



VAR epitomises sector's response to UK lockdown p18

Channel fights virus with cloud-based weapons of choice p22



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Comms Dealer will always champion the channel's efforts and successes, and in the difficult time ahead we will continue to cover the stories that matter most, and applaud the comms industry's unsung heroes.

Coronavirus report – page 16

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Channel chiefs aid resellers with key support measures

CHANNEL leaders are gearing up to help resellers get through the tough days ahead with a series of measures aimed at easing the economic pain of the Covid-19 crisis.

As a Critical National Infrastructure provider TalkTalk Business is prioritising channel partners supporting critical services and vulnerable people.

"We are working to help these groups and have made huge efforts to support a wide range of priority requests from our partners," commented Richard Thompson, Director of Partners at TalkTalk Business.

"It's been truly humbling to see the efforts from all the teams across TalkTalk Business who are providing the robust connectivity needed to keep Britain working and online during this crisis, especially blue light support and our vulnerable end users.

"These have ranged from bandwidth changes to support libraries that are now being converted into Covid-19 pop-up facilities, to connecting hospitals, delivering EAD connectivity to food distribution depots and supporting supermarkets with an emergency strategy to maintain food supplies.

"We'll continue to champion the channel through discussions with Openreach to call for more support for businesses over this challenging period."

Thompson's words were echoed by Daryl Pile, MD at Gamma, which has launched a raft of measures to support channel partners.

"We must help the channel through this crisis," commented Pile. "We are working together to address what we can't control individually, like the need for payment breaks on connectivity



Richard Thompson

services, but we must start by doing what we can control."

Gamma immediately went into action to provide free support on SIP trunking, Microsoft Teams Direct Routing, Horizon Cloud PBX, Horizon Collaborate and MyInbound.

"We will support this from 1st April to 30th June and may decide to extend this period according to the changing environment," noted Pile.

Going forward, Gamma's crisis support programme includes free of charge reductions to cloud PBX users and SIP channels and no early termination charges for customers entering 'hibernation'.

For new customers, Gamma is offering free of charge video and home working, hosted PBX, SIP channels (including MS Teams Direct Routing) and enhanced cloud resilience.

"We're also offering free of charge upgrades to provide resilience, more features and full blown UCaaS," added Pile.

"No contract extensions or roll overs, no reduction in bundles, services or quality. New customers can access 30 days contract terms and still enjoy the free of charge period. This is simple, straight forward help. It's time to step up to the plate, we are all in this together."

Union Street has addressed uncertainty around the availability of billing personnel and the preparation of bill runs by introducing a Business Continuity Billing Service.

"Designed to be deployed at short notice this bureau service provides temporary assistance in managing bill runs on a month-to-month basis," said Head of Sales & Marketing Vincent Disneur.

"Supporting our staff, our clients and other channel businesses during this uncertain time is our top priority."

9 Group has offered promotional support around its eve hosted telephony and collaboration licences, as well as 30-day terms on mobile SIMs.

"Both moves have been widely appreciated by our partners, alongside some practical advice on maintaining customer communications through this uncertain period," commented CEO James Palmer.

"We have been amazed by the spirit of cooperation between staff, partners and suppliers. This crisis will pass, and when it does we will all remember the people and the companies who supported us and, in that regard, I think the channel can hold its collective head up high."

VARs on the virus front line play vital role

COMMS technicians and engineers are continuing to provide lifelines to critical services during the Covid-19 lockdown.

One example is Incom-CNS which has a full support team working at Manchester Royal Infirmary. They risk infection daily to keep the hospital's ICT infrastructure operational.

"At the Infirmary I have designated key workers assigned on site all the time," said CTO Jason Kilvert.

"All we can do is issue them with guidelines and a Health & Safety Executive document that basically says you have to wash your hands more regularly and follow distancing measures.

"Effectively, they are very much on the front line, but we've just got to try and keep it rolling as best we can.

"I think telecoms channel people will get more respect during this period. Lots of organisations consider IT to be important and the telecoms teams that are making sure hospitals can make telephone calls during this crisis tend to get forgotten about.

"I've got lads committed to staying in the hospitals, care homes and health centres we look after for as long as it's the right thing to do."

Following Prime Minister Boris Johnson's lockdown edict,

reseller teams across the UK have been working night and day to make sure vital organisations can continue to communicate and companies can carry on working during home isolation.

"Our teams are working 16-hour days over the course of this crazy period and they are doing it all with smiles on their faces," said Chris Morrissey, MD of Leeds-based Lily Comms.

Andrew Skipsey, MD of Hampshire-based M12, said his support teams are 'full on' and praised the support he has received from vendor partners.

"Our customer service and engineers have helped hundreds of businesses and thousands of users seamlessly transition to home working, and it's great to see vendors offering the remote options at no cost."

Kevin Coll, MD at Aberdeen IT service firm Solab, underlined the importance of innovative reseller teams working in other crucial UK industries.

"The amazing people in our Onboard Tracker team are helping to ensure safe operations, mobilisations and crew movements for tens of thousands of energy and marine workers on rigs, vessels and helicopters worldwide," he said. "Business continuity is in our DNA and Covid-19 will not change that."

Coronavirus report – page 16



Jason Kilvert

NEWS ROUNDUP

AN 'UNSUSTAINABLE' £90m loss this year has forced Dixons Carphone to close all 531 stand-alone Carphone Warehouse stores in a bid to return to profitability with the loss of circa 2,900 jobs. The company said more buyers are purchasing goods online and through the larger Currys stores. It is reported that the number of customers using the group's smaller mobile phone shops slid by 16%.

SO CALLED 'security roadblocks' will hold up the burgeoning public cloud infrastructure market, claims research by Barracuda. Public cloud is set to grow at three times the rate of the overall IT services market but 70% of those surveyed said they are heavily or partly restricting public cloud adoption due to security concerns.

COMPUTACENTER notched up £5bn-plus revenues for the full year 2019, with sales growing 16.1% to £5.05bn. Technology Sourcing (resale) revenue grew 20.3% while the services operation rose 4.7%. CEO Mike Norris said: "Customers will continue to invest in product, particularly in the areas of security, networking and cloud, but it may be difficult to achieve the same growth rates we have seen in recent years."

TIG shops again for MSP firm

TIG has acquired MMRIT, a London-based MSP operating in the financial services and legal sectors.

The financial details of the transaction were not disclosed and the deal is the second for Watford-based TIG since receiving a £6m investment boost from BGF in July 2018.

In January 2019 TIG acquired London-based financial services IT consultancy netConsult for an undisclosed sum.

This latest deal gives TIG a stronger presence in the London alternative financial services market sector and adds capabilities and scale in other sectors such as professional services, logistics and retail.

The enlarged business has over 150 employees, of which over 75% are technical.

TIG CEO Des Lekerman said: "It's a great time to have the capability and expertise to provide these services as the need and appetite for digital transformation and for data insights has never been greater."



Des Lekerman

Gamma spurred by indirect profit hike

GAMMA'S results for the year ended 31st December 2019 point to significant growth in the UK indirect business which generated a 22% hike in gross profit to £119.1m, up from £97.5m in 2018.

The UK direct operation saw profit up 16% from £32.8m in 2018 to £38.2m last year.

Overall gross margin was up to 51% compared to 46% the previous year on total 2019 revenues of £328.9m (£284.9m in 2018, up 15%).

SIP trunk deployments increased 19% last year while the number of Horizon cloud PBX users increased from 435,000 to 522,000 (up 20%), with the main growth area being Gamma's target SME segment.

The company's UC upgrade to Horizon, called Collaborate and launched in March 2019, now has over 9,000 users.

Broadband sales rose 18% and Ethernet connections were up 66%. Mobile connections increased from 50,000 to 62,000 (up 24%).

Gamma also noted that it is gearing up to launch an integrated cloud contact centre solution in late 2020 enabled by the acquisition of Telsis which bolted on development capabilities.



Andrew Taylor

In February this year Gamma also boosted its UCaaS strategy with the acquisition of Exactive, an expert in Microsoft Teams.

CEO Andrew Taylor stated: "Despite an increasingly competitive market our product performance was positive and during the period we contin-

ued to strengthen our market capabilities through the development and launch of new products and services.

"Our Dutch business continues to build market share and we will shortly be operating in Spain following the acquisition of Voz Telecom." See p44

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Sector stands tax relief cut



Paul Davies

THE Chancellor's slashing of entrepreneurs' relief to £1m over a lifetime, announced as part of the Budget on March 11th, will have little if any detrimental impact on business valuations in the ICT channel, according to Paul Davies, M&A Adviser at Evolution Capital.

"We do not feel that there will be a material impact on business valuations at the point of sale," he said.

"M&A activity in the TMT sector is buoyant and we have a number of buyers who continue to be interested in acquiring high quality businesses with strong recurring revenues. Such businesses are still in short supply and remain attractive to potential purchasers."



Paul Billingham

Knight Corporate Finance Director Paul Billingham agrees that the strength of the ICT sector's M&A market will counter-balance the Chancellor's reduction of entrepreneurs' relief.

"While it was predicted, it is nonetheless disappointing to see the significant changes to entrepreneurs' relief," he stated.

"However, with a large range of trade buyers and private equity investors in the sector, competition for well run ICT resellers has never been stronger. So while there may be more tax to pay for business owners, this can be offset by higher business valuations."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

M247's just launched cloud infrastructure, called 247Cloud, delivers public, private and hybrid cloud services and is supported by software partnerships with tech providers such as Cisco, Nutanix, VMware, Cohesity and Zerto. Strong demand for cloud services supports estimates by Forbes that by 2021 83% of enterprise workloads will be in the cloud.

NFON UK has signed a partnership with reseller ASL which has over 6,000 customers on its books. ASL is best known for its expertise in print and IT services and has now added NFON's cloud telephone system Cloudya to its portfolio.

AVONLINE Networks has bagged its biggest deal, a £25m contract with Virgin Media which it has partnered with for over 25 years. Avonline is part of M Group Services and provides telecom network build and installation services. The five year contract has an estimated value of £25m per annum and includes an option to extend by another two years.

ECI-backed IT Lab pockets Microsoft partner Sol-Tec

MICROSOFT Azure partner Sol-Tec has been acquired by ECI-backed IT Lab, catapulting the MSP closer to its £100m revenue target.

The financials of the transaction have not been disclosed but IT Lab's revenues stand at circa £85m including the purchase.

The deal adds expertise in the design, deployment and configuration of Azure environments, and follows IT Lab's summer acquisition of Milton Keynes-based MSP Mirus IT which at the time created a £75m business and built on the purchases of Content and



Peter Sweetbaum

Code in September 2018 and Perspective Risk in May 2017.

IT Lab CEO Peter Sweetbaum said: "The ability to deliver functionality that Microsoft cloud centric services can pro-

vide, particularly at this pivotal and challenging time is key."

Sol-Tec has completed projects for the DWP, HMRC and Department for Education, as well as other public and private sector organisations.

Sol-Tec founder Nik Topham will focus on the firm's commercial growth and integration of the two businesses, while working with Tim Wallis, IT Lab Group Chief Digital Officer to build on the group's relationship with Microsoft.

PE firm ECI Partners acquired a majority stake in IT Lab in 2016.



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NEWS ROUNDUP

ELITE Group founder Matt Newing has thrown his weight behind electronic signature service provider E-Sign with a £400k investment. E-Sign is used in a number of industries and competes with rivals such as DocuSign and Adobe. "E-Sign is looking to shake up the market," said Newing. "I am keen to support technology that will open the industry and make it more competitive for other organisations."

RESELLERS should prioritise the speedy delivery of more agile ways of working according to Beyond Head of Sales Graham Wilkinson, who says ICT providers could transform how customers work in just 24 hours via the rapid deployment of connectivity solutions. "Mobile connectivity can be set up in 24 hours and on the fibre side it's a quick turnaround too," he commented.

NATILIK has extended its relationship with house builder Barratt Developments following a five year network contract based on Cisco's SD-WAN technology. The agreement covers 37 sites across the country deployed on an Ethernet network provided by Exponential-e, Natilik's connectivity partner.

NFON's seat sales up 40%



Hans Szymanski

UNCERTAIN times and a software development skills shortage have prompted German hosted comms provider NFON to revise downwards its growth expectations this year despite indicating strong preliminary figures for financial year 2019.

In a business update it reported that revenues increased 32.7% to 57.1m euros with recurring revenues up by 38.9%, now accounting for over 84% of total revenues.

The number of seats expanded by 40.2% to circa 450,000.

The firm attributed growth to the expansion of its UCaaS product portfolio, internationalisation and M&A activities.

CEO and CFO Hans Szymanski commented: "In view of

the general shortage of resources on the labour market in the area of software development and, in particular, the macro-economic development in 2019 throughout Europe, we saw a need to adjust our plans for the development of the newly acquired seats and non-recurring revenues during the year. We have therefore adjusted our key performance indicators."

NFON AG forecasts growth of between 20% and 24% for the full year 2020, and for recurring revenues it expects to register a growth rate of between 22% and 26% for 2020 compared to the previous year.

These projections do not take into account the impact of potential acquisitions.

Gamma's big push in UCaaS

GAMMA'S acquisition of Microsoft specialist Exactive boosts its Teams expertise, expands its play in the UCaaS space and builds on the November 2019 purchase of Telsis.

Exactive is a Microsoft Teams Voice Partner and previously worked with Gamma on projects for the London Stock Exchange Group and the Guinness Partnership.

Gamma already integrates its SIP trunking service with Microsoft Teams and the direct routing capability offers integration with no need for additional on-premise equipment, licensing or a site visit.

Gamma CEO Andrew Taylor said: "UCaaS is an evolving and rapidly growing market that we plan to be at the heart of across all customer environments.

"Exactive helps us address a part of the market that is already embedded in a Microsoft ecosystem, and this will be an essential part of our UCaaS strategy in the years ahead."

Exactive CEO Scott Millar added: "The acquisition is a key milestone in the convergence of our marketplace as Microsoft continues to become a significant player in the voice and collaboration market."

NEWS ROUNDUP

THE acquisition of Panda Security by WatchGuard Technologies creates a new force in the centralised management of threat detection and response functionality, driven by AI, behaviour profiling and security event correlation.

"Businesses today face a more sophisticated and evolving threat landscape, scarcity of trained security professionals and an increasingly porous perimeter," said Prakash Panjwani, CEO of WatchGuard. "As a result, network security, advanced endpoint protection, multi-factor authentication, secure networking and threat detection and response capabilities are ranked as top security investment areas."

AVAYA'S cloud meeting and team collaboration app, called Spaces (and consumed via a subscription-based model) is now available in over 60 countries including the UK following its launch to channel partners early last month. "The expectations of employees and customers and how they want to engage is driving the shift towards a blended communications model of interactions across a variety of channels, devices and touchpoints," commented Karen Hardy, Vice President of Product Marketing, Avaya.

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SOGEA open for business

THE commercial availability of SOGEA (Single Order Generic Ethernet Access), a new wholesale service rolled out by Openreach, means that CPs can sell standalone broadband lines without a traditional landline attached, with VoIP services available as an optional extra.

Openreach hopes that the launch will 'mark the beginning of the end for the analogue telephone network'.

The 2025 turn-off date already means that the industry is required to switch circa 50k lines a week, every week, between now and the deadline, which Openreach says is a 'mammoth task'.

But it claims that the launch of SOGEA on March 3rd was a big step towards switching some 15 million homes and businesses across the UK from traditional analogue voice services to an all IP network.

"It is hoped this commercial launch will give the communications industry confidence to accelerate the migration to IP services in earnest," said James Lilley, Openreach's Head of Copper & Service Products.

"It's not only voice, there is an array of other services that use analogue signals, everything

from security alarms to bus stops, cash machines, elevators, traffic lights and even sluice gates in rivers and canals."

The extent of the task is also reflected in the high number of PSTN-only point of sale machines, of which there are circa 500,000. And there is up to one million PSTN-based telehealth devices in the UK.

SOGEA will be made available across Openreach's existing FTTC footprint covering 27.7 million premises. It is running two testbed trials – in Salisbury and Mildenhall – enabling CPs and special service providers to test new products and work out how best to migrate people.

The term SOGEA relates to FTTC/VDSL2 based broadband services and will be available in the same geographic areas as FTTC offering a similar service to GEA-FTTC. There is also the SOGEA-based SOGFast service, or G.fast version, expected in May this year; while the variant for ADSL2+ lines is known as SOADSL.

A Single Order Transitional Access Product (SOTAP) pipelined for September 2021 will be targeted at areas where Openreach fibre is not available.

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Sabio advances CX play with acquisition

HORIZON Capital-backed Sabio's capabilities in the sphere of customer experience automation received a boost following its acquisition of London HQ'd consultancy DVELP, maker of the Airline product.

Airline integrates Google CCAI and Twilio APIs and helps organisations to build, test and deploy automated conversational customer experiences.

"The AI-based technology helps customers reach resolution more quickly and enables agents to focus on more complex tasks," stated Sabio Group's CEO Jonathan Gale.

"CX focused organisations have more technology choice than ever before; and the contact centre and CRM spaces are rapidly evolving through the adoption of emerging technologies such as Google's Contact Center AI and Twilio Flex."

DVELP founder and CEO Tom Mullen added: "The CX industry is on the precipice of a customer service revolution."

"Being part of the Sabio Group will allow us to reach more clients and guide them through their customer experience transformation."

DVELP is a long-standing Twilio services partner credited



Jonathan Gale

with advancing its UK growth and contact centre business.

Twilio Chief Customer Officer Glenn Weinstein com-

mented on the deal: "This acquisition underscores the Twilio partner momentum in the contact centre market."



HATS off to Portsmouth-based M12 Solutions for picking up the Training Programme of the Year gong at a local Business Excellence Awards event. M12 claims to have achieved among the best retention figures in the market, with employees that have been with the company since its inception in 2003. Marketing Manager Ruth Seals said: "We place great emphasis on training, empowering and motivating our staff. On average our employees have been with us for eight years, which is a great achievement, especially in this industry." Pictured: Inside Sales Manager Sarah Mulley and Ruth Seals.

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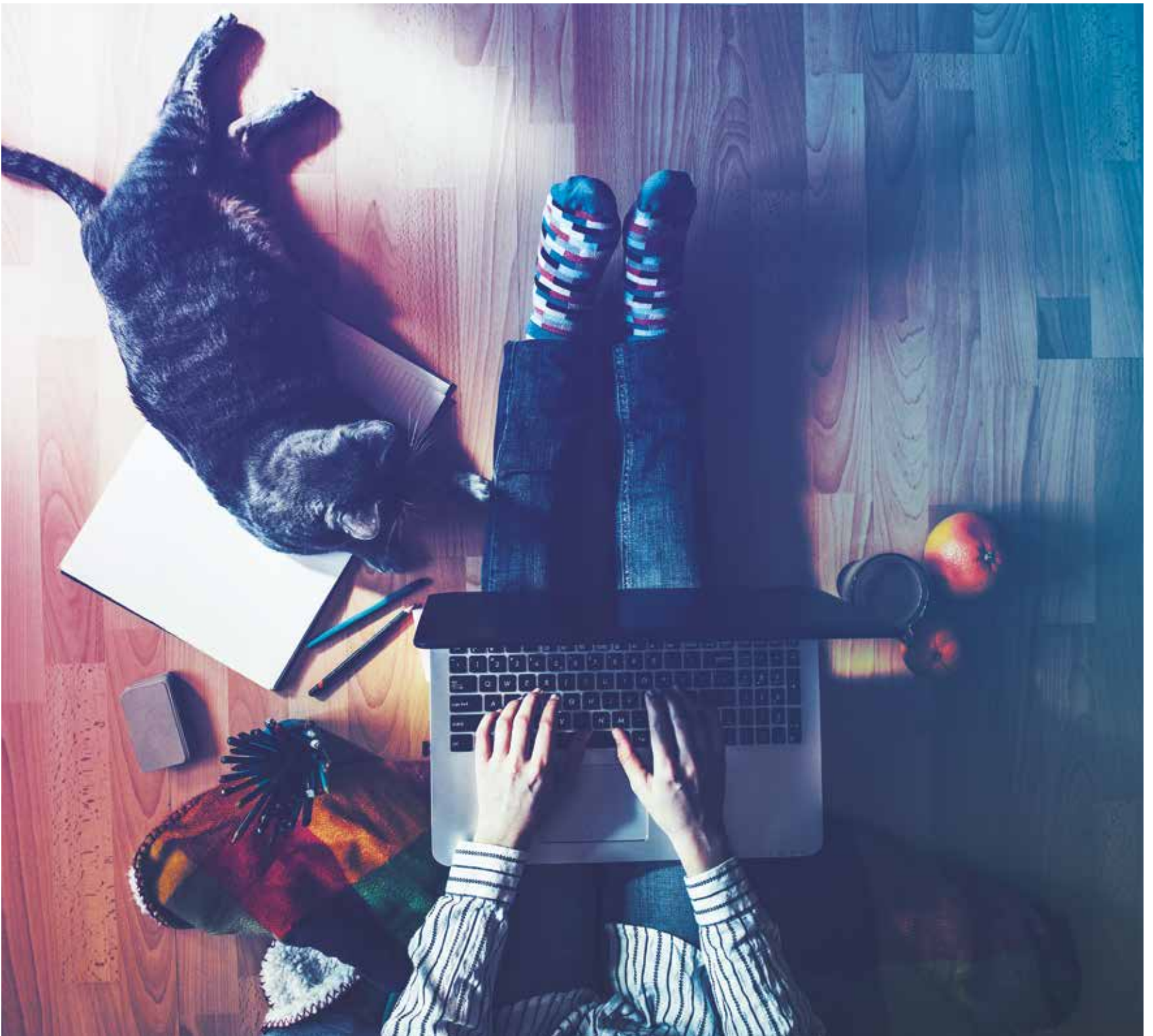
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Excalibur awarded biz gong

A STAFF welfare scheme devised by Excalibur scooped a gong at this year's Federation of Small Business 'Celebrating Small Business Awards 2020' for the South West region.

Excalibur pocketed the Wellbeing Award for initiatives such as subsidised weekly yoga and five-a-side football, free fruit, voluntary team charity fundraising challenges, financial health and mental health workshops, opportunities to celebrate events and time management/systems training.

The schemes kicked off in 2018 following consultation with employees.

"As awareness of wellness and managing positive mental health has grown over the past few years we took the decision to review workplace practices and further support employees professionally and personally," said CEO, Peter Boucher.

"Our programme has given us all a greater understanding of each others' perspectives and improved communications across teams. The impact on the business has been positive, with our annual 'wellbeing' score rising by 15% since last year, and employee retention rates going up by over 50%."

Levelling up key to fibre

RESPONDING to the Chancellor's Budget announcement of a £5bn boost to rural broadband TalkTalk Chief Exec' Tristia Harrison urged Government to ensure it creates the market conditions that will help ensure its fibre ambitions are met.

"Investment in levelling up and Britain's full fibre future is vital, so the Budget measures are welcome, particularly getting to harder to reach areas that have been left behind for too long," stated Harrison.

"But for Government to reach its full fibre roll out target three things are vital: The consumer – so prices are fair; competition – so the £5bn rural subsidy doesn't end in one company's hands; and co-operation within industry to deliver for the whole country."

Chair of the Internet Services Providers' Association Andrew Glover also believes that increased funding alone will not be enough for the industry to get the job done.

"Broadband roll out is largely privately funded and to provide industry with a chance to meet the Government's 2025 ambition the announcement needs to be backed up with further reform on wayleaves,



Tristia Harrison

new build legislation, action on street works and further investment into digital and engineering skills," he said.

"The broadband industry is ready to get the job done but needs full support from Government to do so."

Gigaclear founder Matthew Hare added: "Delivering full fibre for all means building full fibre past four million properties per year every year from 2020 to 2025. That's 16,000 properties getting access to full fibre every working day.

"To achieve this we need to amend or suspend regulations and bylaws that are designed to provide checks and balances to new infrastructure build, and as a result slow down and increase the cost of that build. In parallel we must remove any barrier that delays or prevents consumers switching to full fibre at pace."

Pebble IT snared by Optimity

FPE Capital backed Optimity has acquired Pebble IT, boosting its influence in the London region managed services arena.

Pebble IT specialises in infrastructure, cloud, security, compliance and consulting services, and its technology partners include Google, Microsoft, Cisco and Sophos. The company has grown revenues by 94% over the last five years.

Pebble IT's MD David Osen joins Optimity as Chief Information Officer.

London-based Optimity was backed by FPE Capital in 2016.

FPE Capital Managing Partner David Barbour said: "This acquisition will strengthen Optimity's growth in the provision of managed services to central London businesses."

Commenting on the deal Optimity CEO Leeland Pavey stated: "Optimity's position in London is well established.

"The business has been successful in providing alternative connectivity solutions, coupled with the ability to modernise campus and office IT infrastructure environments.

"With Pebble IT's support we will be better positioned to deliver next generation, integrated IT technologies."

Simwood launches platform

SIMWOOD'S new wholesale and hosted PBX proposition enables partners to create white labelled bundles with their own numbers and all calls routed over the firm's network.

Simwood added a scalable multi-branded hosted PBX platform to its portfolio in October last year with the acquisition of Sipcentric, a long-standing partner that delivered Platform-as-a-Service hosted PBX to channel partners.

Simwood Wholesale supports this proposition with core minutes and numbering services, which are used by 250-plus ITSPs globally.

"Many operate their own hosted PBX platform or license technology from others while Simwood Wholesale underpins them by hosting number ranges, providing number portability as well as carrying calls in and out at a wholesale price point," said Simwood founder and CEO Simon Woodhead.



Simon Woodhead



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Furloughing eased by staff pay pledge

RESELLERS facing bad debts as the coronavirus crisis bites harder have praised the Government's pledge to support businesses and pay 80% of wages to furloughed staff.

"I welcome the Government's response," commented Incom-CNS CEO Jason Kilvert.

"The decision to pay 80% and give us the ability to furlough people as and when required was outstanding because it alleviated the pressure.

"I had to furlough two lads who have worked for us at the Manchester Royal Infirmary all their lives because the Trust

couldn't allow them on site. They now know they haven't been made redundant and as soon as things improve, they'll be back."

Best4Business MD Freddie Hawker furloughed 12 of his staff as soon as customers began to request a cessation of charges for telecoms equipment.

"They have been asked to go home on a temporary basis until we know more about what's going on," he commented.

"The difficult thing is making the decision whether to bankroll your staff to do nothing or accept the help offered by the

Government. Usually I'm the type of person to say, nope, I'll stand on my own two feet. But with things as they are, we are going to claim the money. It's the right thing to do."

Salisbury-based Berry Telecom started the furloughing process as soon as the Government's wage plan was announced and has reduced staff from 92 to 33.

"We have a battle plan to go down to 20 if needs be," said co-owner Paul Hallam.

"But we are staying positive. All of the directors have taken 50% pay cuts and the banks are willing to support us because of our assets."

Focus Group founder and joint MD Ralph Gilbert was surprised how many direct debits from customers had not been cancelled at the time of writing, and had only furloughed 40 of the company's 350 staff.

He also urged company owners not to abuse the scheme.

"I am surprised how many customers are coping including the many hotels we look after," added Gilbert.

"I hope people won't furlough and then claim for those that are still working. That would spoil it for everyone."

Intec nets sixth bolt on scoop

INTEC Business Solutions has augmented its group of companies with the bolt-on acquisition of iTek Computer Solutions.

Kendal-based iTek will continue to trade under its own brand and will be led by current MD Ben Mitchinson.

inTec's acquisition model sees it acquire a controlling interest, but the identity and management team of acquired firms always remain the same.

iTek Computer Solutions is the sixth such transaction and follows the purchases of Hale Communications, Vision Corporate Services, Cheshire Business Services, CFM Hub and Titan Networks.

inTec Chairman Simon Howitt said: "We give companies the ability to offer technology solutions and consulting without having to invest their time and resources into building the skill sets in house."

Mitchinson said: "This deal allows us to expand our product and service offering, enabling iTek to develop and move to the next level with the aim of becoming an all-encompassing ICT solutions provider."

Got a news story? email: sgilroy@bpl-business.com

NEWS ROUNDUP

AN UPGRADE to Oak's Clarify call recording solution enables IP Office users to record, store and index conversations by username, whether calls are made or received internally or externally. Oak says users of its RecordX product will be able to migrate their voice data to Clarify and access their legacy recordings.

A COLLABORATION tool brought out by Mitel integrates video, chat and voice features into the MiCollab application suite. Called MiTeam Meetings, the tool is built on AWS global cloud infrastructure and uses Mitel's CloudLink architecture. This collaboration functionality will be extended to other aspects of Mitel's portfolio in the coming months.

XEROX'S SMB market expansion campaign has advanced with the acquisitions of Altodigital and ITEC Connect, adding to the purchase of Arena Group in January. Xavier Heiss, EVP and President of EMEA Operations, Xerox, commented: "Altodigital and ITEC are specialists in managed print services and IT services, an area into which Xerox is rapidly expanding with new offerings."



SUSSEX-based Focus Group has been delivering free meals to front line NHS staff and local residents who are elderly or living in isolation, all prepared in The Hut, the firm's in-house canteen. Stuart MacGarvie, Chef and Manager at The Hut, and his team have been preparing freshly cooked healthy meals for Worthing Hospital medical staff and Shoreham locals. Chris Goodman, joint MD, said: "There was no question about pooling our resources and doing our bit. We hope to go some way to making a difference during these difficult times." Pictured: Tim Loughton, Conservative Member of Parliament for East Worthing and Shoreham, helping to distribute the Focus meals.



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New industry body for people in billing

BILLING firm Union Street has launched a new membership body aimed at inspiring and educating people who work with billing systems.

The company hopes the Billing People organisation will champion billing professionals in the channel, who it believes are often siloed with limited or non-existent contact with industry colleagues.

“Many other professions, from lawyers to marketers, enjoy thriving communities thanks to the support of industry bodies and trade associations, so why shouldn’t billing?” said Vincent Disneur, Head of Channel.

“Despite the importance of their work, the efforts of billing people often go unrecognised and uncelebrated.

“Billing People will seek to highlight the vital role they play in channel businesses and enable them to collaborate, share ideas and develop professional skills.

“There’s been many times over the past few years, what with all the disruptive changes to technology and regulation, when billing professionals could have made good use of the sounding board a user community provides. It’s our hope that Billing People will



Vincent Disneur

come to be a valuable resource for those that may need to overcome such challenges in the future.”

At the core of the Billing People programme will be a free to attend annual conference, scheduled to take place at the ME Hotel, The Strand, London on July 16th.

“The aim is to bring together billing professionals from across the ICT channel, providing a fun and friendly environment to network, share ideas, and be inspired,” continued Disneur.

“The event will also feature a programme of content to help delegates to enhance their billing strategies, with workshops on topics such as revenue assurance and compliance.”

The event will culminate with the National Billing People Awards, recognising billing professionals that have excelled in their roles over the last year.

Disneur hopes the community will ultimately develop into a platform for personal development and quality recruitment within the channel’s billing segment.

“Any business owner will tell you that acquiring and developing good people is one of their top three challenges,” said Disneur.

“Billing People will promote best practice and educate its members, enhancing the skills of personnel in this critical area of operations. Best of all, it’s completely free to join.”

IT kit sales rocket on virus alert

IN HIS first live coronavirus address to the nation on March 16th the Prime Minister urged people to work from home, avoid non-essential travel and engage in ‘social distancing’.

Far stricter measures followed and as Britain locked down certain IT product sales hit an upward trend with UK consumers doubling the number of monitors bought during the week ending 14th March, according to research firm GfK.

It says the sales spurt represented a 133.9% hike in volume and 132.3% rise in value.

Sales of keyboards also jumped during that same week, registering year-on-year growth of 68.8% in value. Pointing devices such as track balls, stylus pens and mice also rose.

Comms devices leaped 29.4% in value year-on-year in the same week, driven by sales of routers, repeaters, port replicators and docking stations.

Kelly Whitwick, UK Retail Lead for Market Insights at GfK, said: “Following the Government instruction to stay at home and avoid crowded places, IT manufacturers and retailers witnessed a sales uplift as home-bound workers rushed to invest in IT equipment.”

NEWS ROUNDUP

NETWORK aggregator FluidOne has added 8x8’s cloud UC and contact centre solution to its Platform One national fibre network, which interconnects cloud, data centre, mobile, broadband and fixed line services. The 8x8 solution will also integrate with Microsoft Teams. “The partnership with 8x8 routes customer calls via a resilient design, not over the Internet, and provides end-to-end QoS,” stated FluidOne CEO Russell Horton. Other recent additions to Platform One include hybrid SD-WAN, Layer 2 mobile connectivity, new SIP functionality and managed services.

M247’s UC strategy has advanced with the integration of Microsoft Teams. The firm has also added call transcription, sentiment analysis and automated notifications following a link up with Dubber, the cloud-based call recording and voice AI specialist. “With Microsoft Teams most customers require an enterprise standard telephony solution to realise its full potential as a business application,” said Matt Clegg, Voice Solutions Architect at M247. “Working with Dubber we bring compliant cloud call recording capabilities and voice AI technologies to our solution.”



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Digital outbreak ahead

What did we learn so far from the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the comms channel? That cloud strategies must be fleshed out, the recurring revenue model will ultimately hold sway, the future of the on-site PBX could hang in the balance, and that the shift to digital will happen far quicker than previously expected – with businesses given a ‘kick up the proverbial’.

Whether the on-site PBX market will nosedive, temporarily at best, into a tailspin has long been a moot question. But the issue is now more pressing than ever, as selling, installing and connecting PBXs will be nigh on impossible for the foreseeable future, and organisations are far more likely to seek a cloud-based DR and VoIP solution following their jolt into home working, and will want to be geared up for similar scenarios in the future. “Covid-19 could well be the final nail in the PBX coffin,” stated Dean Burgin, Partner at Boxx. “It’s certainly going to change things. We all need to have agility in our product mix. Being reliant on one service assumes there’s a one size fits all approach to comms. That’s not realistic.”

That the coronavirus could truly redefine the channel landscape is a given, believes Burgin. “If MS Teams Phone System had a better, more established offering, we could have seen a seismic shift even away from many cloud comms providers,” he added. “That is because this situation doesn’t just play into the hands of CSPs, but also IT MSPs.”

There’s no doubt that sales of on-premise solutions will

drop during this period of remote working, believes Chris Morrisey, Managing Director at Lily. “But I don’t think demand for CPE will completely dry up,” he added. “It will take more than this to fundamentally shake the system. Most businesses recognise cloud as a future strategy, but are not in a position to consider a replacement yet due to their investment in CPE.”

“However, the pandemic has reinforced the need for business owners to review what they could be doing differently, and have a strategy that is future proofed. What coronavirus has done is bring to the fore that remote working and accessibility to systems needs to be seamless and provide flexibility in working – underlined by the importance of good connectivity to support this.”

Pragma Managing Director Tim Brooks expects to see a higher uptake of cloud services over the coming months, but noted that IP-based PBX systems offer the same flexibility and UC functionality for home working as cloud systems. “A number of our resellers are developing remote installation services where a customer can install a pre-configured system themselves,” he stated.



Julien Parven

Parven, Marketing Director at Daisy Communications. “The industry is working hard to overcome these challenges and continue supplying the nation,” he added. “It’s a challenging time for all businesses but we’re trying our best to stick together, help customers and keep everyone connected and productive.”

I doubt we’ll ever fully go back to the world we knew before

“This should help if site visits are not possible.”

Cloud transition

Brooks has observed a steady transition from CPE to cloud in recent years. “It’s possible that the travel restrictions could accelerate that trend,” he said. “Businesses that did not act fast enough to deploy a cloud or IP-based system to support home working will do so as soon as possible afterwards, providing a potential lifeline to the comms channel as we endeavour to get back to normal.”

According to Brooks, the conversation is also about upfront versus recurring revenue, and this generally comes back to leasing. “How finance companies fair in the crisis will be key,” he added. “If leasing

becomes less accessible it will impact many resellers, regardless of whether they sell cloud or PBX, as they will be using leasing to generate up front revenue.

“If finance providers pull back, then we would expect to see a stronger shift towards cloud with resellers needing to reset their cost base and finance models to cope without a reliance on one-time revenues, towards a higher degree of recurring revenue. While this will be tough for many, those able to make the shift should emerge as stronger businesses.”

It’s also important to note that the coronavirus will have a big impact on stock levels as the globe tackles the crisis which, in turn, will impact the supply chain, observed Julien

It’s an effort that could ultimately come to define a new way of working, noted Parven. “I strongly believe that most of the changes we’re making and seeing within organisations and their relationships with technology will become permanent,” he added. “It’s a situation which has been forced upon the world, but in a business sense it’s probably given everyone a kick up the proverbial.”

“Some businesses were possibly guilty of sleepwalking into the digital revolution, but the coronavirus pandemic has forced the issue of going digital and it can no longer be ignored. People are realising that meetings can be done remotely via a videoconferencing tool, and that their people can be trusted to work remotely without seeing a dip in productivity. I doubt we’ll ever fully go back to the world we knew before.” ■

Report continues on page 18



Billing People.

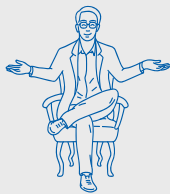
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A view on post-virus landscape

VAR epitomises channel action

Proponents of the recurring revenue model argue strongly that the chickens have come home to roost for comms resellers wedded to opex revenues. The accelerated adoption of cloud and home working tech is now a case of social change, as well as business practice and culture change. Coronavirus could truly redefine the channel landscape if CPE runs out of steam, which would play directly into the hands of cloud comms providers, strengthening further the prospects of global cloud and tech giants. A cloud rush may ensue with a massive shake up of the reseller market potentially.

What will comms look like in the post-Covid-19 world? National boundaries have become no-go zones and nations are looking inwardly. This withdrawal into introspection may have a lasting effect and could be reflected in a new localism in ICT service provider support, with a greater focus on ICT providers becoming regional hands-on champions, which could dilute the national and international ambitions of some channel players. Perhaps ICT providers will re-examine themselves with a strategic emphasis on communal and local environments.

Given the home working shift, the virus has catalysed

a reaffirmation of the role that resellers play in society as well as business. Remote working is literally the only game in town and organisations are having to use more collaboration and videoconferencing technology than ever before (that has been available for a long time now), which breaks down walls and barriers between people at home and the outside world.

Optimistic outlook

The sense of workplace has changed in many sectors but technology provides a cultural and collaborative equilibrium in these radical times that will certainly have a lasting impact, and make many organisations question their hitherto everyday practices. This all has a real plausibility now and should provide ICT resellers with a reason to be optimistic.

Against the backdrop of national boundaries being closed and nations becoming more cocooned, does this bring a new nuance to the role of comms technology as a unifier in a more, albeit temporary, isolationist world? The answer to this question will be a measure of how much the world would have changed its approach to using technology – and comms is central to it. The elevated role of communications in a post-Covid-19 world shines like a beacon at the end of the tunnel – that is certain. ■

Predicting how the coronavirus crisis will unfold is fraught with uncertainty but the pivotal role of ICT providers in helping organisations manage this unprecedented emergency is crystal clear.

As the risk of a national lockdown became more likely by the day it was vital for businesses to ensure staff were ready and able to work remotely – even if they have never considered it before. “We quickly saw a huge increase in demand from clients wanting to roll out remote working technologies including access to VPN and collaboration suites such as Microsoft Teams,” said Air IT Chief Operating Officer James Healey. “Every business is dependent on its people and access to systems, files and data. Thankfully, remote working technologies mean much of this can now be achieved from any location. However, there are several key components to enable an effective set-up including devices and connectivity, VPN and cloud services such as file sharing, storage and VoIP telephony.”

As the Government and chief scientists continue to sound an uncertain note there is no question as to the critical nature of AIR IT’s and its counterparts’ services. In response to the crisis the company, like all other ICT providers, took steps to ensure continuity and minimise disruption for



James Healey

clients. “This included the ability for each and every member of our staff to work from home should the need arise,” explained Healey. “We also carried out a remote working simulation in order to stress test our own processes and procedures.”

Impact limitation

It is imperative for the industry at large to support the business community as it adapts to new ways of working. “Ensuring our own services and support remain available to those in need is critical to minimise a wider impact on society and the economy,” stated Healey. “Long-term there are several lessons to be reinforced including the importance of business continuity planning and proactively investing in newer technology as many companies have found themselves unprepared for this current crisis.”

It is a fact, noted Healey, that until recently remote working has often been regarded as a novelty. “But the coronavirus outbreak has prompted a huge shift in thinking as businesses put contingency plans in place,” he said. “In the long run we expect to see many organisations adopting and even enhancing their remote working and wider IT capabilities as they realise the true benefits of these solutions.”

Although some businesses have previously implemented remote working, few had tested the reality of scaling the technology to a companywide level. “This may also change, or highlight existing processes that do not translate to a more dynamic environment where people are not interacting face-to-face,” added Healey.

The sudden urgency for the roll out of home working solutions demanded a targeted, measured and total response from the channel, but it also raised a key issue, observed Healey. “There will be security challenges posed as remote users log into systems from unmanaged networks with basic levels of protection more suited to home users rather than business,” he added. ■

Driving shift to digital now key **Still deals in leasing**

Last month's lockdown saw a panic rush to home working that will transform how businesses operate, says BT Wholesale Channel Director Gavin Jones, who also updates us on BT's virus response status.

When the nation entered near shut down mode businesses had no option other than to support a greater number of people working from home. "But many organisations are now in an economic environment that calls for fiscal caution and it's going to be critical that the entire sector looks for ways to enable and support the necessary shift to digital," stated Jones.



Gavin Jones

introduce special offers and free licensing across our hosted voice portfolio."

He noted that partners urgently provided solutions such as hosted voice platforms which many firms turned to for better business continuity in the current crisis. "Offerings such as this and other remote working tools will likely become a permanent part of operational normality once businesses and their staff realise the benefits of a better connected, location agnostic world," he added.

"Partners also reported a surge in demand from existing customers with established flexible working patterns requiring network capacity upgrades to support far greater volumes of remote workers. We worked fast to enable our channel partners to rapidly

Delivering new technology at pace through partners is just one challenge, observed Jones. Understanding how to implement technology correctly to make it as effective as possible is also critical. "We boosted our online help and support content so partners could make it easier for customers to quickly enable their staff to get used to a new way of working," he added.

Return to confidence

It is true that the nation has embarked on a journey into greater uncertainty, and at times like this we need clarity and direction as long-term confidence urgently needs to be restored. "It's an extremely difficult and worrying time for businesses, including our channel partners, and we

are working to find ways to support them by creating breathing space over the coming months," explained Jones. "We're exploring how to provide flexibility to temporarily change the nature of their business with us to help them better weather the storm. I'd encourage any of our partners who are concerned about their, or their customers' financial stability, because of the impact of Covid-19 to contact us to discuss their options."

Operational plans already implemented to support partners include a 24/7 split shift for support staff assisting with data, hosted voice and IPEX repairs that will be kept isolated from colleagues to minimise service impact should individuals need to self-isolate or fall ill. Jones also noted that the data provision team operates from a number of sites across the UK.

"We are taking steps to ensure our site notification services continue," he added. "This includes where customers advise that if sites are going into lockdown or closing, they provide us with advance notice so we can free our teams up to support other partners."



Mark Picken



Dan MacKrell

The indeterminate period of national lockdown has not put paid to leasing availability in the channel, as uptake of online leasing, driven by resellers able to sell remotely, can still be leveraged, confirmed Shire Leasing CEO Mark Picken.

Comms resellers have long used leasing to help expand their sales and guarantee cashflow, but an essential component of doing business this way are end user organisations investing in ICT technology. "For many finance companies it's business as usual," said Picken. "All finance companies want to continue to offer their services, but if a business isn't open it's hard to see how any lending can be done safely. A key question is how many suppliers will survive? And when will installations be made in a timely fashion again?"

According to Picken the finance sector has been rocked by an unprecedented level of uncertainty. "One aspect of this crisis is that the finance companies can't control it and they don't know how long it will last," he said. "The strength and continuity of businesses over the coming months is a challenge that both resellers and finance companies face."

Finance firms must accommodate the shift to home working and facilitate vendor finance solutions remotely, urged Dan MacKrell, National Account Manager, Shire Leasing. "Demand has risen from those businesses that can continue to work remotely and Shire is still willing to financially support them with funding solutions," he stated.

Opportunities

"The national shutdown will obviously impact new business opportunities, particularly when people need to meet to make deals happen. Yet, we are fortunate to support an industry channel that enables organisations to trade by making use of technology, while adhering to social distancing. Electronic signatory means there is no need to visit the customer or rely on the postal system to complete the transaction.

"If there is an opportunity to sign customers up with a view to arrange the installation once we return to some degree of normality, there is a solution for the channel. These are challenging times but the channel and finance companies have the products and industry knowledge to make the best of a difficult economic landscape."

Report continues on page 20

How supply chain leaders help ease the impact of co

Crucial to the comms industry's welfare – and for sectors hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic – is that the pain inflicted by lock down measures to contain the outbreak could be partly offset by supply chain leadership, with Openreach at the vanguard of a potential financial relief effort, writes Philip Carse, Analyst at Megabuyte.com.

It has been largely business as usual for the UK B2B telecoms industry through the Covid-19 crisis. Short-term fillips from supporting working from home have outweighed project delays or cancellations, though travel restrictions are impacting installs. But much tougher home confinements and the closure of all non-essential shops, hotels etc moved the crisis into a more serious phase where temporary or permanent business shutdowns in certain verticals will impact revenues and bad debts of telco service providers.

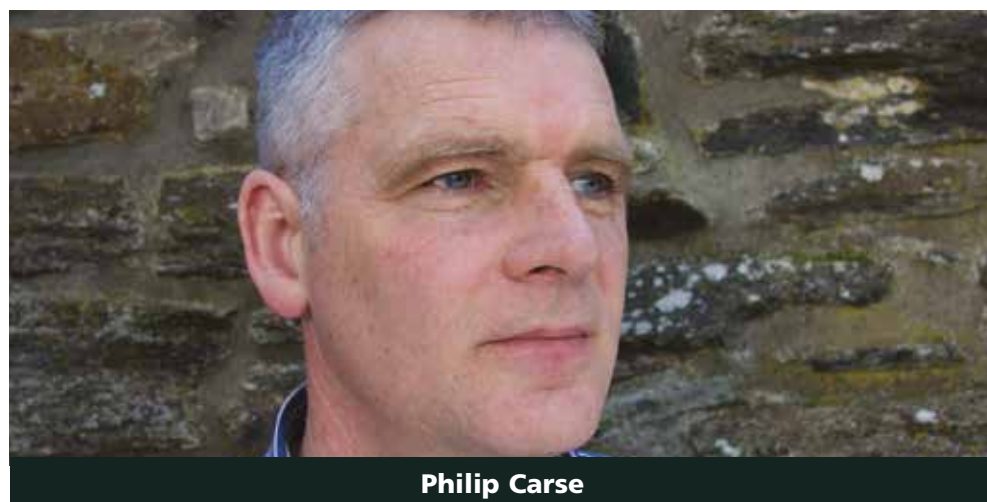
The message from those CEOs we've spoken to is loud and clear – they want to help their end customers by deferring payments for telecoms services, but this can only realistically happen if the same is done further up the supply chain, and notably by BT Openreach. If Openreach deferred all revenue payments for a quarter, that would equate to a very significant £1.3 billion cashflow impact, but if financial assistance was targeted on business customers in the hardest

hit sectors (through both BT Enterprise and third party service providers), the cashflow hit would likely be in the tens or at worst low hundreds of millions.

This would arguably be a small price to pay by BT to help keep its business customers in hard hit sectors (and would quickly be recouped if those customers survive), and one can imagine that the UK Government may also consider supporting BT, given how many hundreds of billions it is throwing at the crisis to avoid an economic calamity.

Home working boom

That said, organisations adopting a work from home strategy have been a boon for ICT service providers, triggering demand for conferencing and collaboration services, extra bandwidth, calls, firewalls, VPNs, remote access software licences, strengthened cyber services, mobile dongles, laptops, screens, headsets and cameras etc. The flipside has been delayed or cancelled projects as organisations either look to conserve cash or focus on crisis management.



Philip Carse

The simplest answer would be for BT Openreach to take the lead

A taster came from Exponential-e which in early March noted a cancelled NHS order as Trusts started to prepare for the Covid-19 crisis. Other network resellers have told us that more projects are being deferred than cancelled due to the virus, though there is of course a risk that deferred projects become cancelled. They are also seeing a small number of direct debits cancelled, although this may indicate customers wanting to have more control over cashflow than indicating likely bad debt.

As with many of their customers, our discussions with telecoms service providers suggest a desire to not overreact in the hope that restrictions are eased in the next few weeks and life can start its long road back to normal. This means undertaking sensible measures to conserve cash. For example, cancelling some discretionary spend, halting recruitment and avoiding more serious measures such as firing staff.

The working from home boon will likely continue for

a while, particularly now as all non-essential travel to work has been mandated. However, the associated closure of all non-essential shops as well as hotels etc will worsen the situation in the already beleaguered retail and hospitality sectors, which will inevitably have a knock-on impact on their telecom service providers. And yet many of these businesses will also hope to ride out the crisis and be ready to re-open when allowed. Government remedial action includes salary support for workers who would otherwise be

Partnership could weather coronavirus

laid off, while there will be pressure on landlords to defer rental payments.

This brings us back to the telecoms sector. One thing these retailers and hospitality companies (or indeed any other beleaguered sector) will need is to retain telecoms connectivity, if they hope to re-open when restrictions are lifted, and yet it represents another outgoing while no revenues are coming in. Some service providers we have spoken to would like to be in a position to defer payments by customers in these sectors to maximise their chances of weathering the crisis, but this is impractical and difficult financially without a concomitant payment deferral to their network suppliers to help with at least half of the cost (given typical gross margins of circa 50 per cent), and ideally more.

In practice, even if service providers are buying wholesale connectivity products from the likes of Gamma, TalkTalk, Virtual1, BT Wholesale and SSE Telecoms, the majority of network cost of sales ultimately flows back to BT Openreach and, to a much lesser degree, Virgin Media. The simplest answer would therefore be for BT Openreach to take the lead.

Let's put some numbers around this. BT Openreach generates annual revenues, EBITDA and capex of around £5.1 billion, £2.9 billion and £2 billion respectively, or 22 per cent, 37 per cent and 54 per cent of BT Group, with the much higher EBITDA and capex

contribution reflecting the fact that it runs BT's capital intensive local network. Its implied FCF of around £0.9 billion compares with £1.9 to 2.1 billion guidance for BT Group, so just under half the total. Openreach is in a strong position to facilitate the aforementioned £1.3 billion cashflow impact.

Social mindsets

There are already examples of social thinking by telcos over and above measures such as upgraded speeds/data allowances, payment holidays for consumers. Take Australian incumbent Telstra which halted its ongoing restructuring and redundancy programme for six months; recruited 1,000 call centre staff; brought forward £250 million in capex from the next financial year to increase network capacity and accelerate 5G deployments; suspended late payment fees and disconnections until at least the end of April; and extended sponsorships due to expire within the next 12 months. It is also paying its planned dividend. The measures mean that its fiscal 2020 outlook is now towards the bottom end of guidance for EBITDA and the top end of capex guidance.

In an ideal world, other major providers of core UK telecoms infrastructure as well as Openreach (Vodafone, Virgin Media, O2 and 3UK) would also participate in supply chain leadership. It is worth noting that there is probably very low incremental cost to BT Openreach of keeping circuits live, if they are being largely unused. ■

Virus points up drivers of value in the channel

The coronavirus has exposed all that is vital to businesses, and chief among these crucialities is an effective DR strategy for end users and a recurring revenue model for ICT providers.

If anyone was in any doubt that a server or PBX in an office cupboard was not a sustainable way to run their business comms and IT, they won't be now, according to Adam Zoldan, Director at Knight Corporate Finance. "When we exit this crisis it will have changed the way we look at many aspects of our life and business, and disaster planning and remote working will feature heavily in this," he stated. "It's a good reason for the channel to be optimistic in their outlook."

Zoldan urged resellers to grasp the gaps in cloud uptake that are being revealed by coronavirus, because the outbreak proves beyond doubt that recurring revenue models are a fundamental driver of value in the channel. "For those companies with a high level of recurring revenue we do not expect to see business failures," he added. "When we look back to the financial crisis in 2008 the notable failures were those with a heavy reliance on equipment sales and leasing. This could well be replicated."



Adam Zoldan and Paul Billingham

Shifts in ICT spending between traditional comms and cloud solutions are now both urgent and sensible. It's a priority that has also been underlined by ongoing interest in M&A in the sector, despite the crisis, noted Paul Billingham, Director at Knight Corporate Finance, who also pointed to the value buyers place on recurring revenues.

Positive outlook

"Most of the deals we are working on are still progressing and we are receiving calls from new buyers and investors in the sector, suggesting that there is much to be positive about long-term," he said. "There is bound to be a reduction in transactions during the

short-term, but as long as the sector continues to receive support from private equity and debt providers we do not expect transaction volumes to reduce over the medium-term."

Furthermore, Billingham believes that the coronavirus crisis has highlighted just how vital a role the ICT sector plays in the economy. "Businesses are seeing a new way of working, and ICT is ever more key to economic success," he said. "The increasing importance of ICT providers should also be reflected in valuations longer-term, which can only be positive for business owners in the sector." ■

Report continues on page 22

Home working goes viral

VanillaIP Sales & Marketing Director Iain Sinnott discusses the unprecedented coronavirus crisis and how the channel can help organisations fight back with cloud-based weapons of choice.

There is no easy way to deal with the pressure heaved onto private and public sector organisations triggered by the coronavirus, and the channel is facing a period of unprecedented demand for contingency planning and emergency aid in advance of more critical times, as the need for remote working goes viral. But according to Sinnott the channel has long been geared up for such a disruption – a crisis which has also exposed the comms sector as sitting on its hands rather than getting on with the job of driving cloud adoption. “As an industry we might ask ourselves why, at a time when we can truly soften the impact of a crisis, only 25 per cent of customers have moved to true cloud solutions, leaving so many good traditional businesses scrabbling for an answer,” he stated.

Last month it soon became clear that the UK might need to lock down, and that any stiff resistance to remote working would crumble. In many ways the war against the coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented challenge and points to uncharted territory, but weapons of choice quickly emerged. “Call control is the key as any DDI line can be turned into a work device, home phone or mobile,” added Sinnott. “Naturally, soft phones, collaboration tools and extension SIMs increase the



Iain Sinnott

The ability to work seamlessly from home is only a revolution to those who have been kept in the dark for the last eight years

productive performance of staff working from home, but user training may be the time consuming element as we ask legacy service users to suddenly understand cloud service tools. Workers will need to help each other out. In theory, businesses are more threatened by having critical levels of staff actually ill or just involved in full-time childcare and unable to work even with the support of technology.”

In response to the coronavirus crisis VanillaIP began communicating guidance to its customer base at the beginning of March, and produced self help guides designed to ease the ordering and deployment of extra tools to make standard extensions geographically flexible. “We are also seeing

resellers make a good number of soft phone sales and expect most customers to enable all the staff they need relatively simply,” explained Sinnott. “We will use non-IP solutions to help those people who fall foul of bad home router issues or too many kids on the X-Box.”

Digital acceleration

VanillaIP has been ‘waving the red flag on DR’ for a number of years and encourages businesses to make geographic flexibility business as usual. “For some organisations a rapid conversion will be easy, but for others the lack of time to assimilate workers to new technology will be a problem,” noted Sinnott.

The shift from an analogue world to a digital one is likely

to speed up, in terms of infrastructure build as well as OTT services, catalysed by the more high profile role of technology in combating and managing the effects of the pandemic for firms, believes Sinnott. “The coronavirus will shock businesses into reflecting on a challenge they should have been ready for,” he said. “PBX players need to be quick to select a technology partner to manage the customer driven focus on cloud services.”

It is an understatement to say that the coronavirus pandemic is making organisations question their everyday working operations. So much so that what is intended as a sticking plaster solution to get us through the immediate crisis could become permanent practice.

“The Government has talked about creating ‘herd immunity’ through enough people catching the virus this time around,” said Sinnott. “But UK business needs to see a big enough switch to cloud flexibility if the economy is to be equally protected next year. We, the cloud providers, and Government need to ensure that lessons are learned and actions taken after this crisis, and I fear that the collapse of some well established SMBs will serve as the justification for a permanent change from old school telephony.”

The coronavirus outbreak also proves the theory that crises can often double up as opportunities in disguise. “Apathy and an ignorance of the products and benefits of UC have held back the conversion of 75 per cent of the business market, so I think this pandemic is an ‘unfortunate’ opportunity for cloud resellers,” commented Sinnott. “It could however prove to be fatal to some traditional solution providers who may see a backlash from customers who suddenly discover that fully flexible and highly productive solutions have been available for many years.

“The ability to work seamlessly from home is only a revolution to those who have been kept in the dark for the last eight years. I would be angry if my provider had failed to insulate me from these challenges.” ■

Teams players lining up

What emerges in the comms market from coronavirus could be on a par with the 2025 switch to all-IP, as swathes of the nation's workforce experience the productivity benefits of home working for the first time, many using collaboration platforms such as the ever popular tool Microsoft Teams, which all agree is having an impact on the UCaaS space.

Microsoft has taken a strategic decision to drive its UC proposition and Teams enablement through Direct Routing and a programme to support partners, which all adds up to a business opportunity for the channel, believes Paul Wakefield, SIP Trunking Product Manager at Gamma. "Microsoft recognises the role of the telco, delivery partnerships and customer choice around voice services and is in effect enabling the channel to deliver voice on Teams, while securing the extended use of Teams as a complete UC platform," he stated. "Microsoft will continue to be the dominant partner in any relationship, but for the first time in at least a decade this currently feels a little more like a real opportunity."

The channel's greatest opportunities are in both enabling Microsoft services and supporting deployment through professional services, technical expertise, customer service and product differentiation. "Some might be fearful of Microsoft bypassing the channel and going directly to customers," added Wakefield. "So it's important for channel partners to ensure they understand where they can add value and how they can make



Paul Wakefield

It's in Microsoft's interests to support the channel as a critical route to market

money. It's in Microsoft's interests to support the channel as a critical route to market, particularly with the blurring of the lines between traditional IT and telecoms and enabling active users as opposed to simply selling licences. The value for the user will be to provide an end-to-end working solution that meets their business needs."

Microsoft Phone System isn't a fully fledged PBX replacement today, although the development programme is heavily resourced and catching up quickly. "This allows for opportunities for feature and service enhancements, either filling current feature

gaps or augmenting the capability with integrated services such as cloud contact centre, business analytics, PCI services or other niche capabilities," stated Wakefield.

Workplace revolution

According to Emily Fallon, Senior Channel Marketing Manager for EMEA at RingCentral, the rise of tools such as Microsoft Teams highlight demand for new ways of working and reinforce the opportunity for UCaaS. "Companies are recognising the value of including multiple channels of communication, whether that's instant messaging, voice or video chat," she said. "Combining functionality

and giving employees the tools they need in one place will open a world of new possibilities for businesses. With working practices evolving, team collaboration is a natural progression in the digital workplace."

MS Teams is a 'great product for project collaboration', agreed Ian Rowan, UK Channel Manager at Wildix, but as a UC platform it still lacks many of the basic functions businesses need and expect, he claims. "Integration is the key," he stated. "If the customer is sold on Teams then let them use it on the desktop and deploy a UCaaS platform that integrates to give them what they need. Teams is also

great for raising awareness of what is possible with a UCaaS offering. There are not many companies that have the marketing budget of Microsoft. However there are many that do UCaaS much better, so focus on the areas you can win and let MS Teams be the project collaboration platform."

That Teams is having an impact on the UCaaS space is not in doubt, agrees Richard Buxton, Head of Collaboration at Node4. "There is still a perception among many customers that Microsoft Teams is free, since they receive it as part of subscriptions that they would take anyway (such as the Office suite)," he said. "It is also well integrated into the operating system and other applications. All of this is accelerating growth in this space."

"However, there are still some technical limitations, meaning that there are few customers completely replacing a feature rich PBX or hosted solution with Teams. Most customers have to retain other systems for some parts of their business. But in the coming months, Microsoft Teams will become stronger and will continue to threaten other vendors in the UCaaS space." ■

More from this month's panel of UCaaS experts on page 34

Industry organisations seamless

One thing is certain in the new, scary and confusing world we now live in; people have become totally reliant on the UK's hardworking comms and IT providers who are keeping our hospitals, emergency services, food stores, logistic companies, government, civil services and utilities functioning, not to mention enabling millions and millions of people to work safely from home.

It has been well publicised that the UK lags behind other countries in the roll out of high bandwidth connectivity, so it's reassuring to hear that our ISP's can handle the additional workload of home-based employees. Andrew Glover, Chair of the Internet Services Providers' Association says: "ISPs are ready to handle any potential extra bandwidth and consistently assess the demands that are being put on their networks. Our members' networks are built to support 'evening peak' capacity, which generally means at least ten times the typical daytime (working hours) demand, driven by streaming video, sports content etc."

Now, and in the weeks to come, comms provider engineering teams will be risking their own health by entering customer premises - including hospitals and care homes - to ensure that on-premise servers are set up to support the inevitable increase in remote connections to accommodate the potential increase in traffic from their employees. It's also nice to hear of generosity and collaboration in such endeavours. Andrew Skipsey, managing director of Hampshire based M12 tells us: "Our customer service and engineers have helped hundreds of businesses and thousands of users seamlessly transition their comms set up to be able to work remotely and it's great to see vendors including Splicecom offering the remote options at no cost."

It would be astonishing if ICT channel businesses weren't able to implement their own business continuity procedures and rapidly utilise the collaboration tools they sell to enable their staff to work in isolation, but as the UK's faces an escalation in the rapid spread of COVID-19, it is interesting to learn how different teams are facing up to the challenge of this unprecedented crisis.



ANDY WILSON
CITYFIBRE

"At CityFibre, we are as prepared as we can be at this stage and have a dedicated task force in place to manage our response to COVID-19. Over recent weeks we undertook multiple simulations to test our capabilities ahead of formally closing multiple offices, and in line with the latest advice all of our office-based staff are now working from home successfully. As CityFibre's channel focused division, we completely understand how the recommendations for more agile working through services such as video conferencing can put added pressure on our customers' underlying infrastructure. It is because of this we are committed to working with them to find solutions and ensure business continuity is not affected."



NATHAN MARKE
DWS

"100% of DWS staff are now working from home. We had well tested business continuity plans in place and knew that the technology would be straightforward. We have had a few niggles, which are to be expected but have been fixed quickly. More broadly, there have been reports across the business community of contention on cloud networks, and concerns have been expressed from many quarters about security in the rush to get UK Plc working remotely. The much more critical aspect for us pertains to our people, given what looks likely to be an extended period remote working. We are a very sociable business with a thriving culture so understanding the impact of the replacement of human interaction with digital is an unknown. Staying productive, ensuring everyone's welfare and maintaining what makes DWS a unique place to work is, perhaps, our biggest priority."



JAMES SHRAGA
FIDELITY GROUP

"Fidelity Group has promoted cloud collaborative working for its internal teams for many years, allowing staff to work with strategic partners in South Africa and India. We have been conscious of the environmental and lifestyle benefits of remote working which have also been promoted to our customers, it is fair to say they have been reacting to current circumstances and the level of urgent demand that this has driven for home working is at an all-time high. Now more than ever before, hosted telephony, mobile data solutions and cloud technologies empower our teams and offices to continue to collaborate and work together whilst remote working. Our channel partners have risen to the demand and are supporting the role out and training for these new workplace environments. We trust that these solutions will serve to mitigate against some of the economic issues ahead."



VICKI RISHBETH
FOCUS GROUP

"Focus Group has a robust Business Continuity Plan in place. The COVID-19 developments over the last few months have given us the opportunity to review, test and be confident that the plan in place enables our team to work flexibly, while maintaining our service levels and key product delivery. Our strategy has been to adopt as many cloud-based technologies as appropriate and possible; meaning our teams have access to their applications and services from remote locations. We're confident in our ability to deliver a business as usual experience to our customers and colleagues alike."



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Businesses switch to home working



DANIEL ALVAREZ
GLIDE GROUP

"At Glide we have been thinking about contingency plans to mitigate the effects the virus may have on business for some time. Our 300 plus staff now have the capability to work from home and a named tactical stakeholder group of individuals has been empowered to make important decisions in a rapidly evolving situation. Most importantly, the technology is in place to allow our teams and our customers to continue as normal. The UK communications infrastructure will come under extreme pressures in the coming weeks and months, as we are already seeing through the mobile networks. The need for full fibre and greatly increased backhaul capacity has never been more relevant. Having our own fibre network means we are well-prepared to meet the challenges from both customers and employees."



STEVE McINTYRE
NIMANS

"The wellbeing of our employees and providing business continuity to our customers remain our top priority - and we're continuing to keep a close eye on the latest government and NHS guidance. We are continuing to provide the same reliable service to our customers whilst also making some sensible operational changes internally, such as using alternative technologies including VC and Teams as part of a more dispersed workforce. We have put in place a robust Business Continuity Plan designed to keep our staff safe and the company fully operational and we are fully prepared should the situation worsen. In these challenging times our warehouse remains fully operational and a huge amount of deliveries are being made."



TIM BROOKS
PRAGMA

"Like most comms companies, we use our own IP telephony and UC applications across our business. When we started Pragma eight years ago, we decided to use cloud services wherever possible, so that our other systems and processes could all be operated remotely. We've spent the last few days testing these systems and checking our processes and communication plans, so it's all systems go. One area that cannot be operated remotely is our warehouse. We hold at least three months stock, so inventory levels are good. We've implemented a split team structure, with two separate teams working alternating days in the warehouse, to limit the risk of all staff being ill at the same time. Whilst it's impossible to protect against every eventuality, we feel well prepared to continue to supply and support our resellers throughout the coming weeks."



DARREN GARLAND
PROVU

"As a distributor we identified the need to ensure our long-term reliability - it is vital for us to keep our warehouse operating, receiving stock and shipping out our customer orders. We made the decision to isolate our warehouse team on 11th March, a few days before the Government advised people to work from home. For those able to perform their roles outside of the office, we enforced a remote working policy - so far, so good! We are in uncharted territory, but with most of our staff trained to be able to work in the warehouse, we have the capacity to rotate our home working staff to cover and maintain operation at least five times. We are in a strong position to adapt to this way of working and will continue to support our partners in every way we can."



IAIN SINNOTT
VANILLAIP

"We have a permanent ability for all staff to work from home, so the only required action was an e-mail to say don't travel. More importantly, Uboss has made us, and our partners, ready to add mobility services to any customer extension that now needs to be remote, as well as deploying softphone devices, mobile applications and setting up a vast number of new conference bridge moderators. What we have seen in the last few days is an urgent need to relocate the voice devices, followed by a realisation that people now need to do more than just hold a simple call. The pay-as-you-use conference bridge that is built into all business setups has been very popular as a second step and now we are seeing the deployment of UOne Trio collaboration apps and MS Teams integration tools. It's going well."



MANDY FAZELNIA
ZEST4

"Zest4 has fully deployed a working from home solution to keep our team safe. The team use their home internet connection to securely 2-factor authenticate into Zest4's internal customer servicing applications. We only allow company provided equipment with cloud based anti-virus to ensure equipment is always up to date and protected. Zest4 has more than adequate bandwidth available. As a connectivity provider we pride ourselves on being 'forever connected' and we are more than able to cope with the spike in home working. Members of the team without adequate bandwidth from home have been provided with our 4G 'internet in a box' solution. The use of cloud-based email, telephony and collaboration allows Zest staff to be in contact from anywhere with an internet connection and we can continue to deliver our award-winning service without disruption."

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Syndico signals growth in

Private Mobile Radio (PMR) has become a high profile component of many single integrated solutions, much of the time in specific verticals. Witness Syndico Distribution Managing Director Andrew Wilson who is at the forefront of developing these opportunities for partners.

Wilson is in joint harness with partners to unlock the market for PMR solutions, and from the outset he went about his task guided by a clear vision and a staunch belief in the technology and its market potential. Syndico was formed in May 2015 by Wilson and Operations Director Shona Barnett to support a tech focused, but relatively new manufacturer in the PMR space, called Hytera, which they believed had the R&D investment needed to push the industry forward.

“We started with four people, four phones, four laptops and no desks,” commented Wilson. “We supported the start-up through venture capital funding for premises, back office systems, stock etc which allowed us to concentrate on core items of operation rather than worrying about bills and cashflow management. The business matured quickly and I was able to buy out the VCs in November 2019.”

Wilson’s career began with selling B2B cellular comms contracts through RSLCom and progressed to becoming a Vodafone Gold Partner. He then moved into the Private Mobile Radio sector. “After working in a two-way radio distribution company for 12 years as Sales Director, the opportunity arose for me to start Syndico and



Andrew Wilson

Many new technologies available to dealers have so far been under marketed to buyers who would bite their hands off

I grabbed it with both hands,” he stated. “Five years later Syndico is going from strength to strength with a CAGR beyond even our most positive forecast, and a strong team hungry for continued growth.”

Syndico has offices and a warehouse in Hedge End, near Southampton Airport, and a sales and marketing office in Dijon,

France. According to Wilson, the Syndico team, now numbering 19 and rising, has managed to achieve 10 years work in the five years since the company started. Their redoubled efforts mean Syndico is targeting £9 million revenues in 2020. “The focus is very much on controlled growth, 20 per cent to 30 per cent, maintaining our conservative approach to fiscal

management and ensuring that our team culture remains the same,” explained Wilson.

Expansion phase

To prepare for its next growth phase Syndico has also implemented procedures and processes to manage high volumes of orders on a daily basis, all required to achieve ISO9001, ISO14001, Investors in People, Cyber Essentials and other

accreditations. “Although we remain flexible and able to respond to bespoke customer requests, there is a more formal structure in the business which is necessary to keep the required checks and balances in place for us to provide a professional service,” noted Wilson. “That has been the biggest change away from our more ‘gung-ho’ approach at the very start.”

in PMR market

The channel-only business is seeking to significantly increase its circa 400 dealer base this year and gain greater market share for its vendor partners which, as well as Hytera, include VoCoVo, Zebra, 3M Peltor, Savox, Push to Talk International, Telosystems, Alfatronix and Procom. This technology portfolio enables Syndico to provide communications solutions for all end user markets, with a growing focus on verticals.

"We used to try and make PMR work in every industry we came across, which was sometimes like trying to fit

Now we match customer requirements to specific vendors

a square peg into a round hole," commented Wilson. "Now we match customer requirements to specific vendors. We have taken this approach to provide a solution for wider area communication needs in Push-to-Talk over cellular, and will be launching Zebra Workforce Connect PTT Pro to offer devices that can cope with voice, data and other back office needs in one package rather than bolting different solutions to a PMR offering."

Thus, Syndico has ploughed more resource into proactively researching the type of solutions end users will be wanting in the years to come, and is forming relationships with right-fit tech partners. "We spend many hours

in management meetings trying to ensure we are as prepared as we can be for what the future has in store, and our financial strength means we should be in a good position to capitalise on all opportunities," added Wilson. "Many new technologies available to dealers have so far been under marketed to buyers who would bite their hands off.

Targeted solutions

"There has been a major shift, for example, from Microsoft to Android operating systems in certain sectors and dealers will be able to cash in on this if they work with the right manufacturer and distributor. We have also changed our approach to marketing. Although we have no plans to start dealing with end users we have initiated programmes to market to them and provide solid leads to dealer partners."

In Syndico's experience it is likely that many of these leads will come with an increasing reliance on the integration of products with end user IT departments. "We have had to provide training not only on the products we are offering, but sometimes on the products and applications that they might be interacting with when they are installed," added Wilson. "Likewise, the role of the VAR will become more heavily focused around technical support, more complicated installations and ongoing support rather than the sales and marketing process. Training will be key, and the processes through which the channel provides that knowledge transfer needs to be slicker." ■

Just a minute with Andrew Wilson...

Role model: I admire golfer Justin Rose who had a tough time but stuck to the job and became World Number 1

What talent do you wish you had? To speak fluent Spanish

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I've always harboured a desire to be a taxi driver

One example of something you've overcome: When I started out in business I may have been a little arrogant at times, which I would like to think I've overcome

Your greatest strength, and what could you work on? My main strength is the ability to respect people from all walks of life. I could work on empathy though. I don't always have sympathy for people with a lot of strong emotions

Best piece of advice you have been given: Never become like 'that' guy. Say no more...

The biggest risk you have taken? Setting up Syndico. My first daughter was three years old at the time, and my wife had given birth to identical twins 15 months earlier

Who do you admire most in the channel? Julian Niman who has now sadly passed

Biggest career achievement? Winning the 2017 Diamond Global Distributor of the Year award at Hytera's Dealer Partner Summit in Thailand. The prize was a brand new Tesla Model S, and the trophy was a sculpture made from glass reserved for the palaces of the Emperors who resided in the forbidden city



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New comms powerhouse

Why not march into an adjacent market and aim to be top dog within five years? For start-up Radius Connect Group Managing Director Ray Ferris, who is backed by a £2.5 billion parent company, no holds barred strategic vision and ambition make the prospect wholly possible.

Ferris is credited with setting up the Corporate Indirect channel for EE and delivering year-on-year double digit growth for four years on the trot. To say that this is a career highlight is an understatement, and he hopes to repeat his trick with Radius Connect, the fast growing comms arm of £2.5 billion revenue business Radius Payment Solutions. "The plan is to be in the UK Premier League of resellers with a global footprint that follows our fuel and telematics business," he said. "Increasing the penetration of telecoms products into our group base presents us with a phenomenal opportunity over the coming years."

Radius Payment Solutions began life in 1990 when owner Bill Holmes set up the firm as a fuel card company. It now provides fleet management solutions including telematics, telecoms and insurance to over 300,000 customers; and was recognised as one of the UK's largest private companies and ranked 19th in the 2019 Sunday Times HSBC Top Track 100 list.

In December last year Radius acquired Reliance Networks, its seventh deal in seven weeks, three of which were in telecoms – Adam Phones, Pure Telecom and Trinity Maxwell. "Radius Connect was launched from the framework of these four telco acquisitions," added Ferris.



Ray Ferris

We are driven to grow the business over the next three to five years, so you will continue to see us acquire and invest

"We are driven to grow the business significantly over the next three to five years, so you will continue to see us acquire and invest."

Growth markets

Radius Connect's technology partners include 8x8, Avaya, Gamma, Cisco, IBM, Node4, O2, EE, Vodafone, BT, McAfee and Microsoft. "In the small business arena we focus on

a mobile, connectivity and voice play," said Ferris. "The medium sized marketplace is more complex and solutions-based, with conversations moving to reliance, security, scalability and continuity. Advice, project management, installation services and ongoing in-life management are critical needs here. For corporates we have expertise in key verticals such as

finance where we are expert in areas such as contract reviews, tariff analysis and bespoke proposal creation. We have big ambitions in all of our markets, but need to ride the coronavirus storm over the spring and summer.

"Like everyone in the UK we are watching the coronavirus situation unravel. We are in the grips

of a global pandemic and my focus is on helping customers use technology to keep functioning. We have made short-term hire facilities available at heavily discounted rates for homeworking, and short-term extensions to expired contracts that give clients peace of mind. We hope that by working closely with our customers in this difficult time we can forge even stronger relationships for the future. We have moved to remote working where possible ourselves."

Big investments in people and infrastructure to support customers has proved to be key in Radius' successful response to the coronavirus. "We've been lucky through our acquisitions to appraise and adopt best practice as we've gone along," added Ferris, who has been equally instrumental in the company's adoption of winning growth strategies, based on his impressive career experience. He joined Orange in 2003 after a period in the software market, never with any great expectation to stay in comms, but he found the constantly changing technology and marketplace fascinating.

"I worked with Orange through to EE and finally BT, and saw the company grow and go through acquisition, and I was involved in large change programmes," he explained. "We brought indirect sales in the corporate market to

e emerges

life for EE and that journey was particularly satisfying and enabled the switch to my role at Radius Connect.”

During this career period the development of VoIP services matured, and with new pricing models available Ferris is poised to do ‘something disruptive’ over the next few months. “The need for specialist advice and guidance in the SME marketplace for UCaaS implementations, in particular MS Teams, also forms a large part of our thinking,” he added.

“Amazon Connect is another interesting proposition for our customers. Our role is to help them work out how

We are in the grips of a global pandemic and my focus is on helping customers

to benefit from services such as this, which will only continue to proliferate, as part of a blended telecoms strategy. Customers value our help in navigating this complex world, providing them with free independent advice and supporting this with our teams.

“Resellers are also being pushed to sell network billed solutions, so they need to adapt to that market to achieve the best scale they can. SIs can provide the expertise around more complex IT projects and cloud deployments, and I see more consolidation in both markets this year.” ■

Just a minute with Ray Ferris...

Role model: Our CEO Bill Holmes. The most driven inspirational person I know

What talent do you wish you had? To multitask

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I used to be a flair cocktail barman in New Zealand

One example of something you've overcome: The 16 stone barrier

Your greatest strength, and what could you work on? I enjoy people and understanding what motivates them, but I could work on my presentation skills. I despise PowerPoint

Best piece of advice you have been given: Nothing is ever as good or as bad as it seems

The biggest risk you have taken? Taking my role at Radius. I had a good job at BT but this was a risk worth taking

Who do you admire most in the channel? Any business leader who runs a small or medium firm. I know how hard it is

Name three ideal dinner guests: Ian Botham, Bobby Robson and Margot Robbie

In hindsight: I would have invented the iPhone! And maybe been riskier with a view to starting my own telco earlier in my career

Industry bugbear? Customer service at the network level is too poor in the main

How would you like to be remembered: As someone who always saw the funny side in difficult times

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? I'd be involved in cricket administration



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From cold calling to the

Since a boy the one thing that Adam Turton, Managing Director for Communications at Elite Group, has consistently shown is that he cannot contain his potential to blossom.

What is clear from Turton's educational and work career is not so much his performance, but his commitment to succeeding and passion for developing people. Having studied psychology and completing a Masters in sports psychology he worked for a number of years in professional sport as a coach, mentor and sports psychologist before entering the business world. "I have a track record of motivating and leading high performance teams and have helped mentor and develop many people at Elite Group who now hold key or senior positions," he said.

Turton 'stumbled' into comms 16 years ago, and by a twist of fate was offered a job by Elite Group founder Matt Newing, previously known to him as they attended the same school. "We were later introduced by a common friend," explained Turton. "In 2004 Matt offered me a cold calling job on the minimum wage, paid hourly. He was driving a black Porsche 911 at the time which also happened to be my dream car. So I took a leap of faith and accepted, hoping some day to drive a similar car."

Turton rose through the ranks and became Sales Director, and is now Managing Director for Communications with a small minority shareholding in the organisation. "I am passionate about business and sit on the



Adam Turton

The growth strategy remains weighted towards M&A and a buy-and-build approach, with £30 million funding in place available for deals

board of other successful growing companies," he added. "I'm also an active investor across a range of sectors, particularly within technology, media and telecommunications, including various public and privately owned businesses."

Milestones

Elite was founded in 2000 to take advantage of opportunities following the deregulation of the telecommunications market. There have been many milestones, but two stand

out, explained Turton. "The discovery of call revenue and Number Translation Services (NTS) was a turning point," he said. "Being early adopters of NTS and network level value added services such as network call recording, IVR and network call queuing was a catalyst for our organic growth from 2000 to 2008. These value added services enabled Elite to penetrate the contact centre market and win some significant trophy accounts that remain key customers today almost 20 years later."

The second milestone is strategic investment in M&A to drive growth and increase capabilities and expertise in new technology, products and services. "We completed our first acquisition in 2008 and it became clear that it was far more cost-effective and quicker to expand the product and service portfolio via M&A as opposed to organic growth alone," added Turton. "Through M&A we have been able to increase our core capabilities in UC, mobility, IoT, cloud and IT services,

meaning we can bring more value to customers." Elite Group's revenues in 2008 reached £11.1 million, but with 17 acquisitions under its belt and with a CAGR of 14.7 per cent the company's revenues are now in excess of £50 million. Elite is active in all markets and vertical sectors but is witnessing most traction and growth in the SME and mid-market space. "Given our size and economies of scale the growth strategy remains weighted towards M&A and

boardroom

a buy-and-build approach, with £30 million funding in place available for deals," added Turton. "Nonetheless, there is a significant opportunity and ongoing investment into delivering sustainable organic growth from cross-sales, supporting customers and their adoption of new services including cloud, IoT and SaaS technologies that drive productivity and profitability for their businesses.

"You can't ignore the strong and consistent growth in cloud services including AWS and Microsoft Azure, along with the impressive

You can't ignore the strong and consistent growth in cloud services

growth in Microsoft Teams as the fastest growing workplace messaging and collaboration application. Through a number of IT services acquisitions we are well positioned as a Microsoft Gold Partner to capitalise on this opportunity and the demand for Microsoft products and services, including bespoke development and systems integration as a fully managed service."

Not surprisingly Elite is experiencing a decline in traditional telco products and services, in particular traditional voice which is registering a 10-15 per cent reduction in revenues in line with the market. "This has been accelerated by the 2025 shutdown of BT's ISDN

and PSTN services which is also driving demand for SIP, hosted voice and UCaaS solutions underpinned by access technology," added Turton. "We are seeing an evolution in access, applications and services that businesses now demand to increase productivity and ensure they stay competitive. We are very fortunate to be operating in an exciting fast paced market where innovation and change is a constant – and whenever there is change, there is opportunity."

Perhaps the biggest opportunity to support customers will be 5G, which Turton tips as a 'game changer' that will enable businesses to do more and access apps anywhere at any time. "5G access technology includes the analytics and insights required to maximise value from adopting the service," he stated. "This is a significant opportunity to level up in our IoT capabilities and bring seriously powerful and transformational solutions to businesses."

Against this backdrop of industry trends, within five years telco revenues will be a distant memory, superseded by SaaS and cloud technology, believes Turton. "I'm confident that we will more than double revenues through a combination of M&A and organic growth, with a focus on the client experience and bringing more value to customers through new technology and professional and managed services," he commented. "Coinciding with and supporting this strategy is ongoing investment into optimising our people and business systems to ensure we are ready to scale." ■

Just a minute with Adam Turton...

Role model: My father. He worked hard, set high standards, taught me how to be a good man and the value of hard work, loyalty, mental toughness and attention to detail – and the value of family

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I met my wife for the first time on a plane to Ibiza

One example of something you've overcome: From a young age I was focused on having a career in professional rugby, but an injury left me debilitated for a number of years and unable ever to participate in competitive sport.

Overcoming this adversity made me better equipped to deal with pressures and setbacks later in life

Your greatest strength, and what could you work on? My biggest strength is that I'm aware of my weaknesses, and I'm making an effort to reframe problems from perceived stressful and negative situations into opportunities

Best piece of advice you have been given: 'To be patient and play the long game' (Elite founder Matt Newing). And 'Your true worth is determined by how much more you give in value than you take in payment', from the book *Go-Giver* by Bob Burg and David John Mann

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? I'd still be involved in advising, investing and running businesses

How do you start the working day? I wake up at 5.25am and go to the gym. I like to do high intensity training first thing and sharpen my mental state

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Milligan on SOGEA and t

The leitmotif running between the lines of industry discourse right now is pressure, pressure from the impact of the coronavirus, and pressure from the approaching switch to an all-IP world in 2025, which continues to build as the clock runs down...

Here, Katie Milligan, Managing Director for Customer Commercial and Propositions at Openreach, explains why it is crucial for CPs to strategise their all-IP migration plans with similar urgency as their commendable responses to the sudden challenge of keeping businesses working during the coronavirus pandemic...

Are CPs acting fast enough to meet the 2025 deadline?

This is a mammoth task. Openreach alone has more than 15 million traditional voice lines that will need to be upgraded to IP over the next five years, roughly 50k every week between now and 2025. We can't do this alone, which is why we started the withdrawal process with industry in May 2018, and since then we've seen migration numbers ramp up. But they're currently still nothing like the levels that we'll need to see.

Is the 2025 PSTN closure date realistic given the scale of the task?

The deadline is a significant challenge, but achievable. We started the withdrawal process with the launch of an industry consultation on upgrading the access network, the withdrawal of WLR products and the smooth transition to IP voice services, which ran for ten weeks. So CPs have effectively been given a seven year notice period.



Katie Milligan

With current transfer rates at around 6,000 lines per week and 15 million lines to go by 2025, there clearly needs to be a massive gearing up across the industry, and quickly

But with current transfer rates at around 6,000 lines per week and 15 million lines to go by 2025, there clearly needs to be a massive gearing up across the industry, and quickly.

We've been working with industry to make sure that everyone knows what's happening and what part they need to play. It's important that CPs work up their all-IP migration plans and engage with Openreach and wholesalers to turn those plans into

real customer moves onto broadband-based networks.

Are you optimistic about the channel's ability to meet the deadline?

The situation elsewhere is encouraging. In other countries the typical migration period is four to five years. For example, Germany, which has many market similarities to the UK, launched a planned four year migration in 2014 and has now successfully migrated over 80 per cent of its fixed lines over to IP. The notice

we've provided industry about the PSTN switch-off and WLR withdrawal is similar (about seven months less) to the amount of time between JFK's announcement that the USA was sending men to the moon to the achievement of that promise. I'd like to think that while we have a challenge on our hands we will be similarly successful.

How have CPs responded to the launch of SOGEA?

The response has been positive, but that shouldn't come as a surprise. Between

our Early Market Deployment (EMD) launch in September last year and the end of December we'd already completed 85,000 orders on both SOGEA and its Gfast equivalent SOGfast. Since then, the volumes of orders have continued to increase as the products have been fully launched.

Our CP customers seem to be gaining confidence in the product and are starting to ramp up their sales volumes. And we've seen a number of customers launching consumer offerings based on both SOGEA and SOGfast. We've been helping the larger CPs learn about the product and giving them guidance on developing their sales and ordering systems to help speed up the sales process. Meanwhile, the smaller CPs have also been enthusiastic with some notable investments in building superfast and ultrafast broadband networks in recent months.

What did you learn during the trial and pre-launch phase?

We saw overall order volumes increase dramatically during the trial and soft launch. This allowed us to get a better grip on understanding key product performance measures such as Early Life Failures and On Time Delivery, as well as the right way to sequence the migration, in other words, when to move the voice service. We were also able to make sure that we had

The 2025 cut off

the right sales and ordering systems in place, and that we're able to provide the right level of support. So, for example, the addition of 600 SOGEA trained engineers to add capacity and help us reduce the number of missed appointments helped improve the overall customer experience.

It also gave participating CPs an opportunity to learn about how best to position their propositions to customers. For example, the trial emphasised the need to supply clear instructions for end users on how to install in-home devices. The switch to an Openreach

LLU SMPF. These products will no longer be available when the PSTN is closed in 2025. We expect the bulk of those customers currently using these legacy products and services to switch over to SOGEA or full fibre.

Naturally, pricing is fundamental to that shift. We're offering our CP customers a greater incentive to switch their customers to a full fibre world with more competitive pricing and a wider choice of products. We believe that a single simplified digital service will provide operational and service efficiencies that translate into commercial

to the new CP provided VoIP service makes this simple for CPs to complete successfully. We haven't seen any significant issues with number porting so far with CPs already using the service. But we continue to monitor performance in this area.

What's in the pipeline for other new broadband product roll outs?

Alongside the SOGEA and SOGfast launches, we've also developed a low bandwidth SOGEA product focused on addressing the needs of voice-only customers, although there are likely to be other low bandwidth applications too, for example telemetry lines at a price equivalent to the existing legacy WLR3 voice service. This will help CPs to migrate those customers who don't need a high-speed Internet connection.

For those customers in areas where fibre isn't yet available we're developing SOTAP (Single Order Transitional Access Product) which uses the copper path between an end customer's premises and the CP's existing exchange equipment, over which you can provide broadband and IP voice services.

What are the biggest drivers of change at Openreach right now?

We're moving towards a radically simplified portfolio, which means any customers using WLR and related products will need to migrate to alternative products. The biggest driver is our plan to build FTTP at scale, reaching four million homes and businesses by March 2021, and with an ambition to reach 15 million by the mid-2020s if the investment conditions are right. ■

We're moving towards a radically simplified portfolio, which means any customers using WLR and related products will need to migrate to alternative products

broadband only product can mean a few changes for end users. Another important lesson we learnt was making sure customers understood that extension wiring on their premises would not be supported – and that it is important to make this clear at the point of sale.

How will you be driving SOGEA to CPs?

One of the biggest drivers will be the task of switching some 15 million homes and businesses across from traditional analogue voice service running over the PSTN to a new fully digital all-IP network. The PSTN supports a number of Openreach WLR products such as WLR3 analogue, ISDN 30 and

benefits for those adopting the services. We're also running two testbed trials – in Salisbury and Mildenhall – giving CPs and special service providers the chance to test new products and work out how we can migrate people safely and smoothly.

How far could issues around phone number portability slow progress?

Number portability is a challenge for the whole industry. However, we have built SOGEA with an integrated number port journey in order to make this as simple as possible. Being able to submit a single order to Openreach that incorporates the transfer of the number from the PSTN



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Virus brings universal ne

A key determinant of an organisation's ability to meet the demands of the day rests, in many cases, on the deployment of a UCaaS solution. Without one, efforts to relieve organisational pressures of all kinds, including the coronavirus outbreak, will be severely limited, according to this month's panel of UC market experts.

UC has long been talked about as a requirement for businesses but the practicalities of the technology and the associated benefits have taken some time to come to fruition. Early UC channel offerings typically sought to consolidate email, voicemail and fax onto one screen for a user. Uptake was slow, solutions were expensive, difficult to implement and required heavy maintenance. However, as connectivity has improved and the move to the cloud has increased exponentially, the long talked about benefits of UC can now be realised by any size business.

In fact, UCaaS is a key component of the digital journeys organisations have embarked on, and Joe Pratten, Horizon Specialist at Gamma, believes that the channel, which has largely secured the SIP market, is primed to lead the UCaaS charge over the next five years. "But for the channel it's about adopting a more consultative approach to customers," he said. "Understanding the particular challenges throughout an organisation and proposing a tailored solution is key.

"SME workforces that are becoming increasingly more remote need to respond to their customers quickly. They can't afford a team of people



Joe Pratten

SMEs are looking to grow their business and compete with mid-market and large enterprise organisations, and UC is vital in helping them achieve this

to run their IT systems. And as they look to grow their business and compete with mid-market and large enterprise organisations, UC becomes vital in helping them achieve this."

When creating a compelling business case for a prospect considering UCaaS it's vital that resellers make it relevant and specific to them. "The only way that can be achieved is through a robust discovery and fact finding stage at the start of the engagement process," added Pratten. "The more you know about the customer, the way they work and the

challenges they face, the more relevant and compelling the business case will be. The sales person should be able to recommend where UC functionality can assist the organisation, demonstrating cost reductions, increased employee engagement and overall customer satisfaction."

Measuring ROI

From a strategic perspective it's vital to check in with a customer to see how accurate the ROI business case has been for them, advised Pratten. "Look at areas such as reductions in travel expenditure, a lower

number of emails between staff or whether employees are now set-up to work remotely," he added. "This could potentially lead to identifying new areas of training or elements where you can add value and improve their business. If the implementation has gone smoothly, it's a great opportunity to engage for a case study."

According to Richard Buxton, Head of Collaboration at Node4, UCaaS adoption rates are higher than you might expect, possibly due to the nature of its customers. "The majority of them have already

embraced the cloud and SaaS and are less constrained by legacy technology," he said. "However, there are still many customers who see the benefits of UCaaS, employee mobility in particular, but have not yet fully rolled it out. It's fairly common for our customers to have teams of people using our full suite of UC applications, but have a slow roll out to the remainder of the workforce. But, with issues such as the recent nationwide flooding and the current coronavirus crisis, organisations are beginning to utilise UCaaS company-wide. We have seen a huge increase in customers wanting to expedite deployments."

To grow UCaaS business the channel must switch its focus away from products and vendors and concentrate more on business solutions. "Customers are bombarded with marketing material that shows off new products from vendors, but often these all appear to offer the same list of features, and it can be difficult to differentiate," added Buxton. "The success of UCaaS comes when resellers are able to look at a customer's business requirement and pain points, and provide a technology solution that solves them. By talking in the customer's own language, and understanding exactly the problems that they need solving, it is possible to provide solutions

eed for UCaaS

that they understand and that fit their needs. Yes, these solutions will still be proposed based on whatever vendor relationships they have, but lead in with solutions, not products."

The key factors involved in aligning UCaaS to a prospect's strategic goals also hinge on defining their appetite for change. Has the customer embraced SaaS? It can be quite a change for some customers that are still set on on-premises and capex-based solutions. "So determine their business outcome requirements and find out their pain points," stated Buxton. "It's important to understand their business and then work out if you have access to the technology to resolve their challenges. Don't lead with discussions about your vendor's products."

Nor is that all: More businesses are becoming global, workforces are increasingly dispersed, and remote working is becoming the norm. Small wonder some companies are recognising the importance of making sure they have the right tools in place to attract and retain the best talent. That said, many organisations are not thinking beyond 'the basics', according to Emily Fallon, Senior Manager, Channel Marketing EMEA and AU, RingCentral, which is one reason why the adoption of UCaaS does not yet match its potential.

Limited thinking

"Most of us have access to a desk phone or a mobile phone, and many businesses may see this as enough to support remote working," commented Fallon. "Companies need

to think beyond this and recognise that there are more effective tools that allow teams to work together more collaboratively."

The Covid-19 crisis is shining a light on the abilities of businesses to support remote working. Employee safety is a number one priority and enabling staff to work remotely is critical. "Businesses that have not paid attention to UCaaS are now being forced to re-evaluate their work situation and ensure the right tools are in place to support seamless communication and collaboration," added Fallon.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to adoption levels. The first is that many firms in the past have been nervous about moving to the cloud. Also, the move to UCaaS isn't just a technology swap, it is a business transformation project that impacts every employee. "It also demands new ways of working," said Fallon. "Today, we are at a stage where businesses are realising the benefits of the cloud and employees are demanding more channels for working together. This means we're seeing a shift in how companies work, and adoption is on the rise."

The channel has a 'huge role to play in selling UCaaS', noted Fallon, and it's not too late for partners that may have neglected the opportunity to date, she believes. "It's also interesting to see how distributors are flipping their business model to become master agents," added Fallon. "We've seen a difference in uptake as a result. Ultimately, channel partners have an

Continued on page 36



Richard Buxton

The success of UCaaS comes when resellers are able to look at a customer's business requirements and pain points, and provide a technology solution that solves them

Switch to energy sales now urges energy chief Haw

AS the Covid 19 crisis worsens resellers can offset any fall in revenues by taking advantage of the massive drop in oil prices and switching sales teams to selling energy.

Fidelity Energy Managing Director John Haw claims the time has never been better to help customers save costs on their energy bills.

they have been in five years.

"The demand for oil is slumping due to the Corona outbreak with many countries now on lockdown and the UK restrictions tightening. A decrease of over 57% in oil price has been exacerbated by the fall out between Saudi Arabia and Russia who are both promising to flood the market

"We are able to buy in advance by up to five years, so now is the perfect time to secure your clients a low rate on their business energy contracts."

John Haw

"There is no doubt that system sales will decline, this will leave many partners with a revenue gap, which can be filled by switching sales team on to energy. Not only will this help your business weather the crisis but will also help clients weather the storm and reduce the financial impact of the pandemic."

Haw also believes employees working remotely will be looking for things to do and housekeeping tasks will become a key focus.

"Energy is very much part of the housekeeping. This represents an opportunity for the channel, especially in the current climate, where prices are at one of the lowest points

with oil in an all-out price war for market share," said Haw.

"Businesses are going to be under a huge strain in the coming months, especially financially as some offices and shops have been forced to close. Resellers can help clients save money, reduce their overheads and offset turnover just by obtaining their energy bills.

"We are able to buy in advance by up to five years, so now is the perfect time to secure your clients a low rate on their business energy contracts."

ICT providers keen to know more should contact Fidelity Energy at partners@fidelity-energy.co.uk for further details.



John Haw

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Continued from page 35
 opportunity to be seen as consultants for businesses looking to make the shift to UCaaS. They have a strong understanding of the market and the solutions on offer, and if they can demonstrate their understanding and how solutions can support each individual business needs, then they will enjoy long relationships with customers as a valuable business partners."

The workforce is also going through a period of change. Generation Z are coming into the workplace and demanding more flexible ways of working; and it is becoming increasingly

difficult to find talent locally. Businesses also want to take advantage of opportunities in different markets and are looking at global expansion. "Resellers that make UCaaS a priority have an opportunity to help organisations support remote working, attract a global workforce, retain the best talent and provide support in times of a crisis," stated Fallon. "UCaaS enables better collaboration, whether that is employees communicating with customers, or with their co-workers. How teams work together is something that often gets sidelined when working remotely, but is critical to ensuring employees feel part of a team. There is

also a big business benefit to adopting UCaaS as it allows employees to work in a more streamlined way. By reducing the number of apps and the amount of 'workplace chaos', employees can be more productive. Ultimately, this helps to drive revenues."

Barriers to UCaaS adoption have tumbled, noted Ian Rowan, UK Channel Manager at Wildix. "UCaaS opens up many new markets for partners to sell UC solutions but without all the barriers to market experienced by traditional UC solutions – high upfront costs, extended engineering skill sets, product updates and a requirement to have IT teams trained to manage complex onsite solutions," said Rowan. "UCaaS instantly overcomes these issues and gives SMEs instant access to solutions that had only been available to enterprise level businesses. Now that these barriers have gone the SME market is purchasing UCaaS daily and soon there will be little business left for traditional telephony."

Market drivers

Rowan also noted that uptake of UC or UCaaS has been relatively slow in the SME segment compared to the enterprise sector. "There are many reasons for this but the drivers for change are the same," added Rowan. "When surveyed, 80 per cent of enterprises moved to UC to offer remote working whereas within SME this figure is only 40 per cent. Not because they don't want to offer this service but the ability to measure RoI for SME is complicated compared to enterprise where tools are in place to look at changes in employee performance."

With UCaaS there are many more performance gains and more businesses are looking at smart working to reduce overheads and increase employee satisfaction, observed Rowan, which should be a boon to the



Ian Rowan

With the Covid-19 crisis it is even more important for partners to make the right selection of UCaaS providers

channel. "Resellers need to focus on helping businesses realise the RoI of UCaaS and then prices become totally irrelevant," he commented. "With the Covid-19 crisis it is even more important that partners make the right selection of UCaaS providers

and this is where a solution based on WebRTC has key advantages right now. With workforces being told not to travel and work from home then having the ability to deploy a zero-touch solution without the need for any hardware is a must." ■

Gamma urges resellers to ask these key questions and unlock UCaaS potential...

- What are the user numbers and their location?
- How much does the client spend on current communication tools (PSTN conference dial-in numbers; are they paying for external conferencing tools?)
- Profile all user types across the organisation: Do they travel? Are they fixed to a desk? Do they work in virtual teams?
- Strategic goals: Is the business trying to implement home working or is it looking to expand the number of staff without the associated spend?
- Get a view on travel expenses and the type of travel: Internal or external meetings? Could some of these be swapped to video conferences?
- How does the customer sell and interact with customers? Are face-to-face meetings essential every time?



Emily Fallon

Businesses that have not paid attention to UCaaS are now being forced to re-evaluate their work situation and ensure the right tools are in place to support seamless communication and collaboration

Are you ready to grow?

3CX partners reported record sales last year. Here's how they're doing it:

The race is on! 40% of UK businesses have now switched to VoIP and with the 2025 ISDN switch off looming, we're set to see this number explode over the next few years. If you are an MSP or ISP, now is the time to start positioning yourself to take advantage of these favourable market conditions. The best way to get in shape? Introduce a UCaaS solution to your portfolio that's engineered for partner profit and growth.

That's where 3CX comes in. The award-winning communications solution is changing the industry's landscape through its disruptive partner program and revolutionary approach to pricing. 3CX's mantra is "flexible, simple, affordable" and it's a model that is clearly delivering results. In 2019, 3CX's revenue grew by more than 40% and partners recorded sales increases of up to 25%. We caught up with 3CX's UK Channel Manager, Paul Clarke to find out how he is prioritising partner growth in 2020:

How is 3CX growing its partners whilst still giving them a competitive edge?

Our solution is designed with resellers in mind and so is our pricing! Resellers are able to take advantage of our annual licensing to offer 3CX as a subscription service. The recurring revenue this generates not only makes it easier for them to forecast cash flow and secure investments, but it also guarantees year on year growth, as they no longer have to manage the 'leaky bucket syndrome' that's so common with older perpetual price models.

When it comes to maintaining a competitive edge, we've made sure that 3CX really stands out from the crowd. Rather than paying per extension, customers pay for the number of simultaneous calls they



Paul Clarke, UK Channel Manager

require. The result is that resellers are able to deliver customer savings of up to 80% - and I'm sure you can imagine how ears prick up when that's laid on the table!

How can your partners create additional revenue streams with 3CX?

We view 3CX as being the central component of a wider ecosystem. Unlike our competitors, we only sell

the software element of the PBX, meaning partners are free to build their own solution around the 3CX core. This opens the door to a whole host of additional revenue streams, including hardware leasing, support, training and managed hosting. Our open-platform solution has no vendor lock-in, so partners are also free to choose their own hosting, deployment method, devices and SIP trunks. They can then join

additional commission schemes available to maximise their profit potential.

3CX aims to make it easy for partners to build this end-to-end solution so plug and play hardware is available from leading manufacturers such as Snom, Yealink and Sennheiser. Partners receive free technical advice from 3CX when using supported devices, making it even easy to set up and maintain their systems.

Can your partners tailor the solution to the needs of their customers?

Absolutely! Nowadays more and more customers are looking to consolidate their in-house systems in order to streamline tools, data and processes. To keep up, MSP's need to know how to successfully integrate 3rd party platforms with their communications solution.

Historically however, only companies with in-house integrators have only been able to offer such services and we wanted to make this accessible for all our partners: after all, integrations can form another valuable revenue stream for our partners. To address this, we released our new CRM Template Generator with 3CX V16 in 2019. It can connect any restful CRM to 3CX and requires only basic programming proficiency to get

started. Thus, what once was only an avenue for a select few resellers has now been made available for all to enjoy.

How does your partner program support new resellers?

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Pilot ascends in comms

The story of 8x8's channel and market expansion reads like a textbook on the effectiveness of right-fit business partnerships, according to EMEA Director of Channel Sales Keith Jackson.

When Jackson joined 8x8 in August last year, moving from RingCentral, he pledged to take the partner business programme 'to the next level'. True to his word, in February 8x8's UK channel presence received a rocket boost with the addition of IT sector giants Computacenter and Softcat to its partner programme, building on new partnerships with key players Charterhouse and NSL.

These important partnerships signal a ramping up of 8x8's efforts to move installed customer bases to cloud-based voice, video and sharing for meetings, contact centres and applications. And the channel will be well equipped to take these migration markets by storm so long as resellers do not neglect the strategic advantages offered by cloud-based technology, believes Jackson.

"The channel is expanding and growing beyond recognition," he commented. "The UCaaS market is experiencing massive growth and innovation and we're seeing a shift from on-premise PBX to an all-encompassing single cloud communications platform. Customers no longer want the burden of multiple contracts with numerous providers. Instead, they're now in need for a single, unified cloud communications partner that can adapt to their needs and wants quickly."



Keith Jackson

The UCaaS market is experiencing massive growth and innovation

Jackson has more than 17 years experience in channel sales, but studied aviation after leaving university and is a qualified commercial pilot who first landed in a telecoms business in Johannesburg where he designed a point-to-point microwave link connecting two buildings. Thus Jackson began a long and distinguished career in the comms sector. Prior to his time at RingCentral he spent over 10 years working with other vendors including Unify, Gigaset and HP/Ingram Micro.

"I've dedicated my working life to the channel," he stated. "Over the years I've worked with some talented individuals, including

sourcing, then aligning with, new vendors. "We take a holistic approach to our partner relationships, creating an integrated channel programme that goes beyond sales generation and feeds into our joint business strategy," stated Jackson.

Much of 8x8's strategising focuses on simplifying processes through technology. "I hear a lot of talk around the need to streamline experiences and how tech can enable this," added Jackson. "This is driven by the need to reach different generations, from Gen Z to baby boomers, who are digital natives and expect all interactions and engagements to have technology laced through them. They're looking for a frictionless experience. Add to that all the channels that are now available to communicate through and we see that the customer is driving the entire business engagement model."

Jackson also predicts that Communication Platform as a Service (CPaaS) will disrupt the IT market in years to come. "Customers are now demanding a much higher quality of customer service and this is creating a need for more advanced platforms and sophisticated ways of interaction with them," he explained. "CPaaS is also set to elevate the customer experience and service offered across many business sectors with the likes of SMS and video APIs being highly sought after." ■

Just a minute with Keith Jackson...

Role model: Nelson Mandela, he's a legend

What talent do you wish you had? To predict the future, especially towards the end of the quarter!

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm a qualified commercial pilot

What do you fear most? Praying mantises. I'd rather face a crocodile

One example of something you've overcome: Ordering pizza on the phone in a South African accent

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Working as a pilot – anything that involves adrenaline. I love racing cars and bikes

Best piece of advice you have been given: Be kind to people

The biggest risk you have taken? Immigrating to the UK. I went from the market I knew well to a place I didn't know at all. But it's paid off

Name three ideal dinner guests: Elon Musk, Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela

Your biggest career achievement: Building successful teams

Lessons learnt: Bad news never gets better with time, so I've learnt to deal with the problem right away

Tip tip for resellers: Don't fear new technology. Embrace it and be the change

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UCaaS inertia collapses

The technological preconditions for a rush to UCaaS were in place, but until the coronavirus outbreak adoption was hardly impressive. Now, amid a global pandemic, UCaaS is universally accepted as a gold standard that binds workers together, wherever they are, as part of a single homogeneous digital workplace, says Enghouse VP of Sales for EMEA Gary Bennett.

As well as a watershed moment in human history for many reasons, the coronavirus pandemic has brought clarity and urgency to one of the comms sector's most pressing questions: What's been holding back demand for UCaaS, which should by now define the market? "We are at an inflection point where the world will be measured in pre- and post-coronavirus terms," said Bennett. "Corona has forced businesses to break down those walls of inertia that have held back UCaaS adoption, and forced organisations to understand just how powerful virtualising systems and services in the cloud can be."

Uptake of UCaaS has been surprisingly low given how long the industry has been trumpeting the technology and business opportunity. Potential sales could have been stalled by a failure in the basic rule of definition – what is UCaaS? "That's the million dollar question," stated Bennett. "When you speak to vendors it tends to look a lot like what they are selling. However, most people agree that the characteristics of UC encompass six functions: Voice and telephony (including mobility); meeting solutions (audio conferencing, video conferencing and web conferencing); messaging (email with voicemail and

unified messaging); presence and instant messaging; clients and communications-enabled applications such as integrated contact centres, communications platform as a service and workstream collaboration.

"As is often the case the technology piece has been available in various forms and levels of sophistication for several years now. This leads us to ask why it hasn't become more widespread. The answer is usually cultural in the form of inertia. In other words, 'it's too difficult', or 'we would move but we have xyz that stops us'."

Mixed messages in the channel, and a case of blinkered vision, may also have stymied UCaaS in the past, with the technology rather strangely perceived as being particularly ill-suited to the commercial interests of resellers. "The channel has often struggled with the 'what's in it for me?' piece around UCaaS," added Bennett. "There are some more creative channels that we work with that have embraced UCaaS, white labelled and re-sold it as part of a broader managed service proposition. In doing this they have made their offering stickier, thereby protecting ongoing revenue streams.

"Then there are those who see UCaaS as something that other businesses, often



Gary Bennett

Corona has forced businesses to break down those walls of inertia that have held back UCaaS adoption

competitive companies, are offering, and have tried to keep customers in the old world. Recent events will force a different approach moving forward."

Direction of travel

It is an understatement to say that sufficient growth has been stimulated quickly by the coronavirus outbreak to redeem past sluggishness in UCaaS uptake, as it has suddenly become one of the only games in town. "Gravity is moving in one direction when you look at UCaaS, so it's better to be on the bus rather than chasing after it," stated Bennett. "There is a great opportunity for channels to create a

range of new services and solutions for customers by white labelling UCaaS alongside other offerings and creating something compelling for a specific vertical. We see several of our channel partners doing this in the local government, housing association and legal sectors."

The stages resellers should go through when building a business case for UCaaS always start with understanding what the end customer truly values, needs and wants, and how technology and services will get them to where they want to be. All of this has to be customer led, advised

Bennett, even though everyone broadly wants the same things. Factoring in what clients are trying to achieve from a customer experience perspective is also key, along with assessing an organisation's goals from a cost-income ratio perspective; understanding the lengths of existing contracts; and gaining insights into the customers' strategic vision for the coming three to five years.

It is likely that such a revision would spotlight Microsoft Teams, which has already set a precedent. "Teams is having a profound impact on the UCaaS space," stated Bennett. "It's one of the largest change drivers in the market, arguably a VHS-Betamax scenario all over again. Most businesses use Office and Windows for their desktop. Most have internal IT teams skilled and certified on Microsoft. So there are many reasons why Microsoft says Teams is the fastest growing app in its history, and its availability is undoubtedly a key part of that phenomena.

"This does not mean there isn't space for others. We see adoption of our own Vidyo conferencing and comms platform accelerating exponentially. There is no doubt we see organisations every day making the decision to put collaboration platforms and UCaaS at the heart of what they do." ■

Pragma ups the pace

Pragma's mission to become a service provider and build an all-encompassing partner support business continues to flourish and was a key theme at last month's partner conference.

Pragma partner conferences are always an affirmation of the benefits that accrue from a channel-only service model and this year's event, staged at the Staverton Estate Hotel in Daventry, was no exception. The post-event social media activity testified to that, and reflected how Ericsson-LG's gamble to exclusively underpin Pragma's partner model has paid off – as Ahed Alkhatib, Vice President for Sales and Marketing at South Korean-based Ericsson-LG was eager to point out: "Pragma were once again our Global Partner of the Year and continue to lead in both cloud sales and overall growth."

At this year's conference there was a step-up in bold statements and a marked increase in Pragma's confidence, which is unsurprising given its seventh year of growth. So much so that Sales and Marketing Director Will Morey was happy to take a dig at some vendors that he claims, 'treat channel partners as agents rather than professional solutions providers'.

Managing Director Tim Brooks was equally upbeat on Pragma and its partners' irreversible move into cloud sales. "We've all proved we can successfully deal with change," he said. "Cloud will be the biggest part of our business this year and we are rapidly changing from being a distributor to a service provider."

With the unveiling of a new WebRTC UC collaboration product available via Pragma for the first time outside South Korea and new integration of the iPECS cloud solution with Microsoft Teams, the big announcements kept coming, but the most compelling came left of field. Netherlands-based Pragma supplier So Connect has introduced a non-telecoms product called Web Listings which, according to Brooks, has netted partners £1 million in gross margin since it was launched earlier this year.

As reported in January's Comms Dealer, the new white label service keeps customer web rankings up to date so they can see who has searched for them online, if they've had reviews and what scores they've received. "It's simple to set up and kept up-to-date via an API," said Brooks. "It offers over 50 per cent margin for partners and has added £1.9 million revenues. We now have 10,000 customers using it with another 8,000 currently onboarding."

In line with the 'Scaling New Heights' theme, two key Pragma appointments were announced at the conference, namely experienced marketer Lorraine Clennell, who joins as Head of Marketing, and Operations Director Grace Lawless who is leading the company's transformation into becoming a full-service provider. Clennell said over the next year her focus



Pragma partner panel debate

Cloud will be the biggest part of our business this year and we are rapidly changing from being a distributor to a service provider

would be on four areas, producing 'fit for purpose' printed collateral for partners, better video content, better case studies and running Pragma roadshows 'because relationships are our DNA'.

Smart processes

Lawless, who has joined Pragma having helped develop the contactless smart cards we all use today, said she would be concentrating on upgrading training, support and processes, especially helping engineers gain speedy access to information. "It's all about how we can improve and creating smart processes. That's what makes me tick," she said.

At the concluding partner panel debate the final word went to Patrick Johansson, Head of Global Network Sales and Commercial Management at Ericsson-LG. "We are absolutely

sure channel is the right way," he confirmed.

Whether others share that view is debatable and with the threat of virus contagion it will be interesting to see what messages leaders of the heavyweight vendors deliver to the channel in the challenging times that lie ahead. As guest motivational speaker Keith Hatter of Planet K2 put it: "So many leaders have lost their sense of purpose. When your confidence is strong your motivation will be consistent and sustainable. Your mental health and well-being will improve, and you will keep going when others don't."

"Most results are delivered through teams who have mutual accountability for shared goals. But you must have goal clarity. Only focus on the stuff you can measure. Your why, what and when must be sorted first."

On that note, the winners of the 2020 Pragma Partner awards, which were again hosted by Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent, were recognised as follows:

- Overall Reseller of the Year – Berry Telecom
- Resellers of the Year – 5G Communications, Lily Comms, BDR and Focus Group
- Overall Cloud Reseller of the Year - 5G Communications
- Cloud Resellers of the Year – DataKom, BDR, Lily Comms and One Connectivity
- Fastest Growing Resellers – Adept and YTL
- New Resellers – Mtech and NIX
- Customer Solution of the Year – Focus Group
- SoConnect Reseller of the Year – BDR
- iCall Reseller of the Year – Lily Comms
- Phone-Link Reseller of the Year – Berry Telecom.

Wilson on fibre mission

According to Andrew Wilson, there was every incentive to join CityFibre as Head of Wholesale, not least because the move offered a chance to help partners unshackle organisations from their bind to copper and migrate them to the sunny uplands of a full fibre connectivity utopia.

Every tactical consideration should impel resellers towards full fibre provision, claims Wilson, who says his experience tells him that everything is to play for in the roll out of Digital Britain. You would be wise to take note: Wilson has worked in the channel for 20 years and has his finger on the pulse of the market. He held senior positions at Virgin Media Business and DWS, moving to CityFibre in September 2019 from Node4 where he was Director of Channel Sales. CityFibre's disruptive full fibre strategy, and its engineering of a fundamental choice about the network infrastructure available to the channel, proved to be an irresistible magnet.



Andrew Wilson

We are shaking up the industry, rivalling the incumbent and igniting a spark of entrepreneurialism among channel partners

"We are shaking up the industry, rivalling the incumbent and igniting a spark of entrepreneurialism among channel partners who are excited by the full fibre opportunities we are creating," he stated. "My role is to harness this interest, working with partners to capitalise on this opportunity and accelerate adoption of full fibre services."

Since CityFibre's £29 million acquisition of Entanet in August 2017 the wholesale comms provider has undergone a migration phase that coincided with CityFibre's scale up to become the UK's third national digital infrastructure platform. The company has also strengthened

its channel position, and developed relationships with regional, business and carrier/national partners.

"We've seen our partners harnessing the opportunities that come with focusing their sales and marketing strategy on CityFibre's full fibre services in towns and cities where we have infrastructure in the ground," added Wilson. "As our network continues to grow, our

partners also have a chance to tap into new business opportunities across the UK."

Regional expansion

CityFibre's wholesale network currently covers 28 Gigabit towns and cities following the addition of eight new cities in 2019, putting the network in reach of almost 200,000 businesses. The strategy is to extend to 62 towns and cities and eight million homes and

businesses by 2025. "Strong collaboration with channel partners across the UK is central to our continued growth, which is why we've developed a new sales structure and focus into three customer verticals across our aligned sales and marketing teams, to ensure we support all partners wherever they sit in the channel ecosystem," explained Wilson.

CityFibre's three customer verticals are segmented as regional partners, made up of City Champions and Launch Partners; Business Partners, which represent the largest segment of partners; and carrier/national partners. "By operating an Open Access Network we are now able to support a much wider part of the UK channel," added Wilson. "The ability to onboard carrier and national partners as an alternative to Openreach means we are now operating a much wider channel ecosystem, and with so much demand for high bandwidth services we are seeing a rapidly growing order book across our three main routes to market."

CityFibre continues to witness an increase in sales across its 28 on-net cities live on its network. It closed 2019 with record on-net sales, while January 2020 was also a record breaking month as CityFibre sold more circuits in that month than ever before, and also for the first time on-net circuit sales outnumbered off-net sales. "This is a clear indication that

the channel is responding to what we are offering to the marketplace, and more and more businesses are now unlocking their digital potential," added Wilson.

"We offer City Champions and the original Launch Partners that helped us go live in each of our cities a range of sales and marketing support to capitalise on the fresh choice and differentiation, helping them to win connectivity opportunities that lead to further value added sales. We also know that a CityFibre-based solution may not always be an available option for channel partners, so we've maintained working relationships with other major UK carriers to provide choice for our channel."

It's also important that partners have confidence in CityFibre's ability to react and adapt to the challenges posed by Covid-19. "Early on we established a dedicated task force to manage our response," explained Wilson. "We also undertook multiple simulations to test our capabilities ahead of formally closing multiple offices, and in line with the latest advice all of our office-based staff are now working from home. We are also aware of the impact of Covid-19 on our partners and their customers, so we've engaged with them to develop flexible options such as temporary bandwidth upgrades where it's possible to ensure any adverse effect on businesses is mitigated." ■

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Pile's master agent alert

Gamma channel boss Daryl Pile has issued a warning to partners on the rise of 'master agents' in the bustling hosted comms market – and he fears there will be many casualties...

Speaking at the London leg of the annual Gamma roadshow, Pile also warned resellers to be wary of new billing models from some providers. "It costs a lot to provide cloud services and it's becoming a heavily commoditised market," he said. "There are more than 100 hosted providers now, all looking to take one per cent of the market, so they cannot all survive. It's a competitive landscape and customers are also being pulled across by some vendors and billed directly. Beware of the master agent model which is on the rise."

Gamma's four roadshows, held at iconic football venues across the UK, were staged at Hampden Park in Glasgow, The Etihad in Manchester, Villa Park in Birmingham, and Stamford Bridge in London. They attracted a total of 700 loyal followers keen to hear the company's tactics and game plan for the year ahead.

Over 300 'supporters' attended the final fixture, staged at Chelsea FC where Managing Director Pile enjoyed his Jurgen Klopp 'You'll Never Walk Alone' moment, declaring: "We had a spectacular 2019 and it's all down to players like you. You cannot chop and change with a channel strategy and the trust and loyalty you have shown is helping us build your businesses."

Attack on all fronts is Gamma's tactic and Pile

underlined the opportunity to turn 14 million CPE seats into Gamma Horizon hosted ones before the PSTN 'stop sell' in 2023. He claimed Gamma's financial strength puts it in a secure position to compete and its strategy to continue to invest in the channel was key, quoting the recent acquisition of Microsoft focused UC business Exactive as further evidence of its commitment to UCaaS development. "Thirteen million people use MS Teams every week," he added. "Exactive helps us address a part of the market that is already embedded in a Microsoft ecosystem and this will be an essential part of our UCaaS strategy."

To meet the growing demand for flexible working amid the coronavirus outbreak, Pile and Head of Channel Andy Smethurst demonstrated, via a fun video, how Gamma's Collaborate Conference solution can turn a meeting room into a video conferencing suite in 80 seconds.

In summary, the key focus of this year's shows was to stress to delegates the tools they now have at their disposal to sell UCaaS and add value via Gamma's partnerships with Akixi for call management, Cirrus for cloud contact centres, Three for everything mobile and mobile data and Microsoft for integration with MS Teams. Interestingly, when asked, 88 per cent of the audience saw Gamma integration with Teams as an opportunity.



Daryl Pile

There are more than 100 hosted providers now, all looking to take one per cent of the market

Conference soundbytes...

Andy Smethurst, Gamma Head of Channel, on UCaaS opportunities:

"SIP growth is flattening out and the biggest opportunity for the channel is UCaaS. Cloud PBX penetration is standing at 49 per cent in the 10-49 seat sector, and it's a Trojan Horse into the mid-market and enterprise markets."

Joe Pratten, Gamma Hosted Specialist, on Flexible Working:

"UC is all about creating value. Having internal messaging, voice and video conferencing on a

single platform is powerful. In the current climate, 478,000 Horizon users are looking at flexible working options. To demonstrate simple RoI to your customers you could look at their spend on travel. It costs £224 to get to London peak time from Bristol which is £1.10 a mile, whereas a first class flight to Dubai is 44p a mile. I am not saying businesses should have their team meetings in Dubai, I'm highlighting the obvious and glaring RoI that can be achieved by a business simply hosting their internal meetings using a collaboration platform."

Matt Barnett, Gamma Head of Channel for the South West region, on integration with MS Teams:

"What does Teams represent for the channel? To be blunt, a big opportunity to enable up to seven million Teams users in the UK with a high level business voice capability. Our Microsoft Teams Direct routing proposition enables users to add value by offering enhanced features such as disaster recovery, call queueing, hunt groups and more."

Matt Worboys, Gamma Business Development Director, on Gamma's partnership with Three:

"Mobile is a £2.9 billion market and it is mostly stable. Video and voice are critical applications to deliver across Gamma's mobile data network and, as an MVNO, we provide full control over the brand, the contract and value propositions. Resellers also have access to the latest technology when it enters the market such as VOLTE, Voice over Wi-Fi and 5G."

Duncan Finlay, Head of Enterprise Product and Marketing, Three, on the potential of 5G:

"Three has invested £2 billion on 5G, and is now the 12th largest holder of mobile spectrum in the world. 5G technology will boost revenues by £1.7 billion and will create 150,000 jobs. Seventy five per cent of businesses do not know how to make the best of 5G, which represents a massive opportunity for resellers." ■

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Cisco in key hire



Elisabeth De Dobbeleer

CISCO'S Elisabeth De Dobbeleer is to steer its EMEAR channel as newly appointed Partner Lead for the region – taking over from David Meads who was appointed Chief Executive for Cisco UK&I in February. She was previously Cisco's Vice President and Deputy General Counsel for EMEAR, and has held a number of prior global and regional roles at Cisco across its legal, business operations and services teams during the past 18 years.

Her remit is to develop growth initiatives and transformation programmes

designed to boost Cisco's partner business, the evolution of its portfolio and investment in customer lifecycle management. "Building strong relationships with partners is increasingly important during these uncertain times," she stated. "Technology is playing a pivotal role in helping customers, critical services and communities around the world."

Also on the move...

GLOBAL IT services firm DXC Technology has appointed Ken Corless as Executive Vice President for Offerings and Strategic Partners. Corless, who recently served as CTO for Deloitte's Cloud Practice,



Ken Corless

will report to Mike Salvino, DXC's President and CEO. The appointment is the eighth addition to Salvino's senior leadership team since he became CEO in September last year. "Ken will help us innovate, optimise and standardise our offerings," said Salvino. "In the IT industry today, teaming is critical and Ken has a track record of developing industry partnerships that produce results."

FORMER Wessex Internet Tech Director Matt Ryan has joined Curve IT as Head of Fibre Infrastructure Development. He brings almost 20 years experience working in network infrastructure and architecture and will be responsible



Matt Ryan

for large scale superfast broadband projects. Previous roles include a stint as Technical Director at Metranet Communications where he oversaw the introduction of a hybrid wireless and fibre gigabit service provider network in Brighton. He was also Technical Director at Moovera Networks. Ryan said: "Getting fibre infrastructure in the ground requires a carefully coordinated approach. With many local authorities and contractors looking beyond Openreach when it comes to delivering their own connectivity projects, I will champion Curve as a full fibre planning and delivery partner."

OPENREACH non-executive Board member Sir Brendan Barber is stepping down, making way for Andrew Barron who joins on 1st June in a similar role. Barber, who was appointed in January 2017, will leave on 31st May. Barron is currently Deputy Chair of Swedish telecoms operator Tele2 and his long career in telecoms and media includes a stint as COO of Virgin Media up to its sale to Liberty Global in 2013. Mike McTighe, Chairman of Openreach, said: "Andrew is well placed to provide expertise and challenge our discussions."

SOFTCAT Managing Director Colin Brown is to stand down on July 31st. He will be replaced Richard Wyn Griffiths who is currently Director of Solutions, Services and Marketing, and joined the company in 2002. Chief Executive Graeme Watt said succession planning was well underway as Brown informed the board of his intentions some time ago. Brown joined Softcat in 2012 from Microsoft where he was UK services chief.



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