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The Big Interview

Sparkle is poised to prosper

Enrico Maria Bagnasco tells Natalie Bannerman about the company's latest global infrastructure projects

Projects, projects, projects. It seems that the last few years or so, Sparkle has seen no shortage of connectivity projects announced. Whether it's the Panama Digital Gateway (PDG) or the Blue Med subsea cable, there seems to be no abating its growth plans.

There are two core geographical areas of business for Sparkle. The first is the big corridor from Europe through the Middle East to the Far East. The second is the North to South America corridor. Sparkle is also developing its business offerings in Africa, focusing more so the South of the continent and the Atlantic portion.

With subsea cables such as Equiano, BlueMed and Blue/Raman all falling within these key business areas for Sparkle.

"It is in precisely the main area of business for us, which has always been the highest traffic corridor for data in the world and also the highest growth area," explains Enrico Maria Bagnasco, CEO of Sparkle.

"So, it's not just the top traffic route but it's also the highest in terms of continual growth. This also aligns with the higher requirements of all the countries along the route."

With six out of the seven high traffic hotspots for internet being in Europe, it would seem that this is the correct strategy.

Capacity aside, the geographical diversity Blue/Raman adds to the resilience of the network which Bagnasco says is "even more important". This is further bolstered by its landing point in Genoa as an alternative to Marseille.

"Genoa is in terms of geography the closest coastal city in the Mediterranean to the larger central European cities like Paris, London, Amsterdam, Frankfurt," adds Bagnasco.

Based on the response from the market, which he describes as gaining a lot of traction, this reinforces the idea that customers are looking for a different route with more capacity.

Bagnasco believes it's a combination of generic drivers, i.e., more people using more digital services, that is a direct contributor to these growth demands, all which was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. But also, on the business side of things, video interactions have increased at least 10-fold a trend that he says is here to stay and is not merely an 'episode'.

Combine this with online gaming, another bandwidth hungry and latency sensitive service, and the influence of the cloud.

"In a few years we went from business applications to running everything in the cloud. It's such a big driver in fact, it's pushing the larger cloud providers to distribute content more locally with edge node applications," he says.

Speaking on the Genoa Landing Platform, which aims to become a preferred route for future submarine systems seeking diversified access to the west European coast,



Bagnasco shares that the company made a very large investment in the platform to make it as attractive as possible for those seeking out diverse routes and locations.

"We needed to build something special," he explains.

"Which we did. We have this very extensive, long, bore pipe that stretches 900 metres to the bottom of the sea where it is buried to fully protect the cables."

In addition, it is an open platform, meaning that there is no obligation to go with Sparkle for any services, enabling customers to choose whatever they like and whoever they prefer to build or to buy infrastructure from.

While it serves as the landing point for the Blue/Raman cable it is a project in its own right as it can accept a total of eight subsea cables.

"Two of those facilities will be used by Blue/Raman and six are available on the market with a good number of negotiations already underway for those," he says.

In line with North to South America being a key area of development for Sparkle, one of the biggest projects for the company has been the PDG, which recently went live in July.



Due to its proximity to the US, the content market as well as the billions of people that span its continents, PDG made sense on all fronts.

“ We have a number of good years ahead, where all this work is paying off ”

"We've been present there [Panama] for more than two years," Bagnasco says. "Panama itself also has a very unique geography being that it's a 40-minute drive from the Pacific to the Atlantic. So, we thought that it would be the perfect place to put our data centre which is, like all our other data centres, a combination of a landing station and a data centre because we do not develop data centres per se."

Not unlike the Genoa Landing Platform, PDG is an open, carrier neutral facility and will be the landing point for the Panama branch of the Curie cable, a Google cable system that runs from the US to Panama and Chile.

"We have our own fibre to connect the PDG data centre in Panama crossing the canal linking our infrastructure in the

Atlantic so we can provide dual protection, Atlantic to Pacific and backwards," he adds.

Since assuming the role of Sparkle's CEO in 2022, it's the company's high level of entrepreneurship that Bagnasco is most proud of, meaning that "everybody who works here is not just an employee. There is that spirit where people are invested in the success of the company and want to see it win."

During his tenure, not just as CEO but as CTO prior, a lot of work has gone into streamlining the company's portfolio of services, because "there is always a risk of you chasing new ideas and latest trends but, in reality, it's the mix of knowledge and skills required to complete the jobs successfully that matters the most," he explains.

What's now left in Sparkle's case is an optimal portfolio which is innovative, but also coherent to its scale. This in conjunction with the refurbishment of its European backbone with the aforementioned projects means that the business now has a number of "good years ahead, where all this work is paying off because we have more infrastructure, colocation space and network capacity to sell".

With its 700-person strong global team, they are central to Bagnasco's vision for the business, all while adopting a long-standing 'one company approach', saying "we are who we are only because we have 700 people doing the job".

QUICK FACTS

- 1. 2014-2016,** Head of video and service platforms, TIM
- 2. 2016-2018,** Head of technology innovation, TIM
- 3. 2018-2019,** Head of product and portfolio management, TIM
- 4. 2019-2022,** CTO, Sparkle
- 5. 2022 – Present,** CEO, Sparkle

