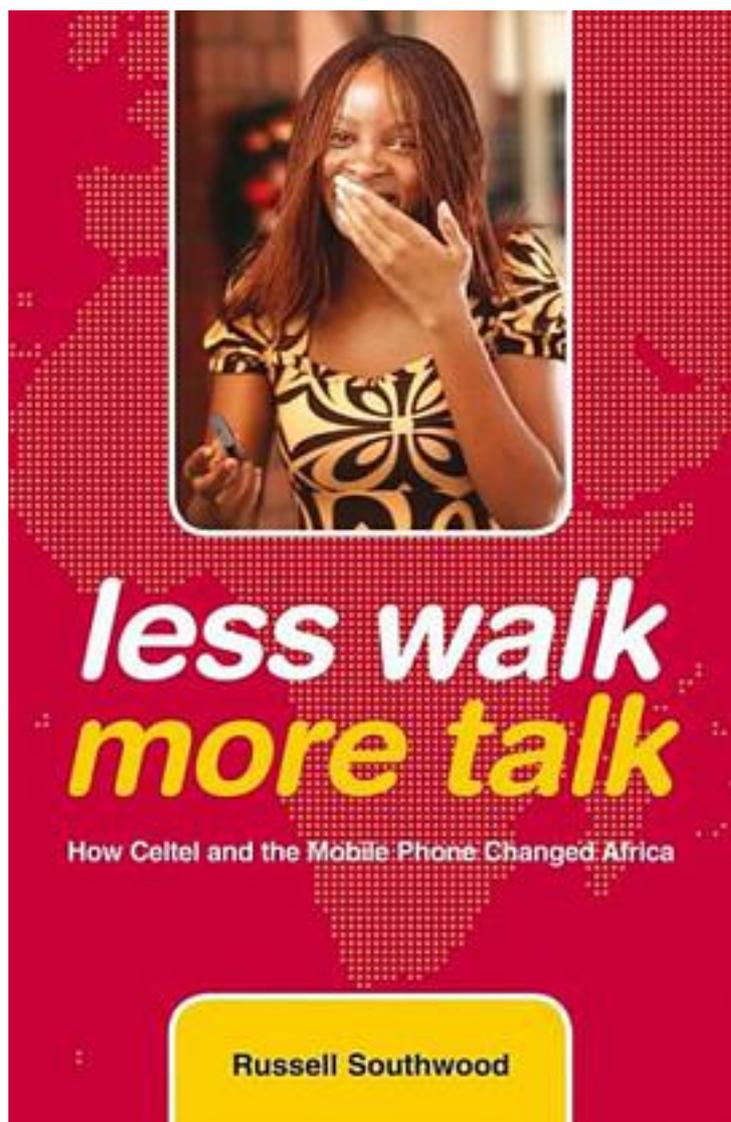


Less Walk More Talk



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A son wants to talk to his mother in a neighbouring village – it’s a two day walk each way. A plumber makes house calls all morning only to return to his shop to pick up messages for the afternoon. A rural farmer wants to know what crop prices are in the market to see when best to sell his crops – he has to take a day out to visit the market only to find out that the prices are too low midweek. This was Africa before mobile phones arrived: a lot of walking and not much talking. In the main, fixed line phones were provided by a monopoly provider and were not well resourced or energetic about connecting customers. Waiting lists for new subscribers could be ten years. The absence of instant communications provided many excuses for things undone and little incentive for action. Africa was considered a difficult place to do business and an even harder place to make money. Early mobile phone pioneers were largely home grown and made their money targeting elites. However, in the space of just over five years, Africa went from having almost no phones to a position where over 100 million Africans now have access to a mobile phone. As one of Africa’s largest mobile operators, the story of Celtel’s rise forms a significant part of this phenomenal growth. This book is the story of how Celtel grew its business with both the successes and failures along the way: everything from launching a mobile network in the middle of a civil war to steering clear of jail and corruption. It is a story that provides a startling insight into how communications is changing Africa’s potential to succeed and how it may well become the emerging market that will most surprise the pundits in the next five years. Russell Southwood is the editor of Balancing Act’s News Update, a specialist e-letter covering Internet, telecoms and computing in Africa.

From the Inside Flap

Celtel was founded in Europe by an African expatriate, the Sudanese Mo Ibrahim, who went from being the son of a humble clerk to running one of the continent’s most successful mobile operators. His work in Britain led him to become a senior figure in UK mobile operator BT Celtel before launching his own company. Against all the odds, he and the international team he put together, convinced skeptical international bankers to invest in the company and demonstrated that the African continent was a place where money could be made. Celtel went from being a start-up that could barely afford to bid for new licences to acquiring the continent’s largest mobile operator in Nigeria for a billion dollars five years later. Although Africa is not entirely the land of civil war and famine seen nightly on TV screens across the world, it is probably one of the toughest places on the planet to do business. In countries with almost no infrastructure, Celtel built networks and sold phones to consumers clamouring to buy their product. Through making a number of technical innovations, they took the mobile from being a product only for the elite, to a position where nearly everyone could afford access to it. More than in the developed world, access to mobile phones in Africa has begun to change how life is led. It has had an impact on people’s personal lives, the way business is done, and even on politics.

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