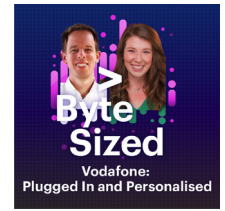# Byte Sized **Episode 5**

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Episode Title: Vodafone: Plugged In and Personalised

Host: Emma Kendrew, Technology Lead, Accenture Technology UKIA

Speakers: Alex Pott – Consumer Digital Director, Vodafone
Mark Farbrace – Head of Data and AI, Accenture

Host Bio:

Emma Kendrew is Accenture's Technology Lead in the UK, Ireland and Africa. Emma has over 20 years of experience driving technology-powered business transformation with clients in retail, resources, government and financial services. Throughout her tenure at Accenture, she has played a lead role in establishing new centres to drive innovation, and helped build new practices including automation, AI and full-stack engineering. In 2015, Emma was recognised as one of the UK's exceptional young business women in Management Today's 35 Women Under 35. She holds a degree in Geography and is passionate about the role of technology in sustainability, diversity and regional opportunity.

Speaker Bios:

Alex Pott – Alex is the Director of Consumer Digital at Vodafone UK. She has 15 years of experience in the telecommunications industry.

With a passion for customer experience, Alex leads digital strategy and innovation to transform how customers engage with technology. A key focus area is to integrate next-generation AI into legacy platforms, driving smarter, more seamless experiences across the digital ecosystem.

Mark Farbrace – Mark helps executives navigate the rapidly evolving world of generative AI, bridging the gap between visionary technology adoption and practical, measurable business impact. As the leader of Accenture's gen AI business across the UK, Ireland and Africa, Mark works closely with CIOs, CDOs and CEOs to orchestrate end-to-end transformations that go far beyond proof-of-concepts—empowering entire organisations to reimagine their operating models, workforce capabilities and ways of working.

Intro: Big ideas in small bytes. This is Byte Sized, brought to you by Accenture.

Emma: Hello, and welcome to Byte Sized.

It takes meticulous orchestration to build trust and play a meaningful and relevant role in your customer's lives. But once you've got the latest trend cracked, your customer may already have moved on.

So how do businesses continue to deliver superb customer experiences when expectations and technology are both changing at pace? I'm looking forward to exploring this today with Alex Pott, Consumer Digital Director at Vodafone, and talking about how they are providing personalised experiences to a huge and varied customer base.

We're also joined today by my colleague, Mark Farbrace, Head of generative AI at Accenture, to give his view on how AI is helping businesses to stay a step ahead of the emerging needs and wants of the consumer.

 Let's kick off today with some scene setting.

As I mentioned, customer expectations are constantly changing. There's a never-ending cycle of us all wanting things quicker, better and faster. Alex, can you tell us a little bit about what this means for Vodafone?

Alex: You can access anything you want at Vodafone, at any time through the channel of your choice. That means there are customers in Consumer who can buy, upgrade, get help and support and add any additional accessory or insurance at any time in any channel. Therefore, we're always on. We're always there for you and you can contact us when you want to.

There are two approaches we're taking to making sure our customers get things when they want them. The first one is decoupling the extreme complexity. For example, removing CRM systems out of major billing stacks to make sure that we can do personalised private pricing. We are also having to build at pace to compete, frankly, with companies who can move faster. That sets a new bar. It sets a new hygiene layer that our customers expect us to be able to fulfil.

They expect to be able to log in using their biometrics. They actually have started to expect their phones to talk directly to us through chat services or using WhatsApp. So, we're building technology around the outside of the complexity. So, while that complexity will take an awful lot of time to decouple and re-architect, the customer base won't change. So, they want something now and we build around the outside for them.

Emma: One of the risks of following that approach of building the new technologies, while also re-architecting the old, is that you can end up with what I would call a proliferation of POCs, lots and lots of MVPs that don't necessarily translate to scale and then the impact that you were actually looking for. Can you tell us a little bit about how you are defending against that?

Alex: I think firstly, it's about your change process and governance. If we don't document what we're doing, we are going to end up with tons of MVPs that were fascinating in their moment, but don't drive the company forwards. We are implementing strong change control, good process documentation. It's the mindset shift from those MVPs cannot just be left. And if they are left, we also have to agree to mothball them. If something doesn't take off, it's a fail-fast, turn it off and move on.

Mark: Something to add to that is having a really clear vision. There's a set of principles that Vodafone have around what their future architecture is going to look like. And then when you're making decisions on programs, MVPs and what you're going to take to scale, you need to decide: is there a tactical reason because of consumer behaviour or because of products that you're launching where you go away from those principles, but you do it consciously, or otherwise the default is that you have this clear vision as to what your future architecture is going to look like that is all about decoupling. It's about shrinking the core, and you make sure that you're always moving in that direction, because the risk always is that the business imperatives of

today take over from the strategic imperatives of the future.

Emma: Or indeed, the customer asks of today again detract you from your strategic direction and vision.

Alex: The risk of that is that our customer base is going to evolve. So, the customers' requirements today, your strategic architecture might phase into where you think the customer is going to be in the future. It's that balancing act between customer now, decouple, customer of the future.

Emma: And then the systems of the future that you'll need, which is a great point for us to come to you, Mark. Lots of experimentation in that space. Again, risk of focus on MVPs rather than scale. Can you talk to us a little bit about the role that gen AI can play in customer experience and how organisations like Vodafone are approaching it?

Mark: Yeah, absolutely. I think gen AI is proving at Vodafone and elsewhere to be exceptional at being able to understand legacy technology, which inevitably has poor documentation or no documentation. And it helps us to accelerate that migration into those future tech stacks. Then, as Alex was describing, we're not clear on the technology of the future or necessarily what customer expectations are going to be. But we do know that something like agentic AI is going to be critical, as part of that.

How do I make sure that in that future architecture and the principles that I create and the journey that I'm going on, that I can anticipate what's coming, I can look at how LLMs are changing and reasoning is advancing, how do I make sure that I'm set up to try and harness that in the future. Then we get into pace, and everything typically is about pace. This is about launching products, making digital changes and doing that as quickly as possible. Ultimately, that's a complex end to end solution in design,

delivery, maintenance process. I talk about the bookends, which is: I can do requirements definition exceptionally well with gen AI today. We're also seeing end to end automation of a testing process. And that's even kind of outside regression testing, actually creating completely new test scripts for new functionality that didn't exist before.

And then it's closing the gap on everything else within that solutioning and delivery cycle. Vodafone are on that journey having deployed GitHub copilot, starting to get some really good benefits that come from that. But actually, having one eye on what's the future end to end delivery cycle? How does that sit within the value stream structure that Alex described? I think what we see there is a blurring of the lines between what I'd consider as the business and IT, which means that there are going to be new roles. There are going to be skills that move between different parts of the organisation. The ultimate goal should be something which delivers actual customer value a lot more quickly than where we are now. All of that is before I actually think about it from a consumer side. If you look at search engines and search results, there's a massive uptick in gen AI driven search. That's starting to translate into how customers actually want to talk with an organisation like Vodafone.

The Voxi gen AI bot is a really good example of where Vodafone have taken the lead on that. That then is translating into, what's the broader strategy around gen AI for Vodafone? How do you take that more conversational approach, which is really rich from a customer side? And how do I look at that? Not just in terms of how I support the customer, but potentially a sales journey in the future where it's much more personalised, I can get much more information from the customer, and as a result, I can create a richer experience, I can offer the wider portfolio of products that Vodafone offer, and I can create something which is much more engaging.

The last comment that I'd make is that Alex and I joke quite a lot around the idea of kind of bot-to-bot communication in the future. And I think we're starting to see it, which is that my bot will start to talk to Alex's bot and that's me as a Vodafone customer, and that's Alex owning the kind of digital estate within Vodafone. And that's a completely different paradigm of engagement between kinds of customers.

Alex: And I think we can simplify that to something in a very different product sense. We can say: my iPhone's battery is no longer charging as well as it used to. Imagine your iPhone spoke to Vodafone and said: I'm going to need a battery refresh soon. And we went: No problem. We've sent your returns bag. Pop your phone in the bag, send it off to us, and your phone's done it for you. Imagine getting that. That's where we're going.

Emma: And that's a great, and I think, a very positive example of how that kind of bot-to-bot interaction could make for a brilliant customer experience, which drives efficiency and sort of satisfaction on both sides.

That's a really tangible example of the vision that you just painted, Mark, which feels a long way in the future, but perhaps is actually a little bit more proximate than we think.

Mark: It is a lot closer than you might imagine. When we talk about 2025, the year of the AI agent. I think that is coming in to be this year. Hopefully the next step of that is that kind of bot-to-bot communication,

Emma: ...the agent to agent,

Mark: ... because, within the agentic architecture, usually that's within a single organisation. And you look at a particular business process, it's a very small leap to have that operating between organisations or between consumers and businesses. And it's something where consumer behaviour,

I think, is going to move a lot faster than organisations. I always use the example of DoNotPay, who are a subscription business where you can basically pay for them to challenge your bills or your parking fines. They're developing their own AI agents that will pick up the phone to Vodafone and it will be a bot operating on your behalf today.

Organisations like Vodafone will already be starting to get calls coming through from a bot that is on the other side. So that's a conscious choice that you're going to have to make as an organisation – how do I deal with that as a contact coming through? And that's going to be a lot faster on the consumer side than it will be me responding.

Alex: There are other parts of gen AI that I think our teams will love. We've gone down a route of looking at content assets on the websites. So pictures, we have to resize them manually for every piece of river content or tile or grid space. We don't need to resize them anymore because there's a piece of AI that can do that for you. What it means is that teams who've had to do these things manually are now able to focus slightly more strategically on – what's next, how am I going to bring this new proposition, how do I bring it to life? But I think for anyone listening to this podcast we should be thinking about – let's all embed some small wins first, and then when the bigger things come, we already have an understanding of how we can make them work.

Emma: What are some of the biggest shifts that you see that you'll need to drive for your teams, and how are you going about equipping them for what's coming next?

Alex: I think the first thing we all have to face into is that there are going to be very young people coming out of school and out of university who will be significantly better at using these technologies than we will.

We are going to have to work a way where we enable them to bring new technology, bring new ideas, in order for them to stay motivated to drive our businesses forwards. I think the second point then is how do you upskill? Mark is an excellent example for me as a partner of someone who is saying, these are the things you need to watch out for.

I don't have anyone looking at bot-to-bot technology yet. But what we do have is people looking at how do we infuse conversation and conversational commerce or conversational care as a first step. And that means that my colleagues and my team are learning through the process of doing. And we need to go down this route of accepting that we're going to have to trial and error, and that's uncomfortable in a big corporate organisation.

Mark: I think that's the key thing. I always talk about gen AI as a kind of muscle within your organisation, so you have to train it, which is in those small steps. And then also looking at how consumer behaviour, because actually in that consumer world, as I was describing before, it's much faster the kind of pace of change because you've got unconstrained access to the tooling and the technology. So there's a lot of lessons that we can take from consumer access and utilisation. Where in Accenture, kind of a snack from our research, is that 50% of people using gen AI at work are self-procuring. And that is a really good example of the consumer behaviour world moving a lot faster than us as enterprises. But the usefulness of the tech is self-evident through those stats.

Emma: You've both mentioned different demographic groups there, how are you making sure that everybody gets served in the right way? And how are you looking at groups who might have very specific needs?

Alex: The average reading age in the UK is the age of eleven. The best way we can serve our customers is making sure our communications are clear.

They understand what we're doing with them and what they want to do with us. So from a vulnerability and accessibility perspective, at Vodafone, we are doing a very large piece of work around redesigning how any customer at any time can tell us that they want to be treated in a slightly different manner, and that could be something like a Braille format, or it could be something as simple as – please, can you just speak a bit slower?

So we're going to enable that. Because we're very aware that a large proportion of our customer base will have all sorts of different accessibility requirements and desires, frankly. The other route here is around how do we personalise each customer's experience with us to make it feel authentic and about them?

Now, we've all been trained for the last 20 years, frankly, that if you phone up and you've seen Martin Lewis on the TV and you phone up and you can get a better discount if you speak to us. I run digital, I don't want you to have that experience as a customer. I want you to know that what I am serving you on the website is the best possible price for the thing that you want at that time. And so building that trust through the right level of personalisation requires an awful lot of data, analytics, content personalisation. So we hope to build trust through attracting you to the right price point, at the right product, at the right time, knowing if you've got a vulnerability or accessibility requirement, we are serving that correctly and you leave us with the right outcome for you.

Mark: I think there's a really interesting point here also around how a more conversational interaction with a customer creates a very different experience, where digital, at times can be a bit of a blunt instrument versus a conversation, which can have the same level of personalisation within it. But you're asking – what can I help you with? What's the activity that you're going to be doing where I think I've got a service that can help you?

Emma: So if the dialog becomes more human, and that in and of itself can engender greater trust?

Mark: Exactly. We've used the example recently if I might have a child going to university, where you might need a phone, a laptop, which is appropriate for someone that's going to university. So that rich information that can be provided to us really helps me serve you in a much better way. That small bit of interaction makes a world of difference for the way it feels as a consumer.

Emma: And I think customers often are a little bit cynical about what they are served up in personalised recommendations. And they do look to other routes, to check whether what has been recommended is right. How do you go about addressing some of that cynicism?

Alex: I think it's quite difficult because if you go right back to the days where you walked around the supermarket. Did you ever buy orange juice if it wasn't on three for the price of two? And the answer to that question is no. We've literally trained the entire nation to deal seek for 20 years. We then introduce price comparison websites who deal seek for you. And then, in my experience, particularly across telco, we have introduced next best action tools, which is where we try to do pricing directly to you for the bundle we think you're going to want. In order for us to reverse that cynicism, we have to bring in a new layer of customer experience that says: you want to be with us because we are the best place to get your device. This is about: how does the customer love our brand, so the part of that cynicism is offset by actually, I really trust this company because I can see them investing in the network, because I can see them investing in customer experience, because I can see them investing in conversational commerce, or whatever it is. That's our opportunity to shift that.

Emma: I think that's so interesting, and so many of the conversations I have with business leaders are similar in that they're talking about one of the ways in which they address all of the change in complexity is actually making sure they stay true to their core purpose and making sure that the technology, the experiences, everything reflects that. Because if you stick to that, then you won't go too far wrong.

Emma: Finally, I want to ask you the question that we ask all of our guests here on Byte Sized. Can you tell us what is it that you're reading or listening to at the moment that's giving you inspiration or pause for thought?

Alex: David Edgar's The Circle. It's in 2026, which is like, now, these are the things you're going to have to do. You're going to have to engage with socials at work. Your job description no longer means anything specifically. And therefore, what does that mean for your family, your networks outside of work, how you engage, how you socialise? I think it brings to life the connectivity of our society, the constant connection to everything, whether that's your family, or your work or anything around the outside of those things. And I think that book really brings it to life.

Emma: Brilliant. Thank you. And Mark, to you.

Mark: I'm reading a book called The Atomic Human at the moment. So what it looks at is, a computer can communicate at roughly 100,000 times faster than we can using language to talk between us. And that has consequences in terms of business processes, in terms of the tasks that they can complete.

What is really interesting is what does that turn into next? The point that you're linking gen AI's capabilities which are continuing to advance, robotics and other kind of technology, quantum, that's coming. How that impacts the human race, what we do, the roles that we take.

So, yeah, it's been inspiring as a read and mind-opening in terms of the things that we need to think about.

Emma: It sounds like it. They are both absolutely brilliant recommendations. Alex and Mark, thank you so much for joining me today.

This has been Byte Sized.

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