

A photograph of Patrick Benon, a man with a grey beard and glasses, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. He is gesturing with both hands as if speaking. The background is blurred, showing an indoor setting with a window and some greenery.

Patrick Benon :
a “serial transformer”
of telecommunications
in Africa

Interview with
Digital Business Africa

With 17 years of experience as CEO in West, Southern and Central Africa, the current CEO of Orange Cameroun has been a key player in the telecoms revolution in Africa. Our editorial team exchanged with this executive, whose career is marked by the transformation of several big companies.

Digital Business Africa : Hello Patrick BENON! You are a telecommunications engineer with a degree from the "Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications de Paris" (Télécom Paris) and a PhD in Computer Science and Telecommunications Networks from the same prestigious school. Looking back through your career, one is really impressed by your longevity in the position of CEO, which you have held uninterruptedly for over 17 years, and also by your continental dimension, as you have managed telecom operators in West Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa. How do you justify this longevity?

Dr Patrick Benon : Indeed, I have been the CEO of major telecoms companies since 30 June 2007, when I was appointed at the head of Bénin Télécoms, the main telecoms operator in Benin. After 4 years at this position, I joined the Orange Group, with my first job as CEO of Orange Centrafrique. Then I joined Orange Botswana as CEO in December 2014 where I served for almost seven years. And finally, in September 2021, I became the CEO of Orange Cameroun till date.

I am grateful to the Orange Group's management, the Boards of Directors and the authorities of the different countries that have trusted me during my various appointments. I think my longevity mainly comes from the good results obtained in the companies I've managed. These results have been quite good at an operational level (revenue increase, profitability, market share, etc.), but also in terms of the development of local teams and the support given to communities and economies in the countries where I have worked.

Digital Business Africa : The statistics on your achievements at the head of companies are truly impressive, especially the changes that occur as soon as you take the lead of a company. For example, when you were appointed Head of Orange Centrafrique in July 2011, the company was suffering from a severe decline in revenues and was last on the market. But when you left in November 2014, the same company was experiencing significant growth of more than 40% and was second on the market, before becoming number 1 a few years after your departure. The same thing happened at Orange Botswana, which you took over in a period of decline, but which experienced a growth of over 20% at your departure in 2021, before becoming number 1 on the market just a few years after you left. Something similar seems to be happening at Orange Cameroun, which saw its growth accelerate under your management to over 18% in the first half of 2024, and is now leading the market according to the figures published by the groups operating in Cameroon. How do you succeed at being such a 'serial transformer'? What's your recipe for achieving such



Dr Patrick Benon : My recipe for success has always been the same: develop a strong strategy with my teams, entrust them with the responsibility of implementing it, and closely monitor the action plans defined together.

Three months after my arrival in Cameroon, I worked with my teams to develop our strategic plan, which we named as "REPERES". This plan clearly defined our strategic priorities, which are reflected in each of the letters in REPERES: R for Growth, E for Customer Experience, P for People, E for Efficiency, R for Resilience, E for Environment/Social and S for Security.

These strategic priorities were broken down into objectives backed up by very precise, measurable performance indicators. We then formed project teams, known internally as 'battles', to define and implement the action plans needed to achieve our strategic objectives. Together with Executive Committee members who sponsor the battles related to their activities, I personally attend the progress meetings of the projects, which enable a quicker execution.

Above all, in order for success to be sustainable, it has to be shared and felt by customers, staff and communities through CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) programmes.

Digital Business Africa : **We've understood that Customer Experience is one of your priorities, however we can't help but notice that there are a lot of complaints about the quality of your network. How do you explain this situation? What solutions do you intend to implement regarding this issue?**

Dr Patrick Benon : Customer Experience is clearly our main mission, so we treat it with utmost priority and rigour, focusing on 3 main areas:

Network quality

Offers and services

Management of Complaints

Network quality is a major concern for our customers as well as for our authorities. Early in October 2024, the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications visited our headquarter in Douala. This was after a visit by the Director General of the Telecommunications Regulatory Board, who had also expressed serious concerns. This shows the commitment of our authorities in finding solutions to the current issues, and we have taken good note of the directives received during these visits. We will strictly fulfil the commitments we made.

We started this year with a vast and promising network modernisation programme. This involves renewing and reinforcing our equipment throughout Cameroon. It is an unprecedented plan in terms of its scale, which will lead to a major improvement in quality.

The first phase of modernisation has been completed in Yaounde and Douala. A second phase is underway, and we can already notice a significant improvement in the technical indicators that measure the quality of the network. Of course, I'm aware that in very specific areas we still have work to do so that this improvement can be seen by all our customers.

After Yaounde and Douala, we intend to modernise all the cities of Cameroon, before finally moving on to rural areas. The aim will be to provide the latest technologies to all, including high-quality 4G, and then prepare to launch the 5G.

However, it is important to emphasise that we are heavily dependent on infrastructure that are not under our control, especially the optical fibre. Our efforts to modernise and improve quality of service are seriously undermined by the poor availability of fibre. This could become the weak point in Cameroon's telecommunications sector, thereby wiping out all efforts made.

With regard to offers and services, we analyse customers' complaints in detail, enabling us to take proactive or corrective action. The complaints index is our main indicator, and we take a range of actions to reduce it thus reducing the number of complaints.

In terms of customer care, we are active on all customer contact channels: call centres, shops, robots, digital assistance through our applications and social networks. A wide-ranging multi-channel transformation programme is helping us to gradually improve our customer satisfaction rate.

Digital Business Africa : You earlier said that success must be felt and shared by the staff. How do you ensure this in concrete terms?

Dr Patrick Benon : The management of issues relating to People is of paramount importance in our REPERES strategic plan, and is the priority P for People. We have made it a battle to ensure that action plans are properly implemented, with strict measurement of performance indicators.

Our main indicator here is the eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Score), which enables us to measure employee satisfaction and the impact of our actions. In 2 years, that is from mid-2022 to mid-2024, we have gone from a negative score of -25 to a positive score of +30, which shows that employee appreciation has significantly improved.

We carry out employee surveys on a regular basis to identify areas of complaint, for which we draw up action plans. Our current plans address a number of areas, including employee appreciation, well-being at work, efficiency and performance, career and development, and diversity/inclusion/diversity.



Digital Business Africa : You also mentioned the importance of CSR for your company's positioning. Can you tell us more about your actions and how you impact communities?

Dr Patrick Benon : CSR is essential to the sustainable development of our company, which must be in perfect harmony with the environments in which it operates. Also, as an African, I am fully aware of the contribution telecommunications operators bring to the economies of our countries, and the extremely important role we need to play as catalysts for development.

In Cameroon, we have two main pillars through which we implement our social initiatives: the Orange Digital Center (ODC) and the Orange Cameroun Foundation.

The ODC is a training centre, a high-tech start-up accelerator and a gateway to a network of high-tech talent for Africans.

In October 2021, we inaugurated our first ODC in Cameroon. Because of the vital importance of this infrastructure in supporting youth and startups in the digital sector, I have decided, together with the Orange Cameroon Executive Committee, to set up an ODC in each of the 10 regions of Cameroon.

I am delighted to announce that in 2024, we are already halfway to achieving our ambition, with the opening of an ODC in 5 of Cameroon's 10 regions. After opening our first ODC in Douala (Littoral Region), we have opened ODCs in Yaounde (Centre Region), Buea (South-West Region), Ngaoundere (Adamawa Region) and Dschang (West Region).

Our Foundation is very active in the support of less privileged populations and women empowerment. To this end, we have deployed four major programmes in Cameroon:

Orange Villages: building or renovating a school, a health centre and a water supply point in each of the selected villages.

Digital schools: providing schools with digital equipment (tablets, servers, digital content, etc.) to introduce children to digital technology at an early age.

Digital houses: providing women's support centres with digital equipment (computers, tablets, training, etc.) to help empower women.

Solidarity actions to help the less privileged populations and also in the event of disasters.

Finally, we strongly support our employees' personal involvement in the company's CSR initiatives through our recently launched programme called 'Engage for Change' which enables each employee to have a 3 days' leave dedicated to the company's CSR actions.

Digital Business Africa : We recall that on 24 November 2023, in the presence of Christel Heydemann, CEO of the Orange Group, you launched your Max it Super Application in Africa. How far with it today?

Dr Patrick Benon : We were highly honoured at Orange Cameroun to be chosen as host for the African launch of the Max it app in the presence of the CEOs of the Orange Group and Orange Africa and the Middle East.

This event was the beginning of a story which we hope will mark an important milestone in the digital development of Africa.

Today, the Max it super application is already operational in 8 African countries and has more than 12 million active customers, including more than 2.7 million in Cameroon.

With the Max it Cameroon app, we were able to bring together in a single application, 3 key platforms enabling a better customer experience:

All Orange Cameroun telecommunications services, completely digitalised in a user friendly interface;

The section dedicated to Orange Cameroun's financial services in a completely secure and ergonomic manner; A Marketplace which provides an innovative platform with access to services such as e-ticketing, exclusive entertainment and information content as well as services that enable customers support on a daily basis by capitalising on partnerships across several assets like agriculture, education, health, etc.



Digital Business Africa : In this days, marked by global upheaval with the advent of generative artificial intelligence, 5G, Big Data, how do you see the future of Africa?

Dr Patrick Benon : " We are at crossroads, and we must ensure that Africa takes full advantage of the ongoing digital revolution. The current digital revolution represents the fourth industrial revolution and I believe Africans have the possibility and the duty to be fully involved in it, given that the 3 previous revolutions took place without the involvement of Africa and this led to a major slowback in the Continent's development on a global level "



During the first industrial revolution, which began at the end of the 18th century, the invention of the steam engine and the massive extraction of coal made it possible to mechanize production and develop railway networks. The second industrial revolution started at the end of the 19th century with the invention of the internal combustion engine and the introduction of electricity, gas and oil, which made mass production possible. The third industrial revolution, starting at the end of the 20th century with the advent of nuclear power and electronics, will allow the miniaturization and automation of production.

The fourth revolution we are experiencing is that of digitalisation, with several waves such as high-speed internet connectivity, smartphones, social networks, Big Data, artificial intelligence, and as of now, no one can predict its exact scope and impact. But it is obvious that this latest revolution will affect our lives even more than the first three.

We must realise the fact that we are at a decisive moment in our history and give ourselves the chance to be actors in this revolution and not just spectators. Recent developments in Africa's telecommunications sector show that we can be a pioneer in technology. Indeed, the development of mobile financial services which is primarily an African success, demonstrates that in terms of technology Africa can be lead over other continents.

Artificial intelligence needs Big Data and high-speed connectivity to operate, the technologies you mentioned are all interconnected, and will have a profound impact on the productivity of individuals, companies and countries. It is essential for all stakeholders (governments, businesses, etc.) to understand the stakes and define transformation plans that will enable Africa and Africans to benefit from them and be competitive.

Digital Business Africa : Finally, we learned that you have been shortlisted for the prestigious "CXO of the Year" award at the Africotech festival organised every year in Cape Town. How do you feel about that?

Dr Patrick Benon : I am highly honoured to be nominated for the CXO of the Year award at the Africotech festival which recognises outstanding leaders in Africa and their contributions to building teams, setting new standards and achieving a clear vision in a rapidly changing business landscape.

It is indeed a prestigious award, culminating in an awards ceremony that brings together in one evening the world's technology leaders, entrepreneurs, policy makers and media who are shaping Africa's digital transformation.



The 4 other shortlisted candidates have good career paths and great achievements. It will be up to the public through their votes and to the jury made up of experts to choose the best for this year.

Digital Business Africa : After 17 years as a Manager in a hyper-competitive sector as telecommunications, what motivates you every morning?

Dr Patrick Benon : Every morning, I commit myself to giving my colleagues and partners the means to think and develop innovations that are relevant to our countries, in line with the best international standards. I am an Afro-optimist and the determination to promote the development of our people and our continent motivates me every day.

Patrick BENON holds an engineering degree and a PhD from the École Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications de Paris (Telecom Paris). He started his career in France as a design engineer, marketing manager and then as a technology consultant for several international companies such as Schlumberger and Accenture, before returning to Africa to manage several companies. He joined Benin Telecoms in 2006 and was appointed CEO in 2007. In 2011, he was appointed CEO of Orange Centrafrique until 2014. He continued his career as CEO of Orange Botswana from 2014 to 2021. He was then appointed CEO of Orange Cameroun in 2021, where he has been serving till date.