

Telenet Business Leadership Circle | Discussion Summary

THE PERMANENT (R)EVOLUTION



On 8 October 2026, the Telenet Business Leadership Circle, organised and moderated by CIONET and Hendrik Deckers at the invitation of Telenet Business, took an in-depth look at the challenges and opportunities of the continuous transformation taking place at the intersection of business and IT. It is a permanent (r)evolution.





KRIS VERVAET
Group CIO KBC

KBC: persistence, urgency and resilience

Throughout his career in IT, Kris Vervaet has had a clear passion: creating momentum within large organisations. He has done this in various roles in telecoms, energy and media. Kris has been working at KBC since 2024 and took on the role of Group CIO of KBC Banking & Insurance in September 2026. "Over the years, I've witnessed one major transformation after another at first hand, such as the rise of mobile telephony when I worked in telecoms and the development of streaming when I worked in media. Today, AI is bringing about another major upheaval."

According to Kris, three elements consistently emerge from these transformations: persistence, urgency and resilience. "Implementing innovation and transformation in a large organisation is difficult," he says. "It requires perseverance. What's more, the organisation itself is often the biggest obstacle. That creates a particular challenge: shaping the organisation in a way that enables transformation." This means persevering, even in the face of initial resistance.

CEO in a pioneering role

There is no fixed recipe for success in this regard. Nevertheless, Kris sees one characteristic that surfaces again and again. "You have to move quickly," he says. "There's always a certain urgency when it comes to transformation. So don't waste time on endless strategic discussions, surveys or other preparatory studies. My advice is simple: get started and dive right in." In the strictly regulated context of banking and insurance, that's not always as straightforward as it sounds. "But regulation means that quite a few guardrails are already built into everything we do. What's more, we have a CEO who puts innovation at the top of the agenda." That's an important asset when it comes to maintaining the necessary persistence.

"It's important that our CEO is a strong driving force behind our transformation," continues Kris, "including when it comes to AI." With the chatbot Kate in the KBC Mobile app, the bank was a pioneer in the use of AI technology in the Belgian banking sector. "We're now fully committed to AI. The market is evolving rapidly, so we have to keep pace. If you're too slow in our market, you'll lose out. But at the same time, we have to maintain control." After all, for a bank, customer trust is paramount. "If Kate were to hallucinate, for example, that would have a huge impact on that trust. So we need to move quickly while also continuing to guarantee the security of the solution."

Belief in the vision

A third element that inevitably comes with transformation is the need for resilience. People are creatures of habit. They resist change, or so the cliché goes. Kris disagrees. "People can actually adapt to change very quickly," he says. But that doesn't mean they simply go along with everything. "For change to be sustainable, people have to believe in the narrative. Anyone leading a transformation must pay attention to this and support the entire process with clear, understandable explanations. That's why the human element remains the key to successful transformation, even in the age of AI."





JOHN PORTER
CEO Telenet group

Telenet group: everything for the customer

John Porter outlined how the company evolved rapidly during his years as CEO, from 2013 to 2026. Telenet group made a name for itself thanks to a strong product and customer service focus. When broadband internet evolved from a luxury product to a commodity service within a short time, Telenet group was able to capture the largest market share very quickly. "We also had the best product," says John. "That enabled the company to grow very rapidly, supported by an IT platform that was custom-developed to accommodate that growth." This was followed by the acquisition of Base Company for mobile telephony, the arrival of digital TV and the launch of Streamz, the streaming platform in a joint venture with DPG Media. "Eventually, though, we had to acknowledge that neither our organisation nor our IT platform was ready for the next step."

Company culture makes the difference

This led to a sweeping decision and the biggest transformation Telenet would undergo: the greenfield development of the company's end-to-end IT stack. And that wasn't all. "At the same time, we redesigned our entire organisation around the scaled agile operating model," explains John. "To give you an idea of just how radical that change was for us, back then the lead time for introducing a new product was nine months. Today, we can do it in two weeks."

No one doubted that it would be a challenging process. "Certainly, it required persistence," John adds. "But it also had to be achievable. That's why we committed the necessary people and resources." But the element that really tipped the scale was the company culture. "Our culture is very clear: Telenet group leads the way. We're always the first. That was the case with broadband, that was the case with digital television, and it will remain the case in the future. Because whoever gets there first captures the market. But the way we work today is different. Our focus is no longer on the product – because that has become a commodity – but on the customer experience."

Value streams

However, the pressure to move quickly remains high. "But because we work in an agile way, there's also a certain tolerance for failure," continues John. "Even when something doesn't work out, we can still move forward quickly." The most important lesson the CEO takes away from the process is that the right focus was in place from the start. "It wasn't just about modernising our IT environment; it was about fundamentally overhauling the entire company." To make the organisation future-proof, Telenet group had to bring everyone on board from the very beginning. This was particularly important given the scale of the transformation: it involved both the organisation and IT, which are very closely intertwined in everything Telenet group does.

"The bottom line is that we no longer think in terms of functional departments, but in terms of value streams," concludes John. "At the same time, we've simplified the organisation to enable an agile way of working." The result is a robust organisation, comprising both a human organisation and a data organisation, supported by an application layer ready for AI. "This puts us in a position to focus more on scale, including through synergies with other companies within the group. That next step wouldn't have been possible without that transformation."



Projects that inspire

The experiences of KBC and Telenet group resonated strongly with the other participants in the discussion. They confirmed that persistence and urgency are essential. But they also pointed to the power of a small project that, after a successful start, spreads throughout the company, creating a ripple effect. These are projects that inspire and give rise to new ideas. The initial stages are often difficult, according to several participants. But as other departments gradually start using a solution, the initiative gathers momentum. And that's how you get an entire organisation on board with a transformation. At the same time, striking the right balance often remains difficult: moving quickly while maintaining appropriate guardrails and still leaving sufficient room for failure, without exposing the organisation to excessive risk.



The mindset of the employees plays a key role in this. In practice, this often proves to be the most difficult thing to change, especially within an organisation where a culture of fear has taken root over the years. Turning that around is a major challenge. And investing in elaborate strategies isn't always the best approach. Instead, the emphasis should be on taking concrete action, making incremental progress, recording gains and building on them. "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth," Mike Tyson once said. Well, the business world can be as unpredictable and brutal as a boxing match. It's not so much theory and strategy that move a company forward in this regard, but rather the confrontation with reality.

Perpetual liminal leadership

In this context, having the C-level executives help develop the right culture is a huge asset. The term used to describe this approach is perpetual liminal leadership. In the context of transformation, you never simply go from the starting point to the end goal. You are always in transition between two goals. By the time you have reached one goal, the next one has already emerged. The work is therefore never finished, which can also create a risk of demotivation.

Working within a framework can help mitigate this. With this approach, you first set global objectives, then regional objectives, then functional objectives, and so on. Each successive layer is aligned with the previous one. This provides focus and helps ensure that the people responsible for execution truly believe in the transformation. As one participant also pointed out, people are not necessarily opposed to change. What they find difficult is not learning something new, but rather unlearning behaviours that have often become deeply ingrained over the years.

Conclusion

In short, anyone driving transformation within an organisation must prepare for a long journey – not months, but often years – during which they may face considerable misunderstanding and resistance. But those who manage to persevere will ultimately reap the rewards.



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