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**The Strategic Review of Critical Social and Business Issues Faced by Sri Lanka  
due to COVID-19 : A Special Reference of Digital Transformation of Kelani  
Cables PLC.**

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**Abstract.**

COVID-19 has become a global challenge since year 2019 after first being identified in Wuhan, China. Many countries were affected by the virus and the impact on the global economy and human lifestyles. Thus All the businesses including manufacturing, services, agriculture, tourism and entertainment activities were frozen or limited. However Most of the people started using digital tools and IMS to execute their personal and business goals and mankind realized that the importance of Digital transformation is much more vital than ever in the past. Sri Lanka is a country with a traceable history of 2,500 years and with an area of 65610km<sup>2</sup>. In 2019 the population was 21.4 million consisting of nine ethnic groups and four main religions. Compared to the Asian region, Sri Lanka still maintains its authentic traditional rituals and people belonging to different cultures are driven by their own religious beliefs and traditions. When comes to the economic point of view, the Apparel and Textiles

sector plays a major role in the country's economy and annually it gains a turnover of USD 5.3 billion while showing a 5.1% year on year increase. Agriculture is one of the industries that continued without much hindrance during the COVID-19 period and since most of the imports were restricted by the government, the local farmers were encouraged to cultivate as much as possible. Whilst foreign employment is one of the main income sources in Sri Lanka and more than 3 million people are employed in overseas countries. After the pandemic the Sri Lankan construction industry is still struggling to resume work and is faced with a labor shortage since thousands of workers have not yet returned to work or they have not been recalled to work yet by their employers. and countries like Sri Lanka find it difficult to find alternative suppliers. While coming out of the extensive review on the social and economic impacts due to COVID-19, we saw the local community switching back to their roots and practicing some of the traditional medical treatments, consuming traditional foods and medicine, old farming methods and even spending more quality time with their loved ones. This article will emphasize the value of transforming to digitalization via technology adaptation and how a company gains the optimum usage of Information Technology in order to gain new market shares and acquire a competitive advantage. Kelani Cables has also obtained evidence of its success story, which is one of the classic cases when it experienced the pandemic in a very effective and sustainable way. They overcome the obstacles caused by the situation and the success stories behind the success stories. Plan, and adjust the company's goals according to new market conditions and the latest methodological and technological advancement practices. Digitization is the conversion from analogue data and information digital platform through use of appropriate electronic tools so that the transformed information can be processed, stored or even made use of whenever needed. The people factor is the most important aspect in order to carry out the expected change. In order to reach the ultimate objective, especially for a manufacturing based company, the ultimate objective will be to digitally transform all its processes.

### **Keywords**

*Critical and Social, Covid 19, Digital Transformation, Kelani Cables*

## **1 Introduction and Back Ground of the Study.**

COVID-19 has become a global challenge since last year after first being identified in Wuhan, China. Many countries were affected by the virus and the impact on the global economy and human lifestyles (Pathirana, 2020). Most powerful countries and their leaders disregarded this pandemic at the beginning and the consequences were horrific and it rendered most of the countries helpless with this uncontrollable situation ( Last quarter Report of World Health Organization, 2020). Many airports and harbors were totally shut down and mobilizing of goods and passengers were also restricted. All the businesses including manufacturing, services, agriculture, tourism and entertainment activities were frozen or limited. Most of the people started using digital tools and IMS to execute their personal and business goals and mankind realized that the importance of Digital transformation is much more vital than ever in the past. While getting adapted to the 'New Normal' condition the community went to their roots and even started getting used to the latest technological aspects which could make a change in their behavior, lifestyle and economic stability.

### **1.1 The impact of COVID-19 virus on Sri Lankan society and the Local Economy**

Sri Lanka is a country with a traceable history of 2,500 years and with an area of 65610km<sup>2</sup>. In 2019 the population was 21.4 million consisting of nine ethnic groups and four main religions(Sensory Department Report ,2020). The GDP of the country was USD 84.01 Billion and the per Capital was USD 3,947 in 2019 (CBSL, 2019) with the forecast-ed economic growth rate being (-1.6 %) (Financial Report of ADB, 2020). Compared to the Asian region, Sri Lanka still maintains its authentic traditional rituals and people belonging to different cultures are driven by their own religious beliefs and traditions. Hospitality, Pride, Strong Beliefs and Peacefulness in Society have allowed the people to live their own lifestyles. 2019 was a year where the country faced the most horrific incident of the Easter Sunday bomb attacks carried out by a group of terrorists that dragged Sri Lanka into an economic disaster, especially by hitting the tourism industry( Pathirana, 2020). While recovering from this situation, COVID-19 came as an unexpected tsunami where many industries were badly affected and some of them still struggling to recover from the crisis.Due to the lockdown situation the normal lifestyle of the community has been totally changed and the primary and secondary education system, national events, religious events and

social gatherings were restricted and new practices and aspects were imposed on the local community while interrupting social networks. Sri Lanka's economic backbone comprise mainly of exports, micro, small and medium scale enterprises ([www.ceylontoday.lk](http://www.ceylontoday.lk)), while the economy has been mainly supported by Tourism, the Agriculture Industry, Apparel & Textiles, Manufacturing [consumer & industrial] and foreign employment (CBSL, 2020). Relating to the industry of Tourism, After the Easter Sunday bomb attacks, the local tourism industry was the most damaged sector and after the bad experience the expected industry growth has not been met yet, and the industry faced its worst decline when the airports were locked down due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Compared to 2019, in the first quarter of the year there was a 30% decrease in the tourism industry and after April it showed a decline in revenue of up to USD 307 million according to the Asian Development Bank (Financial Report of ADB, 2020). On the other hand, the government granted a six month grace period in order to support the local tourism industry and to get them re-established in the market while gaining the previous momentum (CBSL, 2020).

The Apparel and Textiles sector plays a major role in the country's economy and annually it gains a turnover of USD 5.3 billion while showing a 5.1% year on year increase ([www.xinhuanet.com](http://www.xinhuanet.com)). The USA, EU and the UK are mainly the top clients of this industry and due to the pandemic this industry too was in total jeopardy. Agriculture is one of the industries that continued without much hindrance during the COVID-19 period and since most of the imports were restricted by the government, the local farmers were encouraged to cultivate as much as possible. While unutilized lands were identified and the community urged to cultivate on them, the government is now defining a national policy on Agriculture and Cultivation. New technologies and specialties, financial aids and infrastructure are the main areas that the government is trying to focus on ([www.pmdnews.lk](http://www.pmdnews.lk)).

Foreign employment is one of the main income sources in Sri Lanka and more than 3 million people are employed in overseas countries ([www.treasury.gov.lk](http://www.treasury.gov.lk)). Especially the Middle East, South Korea, the European region, USA and UK are the main regions or countries where they are employed. After the pandemic the Sri Lankan construction industry is still struggling to resume work and is faced with a labor shortage since thousands of workers have not yet returned to work or they have not been recalled to work yet by their employers (Annual Report of CIOB, 2020). Similar

to the apparel and textile industry, most manufacturers used imported raw materials for their products. Most of the materials were imported either from China or India (WITS, 2020). Both countries are still under crisis (Last Quarter Report of World Health Organization, 2020), and countries like Sri Lanka find it difficult to find alternative suppliers.

While coming out of the extensive review on the social and economic impacts due to COVID-19, we saw the local community switching back to their roots and practicing some of the traditional medical treatments, consuming traditional foods and medicine, old farming methods and even spending more quality time with their loved ones. Meanwhile, technology is mostly used as a method for engaging in education, online work and for social interactions. During the COVID-19 lockdown period most companies searched for new solutions to fulfill their objectives without being vulnerable to the disease. This situation was very new to the employees who were especially engaged in the manufacturing, sales and marketing industries. This article will emphasize the value of transforming to digitalization via technology adaptation and how a company gains the optimum usage of Information Technology in order to gain new market shares and acquire a competitive advantage. (Wade, 2015). The Author had deep discussion with senior manager of Kelani Cables and got evidence of their success story which is one of the classic example when it went through the pandemic period in a very effective and sustainable way where they overcame the obstacles generated by the situation and the success story behind this the identification of the current scenario and aligning the company goals in accordance with the new market conditions and practise of latest methodology technical advancements.

## **2. Kelani Cables PLC as an Organization**

Kelani Cables PLC is a company established more than 50 years ago, and manufactures low voltage power cables and which also operates even globally (Annual Report of Kelani Cables PLC, 2020). Kelani Cables operates in four major sectors, namely Retail, Institutional, Exports and Power & energy. The company diversified its business in 2012, by engaging in a horizontal extension in addition to the core product related electrical products and accessories. Generating a revenue turnover per annum of Rs. 8.7 billion, (Annual Report of Kelani Cables Plc, 2020) and with a workforce of 530 employees. During the lockdown period the company went

under total shutdown and most of the non-manufacturing related activities were executed through online methods. However, the company's line and support processes were not digitized at that time and the latest IT solutions had not been taken into account for execution. In general, as a traditional manufacturing based company, most of the operations were executed through human labor. Most of the machines were operated manually and all the testing, checking, warehouse management etc, too were done with human involvement. On the other hand, sales and marketing related activities such as invoicing, quotations, customer inquiries and complaints handling were executed within the office premises. Likewise the company's HR, IT and other department workstations are established in-house in order to perform their respective duties and responsibilities. Sales and marketing are also job roles where the salesmen should physically attend to the selling points to complete the tasks. After the pandemic the company faced major issues especially in getting staff members to return to work, sending field sales staff to the field and fulfilling other necessary requirements where human factors are involved. At present KCL has been facing the same issue due to prevailing conditions.

The health authorities imposed more and more rules and regulations to prevent the spread of the virus and hence gathering of staff and employees inside office premises was also restricted ([www.health.gov.lk](http://www.health.gov.lk)). Also maintaining social distance and wearing mandatory protective clothing was also some sort of a barrier to the employees in executing their assigned duties. The company was thoroughly helpless after work resumed and was not fully prepared to face these types of challenges which were completely new to the country and even to the world. There is no guarantee that these types of lockdown situations would not recur in future and hence every establishment should be prepared with proper plans on how to face such situations in the future and drive the company objectives towards their assigned goals, how to survive and to make profits out of any tough situation. In order to do this, the company should undergo a full 'Digital Transformation' and adapt to new technologies (Peter and Alexander, 2020).

## **2.1 Digitization to Digital Transformation & Organizational Change**

Digitization is the conversion from analogue data and information digital platform through use of appropriate electronic tools so that the transformed information can be

processed, stored or even made use of whenever needed ( Wade, 2015). Digital transformation is the adoption of digital technology to transform services or businesses, by replacing non-digital or manual processes with digital processes or replacing outdated digital technology with the latest digital technology or simply 'converting to paperless' to the application of digital technology in all areas of a business or the entire human society ( Wade, 2015 ). In an organization, realizing why such changes should be undertaken is the most important fact at that moment, and while undertaking this to also identify what aspects to transform and selecting the optimum methods to execute such plans are called the 'Digital transformation journey'. And throughout this journey any organization will face its unique distortions and barriers as well (Wade, 2015).

Information technology and digitalization is a tool which has been used by most of the companies as a support service. But what they usually fail to realize is that these two components can easily reduce their overhead costs, increase their efficiency, improve sales and profits, and could be used even for sales and financial forecasting (Peter and Alexander , 2020 ). New business models or ventures, improve inbound and outbound logistic operations, production, sales and marketing and many more sectors. Most companies plan to implement or transform themselves only when they are threatened by a competitor or by their own customers or target audience. But if an organization or an industry can visualize to deliver the unexpected or a potential product or service where the customers or the target market haven't even thought of it by using "Digitalization", then that would be the unique factor or the extra mile which the other competitors cannot reach. This is called the 'Competitive Advantage through Digitalization' (Digital Adoption, 2019). The digital business transformation journey MODEL (Wade, 2015) is like a political, social, and economic change. On the other hand, if to bring the organization to a digital platform all stakeholders of the company, the processes, structures and competitive aspects are the areas that should be changed according to the plan. Failing to plan and execute the proper digital technology transformation will lead the company to a digital disruption. The transformation can be carried out by focusing on the aspects below (Wade, 2015).

## 2.2 Business Model Innovation

So far Kelani Cables has not touched the online selling market and with its new trading arm, there will be a huge potential for this platform. Now the younger generation is more interested in buying goods from e-platforms since it saves their time and money, and since it is also convenient for them ( Alessia ,Vidhya & Ganaka, 2018 ). On the other hand, even for a company like Kelani, it can easily move to the digital platform to promote its portfolio while keeping the existing markets in operation. This also gains the extra mile and will support the company as its competitive advantage (Gerald et al. ,2015 ). Even though the impact and the return on investments will be less in the present situation, this will lead the company to the next level in the future. When it comes to the Structure and Process,can be minimized the gaps among the different hierarchy levels and use digital tools, zoom meeting, cloud, Board pack and ERP to increase the efficiency and productivity. Also, different information systems ERP & CRM could be used for data analyzing and forecasting.Digital tools have been used at operational or transactional levels and they have been improved in many processes ( Abdelsalam, Razak, 2016 ). On the other hand, Managerial work stations, Engineering workstations and Electronic calendars have been used to support the structure and processes. In order to overlook the operational level the company deployed new managerial support systems, Sales management, Inventory control, Production scheduling, Annual budgeting, Capital investment analysis and Pricing/profitability analysis.

The people factor is the most important aspect in order to carry out the expected change. There are proposers, opposes and neutral employees for these types of projects and those who do not adapt to the digital change may try to sabotage the entire process (Digital Adoption, 2019). Even though they do not object, after implementation of the new system they faced difficulties when executing their job related activities. Hence, proper training, knowledge sharing, awareness programs and a friendly work environment has ensured a smoother transformation, establish trust and dispel the fear factor (Wade, 2015).The infrastructure of the IT department was able to absorb the new change and all the databases, core systems, network systems, hardware etc. should be able to support the digital transformation. For example, the latest version of an ERP system, improved server hardware and software, manageable networks (CISCO).



Being an authentic sales and marketing oriented company, it needs to identify its core business ventures and the strategies used in these sectors. Rather than relying on orthodox methods and processes, companies need to be digitalized on their production and processes according to the current e-market trends and differentiate themselves from their competitors. Analyzing how to digitally enable the companies' productions and related activities will recommend the remedial actions that need to be taken by the relevant parties. Customer engagements, e-commerce promotions platform, back office operation processes can be restored by digitalizing (Abdelsalam, Razak, 2016) . The company needs to foresee the upcoming trends and changes in the market. The faster the company can adapt to the changes, the better results will be in revenue, profits and customer satisfaction. Conducting a feasibility study on the current situation of the company will pave the way for setting up objectives and time frames. The gap between the objective and the current status will explain why to transform, what to transform and how to execute the digital transformation (Wade, 2015) within the estimated time frame. They identified key milestone , how Kelani Cables will digitally transform its process and operations successfully within the next two financial years. All support activities related to sales & marketing can be executed from employee's residential locations at turbulence situations and can be modified as to the concept of 'Work from Home'.

By use of different digital and other tools the company can gather data and information of its revenue, customer buying behavior data, stock movements and many other reports which will produce BIG DATA for further decisions (Gerald et al. ,2015) . Likewise, the sales and marketing dashboard indicates data and information gathered from various sources in one single platform where it shows at a glance how the company is performing and hence this can be vital for C level executives. The company has its owned website which caters to the current objectives of the establishment. During the pandemic and post pandemic period the company realized that the existing website could have been better equipped with more digital tools to engage with customers. Creating an online platform to purchase selected product ranges, making the product tangible and visualized in 3D effect and providing a totally automated technical support system will give an outstanding service so that the user or customer would not have to make several attempts to make a decision. Social media tools will create a higher level of brand awareness within a shorter time period to reach globally and it is always measurable to see how effective the approach

(Gerald et al. ,2015). The company's logo, images [product, events], videos and articles have been used as content marketing tactics and will gain social currency among the users or customers. Most of the digital platforms create more brand loyal customers and also lead them to act as brand evangelists in the future (Munasinghe, 2018). Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Whatsapp etc.

### **2.3 Customer & Value Proposition**

The modern world customer tends to be more knowledgeable, well organized and informed, having high levels of self-confidence and seeking convenience. While identifying the customer based on the said characteristics, any company forecasting to reach the most innovative business models should have fully digitally equipped strategies and tools to cater to the differentiated new market potential (Peter & Alexander , 2020 ). For instance elevating customer experience by providing them with a fully digitalized atmosphere that creates a virtual platform where they can see, feel and smell the product attributes while at the same time gain the technical knowledge about the selected category. For example, the company can create virtual house interior models with selected dimensions where the customer can select the Schneider switches and socket types and also visualize how the items look like when fixed on to the wall. All the products can be digitally tangible to the customer by creating an Omni Channel and the most commonly and frequently asked questions could be answered through an automated system ( [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com) ). Developing a secure online buying system will enable the customer to complete his/her inquiry and the company can offer a mode of delivering the product or guide the person to the nearest collection point ( [www.journals.elsevier.com](http://www.journals.elsevier.com) ) . Both B2C and B2B customers can benefit through this system and it could be even used for gathering information for submitting tenders and other price inquiries. The company has already implemented an android mobile application to assist the consultant, engineers, quantity surveys and procurement staff by offering an electronic product catalogue, price offers and calculation formulas and a wire size calculation app and even the public including students can use of the tool. Different digital tools has been utilized to reach the customers such as Facebook, Whats app, Viber, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, while the company too can communicate any CSR projects, awareness campaigns or any type of surveys through these channels . We can design a platform to gather customer feedback. Since we know that getting feedback through a

format is in fact difficult, Kelani can offer various price rebates on different products if the feedback is given properly. Also, the company is planning to create an extranet for all its B2B and B2C customers.

## **2.4 Operation of the Transformation**

In order to reach the ultimate objective, especially for a manufacturing based company, the ultimate objective will be to digitally transform all its processes. Manufacturing, Procurement, Inventory Management, Inbound and Outbound Logistics, Finance Management, Sales & Marketing and HR should be integrated through the latest state of the art technology. By using the latest or the existing ERP system with improvements for utilization, all departments and operations have been restructured gradually to digitally. For example, by automating the most important operation like the plant, it can deliver the best quality product within the scheduled time period in a cost effective manner and can meet the set commitment given by the sales team to the end user. Reducing human errors, maintaining the quality and supply consistency in order to compete or differentiate in the market, customized product outputs will be some of the unmatched advantages that a company can gain where there will be no competition ( Gerald et al. ,2015 ).

Also inventory and warehouse management automation is something that is new to the Company which will lead to maintaining the most effective stocks without any shortages while minimizing the stock aging costs. New concepts like revenue forecasting were able to initiate through the new version of ERP system. Also this remote access points will be strictly monitored and highly protected through Cyber security systems to protect the overall Cyber operation ( [www.itgovernance.co.uk](http://www.itgovernance.co.uk) ).All the backup files and data management systems will be converted in to cloud operations, so that most of the paperwork and data stored in different locations will be brought in to central point ( [www.cognizant.com](http://www.cognizant.com)).Decentralized warehouse systems will deployed in identified geographical locations to support the goods distributing network linked with ERP to enhance and speedup the objectives of the outbound logistics department.

## **2.5 Research & Development**

The R & D Department could be the one of the departments that gets the optimum usage of being digitized. AI is basically a computer management system where the human involvement is almost zero, which will be used to manipulate BIG DATA and raw data to identify market trends, customer behavior ( Gerald et al. ,2015 ). These findings will be useful to the sales & marketing department to build new strategies and new products or services to differentiate in the industry. A company's most classified information is the customer database, its financial information and transaction data. Especially retail customers are willing to share their data and information with the company and most top rated project customers show reluctance to share their company data like owner-ships and other relevant documents. Even the company transaction history should be highly classified and confidential through this new system, while all the big data will be secure and the company will be able to create credibility and build trust among the client base by informing the new data privacy and protection methods. A latest version of firewall like 'Sonicwall' will be implemented within this transformation period and from this a high level of external threats can be reduced to zero level. The company should have at least four months to convert all manual data into soft data so that most of the paperwork will be minimized.

## **2.6 Kelani Cables as an organization and its Agility**

Kelani Cables is a company which has the highest level of capability to adapt to any planned or crisis situation. To initiate the digital transformation process the company must develop a team which consists of experts in different job roles in all departments ( Gerald et al. , 2015 ). Parallel to the appointed team another team with the highest level of literacy and skill on digital transformations deployed on the field. The tasks of the project team and experts' team [change management] have been integrated after the accomplishment of the groundwork and the combined efforts will be transferred to the converting part, where set activities are tested by developing prototypes (Gerald et al. , 2015). Department heads and other employees have been continuously trained on the new concept and most of the training has been planned as on the job training. Digital Transformation will lead the company towards new business opportunities and will also enable it to compete even globally under any given conditions. The company

can adapt to any turbulent situation in the future and perform the crucial processes, activities remotely with less human involvement and face domestic and global challenges effectively and efficiently to keep up the business momentum.

## **2.7 Digital Transformation Management by developing a digital mindset**

Apart from the company's corporate vision, mission, objectives and strategies, it possesses separate Digital Objectives and strategies. The digital transformation team has taken direction from the company's top management like the CEO, GMM, GMO and CFO and there will be a new position of CIO [Chief Information Officer] created during this process. Apart from the change, the management team cultivating the digital mindset among the employees is also very important for the transformation. The time spent on the project and the investments on this platform will be in vain without creating a digital mindset and environment for the expected goals. Kelani Cables' digital transformation team has identified some key factors that should be considered in order to accomplish this task.

Corporate objectives, information or any other data is no longer available only for top level management and it should be wide open to each and every worker. Creating social media groups, micro sites, blogs etc. will ensure the transparency of data and information to all levels of work. When working together, every employee will have equal opportunities to share their ideas and suggestions. This will encourage the worker community thus leading straightaway to the digital transformation goals. For example, the sales team will work with the production team as well as with the logistics team, so that individual and departmental tasks and objectives have been synergized effectively. The objective is to create a culture of learning while at the same time generating digital knowledge throughout the company. It is not a transfer of fully equipped digital knowledge to the employee, but merely injecting the basic awareness of the literature. This will filter the corporate message of getting transformed digitally and employees will engage in every aspect of the process without any fear and with innovative ideas (Gerald et al. , 2015 ).

## 2.8 Controls, Evaluations & Budgeting

Appointed projects team and technical expert's team set their own controls and evaluations against the set objectives and goals. The goals have been monitored on set milestones and time wise. Weekly, monthly and quarterly the progress will be checked and stipulated controls can be used to see whether the efforts are made within the expected criteria and set budget related to different departments. In future Kelani Cables will no longer have its operations centralized within the headquarters and mostly will be operated remotely with use of workstations established in isolated locations. The correct people will be connected through digital devices to accurate information at any time and collaborative technology leads the company to its futuristic digital goals. The latest technological transformation will lead company to operate in small scale and tiny employee groups to be **Intrapreneur** inside the company, will enable them to take risks and initiate new concepts and conduct experiments on concepts which explore new potential products, services or markets and the talented employees will work on behalf of the company not just they need work but they will be definitely wanted to give their service to the company. Innovation will come from anywhere within or outside the company and faster adaptation and quick decision making new culture will keep the company updated with the world trending styles.

The future Kelani Cables will be redesigned with a more flatter structure so that everything will be flowed top to bottom as well as side to side and total organization will run in **'Clouds'**. When it comes to one of the most important corporate objectives is **'Company Profits'** In future the company will no longer focus only on profits and will look forward to **'Prosperity'** such as employee betterment, Community engagements, sustainability and positive impact on the local and global community.

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