

SA businesses need to take responsibility for the impact of their products, services

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Itec SA, a digital and communications solutions provider, earlier this year announced the expansion of its Carbon Neutral programme. The aim behind the initiative is to reduce its customers' printing-related carbon footprint by offsetting this through sustainability specialists and partner impactChoice.



Gavin Meyer, executive director, Itec SA

We interviewed executive director Gavin Meyer to find out more about Itec SA's [Carbon Neutral programme](#), the potential impact of digitalisation on the triple bottom line, and where he believes the gaps are in the South African business community in terms of environmental sustainability.

Tell us a bit about Itec SA's Carbon Neutral programme and what it entails?

Gavin Meyer: There is no doubt that South African businesses can no longer afford to dig their heads in the sand about the impact that their products and services have on the environment. This is no different for us as a business, operating within the technology sector – whom many still consider to be lagging to some extent when it comes to driving a greener economy.

Therefore, in a bid to embrace the green economy, we launched our Carbon Neutral programme in 2009 – a first in the office automation industry - to save our customers money, while also reducing their carbon emissions through our sustainability specialist and partner, impactChoice.

Over the years, the programme has been extremely well received by our customers and, as a result, we announced the expansion of the programme earlier this year aimed at further reducing the environmental impact of the equipment that we offer all our customers, as well as future customers – without them having to bear the cost of doing so.

As mentioned, we have partnered with environmental agency impactChoice to deliver this solution to our clients. To this end, impactChoice audits our carbon offset each year to ensure validity of the initiative so that customers can be assured that their solution is, in fact, 100% carbon neutral. Following this, the company is then awarded a certificate that will indicate their carbon offsets purchased.

■ ***As a digital solutions company, how could digitalisation contribute to sustainability in terms of people, profit and planet?***

Meyer: There is no doubt that digitalisation has penetrated almost every business sector, including ours. In fact, if anything, the emergence of digitalisation has opened myriad opportunities for us as a digital solutions company.

From a profit's sustainability perspective, a report by BI Intelligence reveals that there will be 24-billion digital devices on earth by 2020, which is approximately four devices for every human on earth – demonstrating that businesses need to make operational changes at a fundamental level and take the migration towards a more digitised enterprise more seriously or, in fact, they might lose relevance among consumers. This is ever more critical in a time when the modern consumer has a strong affiliation to 'speed' and 'digital' internet-enabled services.

Looking at the environmental aspect of digitalisation, the uptake in technology devices has also made it easier for consumers to research a brand's green footprint which, according to Nielsen, is among one of the most importance considerations that consumer's make before purchasing a brand/service. In fact, the report also highlights that approximately 55% of global online consumers say that they are willing to pay more for products and services provided by companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact. These statistics should, therefore, drive businesses to make green practices a core element of their operations should they wish to keep up with evolving consumer trends.

Further to this, digitalisation has enabled productivity and less reliance on resources, such as transport for example, where they can digitally connect to one another remotely instead of driving into the office, thus reducing carbon emission outputs. It has also provided a platform for employees to choose their place of work – instead of the brick and mortar traditional office – which is going a long way to improving productivity and driving stronger output in the workplace.

■ ***Do you think South African businesses are doing enough in terms of limiting their impact on the environment? Where do you think are the gaps?***

Meyer: According to Minister of Environmental Affairs Dr Edna Molewa, “there is increasing global recognition that today's economic growth and development trajectory is driven by the worldwide shift to sustainable green economies”. What this tells us is that the business market, as we know it, will no longer be merely driven by profits – despite this being an important part of a business. However, it is becoming more and more about being actively involved in addressing critical environmental issues.

I believe that local businesses, are beginning to take heed of the role that they play in the environmental impact of their operations and are realising that 'going green' is no longer just a concept, but an active way of doing business, despite a slow start in comparison to international counterparts.

As with anything, there is always room for improvement, which I believe we will see more of from local businesses in the future, particularly given the nature in which environmental issues have escalated – no longer making this the sole responsibility of government, but very critically, of corporate South Africa.

■ ***Even with general consensus amongst the science community and mounting information that climate change is a reality for us all, not everyone is convinced all sectors of society need to reduce carbon emissions. How does Itec SA convey the necessity of its Carbon Neutral programme amongst its customers?***

Meyer: Our Carbon Neutral Programme is a core offering – one that helps ensure that we remain a responsible corporate citizen. Therefore, to ensure that the programme is impactful, there is no opt in process. In fact, all our customers are now signed onto this programme – at no additional costs – when they use any of our printing services, which makes the process of convincing our customers of the necessity of the programme that much easier.

Previously, our customers had to pay for this service – related to number of prints made per month, however, due to intensified efforts by government for all members of society to take heed of the role that they play in contributing towards current environmental issues, we decided to restructure the offering, and make it available to all our customers, giving them carbon offsets without anything in return.

■ ***Give us some numbers - what has the Carbon Neutral programme achieved since launch in terms of emissions reductions?***

Meyer: Last year's figures alone revealed that we offset as much as 594,977kg of CO₂-e – which is the equivalent amount of carbon that would be sequestered by over 15,000 tree seedlings grown for 10 years*. And this only represents a portion of our clients. We expect this to grow substantially when we report at the end of this year, given that our full customer base is now making use of this service.



Itec SA expands its Carbon Neutral programme

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■ ***How important is it to align your CSR strategy with your brand and what are the benefits of doing so?***

Meyer: Modern consumers have influenced brands in a number of ways. One such way is in their approach towards corporate social responsibility. With that said, the reality is that brands today can no longer operate effectively when putting their CSR strategy on the back burner, especially as the concept of triple bottom line (TBL) reporting has become critical to a business's success.

As such, businesses need to be strategic about their CSR strategies, and develop ones that align to what they do, and in doing so, the rollout becomes an authentic one. The benefits of doing this are endless.

Not only does a well-thought-out CSR strategy assist businesses in improving the brand's image among consumers, becoming a brand of choice, but in a country built on the spirit of *ubuntu*, companies are also able to improve the conditions for stakeholders in the communities in which they operate, which I believe is extremely rewarding.

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