

NOKIA

Thirty years on from the call that transformed how we communicate

by Pekka Lundmark 1 Jul 2021



The first official GSM call between former Finnish Prime Minister Harri Holkeri and Deputy Mayor of Tampere Kaarina Suonio, on July 1, 1991, lasted just over three minutes.

But it took two years of hard work and many sleepless nights to make it happen.

My colleagues said I looked like a zombie and nicknamed me “Chief Worrier” as we worked around the clock in the frantic run-up to the phone call that transformed telecommunications and made Nokia a global brand.

I joined Nokia in 1990, the mission to make the first commercial call on the new European standard for digital cellular networks, GSM (Global System for Mobile Communications), what we now

refer to as 2G, was already well underway.

My role as account manager for Radiolinja, the Finnish GSM network operator and customer for Nokia's GSM technology, put me in the front line of what was a Europe-wide race.

Who would be first to develop a commercially viable network for this new era of mobile communications?

Our products and software were still being developed. Radiolinja (now Elisa) were still waiting for their operator license to be approved.

But we decided to set an ambitious date and work towards it.

The first successful test call was achieved at 4 am on March 27, 1991. If you look closely at the black-and-white photograph of Kurt Nordman, CEO of Helsinki Telephone Association making another test call later that day you can see a young man standing at the back looking very much like the Chief Worrier/zombie.

That was because I knew we had much more still to do for the big demonstration on July 1 when the world's eyes would be on us.

Luckily, it went smoothly, with Mr. Holkeri, calling from a car phone, remarking that the reception was so clear it was like talking to "someone in the next room."

What the world didn't realize at the time is that one of the official calls we made at that event used the backup analogue system. I guess it's safe to admit this 30 years on and now that there are no question marks over the viability of GSM.

GSM led to data calls, SMS messaging, and data services. It was the birth of cell phones as we know them. We launched our first GSM cell phone, the 1011, in late 1992, and went on to build mobile networks across the globe, establishing a reputation as world leaders for the technology that enables mobile connectivity.

It is not often you get the opportunity to play a part in a major leap forward for your industry. But my decision to return to Nokia a year ago was, in part, motivated by my belief that our industry is on the verge of a similar, if not bigger, leap forward with 5G.

2G was digital voice and data.

 is getting people online.

4G was delivering services digitally.

And 5G is transforming entire industries through connected digital enterprise.

Three decades ago, autonomous vehicles, virtual reality-assisted remote surgery, and intelligent robots controlled by cloud technology belonged to science fiction rather than science fact.

But today all of these things are possible thanks to 5G.

5G enables the critical networks that bring together the world's people, machines, and devices. It will increasingly help run mission-critical services for companies and societies. And after years of talking about the Fourth Industrial Revolution, 5G – together with technologies such as edge cloud, machine learning, private networks, sensors, and automation – will finally unlock the productivity, efficiency, and safety gains we have been hoping for in a range of sectors from transport to factories to energy to smart cities.

A World Economic Forum report from last year estimated that 5G will add \$13.2 trillion to the global economy by 2035, a third of which will be in manufacturing.

At Nokia's fully digitalized Oulu factory, we have seen productivity increase by up to 30%, while for our customers, large ports have reduced their operating costs by up to 25%, and in a pilot agriculture project there was a sevenfold increase in the productivity of sugar beet cultivation.

These are just a few examples. Globally, we are still at an early stage in the 5G cycle, with new applications expected to continue emerging until at least the end of this decade.

Looking back, we now know just how revolutionary GSM was. So far, we have only had a preview of the power and potential of 5G.

I used to be the Chief Worrier.

But now, you can call me the Chief Enthusiast, because creating technology that helps the world act together is how we change our world for the better.



Celebrating 30 years of transforming telecommunications



(Hero image: Helsinki Telephone Association CEO Kurt Nordman makes a GSM test call. Photo credit: Elisa.)



About Pekka Lundmark

Pekka was appointed Nokia's President and CEO in August 2020. He previously worked for us between 1990 and 2000, before embarking on a 20-year journey through the technology, energy, manufacturing, machinery, retail and finance sectors. This broad experience gives him insight into new technologies and techniques that will be at the heart of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

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