

Episode 152 | Fastweb + Vodafone charts a new course (Max Gasparroni)
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Danielle Rios: [00:00] Fastweb bought Vodafone Italy. Your job is to bring these two operators, networks, and systems together. How many systems are we talking about?

Max Gasparroni: [00:08] So apart from the tens of thousands of network nodes in the mobile core, in the OSS domains, we are talking about between 350 and 450 systems that we need to rationalize.

Announcer: [00:25] 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 Max Gasparroni, the Chief Technology and Security officer at Fastweb + Vodafone in Italy.

Danielle Rios: [00:44] Hi guys, I'm DR. Telco M&A hit \$65 billion in the first half of 2026. In the US, Charter acquired Cox in a deal worth more than \$34 billion. In the UK, Vodafone and Three joined forces in a £15 billion deal, and Fastweb bought Vodafone Italy for eight billion euros to bring fiber and mobile together. Every one of those deals wraps up the same way. Somebody inherits two or more of everything, and each one comes with its own vendor quoting a price to sort it out. Fastweb is living this right now, three to five years of work and up to 450 systems to rationalize, every one of them to be merged, migrated, or retired. The usual playbook is integrate first, AI later. That means waiting years for AI to pay off. Fastweb is doing both at once.

[01:37] It's rolling out more than 20 AI use cases this year while the integration program completes. Today, I'm talking to Max Gasparroni, Chief Technology and Security officer at Fastweb + Vodafone. He's more than halfway through the network integration and ahead of plan, and he's targeting level four automation in parts of the infrastructure. We dig into what comes first when you combine two telcos, why he tells his team AI is an existential journey, and why he wants less data, not more. So let's take 20. Max Gasparroni is the Chief Technology and Security officer at Fastweb + Vodafone in Italy. Hi, Max. Welcome to “Telco in 20.”

Max Gasparroni: [02:20] Hi, DR. I'm so excited to be here with you today.

Danielle Rios: [02:24] I am excited to talk to you about the work that you're doing, which is quite an undertaking. I've been in acquisitions of software companies for 18 years, but nowhere on the same

scale. So super excited to learn more about how that's going and what's going on with that. And so at the end of 2024, Fastweb bought Vodafone Italy. What was the thesis behind that acquisition? Why did that make sense for you guys to do that?

Max Gasparroni:

[02:49] Well, the acquisition was aimed at creating a leading converge innovating challenger in Italy by bringing together two highly complementary businesses. On one side, Fastweb with very strong fixed heritage of the most innovative company in Italy. We were the first one to bring now 26 years ago fiber to the home, fiber to the buildings, and ex-Vodafone, which is the leader in the mobile infrastructures, and on top, very advanced services like 5G based fixed wireless access, cloud, and now we have AI and energy. And for us, the logic effectively is the scale. So scale that allows us to be much more efficient in terms of cost structure. So we promised around 600 million of annual run rate synergies that are expecting also to strengthen the combined company ability to invest in new technology, in new services where we are already very competitively priced as well.

Danielle Rios:

[03:59] On that \$600 million in run rate synergies, is that cost savings you plan to take out of the two businesses or that's the new run rate that you guys expect to be spending once the integration is complete?

Max Gasparroni:

[04:11] Well, there are synergies coming out of the integration because there are a lot of overlapping networks and systems that need to be converging together in order to have a bigger scale, but removing also the duplications. And we are already exceeding our plan in terms of synergy realization.

Danielle Rios:

[04:30] Yeah. Well, let's talk about that a little bit more. As you've been describing, your job is to bring these two operators, networks and systems together. And so how much overlap is there?

Max Gasparroni:

[04:40] Yeah, in terms of overlap, it depends on the area. So on the IT domains, both ex-Fastweb and ex-Vodafone, they had similar ERP and BSS and several systems. And on the network, there was very complementarity in the mobile space where Fastweb was a mobile virtual network operator. And thanks to the Vodafone acquisition, we managed to migrate all our ex-Fastweb mobile customers into the Vodafone infrastructure. So we are focusing on integration, which means starting with interconnecting the two network and then migrating, for

example, network services from one node to another in order then to decommission the legacy systems. Or in certain cases, we create a new system that are more future-proof and more powerful, migrate the services, networks, and then we remove the legacy.

Danielle Rios:

[05:32] Yeah. I always know that telcos have pretty big IT estates. How many systems are we talking about? Give me a sense of the size.

Max Gasparroni:

[05:40] Yeah, so apart from the tens of thousands of network nodes in the mobile core, in the OSS domains, we are talking about between 350 and 450 systems that we need to rationalize. So we are becoming much more efficient through a combination of insourcing activities previously done by external suppliers and then new ways of working with suppliers, and then the automation in terms of software defined networks and AI introduction in order to unify the stacks and the OSS systems.

Danielle Rios:

[06:18] Yeah. Well, let's talk about that. Are you guys starting to use AI to help you do this merging, this migrating, this swapping work, or still too early with AI to use it on these systems?

Max Gasparroni:

[06:30] Well, we have started in earnest because for us, we use more automation and AI done in a controlled and sensible way in order to have guardrails and always under human oversight is absolutely essential. So for us, I say to my team all the time, is an existential journey in technology and security because we are moving into a world where our fixed and mobile infrastructure are going to support both the traditional best effort, but also mission-critical applications that could be driverless cars, AI agentic, many other additional applications.

[07:09] And the complexity in order to manage all these different types of connectivity for customers requires an overall of thinking and processes and tools in order to cope with this increased complexity. So we are introducing AI in two separate areas, one on the network automation and another one in using AI for our own soft skills that could be knowledge based system, it could be simplifying or automating normal processes that otherwise we would have done it manually. So it's a combination of the two and we have created a separate team called DNA, Digital Network and AI that is responsible to work with the rest of the team and implement these use cases and

then show how beneficial these use cases are in order to create this kind of flywheel effect.

Danielle Rios:

[08:05] And so how's integration going? You mentioned maybe it's ahead of schedule. What's going well and what's going maybe not as well?

Max Gasparroni:

[08:12] Well, of course it's a multi-year program and the majority of the work will be completed between three and five years, including achieving a level four automation in several areas of our network infrastructure and automation and AI will be introduced first in areas like network operations where we expect to get the most benefits for the investment. And of course, we don't believe that introducing AI is compelling in every single use case. So we need to prioritize the use case, if that makes sense. So we are, I would say more than halfway through the realization of the network integration, including the target of our 600 million yearly synergies. And this year we're going to end up with more than 20 use cases implemented across several areas of the organization.

Danielle Rios:

[09:03] Yeah. I mean, going back to the AI use cases, what I have found has worked for me and my company as we work with operators is really starting from the desired outcome of the AI rather than we have AI, let's go find a place to use it. And so what we really like to do is find million-euro problems because anything less than that is probably pretty easy to solve with the integration or report or basic analytics that we had before AI. But when we really start to attack the problem from looking at the outcome, reducing churn or eliminating fraud or eliminating network outages and reducing the time so it truly is more autonomous. And you can put a number behind that, not only do you get support from the business for the change, but also it's really exciting for even the technical people because they're having impact on the results of the business.

[09:55] I think at the core, AI is pretty threatening to a lot of workers, especially in IT. They feel like if I'm not doing the work with my brain and I'm giving that to a machine to do the work, where is my value? It creates almost an identity crisis. And so we've been really focused on what's the outcome that gets everyone really excited and people feel like, "Oh, this is a big idea and I'm contributing to that big idea." And so let's talk about where AI is getting traction in your organization. Is it widespread? Are people using Copilot and everyone's using

Claude or do you still have within Fastweb + Vodafone Italy pretty tight reins on who gets to use it and how people are using AI in their everyday work?

Max Gasparroni:

[10:36] Absolutely they are. So as I said, we split the use of AI for two different categories. One is the equivalent to use of Copilot to help with the day-to-day tasks. Also, this DNA team identified the most compelling use cases as you mentioned. So what is the biggest problem is how slow we are when we have network issues. In the case, we started from the bottom building a one data platform because understanding the clean minimum set of data is absolutely critical because more data means that you need more processing power, more time, which defines the initial objective on implementing such use cases. And we have effectively identified the 20 most compelling use cases that straddle across various areas, starting with plan and build, operate, optimize, and in the security domain where AI is posing loads of challenges with these cyber AI attacks that are effectively powered by latest frontier models.

[11:40] And we are also introducing cloud, AI, cyber that enable our customers to deploy their own applications in industrial automation, product quality control, smart factories, and many other fields. For this reason, we have launched AI Work, which is our AI platform designed to improve the productivity, the efficiency and cooperation within companies and public administrations. And we want to do an education towards our existing customers and show them the journey as we are doing internally ourselves. So we are effectively eating our own dog's food, as they say. And then it's not measured in terms of how many tokens you use or how many licenses you're buying, but in how many hours you saved. So effectively there has to be an economic return on the investments for our customers. And this is the value we want to show them.

Danielle Rios:

[12:37] Yeah. And that's exactly what I always tell telcos, which is start with the outcome and create a business case for the value. And you got to be really careful with the people side of it because when you start measuring productivity, then people are like, "Well, if you can take my 40-hour work week or in Europe 37 hours and make it 15, you don't need half of me and you do that across my group, you don't need half of us." And so they start to do that math and they start to resist and not contribute and support the AI initiatives. But I think something that you said there that was really important, which is you do have to eat

your own dog food. You have to do that because you can't go advise another organization on how to implement AI and use AI if you are not doing it yourself.

[13:21] And I think that's really obvious with a lot of sometimes even the SIs in our industry where they're selling AI, they're selling big productivity improvement programs and big transformation programs. But when you turn it around and show them the mirror, you're like, "How do you guys use it today?" And they're hardly using it. So I think you guys absolutely have to do that in order for that to be successful. So that's really exciting. I think another thing that's really cool is that Fastweb runs the technology for Luna Rossa, Italy's America's Cup team. So tell me about that project and what you're doing for that team.

Max Gasparroni: [13:55] Well, that's a fascinating project. The CTO of Luna Rosa actually contacted us last October. Effectively, they require to analyze a lot of telemetry data when they do the training because that basically it's like a Formula One car just on a sail.

Danielle Rios: [14:10] Yeah, yeah. On the water.

Max Gasparroni: [14:14] On the water, which is just fascinating. And when they were doing the training out at sea, they were using a Wi-Fi system where the access point was on the support vessel.

Danielle Rios: [14:24] Another boat.

Max Gasparroni: [14:24] Another boat. And this other boat had to keep up.

Danielle Rios: [14:27] With one of the world's fastest boats.

Max Gasparroni: [14:31] With the fastest sailing boats. And they were telling us the crew had to be strapped on their seats by holding this access point with a power generator, and they were jumping up and down because of the weight.

Danielle Rios: [14:41] That's insane.

Max Gasparroni: [14:42] And the signal they would get would be very intermittent, and these poor guys had to orientate the antenna all the time. So it was completely unworkable. So then we said we can create for you a 5G mobile private network with assured quality service. So we designed the network both at their

training center and then for the regattas in Naples, and they did very well. Actually, they won it.

Danielle Rios: [15:05] Congratulations. So were you putting towers in the water?

Max Gasparroni: [15:09] No, I said on the shore.

Danielle Rios: [15:10] On the shore. And they don't go that far from the shore?

Max Gasparroni: [15:13] No, they go maximum four or five miles.

Danielle Rios: [15:15] So you're putting it on the shoreline and it can reach the boat and it's a private network, so it has guaranteed latency and performance.

Max Gasparroni: [15:22] Exactly.

Danielle Rios: [15:22] That is a super fun, awesome private network example.

Max Gasparroni: [15:26] Well, it's an example where technology can be an enabler or a better business.

Danielle Rios: [15:31] That's exactly what we've been talking about. You're trying to deliver a better outcome, right? And they were having intermittent Wi-Fi and you guys focused on, "What do you need? And let's work backwards from that problem." And voila, they're winning the races. And so Max, this is a great conversation about the hard work you're doing at Fastweb + Vodafone Italy, and I really appreciate you coming onto the podcast.

Max Gasparroni: [15:53] Thank you so much for the opportunity, DR.

Danielle Rios: [15:55] 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. Max said something you might've missed. Part of the 600 million euros in synergies comes from insourcing, taking back work that outside suppliers used to do. Think about why a merger makes that possible. For the length of an integration, you're the customer every vendor is afraid of. You have two of every contract, two billing vendors, two CRM vendors, two SIs, and only one of each survives. This is the most leverage you will ever have over your suppliers. Most of it gets

negotiated on a discount, which is a one-time win. The next year, you're back to paying the same vendors for the same work at a slightly better rate. Instead, use that leverage on something permanent, decide which vendors you no longer need, and make sure that spend never comes back.

[16:59] Five years ago, you couldn't do this because you couldn't hire enough people to consolidate 400 systems. You can do it today with AI that already understands telco. That's Totogi. The Totogi Ontology maps both stacks into one model that you own, so the knowledge about how your offers actually work lives inside your company instead of in a consultant's head billed back to you by the hour. When your next deal closes, don't negotiate the rate, negotiate the exit. If you're trying to move off a system, yes, even Amdocs, I can help. DM me on LinkedIn or X @TelcoDR and let's talk. Until then, tune to more "Telco in 20" episodes. Like and follow and leave us a five-star review. Don't forget to sign up for my awesome email newsletter on TelcoDR.com and check out our killer YouTube channel and hit that subscribe button. Later nerds.