When less is more

Stripping away complexity for renewed corporate agility and competitiveness.

Following a complete overhaul of their IT infrastructure, Dutoit Agri flexes their digital muscles, primed for another century of sustained growth.

Dutoit Agri is a leading South African grower and distributor of superior produce.

With 5000 hectares under cultivation in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces, they harvest 250,000 tonnes of fruit and vegetables a year, employing up to 8000 people in peak season.

With ownership of all points in the value chain, including shares in freight and logistics companies, Dutoit also takes full charge of the packing, marketing, and transportation of their agricultural products, 80% of which are exported.

Large and multifaceted businesses breed complexity – and nowhere more so than under the hood, in the enterprise architecture. Complexity threatened to slow Dutoit's digital transformation, negatively impacting its competitiveness. That's why they hired Pieter Schikkerling, their current Head of ICT, since October 2020.

"There is a big need for digital transformation across our industry," says Pieter. *"Dutoit brought me in specifically to drive that process for them. I put in a five-year roadmap focusing first on overhauling our infrastructure, and for that I needed a good services partner."*

More than just a tech vendor.

Pieter Schikkerling would eventually choose First Technology as his services partner because of the sheer breadth of their offering and the high degree of expertise they have on hand to support their clients day and night. But there was something else that helped push them to the top of the shortlist.

"We knew that First Technology knew their business," says Pieter, *"but, for me, the kicker was how well they knew my business. They are very well established in the agricultural sector, and that gave me a sense of comfort that they understand our very specific challenges."*

According to Pieter, there were things that First Technology brought to the discussion that no other provider thought to raise: *"They promised to put down an engineer in Ceres, so we have a full-time resource just a few kilometres down the road. It may seem a relatively small thing to outsiders, but that demonstrates the strategic importance the area holds for them, as well as their understanding of the fact that we're an hour-and-a-half or more from a city."*

"It wasn't just sell, sell, sell with First Technology. I knew I could walk a journey with them."

Pieter Schikkerling, Head of ICT at the Dutoit Group

Business and IT objectives, one and the same.

Dutoit Agri didn't get to this point in their very successful 120-year history without a strong commitment to efficiency, supported by their dynamic, adaptable corporate mindset and their abiding interest in innovation.

By 2020, though, they had outgrown the capabilities of their existing IT service provider and, as both Pieter and First Technology's Data Centre Architect Gerhard Horn tell it, IT strategy was out of sync with the business as a whole.

"It's essential that IT and business strategies are closely aligned, but Dutoit hadn't done an IT realignment in years," Gerhard says. "First Technology always wants to know what the business needs are first, then design an integrated solution to support those. We're not here to sell you a stand-alone product if it won't directly contribute to business success."

To make a proactive and material contribution to Dutoit Agri's vision of being the top domestic producer and distributor of fruit and vegetables, Pieter for his part emphasised the importance of a programme of IT systemisation, the integration of systems and technology that were sustainable and truly fit for purpose.

This would directly translate into cost, production, and data optimisation, which would, in turn, improve the ability to make critical business decisions based on real-time data. That was, quite literally, his manifesto.

> "Signing up with a company like First Technology sends a clear message that we're very serious about where we want to go with our technology."
>
> **Pieter Schikkerling, Head of ICT at the Dutoit Group**

First Technology
Western Cape

In order of preference.

Infrastructure was Pieter's number one priority. The network he had inherited was unstable, and his team had little visibility into the causes of frequent disruptions.

"There would be a hub or network switch or someone would plug something in somewhere, and I'd have no control over it," he says. To boost overall productivity and business continuity, he needed to radically simplify an environment sorely lacking in standardisation and automation. The company's data centre was key to that transformation.

Another priority was security and data protection, for which the company had stringently defined their requirements. An overhaul of the company's backup and disaster recovery strategy was long overdue.

He also wanted to outsource the help desk. *"Our team of seven holds responsibility for 400 computer users and thousands of other workers and their family members who may access the Wi-Fi and other resources on the job or at one of our farm schools,"* explains Pieter. *"We couldn't do it all ourselves. We needed to outsource it, so that there's one number people can call day or night, and someone will pick up the phone and say, 'How can we help?'"*

First Technology
Western Cape

"It's just about everything."

Dutoit Agri's head office was the beneficiary of complete infrastructure refresh with a 10 GB backbone, which is a critical component of a Software Defined Datacenter (SDDC) design.

Dutoit had many servers on legacy 3-tier solutions," recalls Gerhard. *"They requested an on-site private cloud, aiming to commoditise the data centre, repurpose data center infrastructure where possible, and with a plan to retire older investments in subsequent phases. This requirement led to a hyper-converged software setup that combined storage, computing, networking, and management functions. We delivered this through the VMWare HCI software defined solution."*

"That has made a huge difference. When you have everything running off a single software platform, it is reasonably easy to simplify," adds Pieter. *"You can manage everything working from one virtual stack."*

With the new infrastructure and tools like PRTG network monitoring software, Pieter's team now has visibility across the entire network. *"That goes hand in hand with some of the security that has been put in place, like the Sophos antivirus. It's given us so much more control."*

First Technology thoroughly modernised the actual facility too, reworking everything from network connectivity, power continuity, and temperature control to digital security, physical security, and biometrics-based access control.

Security and data protection were boosted significantly. *"The way that we do backups and disaster recovery was completely redone"*, says Pieter. *"We've got immutable backups; we've got disaster recovery replicating to a remote site. We have the knowledge and expertise to do things the right way, first time."* First Technology helped draw up and performs Dutoit's disaster recovery test every year, and they recently assisted with a ransomware rapid response plan too.

They now operate a dedicated help desk on Dutoit's behalf, available 24/7. Several First Technology divisions are represented on it, fielding issues related to hardware, software, licensing, engineering, security, networking, and more. *"The help desk team is integral to everything from backups to recommendations for future work,"* remarks Gerhard. The general user experience is immeasurably improved, and the support is especially appreciated by remote workers and business travellers.

"First Technology manages all of our infrastructure countrywide," says Pieter, mentally tabulating the services he's outsourced to the provider by way of a recap. *"Our entire server and network environment, DR, security, Dmarc authentication, the help desk. I've outsourced my entire printing contract to them. We're building a data warehouse with them. I'm in the process of outsourcing and moving all of our websites to them, of which one is e-commerce. We buy all of our software through First Technology, so they're our licensing partner too. It's just about everything, to be honest with you,"* he laughs.

First rule: simplify, standardise, automate.

First Technology is all about standardisation.

Pieter recalls how frequently the team repeated the terms 'simplification', 'standardisation', and 'automation'. *"The first two of these have been at the heart of what we've done together so far. They have gone a long, long way to stabilising our network and driving efficiency in how and what we do."*

> "Partnering with First Technology, I can focus on continuous improvement in areas that make a demonstrable difference to the business and its bottom line. It's a never-ending journey, of course, but it is many times more easily travelled when you're not putting out fires every step of the way."
>
> **Pieter Schikkerling, Head of ICT at the Dutoit Group**

About Dutoit Agri.

Dutoit Agri has been in the agricultural business for more than 120 years.

Along the way, we have gained valuable experience, elevated quality levels, improved efficiency and expanded our vision. Such a rich, long history means that we are an established and stable company with a strong infrastructure, while our long term vision has made us dynamic, adaptable and innovative.

First Technology
Western Cape