saw the GLF hold its first meeting with Romano as chair, as well as being only the second meeting in person for a long while, prompting the group to take stock of not just what the organisation has been doing but where it is going.

“There was a lot of talk about priorities and defining what needs to be done in order to address them,” shares Romano, recognising that not all operators are on the same page in their journeys or on changes that needed to be made. Before joining Sparkle, Romano worked for a tech company that was selling to telco operators a global perspective on the industry from the outside.

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Elisabetta Romano, CEO, Sparkle

creating value for the industry and something the GLF can facilitate.

“If we do well as an industry and we get to do more with automation and the use of cutting-edge technology, we become cooler, which is half the battle,” she explains.

At same time, a general modernisation is needed because “if you come to work in a company and there is still a lot of unnecessary manual tasks you have to do, and the process is cumbersome and slow – you can hire people, but after a while they leave.”

The other side of it – which involves things like interacting with universities, mentoring etc – Romano says, “depends largely on the country and the institution”, believing that addressing this at the GLF-level will not yield the desired results, as it requires a more tailored approach.

With work set to continue across its various working groups, such as Fight Against Fraud and Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, Romano says that, looking ahead, the organisation has a working list of ideas for potential new areas of development, which will be better defined in the near future.

One would assume that the focus areas for Romano would be split between those of the GLF and Sparkle, but to her they are quite aligned – in short, it’s the three pillars of technology, business transformation and operational transformation.


“Technology is the foundation, but the true goal is to achieve complete business and operational transformation,” she says. “Although these things have been talked about for decades, very little has been done; there is still a lot of work to be done.”

Recalling her time working for a tech company, she says this lack of progress in transformation “made me nervous when I was a vendor. I was working only for telco operators and their success was my success. But at that time I had no sense of the real capabilities needed to enable this transformation.”

It was this challenge that inspired Romano to make the leap from tech to telco when the opportunity arose.

As someone who was pitching this idea of transformation to customers for many years, she says, “I thought maybe now I can actually do it. Because when you are a vendor, you can only suggest the products that help them.”

Now that Romano is both in the industry and chair of the GLF, she has a big responsibility to ‘walk the talk’ and do what she would have been advising them all those years ago.

“Now’s the time to finally make this happen,” she says. 

As someone ‘wearing two hats’, Romano will be balancing her role as chair and facilitating a group of her colleagues and peers, while at the same time leading a company. However, the activities at one will only improve the other, she says.

“If we do well together with the other leaders in the GLF, then we, as leaders of our respective companies, will benefit from the improvements we are making throughout the industry,” she says. “I’m excited because this is what we need, a space where industry players can come together in an open and collaborative way.”

Romano believes that in past years telcos have been too closed and siloed in their work, and reminds us that “none of us are a global player.”

“Big tech companies such as Google or Uber and the likes are global because they deal with software and software is global by definition,” she explains. “If you compare them to one of us [telcos], even the largest operator in the world is not global and cannot serve everyone alone.”

This means working together, while maintaining respect for each other’s business and competition, “to provide this

“That experience taught me that not all operators have a clear picture of their position, resulting in under- or over-evaluating their assets or added value. So, awareness of where we are is a very important step to evaluate and recognise our strengths and our weaknesses as well.”

Creating an inclusive GLF

The other thing to consider is that not all operators are at this stage – depending on the geography and maturity of the company – and that “we need to make sure that the GLF is a home that all operators can belong to.”

This, according to Romano, is one of the challenges she hopes to address, to create an inclusive GLF that addresses the various needs and stages of development of its members without slowing down the ones that are charging ahead. The talent deficiency is another big talking point of the industry that Romano says the GLF will contribute towards in a number of ways.

The first is a call to action, “to make our industry more appealing”. This is something that can be achieved by

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