

Episode 119 | The 4 Strategic Imperatives Turning Etisalat into Tech Company e&
(Harrison Lung)
Harrison Lung, e&
Released July 8, 2025

DR: [00:00] As head of strategy, where are you guys placing your biggest bets for the next few years at e&?

Harrison Lung: [00:06] I think we're at a very interesting time. We have laid out an eight, nine year plan for 2030. As part of the journey, we refreshed our overall strategy into what we call the 4D strategy. D number one is called double down on core. The second is diversifying a portfolio. The third D is digitizing and transforming operations. And lastly is actually delivering it and doing it all sustainably.

DR: [00:31] Yeah.

Announcer: [00:37] This is "Telco in 20," a podcast that helps telco execs achieve a competitive advantage with AI and the public cloud. It is hosted by Danielle Rios, also known as DR. Today we're talking to Harrison Lung, Chief Strategy Officer at e&.

DR: [00:56] Hi guys, I'm DR. The most important issue facing telcos today is how to generate more revenue. So who do CEOs turn to when they need help thinking about this? Their Chief Strategy Officer. Strategy officers look five years into the future and project where their companies should place their big bets today. But trying to figure out which plays to make in our industry can be super challenging. There are a lot of ideas floating around, GPU-as-a-Service, AI-RAN, network API's, hyperpersonalization, 6G, moving everything to the public cloud. So where are telcos placing their bets? And just as importantly, what are they walking away from?

[01:38] Today I'm talking with a Chief Strategy Officer who's been on the front lines, Harrison Lung from e&, formerly known as Etisalat. We're going to dive into e&'s four strategic pillars, Harrison's take on the big strategy ideas in our industry and how e& is applying AI behind the scenes to deliver a better subscriber experience. So let's take 20. Harrison Lung is Group Chief Strategy Officer at e&. Hi Harrison, welcome to "Telco in 20."

Harrison Lung: [02:09] Thank you for having me here today.

DR: [02:11] I am so excited. We were both speaking at the oversold Gen AI Summit at MWC in Barcelona this year, and then I

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randomly ran into you at the VIP pickup area and I was like, "Oh my gosh, you have to be on the podcast." And I'm so happy you said yes.

Harrison Lung:

[02:29] You're much too kind. Thank you again.

DR:

[02:31] Yeah, yeah, it was great. And so, looking in your background, you've been in telco and technology for over 20 years, including 10 years at the famous McKinsey & Company. And so it's one thing to advise people on their strategy and tell them what to do, and it's quite another to own and implement the strategy like you're doing at e&. e& is one of the most prominent techcos in the Middle East and North Africa. And so what's that transition been like moving from advising people to actually owning the strategy?

Harrison Lung:

[02:59] It's been great so far. I joined e& about two years ago. In fact, I started my career in technology operating roles in the Canadian telecom industry, building 2G, 3G networks two decades ago, and since then, transitioned to consulting and now more recently back in an operating role. And the transition has been great so far, but really focused on driving and delivering impact for our businesses. McKinsey has been a tremendous experience for me, great learning, great exposure, but at the end of the day, I really wanted to get my hands dirty and roll up my sleeves and really own the toughest problems that we can solve. So I'm really glad to have joined e& as we go through this massive transformation journey, not just becoming a regional telecom operator, but being a global technology company, expanding not just in MENA, but also in Eastern Europe more recently as well.

DR:

[03:52] Yeah, that's awesome. You mentioned e& is on this transformational journey. Many telcos are making this transition from telco to technology. Before, there were a lot of telcos out there saying in order to become a techco, they were going to go hire legions of software developers. For example, Vodafone said in 2022 they were going to go hire 7,000 software engineers to expand its technical workforce. How do you think workforce strategies are changing, especially in the age of AI?

Harrison Lung:

[04:22] It's ultimately super important because workforce and people are the linchpin that would drive any transformation. As

we embarked and started this transformation back in '21, '22, we did three things that were different. Number one is we actually went through a rebranding exercise. For close to 50 years, e&, which is now what we're known as, was called Etisalat, which for those Arabic speakers means communications in the language. This is tremendous because we have built great brand equity and we are known in the region for that.

[04:56] However, as you expand outside of the communication space, as well as globally, in non-Arabic speaking regions, it makes less sense. So we wanted to maintain our heritage and that's why we're called Etisalat and or e&. The second thing is really about restructuring and reorganizing ourself. We have a group holding structure and various operating units from UAE Telecom, our home and heritage to the 19 other international countries of which we operate telecom networks to e& enterprise. This is a B2B arm of our entire business that focuses not on connectivity, but really up the technology stack into solutions and services. And lastly, e& life, our digital consumer unit. All of these are staffed and led by different leaders and individuals with the different capabilities that really tunes to each vertical strategy.

DR:

[05:47] And so as head of strategy, I think if I had to distill your job down to one simple sentence, you are shaping the strategic direction, trying to figure out how to generate more revenue for the group, how to be more efficient with the assets that you have. You're coming off of a great quarter with strong growth. And so where are you guys placing your biggest bets for the next few years at e&?

Harrison Lung:

[06:12] I think we're at a very interesting time in our overall journey, being three years in and we have laid out an eight, nine year plan for 2030. As part of the journey, we also refreshed and realigned our overall strategy into what we call the 4D strategy. D number one is called double down on core. At the end of the day, we are a telecom company. This is our heritage, this is what we're good at, this is what we'll continuously do, so continuously in the telecom business. The second is diversifying a portfolio. So not only are we diversifying on the telecom side, but we also invest in a number of technology assets in the last three years from STARZPLAY, which is an OTT platform, to

Careem the regional super app to even e& money, which we've incubated and built from scratch internally.

DR:

[07:00] Cool.

Harrison Lung:

[07:01] Additionally, we've also diversified our footprints and geography too, not just in the Middle East and North Africa, and as I mentioned earlier, four countries in Eastern Europe as well. The third D is digitizing and transforming operations. What this means is really focusing on the customer, providing the utmost enhanced customer experience, but using it via different digital technologies such as AI and automation for straight through processing, both in the customer facing aspect of the processes, but also internally in our business.

[07:36] And lastly, and certainly not least, is actually delivering it and doing it all sustainably. We look at sustainability not just at the environment level, which is really important as we also have net-zero commitments and mandates within our organization, but we look at sustainability within the broader ecosystem in the markets of which we operated, which is the social fabric, the community. How do we bridge the network and digital divide? How do we ensure financial inclusion? But, of course, doing it from the people and culture perspective. So it's actually a very holistic structure and strategy and these are the areas that we'll continue to double down on in the next few years as well.

DR:

[08:17] I got to love the alliteration you have going on. Every HR leader's dream and probably strategy is you could stop any employee in the hallway and ask them what the four D's are and they can repeat it to you. And so just aligning those messages that can refer back to the planks of the strategy is great.

[08:37] There's a lot of talk in the industry always at MWC and the big conferences about the big strategic plays that different telcos are making. And the big ones I think I'd say are obviously the network API's, opening up your network to programmable APIs through the Open Gateway and CAMARA initiatives. I think another big newer topic is GPU-as-a-Service and AI-ran, which is basically using the extra capacity of your networks, either your edge data centers or your RAN itself to run enterprise workloads and create a business out of this. And then my favorite, of course, is moving your network core to run on the public cloud.

Telefónica Germany is experimenting with and DISH has done in the United States. And so if you take your e& hat off for two seconds, what's your take on these three big strategies? Do you think these are good ideas? Are they worth pursuing? What do you think about them?

Harrison Lung:

[09:38] Yeah, I think these topics, including things like LEO satellite, eSIM and many others-

DR:

[09:43] 6G.

Harrison Lung:

[09:45] 6G, are always top of mind of any industry conferences, as well as within the top telecom companies and technology companies in the world, along with the boardrooms.

DR:

[09:55] Of course.

Harrison Lung:

[09:55] So I do think there's a piece by piece here you need to look at and assess because I think depending on the current state of each organization, they may react to each one of these items differently. Some are opportunities and some are threats. And I'll list a few examples. On the API front, currently there's initiatives in place already, Kamara, which is the TM Forum, Linux Foundation, as well as the GSMA Open Gateway. A lot of them are industry standards to ensure a common protocol and specifications in opening up the network. You're now seeing more broader collaboration in the industry in itself to monetize this. I think in the past, there have been a number of other companies in this space, like Vonage, Twilio and others, but these are more traditional technology companies. On the telecom side, e&, along with a number of global leading operators, approximately 14 or 15, along with Ericsson, formed a joint venture called Aduna Global.

[10:56] The idea here is all the telecom operators collaborate, provide our APIs within the right specification, pricing, as well as regulatory framework because we all operate in different geographies to ensure that third party customers, global enterprises, whether it's the McDonalds of the world or the MasterCards of the world-

DR:

[11:14] Starbucks, yeah.

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Harrison Lung: [11:16] ...can actually access and provide seamless interfaces to our network through a one-stop shop. So there's definitely an opportunity there.

[11:25] Now, some of these other ones, whether it's AI-ran, whether it's GPU-as-a-Service, it also depends not just the strategic nature of threats and opportunities, but also capital allocation. Because if you look at areas like GPU-as-a-Service, it does require quite a bit of investments to get the GPU forums to set up.

DR: [11:43] Absolutely.

Harrison Lung: [11:43] And as you know, in the last 5, 10 years, many telecom operators have actually either carved out or divested their data center assets because of the need for CapEx. So it's really a critical view working in conjunction with a broader management team, strategy, finance, and, of course, a board to really chart the path forward. Is this build your own GPU-as-a-Service and sell? Are you a reseller of these services working with the hyperscalers and many others? Every single strategic conversation has what's the end state, an objective you want to achieve, and then more importantly, how are we going to get there? Are you buying? Are you building? Are you partnering? Are you defending? So there's a constellation of decision logics within all of that.

DR: [12:24] When I think about strategy, the strategy really is in what you say no to, not what you say yes to. Because I think a lot of times people are like, "We have the money. We can. We have the edge data centers. Why not? Let's just do it." And if you say yes to everything, it's like having a boat with one oar, you just go in a circle. You won't do anything well.

Harrison Lung: [12:48] Absolutely.

DR: [12:49] You have to be disciplined and say, "No, we're not going to chase that idea and we're going to say yes to this thing and we're going to do this really, really great." And I think leaders, boards and the CXO team saying, "No, we're placing our bets. We all believe in it. We're going to put two oars in the water and we're all going to row together and then we're going to go fast in this direction," I think that's really what strategy is.

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- Harrison Lung: [13:13] Correct. That operating discipline and linking the big picture to the execution engine is really important because at the end of the day, we're also a publicly traded company, so our goal is to provide the best shareholder value return, both in the context of growth as well as dividend.
- DR: [13:29] Yeah, and you said something really important there, which is one thing to have the idea, but then you actually have to go execute.
- [13:35] Jim Abolt, one of my HR mentors, he was like, "Strategy or an idea without execution, it's just a hallucination." And so it's really important to connect those two things together. And so let's talk about this new idea that's come bursting on the scene and that is AI. Everyone's talking about it, investing in it, trying to figure out how to make money from it and how to use it. e& is a global company that has both technology and telecom investments and assets. And so what are some of your most exciting AI use cases on both sides of the business?
- Harrison Lung: [14:06] This is actually really interesting to share because I think most people think about AI in the context of telcos as chatbots and solving certain customer issues. And we certainly have that because it's very relevant and easy to see. But I want to highlight a couple of use cases and scenarios where there's AI being deployed and you actually don't even know it. One on the technology side and one on our telecom side. On the telecom side, we're actually embedding AI within a network to prevent scams, phishing, potentially hackers, et cetera. A lot of people get random SMSs or text messages, random phone calls, random WhatsApp messages nowadays. So we're actually embedding AI to screen and filter out a lot of them with the right reinforcing mechanism and the right feedback loop.
- DR: [14:52] Yeah, perfect.
- Harrison Lung: [14:53] This, a lot of times you don't see unless you get, I don't know, three or five a day and now you see one, you might experience it.
- DR: [14:59] Exactly.

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Harrison Lung: [14:59] So this actually ties back to our strategic pillar D number three, which is digitizing and transforming our operations. Because at the end of the day, we're enhancing customer experience, we're providing a seamless experience on connectivity, all the while we're preventing fraud.

DR: [15:14] For sure.

Harrison Lung: [15:15] On the technology side, one of our portfolio companies is called Careem. It's the regional super app that has ride hailing, food delivery, grocery delivery, and it does a number of other things. During the peak hours of service, we're able to use AI to really augment the catchment area of the delivery person so as to meet certain SLAs and KPIs. We know, for example, that during certain hours we have more orders, so we staff up in terms of delivery people. In certain hours it's less, so we give them breaks and different tasks. And then when they deliver, depending on the locations of the restaurant, the location of the individuals, we can ensure the food actually gets to you while it's still hot and still a good meal. So this, again, you don't really see because at the end of the day when you order food on your app, whether it's Careem or Uber Eats, all you care about is it gets here in about 20, 30 minutes, anything over an hour is a no-go.

DR: [16:10] So it's dynamic staffing and then moving the workers to highly likely delivery zones or restaurants that they're there very quickly.

Harrison Lung: [16:19] Correct. And we know exactly which restaurants are more popular based on the data on the platform. We know who's likely going to order from which restaurant. For example, if you have a family dinner every Friday from this restaurant, we know all that data. So we're actually able to really tailor the experience, both on the consumer side but also on the other side, which is the restaurants. Because at the end of the day, we can also provide them insights to actually say, "Hey, this food is actually most popular." So ensure you have the right ingredients, the right staffing level to meet the demands of the customer to really enhance that experience.

DR: [16:50] That's cool. Very cool. And so I imagine being a strategy officer is incredibly stressful, right? You're traveling, you're

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coming up with new ideas that are huge moneymakers and cost improvement drivers for your company. And so what do you like to do to relax and unwind?

Harrison Lung: [17:07] First of all, the role is stressful, but also super fun.

DR: [17:09] Yeah.

Harrison Lung: [17:09] The funny thing is I also love reality TV and the reason is, as you already mentioned, the job's typically so busy, so stressful. I found and used this as a way to relax because many of these reality shows focus on different things. It could be real estate, it could be sports, and I find a way without really having to think too much to enjoy my evenings and weekends and whatnot.

DR: [17:31] My family hates to hang out with me because I'm a little bit the same way. I had a long day of making a bunch of decisions. I don't want to be entertained by a scary movie. That is not entertaining, that is stressful. And so I watch the same movie over and over again. So when I get onto a flight, I go looking for the "Devil Wears Prada", which I've watched at least 100 times and then "Top Gun: Maverick."

Harrison Lung: [17:54] The new one, yes.

DR: [17:56] I think I've already watched it 50 times. I just put it on, it's in the background. I can kind of work. I know what's going to happen. So we have that in common. I think that's hilarious. And Harrison, it sounds like you guys are on a great trajectory, really making that transition from being seen as a telco in one country to multi countries and a technology company. And I wish you the best of luck as you continue to lead and guide e&.

Harrison Lung: [18:23] Thank you again, and for providing the opportunity and sharing our story and journey.

DR: [18:25] Yeah, awesome. Stick around, we end each podcast with a "Telco in 20" takeaway. I've got two minutes to tell you something you need to know. Harrison and I just talked about the big growth ideas that telcos debate at all the industry conferences, and I wanted to give my take on how to think about it. This is the takeaway after all.

[18:52] Let's start with the network APIs. Everyone is acting like the APIs are the hard part. Wrong. That's just one side of the equation. The real challenge is building the developer community. You know, the actual users to use the APIs. This is no small feat. Twilio has over 10 million developers, Vonage, one million. My take, this idea is doable, but telcos need to focus on building the developer relationships to make money.

[19:23] Then there's GPU-as-a-Service and AI-RAN. Here's the problem with this idea. You might have the real estate, but you don't have the energy capacity or the executional capability to do this at scale. You can't just buy some GPUs and expect money to fall from the sky. My take, pass, too hard and too expensive to do, but moving your network to the public cloud, hello, this is a no-brainer. Just look at what Telefónica Germany and DISH are doing. Plus, Ericsson just threw their hat in the game and built you a 5G SaaS cloud native core for the public cloud. The question isn't whether you should move your network to the cloud, it's why you're still having this conversation in 2025. So my take on this idea is do it. The telcos that figure this out first are going to own the future.

[20:10] If you're ready to get serious about the public cloud and AI, connect with me on LinkedIn or X @telcodr. And we'll set up a time to talk. Until then, tune into more "Telco in 2 episodes, like and follow, and leave us a five star review. Don't forget to sign up for my seriously amazing, totally free email newsletter on TelcoDR.com. And be sure to check out our awesome YouTube channel. Later, nerds.