



Aptia CEO, Bala Viswanathan

Before co-founding Aptia in 2023, Bala was chief operating officer at Mercer and CEO of JLT's global Employee Benefits business, which he turned around to achieve market leading organic growth. He has extensive experience in financial services and a strong track record in delivering excellent client outcomes and efficiency through client focus, process redesign, and digitalisation.

For a new entrant to the UK's third-party pensions administrator scene – having only recently celebrated its second birthday – Aptia is already developing a stellar reputation for shaking up the established order.

The reason for its success may lie well in this challenger brand's blend of embracing innovation while utilising its established industry origins.

Aptia CEO, Bala Viswanathan, was previously the Employee Benefits CEO for Jardine Lloyd Thompson (JLT), which gave him an oversight into the opportunities in the UK pensions market.

A few years after Marsh & McLellan (Mercer's parent company) acquired JLT, it wanted to exit the UK administration sector. Viswanathan, now working as its global chief operating officer responsible for transformation, change operations and digitisation, recognised this as an opportunity. Partnering with Bain Capital, he acquired Mercer's UK administration arm, forming Aptia,

Aptia: Adding innovation to administration and beyond

➤ **Aptia Group CEO, Bala Viswanathan, chats with *Pensions Age* about reshaping pensions administration through technology and talent**

which began transacting in January 2024.

"Aptia has a rich heritage in pensions. Alongside that, we bring the energy of new organisation that is looking to achieve breakthrough results," Viswanathan says.

It is this combination of experience and ambition that Aptia is now deploying to address long-standing weaknesses within the pensions administration market. For instance, while pensions administration is a 'must-have' service, Viswanathan argues it has historically suffered from chronic under-investment.

In his view, the industry was ready for a provider willing to invest meaningfully in the space and fundamentally rethink how services are delivered. "By providing better service, not only do you earn the trust of clients and their members, but you also ensure you're supporting them properly in meeting their financial obligations and needs," he explains.

Leading the way with technology

To best serve its clients, and their members, Aptia believes in optimising technology. So much so that its goal is to invest around £40 million in technology for the business over four years.

According to Viswanathan: "Member experience and cost optimisation are two sides of the same digitisation coin. The greater the level of digitisation that you're able to do, the more optimisation you're able to do in terms of the cost, and your ability to provide much better member experience."

Turning this philosophy into action, Aptia has invested in a conversational

artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance the experience of members contacting its call centres. The system is trained to handle the 35 most common member queries in a natural, conversational way, significantly reducing wait times and removing the need for callers to navigate automated menus by punching in numbers. If a query falls outside the AI's remit, the system automatically transfers the caller to a human adviser.

The impact has been tangible. Aptia's member satisfaction score for its call centre currently stands at 97 per cent. "We're able to delight members by ensuring they get the right answers with no wait times," Viswanathan says. "That's how technology can really make a difference."

As vital as call centres are, members may contact their administrator in different ways at different times. Therefore, Aptia's technology can pick up the member query at any stage, through any channel. For instance, a member might email first and then follow up by phone; Aptia's technology ensures that a seamless integration of information between the channels.

Another area of focus is communication using mobile phone apps. "For some reason, the pension industry has been the one of the last to recognise the power of the mobile", Viswanathan says.

To rectify this, Aptia is the first UK pensions administration firm to launch a transactional mobile app, linked to the open banking structure to ensure security and reduce fraud.

“We’ve taken on the challenge of driving greater digitalisation across the sector,” Viswanathan says. “We’re happy to be the first to invest because we believe the benefits will quickly become clear. The better use of technology means members are served better, while the cost of transactions become much lower, making it a win-win for everybody.”

Investing in people

Despite its emphasis on digital innovation, Aptia understands that technology cannot fully replace the vital skills humans provide, such as providing empathy when members are contacting during a vulnerable time in their life.

“We believe pensions operates at the intersection of technology and talent. The greater the investment in both, the better the opportunity to provide information to people in a manner they choose, at the right time, to ensure that they can make informed decisions about their retirement,” Viswanathan says.

However, Viswanathan feels the administration market has been constrained by a lack of investment in talent.

“The biggest challenge we saw was the shortage of skilled resources,” he says. “Everyone was fishing in the same pool of talent instead of building capability. So, we said, what can we do to pensions an industry that is exciting, where people could look to build careers?”

The answer, for Aptia, was to create its own training academy. The programme recruits individuals with no prior pensions experience and puts them

through an intensive six-month training course. Through this, Aptia is training 15-20 people every couple of months, with just over 250 people having completed training so far.

To retain this talent, Aptia instils a sense of ownership throughout the entire organisation, “so that everyone understands how important the job is that they’re doing,” Viswanathan says.

He also recognises the importance of staff being financially rewarded for this. Therefore, every employee is a shareholder in the company, “to make sure that everybody benefits from the financial success that comes from the hard work they put in”.

Taking on industry challenges

Aptia’s ambitions extend beyond using its technology and talent to improve administration service; it also taking on broader industry challenges, such as the pensions saving gap.

“Statistics show that more than 35 per cent of 50-year-olds in the UK do not have enough in their pension fund to support them in retirement,” Viswanathan highlights. “Also, fewer than one in 10 access regulated financial advice, and seven in 10 receive no guidance at all when planning for retirement.”

Therefore, Aptia has created the Pension Decision Service to guide members through their retirement options.

Aptia is also leading the way in an emerging ‘third way’ for scheme design – that of collective DC (CDC).

“We strongly believe that CDC can play a major role in addressing the pensions saving gap,” Viswanathan says.

Taking action on this, Aptia recently appointed former Pensions Minister, Guy Opperman, as a strategic adviser to help the company establish a CDC product.

“We will be one of the first firms capable of delivering a multi-employer CDC scheme, which not only optimises costs, but, through active investment

management, can deliver better returns for the members as well,” Viswanathan says.

Continuing to expand and innovate, to provide greater value for all

Aptia’s blend of technological investment, talent development and a clear sense of purpose is shaping its roadmap for the year ahead. Underpinning all of its ambitions, however, is a continued focus on service quality for clients and, ultimately, their members.

For instance, following feedback from existing clients, Aptia is now extending its innovative approach beyond administration and into the pension consultancy sector, while also providing enhanced support for companies offering bulk purchase annuities.

Yet expansion is only one part of the firm’s future strategy.

“We want to keep earning the trust of our member population by ensuring that we’re able to provide more accurate, more secure and more timely information by being more responsive. We want to remove complexity and make pensions as simple and frictionless as possible,” Viswanathan says.

For Aptia, this means simple adjustments to member communications, such as ensuring that key information is provided upfront, “so people know exactly what they need to do, and that anything that can be pre-filled, is,” Viswanathan explains.

Technology continues to underpin these efforts. For instance, Aptia is currently the only administrator to fully automate pension increases when they are required, achieved by digitising the individual rules of each client scheme.

As Viswanathan concludes: “We want to continue being known as an innovator in this market, delivering genuinely better outcomes for our clients and their members.”

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Founded just two years ago, Aptia is a leading provider of pension administration, consultancy and actuarial services in the UK, and a US employee benefits administrator. Aptia’s UK business is one of the largest third-party pensions administration providers, with over 1,200 clients and paying more than a million pensioners every year.