



Pandemic spreads digital transformation says Beacham p26

Vodafone UK channel leader turns industry figurehead p30



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3-10

Industry News

Catch up with events in comms

16

Business Insight

How coronavirus impacts M&A

20

Special Report

Charting the Covid-19 recovery period

24

Leadership

How to help people through lockdown

38

Comms Vision

Driving value in disruptive times

46

Comms People

This month's movers and shakers



New watershed for ICT resellers

ICT resellers are facing a watershed moment and cloud providers could be the big winners when the immediate impact of the Covid-19 lockdown eases.

SPECIAL MESSAGE

A post-coronavirus ICT procurement boom driven by cost and flexibility considerations is set to create stark winners and losers in the channel as organisations become much less dependent on office space compared to pre-coronavirus times and seek to become leaner.

All indications point to cloud comms providers being best placed to shake the disease and poised to receive a boost when the lockdown is relaxed as firms

double down on cost savings and scale up remote working while UCaaS and collaboration also become priorities.

“Covid-19 is a wake-up call,” stated Shiv Passap, Director, BTT Comms. “We will see a big shift to homeworking solutions and the traditional office will reduce in size as businesses will want to cut their overheads.”

According to T-Tech MD Daniel Teacher (pictured) far more business leaders are opting to examine expenditure and identify savings. “Usually we

talk about growth without thinking about the cost of growth,” he stated. “But the Covid-19 crisis has taught business leaders to be tougher on how to manage costs and deal with productivity. Managers will be given more accountability and they will be required to meet new objectives.

“RPA and automation will also become more important.

“The value of IT as a currency has increased and everybody will be leaner in how they run their businesses.”

Assessing the recovery – p20

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

THE channel has treated 'business transformation' as a priority for many years and long promoted the workplace improvements that are unlocked by technology, which is a trend that has been accelerated by those selling it and those buying

into the benefits. But in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, which has catalysed the biggest ever tech enabled business and workplace transformation in UK history, we can clearly see the true scale of the market opportunity for flexible cloud solutions that offer everyone in the supply chain long-term sustainability. We must now ask what more can be done to build on the Covid-19 induced Damascene moment, when most business leaders saw the technology light that has existed for many years.

It is also clear that the comms sector has hidden its light under a bushel for too long. Home working is nothing new and the tech that enables it has been around for a long time. Yet you'd think that the realisation of the benefits of these solutions in March among the business community was on a par with Christopher Columbus's discovery of America.

True, America has been around for slightly longer than a SoHo set up. It is also a fact that it took a pandemic to drive home the real benefits of remote working, collaboration and video conferencing to the end user community. Now it is time for the channel to turn up the volume even further on ICT solutions of all kinds as buyers are more primed than ever to lend an ear.

The channel achieved the near-impossible in absorbing the lockdown jolt and enabling the UK to close doors as the edict to work from home where possible descended with force. And as the UK shut down, many minds opened up to the possibilities of technology that has been within reach for years. Once the Covid-19 restrictive commands have been lifted, pushing against open doors could become the order of the day.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Fishwick on virus impact

ADEPT Chairman Ian Fishwick has pinned his post-Covid-19 profitability hopes on the firm's 75% recurring revenue ratio, a mix of public and private sector business and minimal capital expenditure.

"We will use all the tools available to us to reduce cost and cash outflows where appropriate, including pausing any acquisition activity, a pay and recruitment freeze and a replacement of overtime payments with time off in lieu," he said as the AIM-listed firm reported sales up 19% and EBITDA rising 13% year-on-year for its year ending 31st March 2020.

Turnover is roughly 45% public sector across the NHS, education and Government, and 55% commercial.

Net debt of £28m at year-end is £3m below market expectations, said Fishwick, primarily as a result of a share placing in February 2020.

"Given the current economic uncertainty due to Covid-19 it is possible that we may not pay a final dividend in respect of the year ending 31st March 2020," added Fishwick.

He noted that Adept has seen another strong year with geographic expansion in Yorkshire.



Ian Fishwick

The acquisition of Advanced Computer Systems in Doncaster saw the previous acquisition of ETS in Wakefield integrated into the Doncaster office.

Following the escalation of the Covid-19 crisis Adept conducted stress tests to understand the potential impact on sales revenue, profitability and cash position over the coming year.

"Our stress tests assume that the next six months will see the most significant impact after which the Covid-19 outbreak will start to be under control," Fishwick said.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

FOLLOWING four consecutive years of growth in the UK and a 57% increase in revenues for the year ending 31st March 2020 (closing out the financial year on 74m euros turnover), Dublin and Camberley-based distributor DataSolutions now plans to double down on its UK operations as it enters its 30th year in business. MD Michael O'Hara, who has ambitious plans to grow the firm significantly by 2022, said: "We have proven that we can expand while maintaining levels of support for channel partners. Having moved into the UK market in 2016 we now wished we had focused our efforts here earlier."

THE UK's altnets increased their full fibre coverage by 50% in 2019, up from 23% growth in 2018, to pass 1.2 million premises, according to a report put together for the Independent Networks Co-operative Association (INCA) by Point Topic. The study also shows strong continued investment with financial related announcements up by £936m and rural fixed wireless connections remaining stable. INCA calculates that a commitment of £6.6bn has been announced for the independent operators.



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NEWS ROUNDUP

POLY has blended the partner programmes of its constituent businesses, Plantronics and Polycom, to create a unified portal that provides access to all assets, training, tools and content. The programme also shifts the evaluation of partner levels away from a focus on revenue, rewarding partners for investments they make in working with Poly, not just the number of devices they sell. "We've reimagined our programme to encourage participation from a broad range of partners," said Nick Tidd, VP of Global Channel Sales for Poly.

OAK Innovation has added LogMeIn to its range of cloud services available to UK partners. The LogMeIn remote connectivity tools enable people to work from anywhere and Oak believes that in the coming years environmental, social and economic factors, along with new technologies like 5G, will see more and more companies adopting 'the virtual workplace'. Oak CEO William Emm said: "The partnership comes at a time when many businesses are looking for flexible working solutions." The agreement includes LogMeIn's GoToMeeting, GoToConnect, GoToWebinar, LogMeIn Rescue and RescueAssist tools.

Natterbox in new era of growth

NATTERBOX has shifted up the gears following an additional £7.5m funding boost from Octopus Investments.

The cloud communications scale-up business will use the capital to drive global expansion, strengthen its sales and marketing operations and invest in product development teams.

Natterbox's phone system is managed entirely within Salesforce. And since Octopus Investments' initial investment in 2018 the organisation has opened new offices in Sydney and Chicago.

Neil Hammerton, CEO and co-founder of Natterbox, commented: "We're on a big growth trajectory and last year was the best one yet for Natterbox."

"Our updated product suite alongside the increased reliance on virtual communication puts us in a strong position for the years ahead."

Richard Court, who is the Head of Development Capital at Octopus Investments, commented: "There remains a large global market to go after and Natterbox is primed to build on its successes to date."

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Tech whiz produces Covid-19 protection

VAPOUR'S Head of Cloud Craig Holmes has turned his hand to making face masks designed to protect wearers from the Covid-19 virus.

Using cash freed up from a cancelled cruise Holmes bought two high-end 3D printers and using CAD models for face guard headbands he is manufacturing circa 300 units per week, complete with visors.

The units are donated to local shopkeepers and other 'forgotten' key workers who may struggle to obtain PPE.

"I decided to do my bit after visiting my local village shop and talking to one of the ladies there who was worried to still be working," said Holmes.

"It's no surprise – given my job – that I love tech, so when our cruise was cancelled due to Covid-19, the printers seemed the perfect thing to spend the money on. With the help of Vapour, we're now able to support some of the unsung heroes during all of this."

Vapour Cloud CEO Tim Mercer is paying for all materials and distribution.

He said: "We've seen an overwhelming degree of generosity from the business community since the Covid-19 out-



Craig Holmes

break began, and Vapour has also been keen to find ways to give back wherever we can. But to see our colleagues also

go out of their way to think of ways to help fight this horrific health crisis makes us proud as an employer."

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Block secures key purchase

LONDON and Crewe based Block Solutions has bagged IT infrastructure provider and long time partner Connect-IP, its second acquisition.

The deal brings additional lines of business, an expansion of the client base while the new Sheffield location is a boost to its geographic presence.

“We’ve partnered for more than 12 years and I’ve always felt a strong synergy between our ethos, values and culture,” stated Block Solutions CEO Marc Chang.

The organisations will target key sectors including health-care and retail with end-to-end connectivity from the network outlet to final application.

“Increasingly, our clients are becoming challenged in assessing and transforming their physical environments to the level and speed that modern business demands,” added Chang.

“This can introduce unnecessary risk into high value network infrastructures through inconsistent quality, often significantly delaying projects



Marc Chang

and return on investment. With networks becoming ever more critical many clients are looking for one trusted partner to take the hassle away.”

Connect IP Director Bob Allen, who joins the Block executive board, added: “I can think of no better example of our shared values than our most recent collaboration to stand up the infrastructure at London’s 4,000 bed Nightingale Hospital in just seven days.”

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NEWS ROUNDUP

RINGCENTRAL has added a Google optimised video component to its RingCentral Office platform, which is available in the US now and will be rolled out to new RingCentral Office customers in EMEA later in Q2. “The world is experiencing the largest work from home demand ever,” said Vlad Shmunis, RingCentral’s founder, Chairman and CEO. “RingCentral Video addresses the demand in work from anywhere by leveraging next generation technologies to enable a fast, unified and open video meeting experience.”

CISCO and Google Cloud have confirmed their intent to develop an application-centric multicloud networking fabric. This automated solution means that applications and enterprise networks will be able to share service level agreement settings, security policy and compliance data, to provide predictable application performance and a consistent user experience. The partnership aims to support businesses that are embracing a hybrid and multicloud strategy.

Jola marks sixth year with £2m boost in annual billing

JOLA marked its sixth anniversary last month by closing the books on a successful trading year in which it billed just under £2m more than the prior year.

“We have invested in our billing and development teams and are recruiting in sales and product management,” commented MD Andrew Dickinson.

The company now employs 27 people, bills over £6m and plans aggressive growth over the next few years having launched 28 products and product extensions during the last 12 months, including multi-network eSIMs, unlimited data SIMs and Direct



The Jola team

Routing for Microsoft Teams. Jola now supports 700 MSP, IT and telecoms partners, and through them thousands of cus-

tomers globally. “160 new partners signed with us last year, 75% of which sell mobile data,” added Dickinson.



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NEWS ROUNDUP

TO HELP companies maintain clear customer messaging and service levels during the Covid-19 crisis wholesale audio marketing provider AudPro has cut the cost of its minimum order by half. "During this unprecedented time of uncertainty, clear communication with customers is key," said Director Andrew Jones. "Companies need to make sure that any customers contacting them by phone get the help they need. Poor service now could cause commercial damage in the future."

ELITE Group is offering free professional voice prompt bundles that can be used on any compatible IVR phone system in a bid to boost clear messaging and communication between organisations and their customers amid the Covid-19 crisis. "When the opportunity arose to offer everyone free professional voice prompts, we took it," said Adam Turton, MD, Communications, Elite Group. "Normally they are provided as an additional add-on that is chargeable and attached to a core managed service package. However, these aren't normal times and we are conscious of the need to support other businesses and groups where we can."

SCC solution hunts fevers



James Rigby

FEVER detector technology being tested in hospitals, restaurants and airports will be provided to business customers by IT solutions specialist SCC.

The firm has already installed a mobile Thermal Temperature Detection system mounted on a tripod in the staff entrance at Bournemouth Airport.

Phase two will see the introduction of a multi-camera system positioned at each entry point across the airport's terminal building in departures and arrivals, enabling border staff to intercept any passengers showing signs of a high temperature.

Devices ranging from handheld to fixed multi-camera systems are used to record body temperature and identify febrile people with real-time alerts.

The tech works in all human traffic environments and is being used by governments, transport authorities and retailers.

"Businesses are preparing to resume operations and will be required to demonstrate that proactive measures are in place to safeguard the health and wellbeing of employees and customers at all premises," stated SCC CEO James Rigby.

"Thermal Fever Detection will play a vital part in protecting people and enabling safe social distancing.

"This will help to accelerate the authorisation for businesses to reopen by Government and other relevant authorities."

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

NEC's set for cloud expansion

A LINK up with Intermedia has enabled NEC to ramp up its global cloud comms and collaboration services strategy as the tech partners plan to launch the Univerge Blue Connect UCaaS solution and the Univerge Blue Engage CCaaS offering.

They will be sold primarily under private label through resellers and IT distributors.

The roll out kicks off in the United States within Q2 2020. The follow-on expanded offering will integrate with NEC premise-based systems.

"Enabling customer migration to the cloud is key," said Paul Kievit, President and Head of NEC Enterprise Solutions EMEA and Americas. "To support this rapid migration on a global scale NEC aimed to team up with a born-in-the-cloud partner that could provide a fully integrated suite of UCaaS and CCaaS solutions."

According to Elka Popova, VP, Information and Communications Technologies at Frost & Sullivan, the deal is 'a big move for both NEC and Intermedia'.

"When you combine Intermedia's UCaaS and CCaaS offerings with NEC's channel reach and relationships you have to take notice," she said.

NEWS ROUNDUP

CITYFIBRE has deferred billing on new Gigabit Ethernet installations for up to 90 calendar days as a supportive move in the ongoing battle against Covid-19. The grace period applies from the installation date of new orders of Ethernet Flex 1Gbps and 1Gbps bearer-based Ethernet circuits, unless the customer requests the connection to be activated sooner because they have resumed working from their premises. The initiative currently covers orders placed until the end of May 2020 and includes existing orders that customers have put on hold.

CLOUD telephony provider Xelion UK has introduced pay-as-you-go licensing to aid customers that want to move to staff home working for the duration of the current Covid-19 emergency. David Reynolds, Xelion UK MD, commented: "This is a challenging time for businesses of every kind. Some may want to move to a home working model temporarily during the crisis. By providing pay-as-you-go licensing for new customers we are allowing them to locate their staff safely at home without the worry and cost implications of entering into long-term licensing agreements."

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West arrives at Truespeed



Henry West

SOUTH west full fibre infrastructure provider and ISP Truespeed has signalled plans to set up a wholesale operation with the appointment of Henry West as Commercial Director.

He is tasked with evolving the direct business sales strategy and developing plans for a channel offering that will see the firm appoint IT resellers and other service providers.

West joins Truespeed from fibre network aggregator Fluid-One where he spent 18 months as Director of Channel Sales. Prior to that he spent 12 years at communications and IT services provider KCOM, most recently as Head of Channel Sales.

"Having grown up in Somerset and spent most of my working life based in the south west I am passionate about helping local businesses to thrive," he said. "I have been

following Truespeed's growth with interest and share its community-first ethos.

"My immediate task will be to review and expand the firm's business portfolio so that we can offer businesses and IT resellers of all shapes and sizes the right digital springboard, both during these challenging times and in the future.

"This will help bring businesses into the digital fast lane, with a level of connectivity that's able to support VoIP and cloud-based applications."

CEO Evan Wienburg added: "As a local Somerset man with an industry track record Henry is the ideal candidate to supercharge our business offerings.

"Plus, his experience in building and growing indirect channels will help us to lay the foundations for our future wholesale play."

Project seeks to tackle virus

THE Vodafone Foundation and scientists at Imperial College London have called on smartphone users across the UK to come together to support a project to speed up research into treatments for Covid-19.

The Corona-AI project will be delivered through DreamLab, an application developed by the Vodafone Foundation and launched in 2017 to aid cancer research.

For the project to work people need to download the DreamLab app and activate it every night while they sleep and charge their phones.

This collective processing power creates a virtual super-computer, capable of processing millions of calculations.

The project uses AI to trawl through data and identify existing drugs and food molecules that could benefit those with the infectious disease.

Dr Kirill Veselkov from the Department of Surgery and Cancer at Imperial College London, who is leading the research, said: "We urgently need new treatments to tackle Covid-19.

"There are existing drugs out there that might work to treat it; and the great thing about repurposing existing drugs is that we already know they are safe and therefore could get them to patients quickly."

Helen Lamprell, who is a Trustee and board member of the Vodafone UK Foundation and General Counsel and External Affairs Director at Vodafone UK, commented: "We ask everyone to come together and harness the collective power of their smartphones by connecting to DreamLab.

"If everyone in the UK connects, we have the potential to really make a difference in the fight against Covid-19."



Helen Lamprell

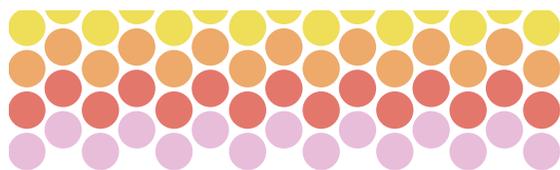
NEWS ROUNDUP

FORTINET continues to attract new managed security service providers (MSSPs) seeking a SD-WAN solution, including Node4, Zain Jordan and Liquid Network. "Increasingly, MSSPs in particular are delivering new managed services built on Fortinet's SD-WAN solution," said John Maddison, EVP of Products and CMO. "Our MSSP partners realise that delivering connectivity-only SD-WAN services is not sustainable long-term and are choosing to differentiate their services through the inclusion of security."

BT CEO Philip Jansen has committed to no job losses related to the coronavirus crisis for the foreseeable future, and confirmed a pay increase for key and non-managerial workers, and a pay freeze for managers. All staff will receive



£500 worth of BT shares in June and Jansen is to donate his salary for at least the next six months. "This is an unprecedented situation and I want to give our people some certainty about the months ahead," he said. "This period requires sacrifices from us all, and I want our people to know we are in this together."



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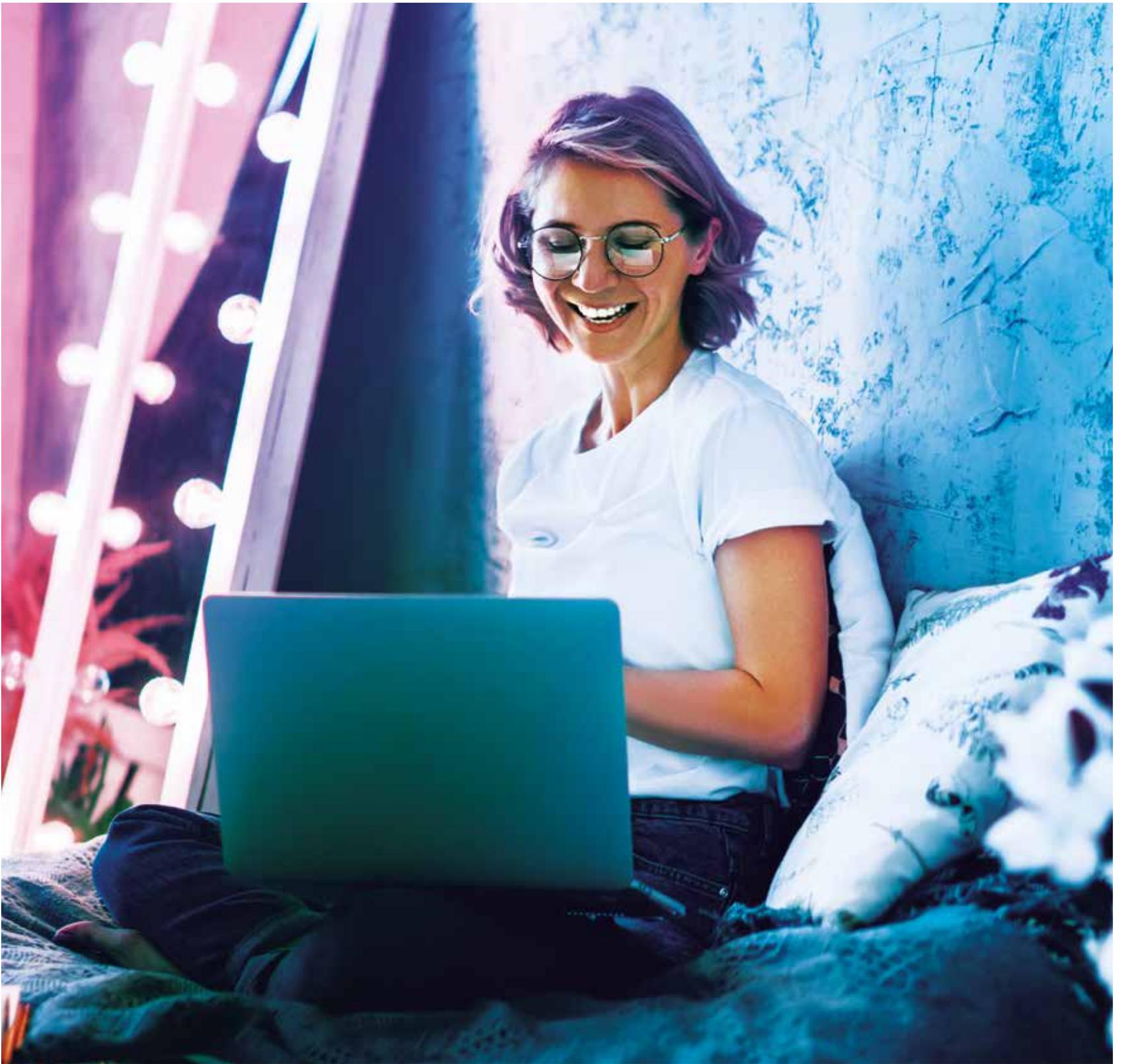
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Repurposed event designed to fill ICT channel engagement gap

MARGIN in Voice & Data (MiVaD), Comms Dealer's popular networking event for the SME ICT channel, has been repurposed as a 'virtual' symposium in the wake of the Covid-19 social distancing restrictions.

The renamed MIVAD Virtual event will now be staged online across two days in June (23rd and 24th) allowing the reseller community to gain valuable insights into the state of the rapidly changing communications and IT supply sector and meet potential suppliers in a unique online forum.

During the event registered resellers will be able to log-in to hear informative interviews with industry analysts and industry leaders and arrange a private video conference meet-



Nigel Sergent

ing with selected suppliers. "Ultimately, MiVaD Virtual is simply an online version of the same event we have run for 20 years," commented Nigel Sergent, Editorial Director at

Comms Dealer magazine publisher BPL Business Media.

"MiVaD has always been about connecting resellers with suppliers keen to help them be more successful and in these

challenging times we felt we had to keep that process alive.

"We know some resellers are busier than they have ever been in this crisis while others are finding it tough, so we felt we had to offer a means of bringing them together with suppliers who may be able to help make their life easier now and in an unpredictable future.

"Now, more than ever, it is vital for channel players to keep up with the changes and trends that will shape the 'new normal' ahead of us and MiVaD Virtual will provide that opportunity."

The managed 1-to-1 formats of Comms Dealer's events have a demonstrable track record of delivering genuine ROI for both sponsors and delegates and Mike O'Brien, Managing

Director, is confident MiVaD Virtual will be no different, albeit without the face-to-face elements which are so risky in the current pandemic.

"We have re-tasked our event system which provides a seamless and familiar user experience to continue to provide a fully managed 1-to-1 facility that enables sponsors and delegates to schedule virtual meetings," he explained.

"We decided we could not let restrictions on personal engagement be a loss of opportunity for a fully profiled group of potential partners to meet with channel suppliers old and new."

Resellers can register for MiVaD Virtual on the event website at www.margin-in-voice-data.com

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ICT solutions prove vital

Collaboration technology has taken centre stage following the shift to home working, but the current crisis does not mean we have to be in strategic lockdown, so plan now for the next digital transformation push, urges Richard Roberts, Vice President, UK&I and sub-Saharan Africa, Mitel.

Strategy can bring reassurance and empowerment, and there has never been a better time for the channel to plan ahead for the widespread digitalisation of businesses, believes Roberts. "Covid-19 has shown how critical seamless communications and collaboration solutions are to the viability of businesses, economies and communities," he stated. "Expectations have been raised for what communication and collaboration solutions can deliver in terms of business resilience, productivity and innovative customer experiences. The channel has a key role to play here in connecting customers with the opportunities to transform their businesses."

Roberts says it is now vital for the channel to have a strong virtual services offering that offers resilience to physical disruptions. "The current crisis has highlighted the incredible value of the channel to our customers, and we are seeing every day that when expertise, customer insight and a fanatical commitment to customer service come together there is little that cannot be achieved," he added.

"We are seeing the importance of quality collaboration and



Richard Roberts

Covid-19 has shown just how critical seamless communications and collaboration solutions are to the viability of businesses, economies and communities

communication for businesses, and the ability to enable employees to work productively from wherever they may be. Organisations need the flexibility to choose their own path, whether this be using on-site, cloud or a combination of both. There is no one-size fits all approach to business communications – only by providing choice can we best support them in achieving their business goals."

Fast reaction

Mitel began monitoring the Covid-19 outbreak from the outset of the year and took steps to ensure its business continuity plans were robust and that

the supply chain was not interrupted by changes in demand across a range of hardware and software platforms. As part of its Covid-19 effort Mitel is also offering its MiCloud Connect solution with nothing to pay until 2021, along with the option of a six month free trial of its collaborative tool MiTeam Meetings, as well as providing a 50 per cent discount on self-paced training among other offers relating to remote working solutions.

"This is a challenging time for some of our channel partners, particularly those serving industries that have been heavily impacted by

lockdown measures," added Roberts. "They may need to rely on us for additional skills, experience or technology. We're working hard to ensure partners have the resources, supplies and support they need. This includes offering our solutions in ways which address the immediate challenges."

Covid-19 has brought an immediacy and urgency to trends that have in fact existed for some time, observed Roberts. "We have been talking for years about telecommuting, dispersed workforces and digital collaboration," he said. "In many instances businesses were already implementing these solutions, to a larger or smaller extent. However, Covid-19 has prompted them to move more rapidly and to appreciate both the value and the necessity in so doing."

Collaboration technology is not just seen as a stop gap while business people are unable to meet face-to-face, pointed out Roberts. "Businesses are recognising that collaboration affords more opportunities for interaction and makes internal networking much easier," he commented. "I believe that more businesses will adopt remote working practices permanently as they experience the benefits first hand. Furthermore, for many organisations, their contact centre lies at the heart of

the customer experiences they strive to create and the services that they offer.

"We're working with these customers to help meet the sudden change in demand and to securely enable dispersed contact centre solutions at scale, the likes of which we haven't seen before. I'm impressed by the way so many UK businesses are moving so quickly to preserve and enhance the experience of their customers with new approaches to front-line customer services."

True partnerships, both channel and end customer, have been forged in adversity, and it is those who have shown an ability to meet the challenge by serving rather than simply selling that will see sustained success, says Roberts. "It's a combination of Mitel and our channel together that delivers the diversity of communication and collaboration solutions that empowers customers to meet the challenges they face," he commented.

"Many businesses are only just now discovering the unused potential within their current communication and collaboration infrastructure, while many others are seeing the art of the possible in the actions of others. Our role with our channel is to enable, educate and help those organisations release this value to full effect." ■



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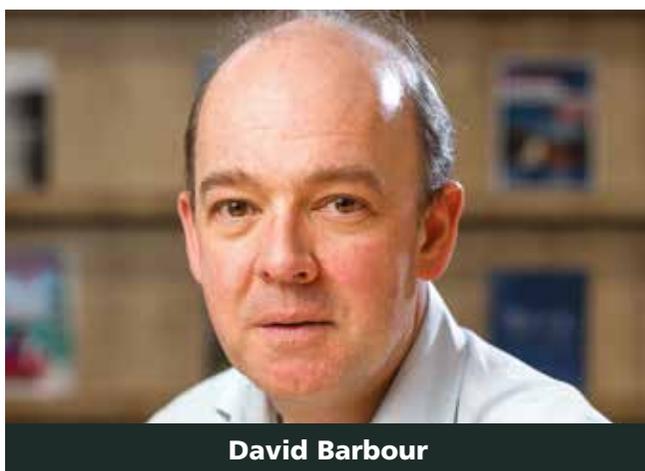


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Sector shows resilience

That there is a disconnect between the pre-pandemic M&A sector on the one hand and the Covid-19 economy on the other is no surprise. Just as obvious, says FPE Capital Managing Partner David Barbour, is the positive outlook for acquirers, vendors and investors in the ICT provider space.

Not surprisingly, M&A in the comms sector is diverging from its previously steady course, giving way to Covid-19 pressures which have to some extent applied the brakes on funding and deal doing. But things are already looking up, and a robust investment and acquisition story is certain to emerge in the not too distant future, according to Barbour...



David Barbour

How is the ICT sector weathering the Covid-19 storm?

The ICT sector is far more resilient than most and it is clear that in the medium-term clients will need rapid assistance and more technology in moving their workforces to a true remote working environment. Cloud migration, cyber security and remote access software will be in high demand. But there are some headwinds. Much of the smaller end of the ICT market relies on a customer base of largely SMEs, and a national, economy-wide recession will impact SMEs disproportionately.

Business failures, late payments and bad debts will become a fact of life, and some sectors have taken a hard hit and will take a long time to rebound. Therefore, any buyer or investor in the ICT market will be careful about the end sector an ICT supplier focuses on. Retail, travel, leisure and hospitality

There will always be a need for agile, service-led businesses in the mid-sized and SME market

are going to be difficult and likely to put investors off. Government customers will be seen more positively.

How will Covid-19 change approaches to the ICT channel market?

The pandemic will change the criteria in identifying and partnering with ICT firms looking to raise investment in the future. Buyers and investors will look for end customer sectors that can get through this particular downturn – and for ICT suppliers that are strongest in the cloud, cyber and software areas to provide growth momentum going forward. Pure connectivity and voice, while valued for their perceived resilience, will

be less important drivers. Also, debt leverage levels are likely to be lower for a while. Deals may well happen before we get through the recovery phase, but pricing will have to reflect the new economic circumstances.

Have scale up opportunities been impacted?

There will always be a need for agile, service-led businesses to service the mid-sized and SME market. The product mix will evolve but the opportunity will be excellent. The most attractive resellers/MSPs for investment will be those with strong underlying sector dynamics (we may see MSPs become quite sector specific) plus

the right product mix for the evolving workspace.

Have you witnessed banks pulling back?

It is still early days, but we are aware of sale and investment processes being put on hold, or going slower, while the Covid-19 impact is assessed. Another big driver of investment is the attitude of the debt markets which are both cautious and also swamped as they implement the Government's debt guarantee scheme. For larger deals the debt market looks to have put a major brake on activity for the near-term at least. But there are a number of banks, and even more debt funds that like the sector dynamics given a perceived longer-term move to remote working. So it is likely that some debt will remain available at the moment. We have had a couple of debt funds speak to us about committing now.

And on the equity side?

Venture capital firms will probably be preoccupied with their existing large portfolios, many of which may require further equity funding, so they are unlikely to be in the market for new opportunities for maybe 12 months or more. PE investors will be a mixed bag. Some have funds that are already heavy with connectivity and reseller/MSP assets so might be reluctant to get more sector concentration.

Others, with newer, less invested funds may see this as a good time to invest at lower valuations and with some interesting underlying dynamics as tailwinds.

For scale-up ICT providers, what are the key challenges and opportunities now?

The flip side of an increase in remote working might see a lot of offices reduced or vacated, so some of the more traditional connectivity and analogue call revenues might be significantly reduced, and fast. We are seeing SMEs talk about changing their workplaces permanently following this disruption. And the first sign is through shared workspaces where companies on short notice terms have left and may never return.

Also, many scale up projects have been acquisition driven, which will be challenging when the debt markets are more difficult. The bigger consolidators will have an advantage as they will be able to get better debt terms and larger facilities. Organic growth will be possible and the opportunities will be there, but product and skill mix will be key. Smaller firms without the depth of talent and skills to service demanding customers 24/7 may find they are squeezed by mid-sized businesses coming into their market. ■

Report continues on p16



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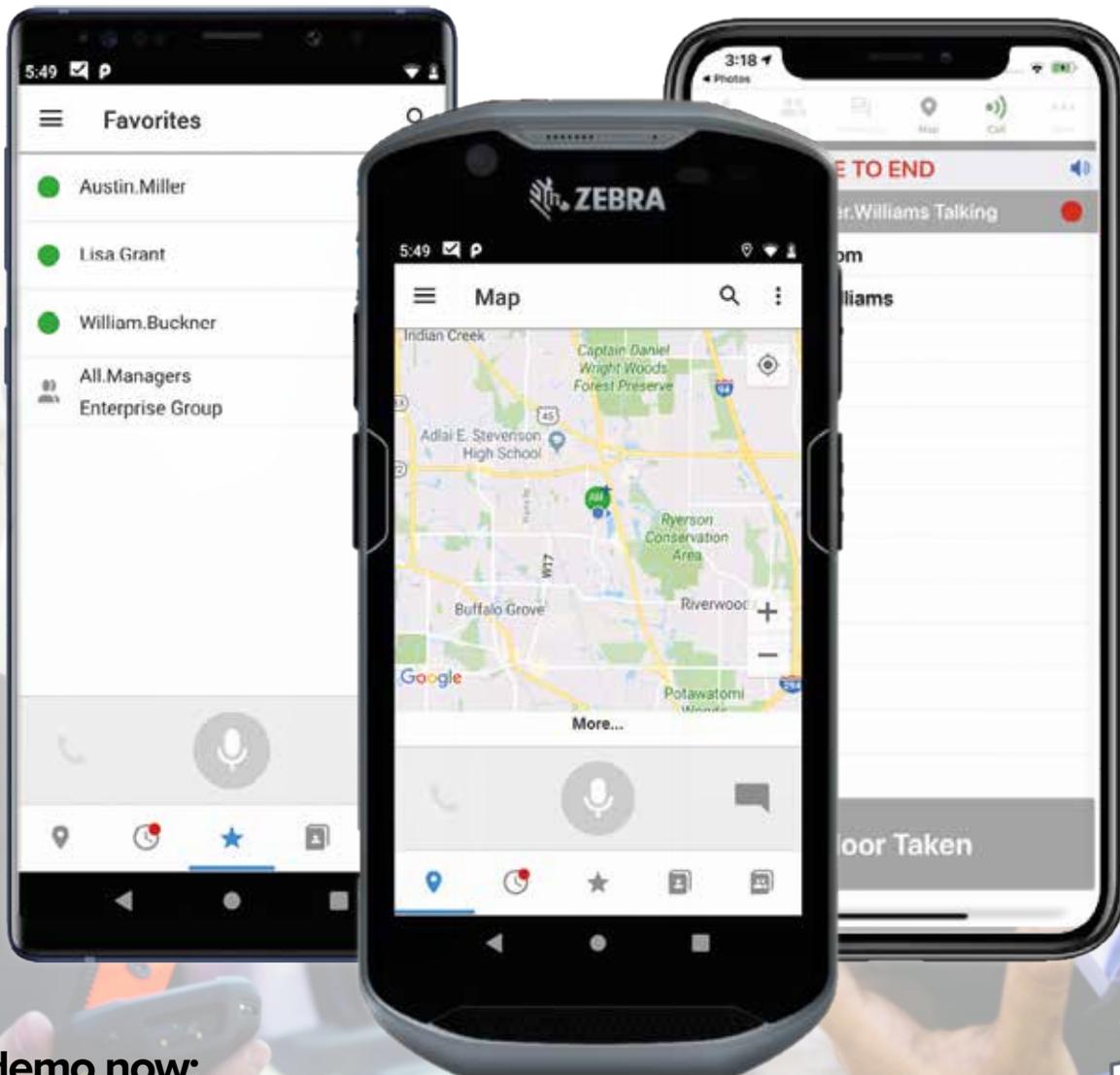
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How new Covid-19 realities

Economic disruption and business growth challenges are among the Covid-19 comms industry headlines, and a primary area of interest is the pandemic's effect on the ICT sector's M&A market. Here, our panel of experts assess the most important M&A impacts and trends, how they will shape up, and the implications for ICT business leaders and all elements of the M&A model.

It is clear that Covid-19 M&A considerations will impact long-term strategies on where to invest and what constitutes a sustainable operating model, while financial backers and acquirers will become more focused and cautious. As we head closer towards the post-Covid-19 lockdown era, many existing M&A trends will persist. But our expert panel expects a short-term downturn in deal activity and a return to market strength over the longer term...

Dan Freed, Partner, YFM Equity Partners

The ICT sector has the potential to be one of the more resilient segments and should bounce back quickly. In the immediate days and weeks after the Covid-19 crisis hit, private equity and banks have on the whole been focused on their existing portfolio of investee companies and borrowers. The sector does not appear to have been as badly hit as others so I have not seen a pull back over and above the general more cautious approach that would be expected at a time like this. We're continuing to see new opportunities and resilient sectors such as comms will be attractive areas to invest.

Marcus Allchurch, Partner, Acuity Advisors

I have spoken to numerous ICT clients and contacts over the last month, and to over 30 of the private equity houses which have been active providing growth capital into the sector. The overwhelming sentiment from a business perspective is positive: In the short-term ICT players are providing a lot of the tools to enable companies, schools etc to operate remotely and there has been a huge push to make that happen. Longer term, discussions are already starting to take place where companies are engaging with their customers to work out what more robust, sustainable solutions ought to be implemented. The key risk for most ICT companies comes from the sectors they are ultimately exposed to.

Paul Billingham, Director, Knight Corporate Finance

ICT businesses will have to be patient when looking for funding and investment over the next six months as institutions focus on existing portfolios, and wait to see the longer-term impact of the economic shock. The majority of high street banks are solely focused on supporting the Government CBILS at the moment and



Paul Billingham

Resellers with a high level of recurring revenue and less reliance on project work will be viewed positively

are not considering new opportunities outside of that. We have seen almost all high street banks and some private equity houses pause on new funding and investment opportunities, but challenger banks and some private equity houses are still open for business to resilient and key business sectors, and ICT is in that category.

• **Acquirers and investors will be more attuned to how a business may cope under certain future scenarios, such as Covid-19, as well as base their**

decisions on a company's past performance. Furthermore, the bar for due diligence is rising with a broader set of factors for growth MSPs to consider...

Dan Freed, Partner, YFM Equity Partners

Investment criteria for funders are unlikely to change significantly due to the coronavirus pandemic, but there will be an even sharper focus on the robustness and sustainability of companies to withstand the impact of such events. Businesses with high recurring revenues and

a good spread of customers across defensible sectors, for example, should continue to be attractive investment opportunities. Also, those that support changes to the way we work, such as home working, virtual meetings, online consultations, and the accelerated use of data to allow businesses to be more agile, should be well placed.

Paul Billingham, Director, Knight Corporate Finance

Moving forward there will be more focus from investors on what sectors an ICT provider's customers are from, as anyone with a high level of exposure to hospitality and non-food retail, for example, are going to see a number of customers struggle to recover from the crisis. On the other hand, any provider with more of a focus on public sector, financial services and education will be far better placed.

Marcus Allchurch, Partner, Acuity Advisors

The coronavirus pandemic will change the criteria in identifying and partnering with ICT firms looking to raise investment in the future insofar as buyers and investors will be even more focused on the quality of the business. What does that mean? The ability to grow



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How Covid-19 is impacting ICT sector M&A

organically, the relevance of the proposition, how recurring is the revenue, how cash generative is the business, and defining the upsides to accelerate growth. Failure to measure up on these criteria will almost certainly lead to an impact on interest and value.

Ryan Sorby, Principal, Boost&Co

The criteria for acquisition targets should focus on two key metrics during this time, outside the more traditional diligence metrics, which together will stand businesses in good stead to survive this crisis and then thrive. These are balance sheet strength (retained earnings, surplus cash, minimal historic shareholder withdrawals) and a track record of managing and reducing costs where possible (strategy, agility, speed of decision making and implementation). Working capital will be a key challenge during the pandemic and beyond. If Government schemes – furloughing in particular – are delayed, then customer payments will slow down or in some cases cease as businesses fail. This knock-on effect will hit



Ryan Sorby

The criteria for acquisition targets should focus on two key metrics during this time – balance sheet strength and a track record of managing and reducing costs where possible

companies hard, emphasising the need for a strong balance sheet to absorb this.

• **The difficulty of sustainably growing an ICT provider business could be the biggest strategic challenge they face. Our experts**

offer advice on how to tackle those challenges and opportunities...

Paul Billingham, Director, Knight Corporate Finance
For resellers looking to scale-up, the biggest challenge post Covid-19 will be having the confidence to

understand that the impact is short-term and that their business is resilient to the economic shock. There will undoubtedly be opportunities as customers put in place far better home working and video conferencing plans in readiness for a potential crisis like this occurring again.

Marcus Allchurch, Partner, Acuity Advisors

The key challenge will be finding and securing deal pipeline. We all know that this sector has been very active from a consolidation perspective for 15 years now, but with evermore private equity backed platforms looking to buy smaller bolt-ons we see a real ramp in demand which isn't really offset by a similar ramp in supply. I do not believe that access to capital will be a challenge for this sector, nor that scale up opportunities will be negatively impacted over the longer term. If anything, good businesses will do better and potentially see higher valuations.

Dan Freed, Partner, YFM Equity Partners

While uncertainty and the rapidly changing landscape have had some impact on scale-up opportunities in the short-term, the longer term fundamentals for the sector should be sound. Scalable business models which ride the wave of long term trends, for example AI or driving efficiencies, should be well placed when the economy rebounds. The quality of the management team and business plan are key considerations for investors and will drive appetites to pursue investment opportunities. Features such as recurring revenue, earnings visibility, scalability and exposure to robust customers

and end markets are attributes that will increase the chances of a successful round. ICT providers must demonstrate a strong organic growth plan and the potential to accelerate this through inorganic growth should also be attractive.

• **While fundamental M&A factors stand the test of time, acquirers and investors are evolving their approaches to M&A within the ICT provider sector, and are becoming focused on key metrics from a more cautious and different vantage point...**

Marcus Allchurch, Partner, Acuity Advisors

Preparing for a sale or investment is like training for a sports match, and so often the difference between a good process and a bad one comes down to the basics. Prove you can grow organically, maximise your proportion of revenues which can be called genuinely recurring, invest in having a highly relevant proposition, make sure it's generating an appropriate level of cash, and articulate convincingly where the upsides will come from. It's important where possible to have data supporting all this, and it may be helpful to ensure your narrative around downside protection (for example, the ability to withstand Covid-19 and similar unexpected disasters) is well thought through.

Paul Billingham, Director, Knight Corporate Finance

Resellers with a high level of recurring revenue and are less reliant on project work to achieve profitability will be viewed positively, as well as those focused on sectors that continue to perform

Key M&A trends and trajectories to consider

- Covid-19 disruption will place more pressure on some ICT providers to adapt to new realities, such as the shift to cloud and recurring revenues, or face an existential crisis.
- M&A-related investor activity will focus more on areas with long-term sustainability.
- Businesses operating in less robust sectors such as hospitality are urged to find growth in new more robust markets and reassess their operating model.
- Acquirers and investors will be more attuned to how a business may cope under certain future scenarios, such as Covid-19, as well as base their decisions on the past performance of a company.
- The bar for due diligence is rising with a wider set of factors taken into account.
- Acquirers and investors are evolving their approaches to M&A with far more emphasis placed on familiar priorities as well as new ones.
- The trends in M&A that have been caused by Covid-19 are likely to decrease the choices for acquirers as certain markets such as hospitality and retail may now be deemed a long-term risk.
- Acquirers and investors will effectively raise their game, become more strategic in their decision making and more selective with a longer-term outlook.



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Continued from page 17

well despite the current economic crisis. Businesses that have been prudent with cash and demonstrated that they can plan and re-forecast effectively during the downturn will also stand a much better chance of securing funding and investment.

Ryan Sorby, Principal, Boost&Co

In the short-term, I expect to see a slowdown as lenders wait for more certainty of performance through the crisis. I don't think that raising investment will be affected in the long-term. The appetite is still there for the sector and in fact, this may increase when the pandemic is over, if the initial performance and resilience continues through Q2. Scale provides protection and comfort during times like these. Our research shows that owner-managers, who had previously considered an exit but hadn't progressed the idea, are actively looking

at consolidators to either 'join' their larger group or to facilitate an exit.

• **Beyond Covid-19: Here we explore the reasons why M&A is set to accelerate, overcome disruption and aid growth challenges...**

Dan Freed, Partner, YFM Equity Partners

For ICT providers with scaling-up on their mind, the opportunities and challenges will probably not be dissimilar to the pre-Covid 19 era but with even greater emphasis on the ability to be agile and responsive to customer needs and having a highly scalable proposition. ICT providers that can demonstrate resilience through a period of challenge and change should emerge with strong prospects. I am optimistic that there will be good investment opportunities in the sector in the near to mid-term. Covid-19 has highlighted communications businesses as critical suppliers

to many public and private sector organisations with the huge increase in working from home driving calls, videoconferencing and broadband usage. Times of change will also drive consolidation opportunities so I would expect to see M&A activity in the sector where well capitalised businesses can accelerate their strategic plans through acquisition. We're continuing to see new opportunities and resilient sectors such as comms will be attractive areas to invest.

Ryan Sorby, Principal, Boost&Co

There is an increased awareness of how important ICT is, not only as businesses evolve and improve efficiencies in general, but when there is a change to the norm – another black swan event – ICT has proven itself to be invaluable in keeping businesses functioning. The crisis will increase demand because additional places of work are now needed as part of business continuity planning. Security requirements will expand as access points to business data increase and need sufficient protection. General ICT consultancy should also expand as businesses seek health checks on their systems to make sure they are prepared for the future.

Marcus Allchurch, Partner, Acuity Advisors

From an M&A perspective, we are seeing a few important themes, including lots of conversations about ramping up buy-and-build strategies, especially where companies see a gap in their portfolio around unified comms, cloud services or remote working. Generally, investors are talking about a 'flight to quality' which means that while good deals will get done – potentially at higher values – lower quality businesses may struggle to get interest. Bigger deals, which are



Marcus Allchurch

The key risk for most ICT companies comes from the sectors they are ultimately exposed to

dependent on debt funding to fully maximise value, are reportedly being put on hold for the time being. As the sector will no doubt prove resilient especially compared to others, we anticipate more interest in comms and ICT M&A. When the dust settles, there will be more focus than ever before on homes and businesses having the right infrastructure, the right solutions and the right security to enable people to live and work wherever they are. That presents a massive opportunity for the sector.

Paul Billingham, Director, Knight Corporate Finance

The sector is highly resilient and has proven to be a critical part of the UK and world economy, so we do

not doubt that there will continue to be an abundance of M&A and investment opportunities in the mid-term. Knight has seen two transactions complete since the Government lockdown and we still have several transactions progressing. We do not see any long-term impact on the numerous scale-up opportunities, but the timing of business plans will be affected and are likely to be delayed by six to 12 months as we get to fully understand the longer-term impact of the crisis. The sector has proven itself to be key to the effective operation of home working and the economy in general, and this is likely to be reflected in continued support and appetite from funders. ■

Implications for ICT providers

THE trends highlighted in this report have significant implications for the future success of the M&A value creation cycle, with greater scrutiny applied to ICT providers seeking to exit or secure funding. This requires ICT provider business leaders to assess and perhaps rethink their long-term strategy through a post-Covid-19 lens, and bring a fresh look at the sustainability of their approaches to target markets, diligence and processes. For example, there are a number of reasons to believe that increased competition in more robust sectors will be an aberration stimulated by Covid-19 factors, as the intrinsic value of a firm operating in the Government sector, for example, versus hospitality, will be increased.



Dan Freed

ICT providers that can demonstrate resilience through a period of challenge and change should emerge with strong prospects



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Assessing comms industry charting the coronavirus

From the start of the coronavirus outbreak the focus of attention has been on facilitating the national shift to home working. Now, thoughts turn to how we can cope with a return to partial normality, and why recovery will be more difficult for smaller ICT providers, writes Philip Carse, Chief Analyst at Megabyte.com.

In recent weeks we have had off-the-record conversations with CEOs of 16 B2B telecoms service providers about Covid-19, while there has been added flavour from trading updates from public companies Adept, Maintel and Redcentric. All have enjoyed a working from home boost (WFH) and have yet to see significant cash collection issues, but expect an inevitable downturn in demand as projects are delayed and new sales fall away.

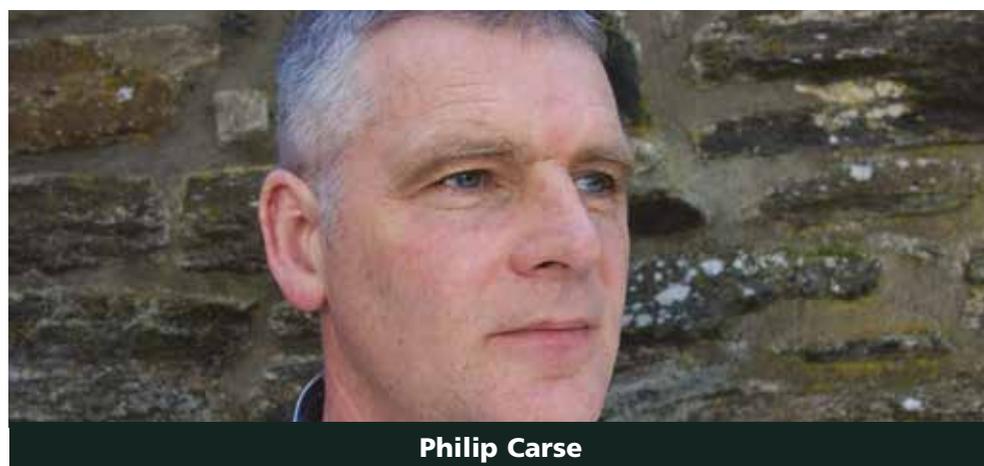
Broadly speaking, the telco providers we've spoken to currently assume that the crisis knocks back their business growth plans by a year (with a commensurate exit delay for private equity backed businesses). There will be a sharp one quarter revenue contraction after the working from home uplift, perhaps 10-20 per cent, followed by a gradual recovery.

The P&L impact is partly mitigated by cost measures as well as a decrease in spending on sales commission, events, advertising etc. And the inability to go out and attract

new customers is at least mitigated by likely less churn from existing customers.

Overall, the larger players have robust business models, typically high (80-plus per cent) recurring revenues and an enterprise and/or public sector focus, albeit that the crisis may push back business models by at least a year. Adept Technology's trading update highlighted stress tests assuming reduced order volumes, delayed installs, extended cash collection and increased churn from customer bankruptcies. Prior to any Government support (and the VAT deferral), Adept estimates it would remain profitable and cash generative under any possible scenario given high recurring revenues (75 per cent), its public sector weighting (45 per cent) and low capex.

The situation is not quite the same, however, for small telco providers which lack balance sheet strength and/or have an above average exposure to hard hit sectors and/or smaller customers. Of the 277 telecoms and IT resellers on the Megabyte platform, six have revenues above £100 million and 49 between



Philip Carse

Few if any customers expected a scenario in which most or all staff had to work remotely

£10 million and £100 million, with the remaining 222 below £10 million. Some of the latter must surely be under pressure.

Demand impacts

Pretty much all telecoms service providers (and IT resellers) that we've spoken to report a short-term filip from increased working at home, 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, and so on.

This has pretty much run its course, though attention has now turned to cyber protection given the proliferation of end devices on corporate networks.

While some end customers had business continuity plans, few if any expected a scenario in which most or all staff had to work remotely. Unsurprisingly, the telecoms service providers themselves were generally well geared up for remote working, and most have expressed surprise at how smoothly staff have transitioned, to the point that some plan to increase remote working/review their office

requirements once the crisis is over. One company noted that its own contact centre KPIs have improved with remote working. If nothing else, video conferencing has become the default method of communication.

In addition to the WFH boost, many telco providers which have NHS customers have been involved in helping meet the current crisis, most notably supporting the new temporary hospitals and upgrading capacity for services such as 111 and the ambulance service. Among the doom and gloom, it is worth calling



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Business disruption and recovery period

out suppliers that have gone above the call of duty to meet short-term needs quickly: Adept Technology highlighted Gamma, Microsoft, Avaya and Pragma, whilst Convergence Group praised BT Group/ BT Openreach and Cisco regarding the new hospital at the Birmingham NEC. We are sure many other suppliers have gone beyond the call of duty. Many of the short-term projects have been done outside normal procurement processes, requiring considerable trust on all sides.

However, projects are also being cancelled or deferred. While many telecoms resellers have a significant recurring revenue base (typically 70-95 per cent) to tide them through the crisis, some are weaker financially due to size and/or exposure to hard hit verticals such as transport, non-food retail and hospitality, where customers have seen their revenues collapse overnight. Deferred projects are also being exacerbated by install challenges with, for example, BT Openreach prioritising keeping the network running rather than doing customer installs (other than in essential services such as hospitals).

Cashflow pressure

Of more concern is pressure on telecom reseller cashflows due to bad debt or customers requesting extended payment terms. If anything, CEOs we've spoken to have seen fewer issues than they were expecting at this stage, though all admit that it is a very fluid situation with

each new direct debit run providing new data points. Broadly speaking, the better placed telco providers appear to be those with enterprise customers, even in hard hit sectors such as hospitality and non-food retail, who have solid balance sheets and access to additional funding to withstand low/no trading for a few weeks. Those with public sectors customers are also well positioned, though Covid-19 seems to be an excuse for some public sector discretionary consulting and other non-telco projects to be delayed.

Cost mitigation

So how are telco providers managing costs and cashflows? Fairly standard responses include drawing down unused credit facilities and, for public companies, cancelling or reviewing dividends. Recruitment is being frozen, partly because of the logistical challenge in the current environment. Discretionary projects such as systems upgrades/ implementations are being put on hold, for a mix of cash conserving, management focus and logistical reasons.

There is, however, a wide divergence in policies towards staff. Most telco providers – even solid businesses – have already or intend to furlough staff, alongside freezing salaries, deferring bonuses etc, and at least one has cut salaries across the board by 20 per cent. On the other hand, some have pointedly refused to do any such measures for what they perceive as the signals it sends to staff, even

if not doing so will depress profitability, or in some cases because staff are simply too busy. One company, which serves a currently hard hit vertical, directly tied the cost savings from furloughing to being able to offer temporary customer discounts.

Supplier leadership

This brings us on to the final point, one we have laboured before – the need for supplier leadership. All of the companies we spoke to genuinely want to help customers that are in distress because of Covid-19, for example extending payment terms. But, as resellers of calls, lines, connectivity etc, they (rightly in normal circumstances) carry the bad debt risk. There is also no clear mechanism for service providers to temporarily disconnect customer circuits. For example, for retailers with empty shops, given minimum contract terms and reconnection charges.

In practice, the large majority of UK business connections still rely on the BT network, whether bought directly from BT Openreach via BT Wholesale, or third party providers of network services such as TalkTalk, Gamma, Virtual1 and SSE Telecoms.

We understand that there is an active dialogue involving BT, resellers, Ofcom and the Government about additional supply flexibility from BT Openreach regarding temporary disconnections. A well designed and targeted policy would certainly help UK telco resellers withstand the current crisis. ■

Time to Take Pride in Comms Support

Tamsin Deutrom-Yue:

Many business users are realising for the first time that their comms systems are everything, and that, without them, they are completely cut off from colleagues as well as customers.



This lockdown is showing us who the real heroes are. And while NHS professionals, delivery drivers and shop workers are each worth their weight in gold, we shouldn't be shy about celebrating the work of comms support professionals during this difficult time, says Tamsin Deutrom-Yue, Managing Director at Support to Win.

"Many business users are realising for the first time that their comms systems are everything, and that, without them, they are completely cut off from colleagues as well as customers. That really raises the stakes for the quality of support people expect."

According to Deutrom-Yue, Support to Win experienced a major spike in inbound support calls on behalf of channel partner customers when office-based workers shifted en masse to work from home.

"It's been a stressful time, especially for end users feeling stranded at home with a technical issue or struggling to understand advanced functions they've never had to use before. People are much more emotional than we've seen before – they need a bit of patient TLC as well as having their issue dealt with as quickly and professionally as possible."

In addition to performing as the outsourced in-life support provider for a range of comms/ UC operators and partners, Support to Win has been busy delivering lots more virtual onboarding and 'assisted plug and play' services to support new rollouts and platform migrations.

"Lockdown means you can't get engineers onsite for installs or bring customers in for onboarding training – but that shouldn't stop you selling, signing up new customers or switching existing ones to new platforms," added Deutrom-Yue.

"We've been offering remote, zero-touch onboarding for our clients for the last 18-24 months so we know the ropes and haven't had to design an approach to cope with the new restrictions. We originally came up with it to help customers preserve margin on small sub-10 seat deployments. Little did we know that it would become our meat and drink for rollouts of all sizes during a worldwide crisis!"

At this time more than any other, comms dealers and other channel partners cannot afford to compromise support levels, and need to show customers how much they care. What's more, by harnessing virtual and remote support offerings from the likes of Support to Win, many are well set to adapt to changing market dynamics rather than simply 'keeping the lights on'.

"It's a very fluid market and the leading players are doing whatever it takes to stay agile. At the end of the day, we're all relying on the boys and girls on the comms support front line to keep service supply chains moving and help users overcome their comms challenges. And that deserves some credit."

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PWANs aid lockdown

One of the most apt connectivity solutions right now is also one of the least understood, according to CityFibre Pre-Sales Technical Manager Lee Hill who provides a guide to Private Wide Area Networks (PWANs) and their positive impact on easing the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown.

The coronavirus crisis is hurting all organisations in lockdown and future planning is in limbo amid the ongoing uncertainty. What is clear however, says Hill, is the need to clarify PWANs, how they work, the services and solutions they include and utilise, and how they compare to IP VPNs, MPLS or SD WAN solutions – and why they are particularly suited to managing the current lockdown. How? Because PWANs enable a number of locations to share data, often without the traffic passing over the Internet. They can also include centralised Internet breakout shared between the sites, thereby pooling bandwidth and reducing the need for expensive security hardware in each location.

“A PWAN is a bespoke network which can connect multiple sites using a variety of technologies, and can include business services such as VoIP and firewalls to provide secure access to centralised systems and many more specific features the client requests,” said Hill. “A PWAN can utilise a variety of connectivity options to provide full resilience such as leased lines, carrier diverse leased lines, xDSL and 4G backup. All of this is provided without the need to create VPN tunnels that cross the Internet and all connectivity is terminated directly into the secure PWAN infrastructure.”



Lee Hill

You need to get a full and clear understanding of the issues the business is facing

In essence, noted Hill, a PWAN is the same as an IP VPN or MPLS solution, but an SD-WAN is a different solution altogether. “An SD-WAN’s purpose is to make the implementation and management of a WAN much more efficient and user friendly,” he added. “By separating a network’s hardware from the systems which run it and making more efficient use of Internet connectivity it can greatly improve resilience and bandwidth when multiple routes are available.

“However, the control of all traffic leaving the site is the only part that’s in your

hands. After this point, it still has the potential to cross multiple carriers and peering links, therefore the number of variables outside of the customer’s control that impact on service quality is much greater. It is also important to consider that unlike an MPLS network, the initial configuration demands are likely to be more complex if bandwidth is at a premium or contended circuits are utilised.”

Resilience counts

Key considerations for PWANs are often resilience and security, pointed out Hill. The network must be resilient as it’s integral to business

continuity and therefore most PWAN solutions incorporate a system of back-up connections and auto-switchover in case of a fault or issue. “Similarly, through the use of centralised managed firewalls we can ensure the security of the data and even host servers in highly secure colocation spaces to provide complete disaster recovery too,” stated Hill.

He reiterated that an effective PWAN can help a business to improve flexibility by connecting multiple sites and supporting remote workers. It can also support secure access to centralised business critical systems such as CRMs enabling staff to work remotely or on the road, improving efficiency and productivity. “And of course they can save businesses significant costs by unifying their communications infrastructure and connecting multiple offices,” said Hill.

On the channel opportunity Hill noted that PWANs deliver significantly larger margins than standalone services and enable partners to deliver a complete solution, adding additional services to their portfolios (such as voice or security solutions) and generating increased customer loyalty. “The partner can choose to manage the solution on the customer’s behalf as a consultant, generating recurring revenue,” he said.

A comprehensive PWAN can fully support remote and home working which is critical in the current pandemic. It can enable full secure access to business critical systems across all departments regardless of location and with confidence in the security of the data. “The partner can fully manage network performance, bandwidth utilisation and resiliency to ensure optimum efficiency and productivity,” said Hill. “With certain connectivity bandwidth can be upgraded as and when needed.”

When proposing a PWAN solution it is best to adopt a consultative approach from the outset, noted Hill, to ensure all bases are covered and all requirements are met from the beginning. “It’s much harder to add and amend things mid-process than it is to get a full understanding from the initial talks,” he commented.

“You need to get a full and clear understanding of the issues the business is facing and the problems they are trying to overcome. Then you can work together to devise the best solution to those problems while often adding further benefits at the same time, such as cost savings and Unified Communications. Be clear in your comms throughout the process and keep checking that nothing has changed in terms of customer requirements.” ■



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Helping people through

No one knows for sure how the Covid-19 outbreak will ultimately pan out, but it is squarely within the power of business leaders to impose some control and shift from a crisis to real employee engagement and achieve positive outcomes, writes Engage Your People Managing Director Kate Wood.

From the moment Covid-19 distanced many people from their routine office life, leadership and people engagement became urgently needed to maintain business performance and adjust to lockdown. In this, regular communication is critical, along with morale and performance management, mental and physical wellbeing, managing furloughed employees and planning for a stronger future.

Communication

Short daily huddles with diary invites are a good option. Many people feel more comfortable on video, but some may not be ready to share their homes, so remind people of blurred background options. Don't comment on appearance, personal or home, unless appropriate.

- Communicate with emotion, passion and fact, be mindful of tone (especially in written communication), take this time to get to know your team and allow them to get to know you. People are looking for leadership, routine and support.
- Deliver regular company announcements. Provide clarity on the platform and timings, keep them at the same time, and offer visibility of the plan. Record the session so people can re-watch.



Kate Wood

Take this time to get to know your team and allow them to get to know you. People are looking for leadership, routine and support

- Make time for informal communication, fun and team building, quizzes, classes, and encourage people to be themselves. People need forums to chat about non-work things with the colleagues who they miss seeing.
- Diarise monthly one-to-one meetings with team members to set clear expectations and goals. People need structure

and guidance more than ever, work can provide this.

- Conduct regular Q&A sessions so people feel empowered to ask questions, and then document and publish all of the responses.
- Virtual meetings require different levels of focus to engender a sense of personal connection. People often miss non-verbal cues and may get the wrong end of

the stick. And it's critical that everyone feels included. So set out guidelines, create presence by encouraging people not to use the mobile during meetings and resist multitasking.

Morale

- Keeping people upbeat needs planning, and some of the face-to-face activities that teams previously enjoyed

can be moved to the virtual environment. But not all will transfer well, so get feedback and ask for ideas about what people want and how the timings will work for them.

- Appoint ambassadors or mental health first aiders to keep in regular contact with people who may live alone or be at greater risk of struggling, and may have heightened anxiety. Ask how people feel with daily or weekly check-ins.
- Encourage people to take coffee breaks with small groups online (you can even make it into a lottery, so people meet new people)
- Ask people for song nominations and create 'lockdown listen' playlists, which is a great way for employees to get to know more about their colleagues.
- Create specific communication channels for different situations to bring people together who may be experiencing similar things. Being at home with a new baby will be very different than with an elderly parent or in a shared house.
- If possible, offer a hardship fund to people who may really be struggling. Helping them with basics will pay off long-term for everyone.

Performance management

- Perhaps more than ever people are looking to leadership, but less experienced leaders may feel



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the Covid-19 lockdown

isolated. So create networks that enable company leaders to work together and be open and honest about how they feel and the challenges they face.

- We need to trust people to get on with work and trust people to manage, avoiding over and under managing.
- Do leaders have training on how to manage people from home long-term? Leaders need support more than ever to achieve consistency.
- Training and knowledge sharing must continue – move it to online, set times, buddy for new starters, less experienced people, and create a robust remote induction process.
- To impart praise and feedback, implement monthly one-to-ones, help people set priorities and support your team with regular and consistent feedback.
- Who is supporting the senior leaders? Do they have an outlet for support and feedback too? There are plenty of webinars out there with people sharing best practices. Now is a great time to join up and learn from other businesses and networks.

Mental wellbeing

- When our stress system stays activated for a prolonged period, it can suppress our adaptive immune systems and make us more vulnerable to viral infections.
- Acknowledge changes in how you feel every week, and be open with employees about this so they can be open too. Seek facts from recognised sources (MIND, BBC, NHS) and limit or block negative social media sources.
- Share information about different ways of supporting mental health – remote mindfulness and

yoga sessions may not be to everyone's taste.

- Recognition and reward systems are fun and can help people feel valued and recognised and provide employees with a confidence boost. Send packages, cards and treats in the post. Small things make a difference at this time.
- Create an Extra Love list for the most vulnerable in your organisation (there may be people impacted by domestic violence, an unsettled home life, poverty, break-ups etc). Reach out and keep an eye on these people so they don't become further isolated or lonely.
- Make sure people know how to access benefits packages and remind them of the services available. People

preferred routine. You could have a team target for activity, including dog walking or trampolining.

- Keep up good routines: If you drank a lot of water or ate a lot of fruit in the office try to keep it up at home, it's easy to pick up bad habits.
- Try and keep your regular sleep routine. Sleep can be impacted during change so acknowledge this and take steps to stick to a routine.

Furloughed employees

- Be clear and transparent, explain and don't make false promises. Keep up-to-date with HMRC information, empathy and thoughtfulness is required more than ever. Identifying ambassadors to keep in touch and support people can help. It may not

- Tailor your internal communications and target content towards furloughed employees. Send weekly updates including videos so people feel part of things, without intrusion.
- Don't forget about people on maternity, paternity or long-term sick. At this time they may feel more out of the loop than ever and will need advance communication if they were set to return during the next few weeks.
- People may have more time to think about their future. They may not want to return, or when they can come back, they may want to talk about changes and progression plans.
- If people have to be permanently laid off, create support packs for them to

what hasn't while it's fresh in your mind, and look at your other DR plans.

- Your business may not be able to run as normal, but can you explore new partnerships with other businesses that may still be busy but lack skills you and your team have? Increasing your specialised partners, innovation and resilience may mean new partnerships to drive growth.
- New goals for new times: Review teams and individuals' goals to help employees focus on what will support business objectives.

Future benefits

- As the months pass, the home working benefits and shortcomings will become clearer. Listen to the feedback from your employees. Will home take precedent over office? Many of us will happily return to the office, some will not. But Covid-19 has not brought about an end to office life, rather a reinvention of it, a fresh modern way of working.
- We will have learnt lessons in communication, reduced fears around home working, and perhaps move to more outcome focused ways of measuring performance, allowing people more family or down time.
- Our leadership teams may be better equipped for empathy with a deeper connection and understanding of who their employees are, identifying inner winners, people who have bloomed and new groups of employees now functioning as strong tight knit teams.
- Covid-19 is an unusual opportunity for employees to emerge from lockdown more engaged than ever. ■

Anxious? Don't suffer in silence – see page 32

Covid-19 has not brought about an end to office life, but a reinvention of it, a fresh modern way of working

may try to cancel holidays but it's important to take leave and break from work.

Physical wellbeing

- Sunlight and fresh air are proven to increase endorphins and make you feel happy. For those who can take walks, rides or runs outside this can be the highlight of the day.
- Support your employees with how to structure their day, encourage a routine with defined breaks, in another room if possible.
- Lots of organisations have set up Strava or Fitbit competitions to maintain team building and a sense of competition.
- People may want to join Joe Wicks with their kids so try and schedule daily meetings around peoples'

be a simple case of people picking up where they left off, so re-integration needs to be thought through.

- If you have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) employees have access to this. Most EAP's provide counselling services and advice on family and financial problems.
- If people cannot be deployed there are a lot of ways they can volunteer, learn new skills and embark on qualifications while furloughed. There are free schemes available, meaning people can keep busy and return to work with new skills and perspectives.
- Create dedicated channels for furlough communications so people can keep in touch easily (WhatsApp, Slack or Microsoft Teams for example).

help navigate the changes ahead, including interview advice, CV help and benefits guidelines. Hard decisions can be handled with integrity and care.

Review and renew

- For some businesses, now will provide time to do the things they previously didn't have time for, so make use of this time to come back stronger.
- Conduct internal satisfaction surveys and whole business reviews to assess processes and how they can be simplified going forward.
- Skills share and role swaps: Now is a chance for people to enter other areas and learn new skills.
- Did you have a pandemic plan? If not, document what's worked well and



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Pandemic spreads digital

As the nation cautiously feels its way to ending lockdown, there will be nothing precarious about heightened awareness of critical business grade ICT and the accelerating drive for DX, according to Paul Beacham, Senior Manager, Data Networking Portfolios, BT Wholesale.

Covid-19 has greatly accelerated the pace of digital transformation and organisations are being forced to adopt connectivity and collaboration services that they would not previously have considered, pointed out Beacham. It's a trend that is reflected in evolving, and significant, bandwidth demands. "We're witnessing a change in the levels of bandwidth being ordered and provided," he said. "We have seen differences in the percentage of orders wanting higher access levels. It's now 50/50 whether we're providing 100MB or 1GB. That is being driven by current and future proofing needs."

Beacham also noted that services and functions need to be flexible enough to support these changes. This not only means scalable bandwidth, but also reroutable traffic so that the network capacity, which would typically be presented in their networks, can be directed to support the changing business and user profiles.

"As we shift back to a more business-as-usual situation there will be an awareness that channel partners need to be able to support this rapid change," added Beacham. "Future buying decisions will be more influenced by partner flexibility around



Paul Beacham

Future buying decisions will be more influenced by partner flexibility around services, products and associated commercial models

services, products and associated commercial models. Furthermore, how organisations supported customers during the Covid lockdown will play a part in choices made moving forward. We are re-prioritising which solutions we bring to the market so that we can focus on those propositions that will bring the most benefit to partners now."

It goes without saying that the Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the critical importance of connectivity to all businesses, emphasised Beacham. "Broadband into the home connections are now supporting businesses as well as the traditional consumer demand," he commented. "With more services and critical functions taking place in the cloud, reliable connectivity

is essential in ensuring organisations remain operational and can support these more flexible and agile working conditions. Some employees also still require access to traditional LAN environments, and we are seeing a growth in traffic using Ethernet supporting dedicated Internet connections, which can help ensure smooth running as a result."

Network resilience is also key, noted Beacham, and across wholesale many partners are working with critical national infrastructure (CNI) providers which need to be always-on and have guaranteed resilience. "We have established resilient connectivity and upgrades into a number of health and other CNI end user locations across the UK," confirmed Beacham.

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transformation

Another example where consistent connectivity is essential is critical customers within the retail industry, in particular, food retailers to distribution centres and logistics organisations. "If they lost connection it would impact everything from stock levels in shops, to delivery issues further down the supply chain which are under significant micromanagement at present," said Beacham.

Remote working

He also observed that partners are experiencing a huge increase in demand for tools that facilitate rapid and scalable remote working capabilities. To help fulfil requests, BT Wholesale simplified access to its hosted communications portfolio which includes self-install solutions, through discounts and free licences. The company also waived Etherflow bandwidth on-demand modification fees to enable partners to more easily meet the evolving requirements.

"BT Wholesale has not placed any restrictions on customer orders or asked partners to stop selling, but we have had to make sure that new initiatives do not jeopardise the network's overall performance," added Beacham. "That's why we

have implemented service protection windows. For urgent Covid requirements, such as CN1, we have put in place processes to fulfil them as a priority. "

That there needs to be flexibility in products and models is a given, and BT Wholesale has a long-standing bandwidth on-demand model. Prior to the outbreak, it introduced 24-hour billing so that partners could provide customers with higher bandwidth for the period they require. Access to bandwidth modifications have been simplified further during Covid-19 through the waiving of typical fees and one-off charges. "Providing the channel with self-serve flexibility is vital, particularly at a time like this," added Beacham.

"We are also conducting forensic network analysis and management. With profiles changing daily, we are ensuring that every element of our services – fixed, mobile, Ethernet, IP-layer and broadband network – have strategies in place to protect network quality. The speed of evolution of the portfolio has been driven by available IT stacks. And everything is built on top of our network, to ensure it is

always on, free of capacity issues and can support flexibility. Additionally, the benefits of our automation efforts are being made more apparent. With automated processes there is less reliance on individual resources. Bandwidth can be changed remotely, support can be delivered more effectively, and a greater emphasis on self-install solutions is getting organisations connected without the need for an engineer."

Getting organisations connected has been a priority for Beacham since he joined BT on the graduate scheme straight out of university. He has spent most of his career operating in wholesale, holding a number of roles across sales and business, market and product development, through to product management. "I believe a strong wholesale market drives good competition in the channel and retail markets, and plays a pivotal role in both the digital transformation and fibre enablement of the UK," commented Beacham. "This is where my real passion lies. We're now at a point where BT Wholesale and BT Enterprise are aggressively accelerating new technology and methodology transformation." ■

Beacham's connectivity market hot picks

- **Digital transformation:** The pandemic will only heighten focus on digital transformation. Digitalisation, automation and API-first strategies will all play a key role, underpinned by always-on connectivity.
- **Fibre enablement:** The closure of legacy platforms and technologies presents the channel with a major opportunity of supporting customers through migration and transformation programmes. Supported by investment and rollout of full fibre connectivity into premises, it will be the foundation for driving the transformation of the communications industry.
- **Fixed and mobile convergence:** 5G will be transformational, both for the mobile market as well as the overall connectivity industry. We'll see an increase in the number of solutions converging mobile and fixed networking, which will further drive digital transformations.



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RingCentral drives expansion

RingCentral has turned a three-year-old European expansion bid into a push towards regional dominance, according to Sahil Rekhi, VP and Managing Director EMEA.

One of the best ways to illustrate the extent of RingCentral's European advance is within the context of Rekhi's past experience. He has worked in the comms sector for 15 years and is credited with launching the Vodafone One Net UC proposition across key European markets including the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and Ireland. In March 2017 at RingCentral he launched across 13 European nations simultaneously, setting up and scaling the business. He also brought to market RingCentral's cloud solution with BT. Not surprisingly, the company is growing at 34 per cent year-on-year with mid-market and enterprise growing at 59 per cent. "We have also seen tremendous growth locally, and our teams across Europe are growing," stated Rekhi.

He describes himself as a 'natural technology evangelist', focused on driving and enabling business transformation via technology. "My journey began when I started an internship at Vodafone and I was attracted by two aspects of the industry – fast-paced innovation at every level, and the critical nature of what communications means to businesses as a lifeline, feeding every aspect of developing and delivering products and services," he said.

"Joining RingCentral seven years ago gave me another opportunity to make a



Sahil Rekhi

Now is the time to get our heads down, execute at pace and help drive success for our partners and customers

substantive impact. The working style is characteristic of a start-up, despite the company having over 5,000 employees. What I also find attractive is the pace of work, which is refreshingly high, driven by a 'can do' attitude."

RingCentral's high spec 'engine' is driving growth in multiple areas, and strategic partnerships, such as the link up with Avaya, are providing a runway to a large installed

base currently using legacy services. "We are also continuing to build on our fastest growth segment of upmarket business, which is growing over 70 per cent," added Rekhi. "And we are expanding our global presence.

Hot demand

"The market was already at an inflection point two years back, but the unprecedented Covid-19 situation has increased the demand for

cloud communications further. Every business is evolving to embrace flexible working and other benefits of cloud services. Now is the time to get our heads down, execute at pace and help drive success for our partners and customers."

RingCentral offers a portfolio of services covering Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS) and Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS), with a focus on customer experience

and engagement. "We've witnessed a drive towards digital transformation in the market, not just for back office staff but for front line workers across industries like retail, FinServ and healthcare," noted Rekhi. "This drive is fuelling the demand for unified communications and collaboration, and for cloud-based solutions. This enables our clients to meet the expectations of their customers and stay agile in a rapidly changing business environment."

The biggest shift in the market, observed Rekhi, is large enterprise organisations moving from on-premises legacy communications stacks to cloud systems. "This is driving innovation in the industry to bring to market integrated experiences as well as vertical solutions for back office and front-line staff," he commented. "But most importantly, it's changing the way customers operate and measure businesses for themselves.

"These kinds of shifts result in changes in business models for many industries. Not only is RingCentral a part of this change, enabling disruption of other industries, it is influencing our technology development. The evolution of our portfolio, based on what our customers, prospects and partners are feeding back to us in terms of challenges and feature requests, is a key element of our product development cycle."

Expansion in Europe

RingCentral invests 20 per cent of revenues into R&D. A recent example is the launch of RingCentral Video which delivers an instant 'join from browser' experience without the need to download any apps. "We are also focused on how this service is consumed by our end users, and how to improve the pre- and post-meeting experience for the host and participants of video meetings," noted Rekhi. "For example, if a participant has joined a meeting, our system will automatically trigger the call to the host to bring them directly into the meeting. This is made possible by the integrated experience across our messaging, video and phone services."

Key investments

Ongoing areas of investment include enhanced analytics, an open platform with an app store of integrated third party applications, and layering RingCentral's product to solve AI-assisted business challenges. "We'll also continue to invest in and expand our partnership strategy and channel harmony programme, as they have allowed us to develop productive relationships with a variety of organisations," added Rekhi. "And we will strengthen and innovate our UCaaS and CCaaS offerings given the pace of evolution in the marketplace. There's no room for complacency."

Rekhi also pointed out that RingCentral is experiencing strong growth across its partner community. "Channel is core to the fabric of communication services globally, and I see that set to continue and grow in the coming years," he added. "I'm confident all vendors are going to invest more in

enabling channel partners. This community maintains the trust and the relationship with customers, and at times like those we're experiencing right now, that's more critical than ever. Customers are ramping up their engagement with the channel to seek advice and solutions as they prepare to establish the new normal of working from home and further embrace virtual engagement.

"With SaaS, the role of channel partners is also going to evolve, providing wider bundled solutions across the IT stack. Furthermore, partners will play a bigger role in delivering integration services to end customers, putting them in the driving seat to deliver on business objectives and KPIs for their customers."

Almost 50 per cent of RingCentral's revenues in the region are driven by its channel community, and Rekhi reaffirmed the company's commitment to partners and their capacity to drive greater revenues. "We continue to invest in the community, and through this investment we expect to see the contribution from our channel partners grow at a rapid pace," he stated.

"Every opportunity, no matter how big or small, is important to us. Every partner, every customer, every prospect takes us on a journey to learn, develop and evolve just as we are taking them on a transformational journey over time. The key to success is to stay grounded, address feedback and drive relentless execution in this marketplace, as the global opportunity for cloud communications is in the range of over \$60 billion." ■

Just a minute with Sahil Rekhi...

Role model: I'm a Formula 1 fanatic, and particularly admire Ayrton Senna for his focus and determination

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm a bit of a geek, but I break more gadgets than I fix

Your biggest career achievement? I have been fortunate enough to have a career with many special achievements. But each one of them was only possible because of the team and my colleagues working around me

Your greatest strength, and what could you work on? Focus, drive and passion are what I would consider my strengths. I could work on my work-life balance

What possession could you not live without? My smartphone

Best piece of advice you have been given: Always hire someone you can learn from

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? I've always been fascinated by medicine, so probably something in this field

How would you like to be remembered? As one with my team

Name three ideal dinner guests: I like to listen and learn, and dinner presents an opportunity to do that no matter who the guests are at the table

How do you relax when not working? I love reading

Top tip for resellers: Evolve your services and transition to being more consultative. Focus on the professional services you would provide as value adds above the SaaS service from vendors

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Energising Our Partners

Fidelity Energy gets top recognition for business expansion

FIDELITY Energy has led the field in helping ICT resellers add energy supply to their portfolios and now it has been recognised as the 26th fastest growing SME in the Thames Valley by a local business index.

The Thames Valley SME 100 Growth Index was first published in 2019 by The Business Magazine. It ranks fast-rising, independent businesses which have an annual turnover of between £1 million and £12 million that have seen significant growth over the past year and Fidelity Energy were announced this year.

The 2020 list was announced earlier this year in March, placing Fidelity Energy at number 26, narrowly missing out on the top 25 by a difference of 0.2%. Fidelity Energy were the highest ranked business on the list from Newbury, where their office is based. Based on growth in turnover, the company had shown 36.6% growth.

Managing Director, John Haw said, "On hearing the news that we had been recognised as the 26th fastest growing business in the Thames Valley, was the icing on top of the cake for an already excellent year for the company.

"Last year we saw exponential growth, thanks to focusing on the continued development of

existing products as well as the introduction of new solutions, all aiming to make the process stream-lined for our partners and their clients. We spent a lot of time focusing on the development of our industry-leading portal, promoting renewable energy and the benefits of businesses 'going green' and the addition of two brand new products to our portfolio; Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points and our automatic switching service, Switch Once, Switch Forever."

2019 not only saw the company grow financially, but also in size, with staff growing to 35, representing a huge leap since its foundation in 2014 with a small team of four. In October, the company also celebrated the company's fifth birthday, with a daytrip to Top Golf in Surrey.

"The listing on the Thames Valley SME 100 Growth Index is further evidence that we are moving in the right direction and gives every member of the Fidelity Energy team recognition for all of their hard work and dedication to the company over the last year," John Haw continued.

"Congratulations to all the other businesses who made the list and a huge thank you to all the team here at Fidelity. With many exciting opportunities in the pipeline, we are looking forward to what the next year of growth brings!"

"Last year we saw exponential growth, thanks to focusing on the continued development of existing products as well as the introduction of new solutions."



John Haw

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Business leader turns figurehead

As we laud the efforts of channel partners in home-work enabling swathes of UK employees, we must also recognise that the role of ICT providers includes getting to grips with emerging technologies such as 5G and the IoT and enabling the digital transformation of a nation, says Kathy Quashie, Head of Partnerships and Alliances, Vodafone UK.

Quashie performs her various duties and functions as a figurehead with assurance. Her career path and achievements speak volumes about her strength of character and underline why leadership really matters. Prior to joining Vodafone as Head of Partnerships and Alliances last July Quashie worked for BT as Major Business Director for Enterprise. She was also CEO and Chair of BT Expedite, BT's omni-channel retail business, where she led the turnaround and profitable divestment of the unit to an Equity acquirer, APAX, based in America.

Prior to these achievements Quashie held a number of other senior roles during her tenure at BT and across other retailers and telecoms brands including Carphone Warehouse and TalkTalk. During this period Quashie took on commercial and financial leadership positions in which she delivered strong revenue management and M&A assurance activity, covering both the AOL and Tiscali acquisitions through to integration. Not surprisingly, her growing influence in the telecoms sector was recognised in 2009 by GT in the Global Telecoms Forty under Forty top executives to watch.

"My biggest career achievement was being made Chief Executive of



Kathy Quashie

You can have the best tech, the best customers, pricing and propositions, but you can only create an engaged and vibrant culture, leading you to success, if you invest in your people

BT Expedite," commented Quashie. "I led the performance turnaround of the two separately run entities and then later the successful sale of these companies to a PE business. This not only delivered stronger P&L performance but also rebuilt customer credibility and loyalty through a high performing team culture. The transformation success journey mirrored all areas of

business improvement and strategic growth which was recognised by the sale price awarded for the business."

Women in tech

In other activities, Quashie is a member of many women in technology programmes, and she has mentored and contributed to the diversity and inclusion agendas of the companies she has worked for. "In hindsight, championing more women

to work in technology is something that I would have pushed for earlier," she stated. "Working in tech and building diverse teams is critical to delivering performance. Technology is still a male-led industry and the need to bring diversity of thought to mirror tech trends is more important now than ever before. As a result, I am proactively involved in networks – most recently, Vodafone women's

network – to drive diversity and inclusion in tech."

That's not all: Quashie was recently appointed as a NED at the Transport for London (TFL) Museum, she holds an MBA from Heriot Watt University, is CIMA part-qualified, appears in the Women to Watch 2019 list from Cranfield University (as part of its spotlight on the BAME Board of future talent) and is a Black Belt in Lean Six Sigma. "All of these are credentials that have equipped me for overcoming the challenges of leading a major division within a global business like Vodafone," she stated.

When the opportunity to lead the partner programme at Vodafone presented itself Quashie was drawn by the combination of opportunities and challenges in driving growth. "These include the chance to bring my telecoms experience to the table and offer a fresh perspective to the team and develop the culture," she added. "People and culture are something that I am deeply passionate about. You can have the best tech, the best customers, pricing and propositions, but you can only create an engaged and vibrant culture, leading you to success, if you invest in your people."

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Headline

the wider Vodafone business into the partner channel was also a magnet. "I got excited and saw a real opportunity to help Vodafone's partner programme on its transformation journey," she said. "Channel partners are playing an increasingly important role in the strength of British businesses. Their knowledge of industries, geographies and organisations means they are positioned to help companies digitise their operations. To adapt to new market conditions and opportunities, businesses are looking to work with specialist partners who can advise and guide them on the right technology choices, and importantly how to integrate technology into business strategy."

Challenger brand

Vodafone itself is undergoing a period of adaptation as it continues to build on what Quashie calls a 'challenger brand' in the fixed market. "This is an area we are investing in to bring our services up to speed with competitors," she explained. "Vodafone's SIP over Public Internet is the first of a new range of SIP services we have been working on recently. Developed with our channel partners, the solution lets businesses use their phone system to make and receive calls via their Internet connection rather than relying on traditional phone lines. This significantly reduces business telephony costs while offering new levels of flexibility and scalability."

As markets like fixed line and mobile shift and new technologies emerge every customer has different demands, and according to Quashie a key way to meet

these challenges is to work closely with the partner community. She also says that it is critical for Vodafone to be ubiquitous in its role as a digitiser and transformer of UK businesses. "From the launch of 5G to cloud services and IoT, we are helping businesses to improve the way they communicate and collaborate," she added. "Our 4G service is now at 99 per cent population coverage and, although a new technology, we have 5G in many locations."

Vodafone has more than 100 million IoT connections worldwide and Quashie believes that the company has reached an 'exciting inflection point in IoT's development'. "With 5G fully rolling out over the next couple of years billions more objects will be connected quickly and easily, powering IoT for the next decade and driving adoption even further," she said. "As part of this we are helping partners to get their hands on the latest technologies, including 5G, NB-IoT and high speed fibre, by opening innovation centres across the UK."

She refers to Vodafone's Customer Excellence Centre in Newbury, the new Digital Innovation Hub at MediaCityUK in Manchester, and the Vodafone Business Lounge at the Ricoh Arena. "There is a significant amount of pressure on businesses to adapt and prepare for the impact of the digital world, and to position themselves to thrive within it," commented Quashie. "Partners are at the heart of these digital transformations. They are a key ingredient in helping businesses adapt to changes in the modern market." ■

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Don't suffer in silence

Mental health issues are too important and sensitive to be swept under the carpet, but they're a price many entrepreneurs and business owners pay as they seek to triumph over adversity – emphatically underlined by the potential psychological effects of the Covid-19 lockdown. So what better time for Focus Group Joint Managing Director and Comms Dealer's Entrepreneur of the Year Chris Goodman, in his own words, to bravely share insights into his battles with anxiety, the scars they leave, and how such life experiences can be a 'blessing' in disguise.

Owning and running a business is a privilege that few get the opportunity to experience, but for those who brave the choppy waters of entrepreneurship there are a host of unforeseen challenges, some of which lurk deep inside the recesses of their psyche. Most challenges are familiar – cashflow, HR, recruitment, regulation, competition, sales targets, customer service and many more. But it's ok – when you get home you can switch off, right? For a business owner, particularly in our sector, these issues are ever present. Customers need service 24/7 and you are ultimately the last stop on the escalation path. The competition, industry and technology, don't stand still, so neither can you.

All too often people find themselves isolated, unable to share the burden and staring at what seems like an insurmountable set of challenges. This can be an incredibly lonely place. Doubt creeps in and often people can become overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility, both to their staff and family, and a terrifying fear of failure.

Turning to my story: In 2005, a year after leaving a well paid job to set up Focus



Chris Goodman

I now see my experiences as something of a blessing

Group, I began suffering from panic attacks. They were innocuous at first, but quickly began to impact my daily routine. Traffic jams, flights, presentations, sitting in the middle of a row in the theatre – all saw me experience full-blown panic attacks which were terrifying.

Anxious times

Within weeks I was in pieces, stuck at home, too nervous to leave the house. I sought help and was prescribed medication (SSRIs) to combat what was termed General Anxiety Disorder. Slowly I rejoined the rat race, but my confidence was impacted and there was always a nagging doubt about whether it would come back.

In 2012 it did – with a vengeance! By this point Focus had circa 80 staff and annual revenues of over £15 million. My wife was expecting our second child and life was good. But I should have seen the signs – occasional breathlessness, unusual sleeping patterns, tension headaches. Then out of nowhere I crashed into dreadful anxiety. What on earth did I have to worry about? I had a wonderful wife, a beautiful four-year-old daughter, friends and family nearby, a lovely house and a thriving business. It totally knocked me sideways.

I briefly engaged in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), had a few sessions with a

counsellor and was once again given medication by my doctor. While I didn't take much time off work, it took about six months before I felt back to my old self. Now the business has over 300 staff, revenues over £80 million and we have concluded a PE deal with Bowmark Capital. Life is good, so I must be in the clear. Unfortunately not. When you suffer from any sort of poor mental health, whether an isolated short-term event or on an ongoing basis, it leaves behind a scar tissue that people cannot see.

You live with it to some degree for the rest of your life. You learn your own triggers, things that will make you feel unwell, nervous, fearful, and you learn to manage them. However, over the years I have learnt how to combat a build-up of stress through mindfulness, breathing techniques, exercise or just snuggling up with my wife and kids on the sofa.

At the time in both 2005 and 2012 I would not have said this, but I now see my experiences as something of a blessing. I now really appreciate good mental health and understand all too well that we all sit somewhere on its continuum. I tell my story for good reason. It was hearing other people's stories during my

worst moments that enabled me to see that there was a path back to feeling 'normal' again. I am now lucky enough to be able to support others who are suffering, both my staff, my family and others within the industry who have reached out to me.

At work we have introduced Wellbeing Champions. A team of 12 who have had mental health first aid training and who, where needed, can support staff by listening and signposting. We are also providing all managers and team leaders with training so that they can better support members of their teams who might be suffering in silence. Especially now that the world has been thrown into crisis, caused by Covid-19, which has sent us into forced isolation.

These are challenging times and I hope that friends and colleagues across the sector are safe and well, and that the pressures of running your businesses in this climate are not bearing down on you too much. Poor mental health is not suffered exclusively by the less well off or the weak, it can strike down the most successful and wealthy, without warning. Don't suffer in silence – you are not alone. ■ <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

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Optimity eyes growth

Acquisitions truly expose the growth ambitions of scale-up ICT providers and their appetite to gain ever wider competences, none more so than Optimity's purchase of Pebble IT in March this year, according to CEO Leeland Pavey.

FPE Capital backed Optimity acquired Pebble IT in early March, boosting its influence in the London managed services arena and augmenting its capacity to deliver integrated ICT solutions. The deal also extends Optimity's geographical reach. "Our priority is to fully integrate and tick the 'done, done, done' box!," stated Pavey.



Leeland Pavey

Pebble IT is a managed IT services provider specialising in cloud, security and compliance, infrastructure and consulting services. Its tech partners include Google, Microsoft, Cisco and Sophos. The company has grown revenues 94 per cent over the last five years, and Pebble IT's MD David Osen joined Optimity as Chief Information Officer following the transaction.

London-based Optimity was backed by FPE Capital in 2016. "Being private equity backed our plan centres around growth," stated Pavey. "We have an integrated and complementary product range and have historically been concentrated on the London region. I expect that more of our business will be national and international based."

The acquisition gives Optimity the ability to deliver full end-to-end business IT solutions, which Pavey says will enable the firm to accelerate growth

As products become more integrated, so will the companies that deliver them

in IT and cloud services. "We can use our own connectivity network right the way through our product stack of managed Wi-Fi, firewalls, hosted telephony, cloud infrastructure, security and end point device management to truly help integrate our customers' IT infrastructures," he added.

Strong pedigree

Optimity began its commercial life almost 20 years ago as a fixer of PCs and later developed into selling IT and telco services, and more recently rolling out fixed wireless access networks as an alternative to fibre optic cable. The business was established by Anthony Impey who was CEO until Pavey took over the reins in 2017. Today, Optimity employs 70 staff, serves over 1,000 customers and generates circa £8.5 million revenues.

"The company grew successfully due to the entrepreneurial style of leadership that existed," said Pavey. "Operationally this became difficult to manage, so three years ago we deliberately decided what products we would support, focus on and become good at. This meant saying no to some deals as we defined our product portfolio. The process gave us great visibility into our product set, what we need to develop, what skills we need to train and margins. It also helped to define our go to market strategy."

This all has a telling influence in the way Pavey is driving the company forward. And the acquisition of Pebble allows Optimity to manage the entire suite of IT connectivity, hosted, cloud and device management

services. "Our interest right now is to develop our existing products," added Pavey. "And our growth strategy over the past 12 months has been to broaden our offering down the chain from connectivity, right the way through to end point device management and everything in between. We see a need for in-building mobile coverage which is on our product development and partnership roadmap.

"In recent years the convergence of telco networks and IT has been a natural evolution and I have driven this convergence within Optimity. With our customers we see the move away from private, office infrastructures towards cloud-based systems, remotely and securely accessible. This is driving our strategy towards agile, secure, cloud-based products together with the connectivity infrastructure needed to supply them. As products become more integrated, so will the companies that deliver them. One feeds the other."

Pavey set off down the telecoms road 30 years ago when fibre cable first started to appear. "My career has always centred around telco infrastructures," he stated. "I've built infrastructure networks across Europe, set-up large call centres as well as simple administration teams. But at the heart it has always been about building great teams of people." ■

Just a minute with Leeland Pavey...

Role models: My father for his work ethic, and my mother for teaching me the importance of family life

What talent do you wish you had? To run faster

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm a keen runner and cyclist and have completed a mammoth mountain stage of the Tour de France

What do you fear most? Not finding answers to control the uncontrollable

One example of something you've overcome: The dotcom bubble burst in the early 2000s

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? I'd be a pilot

In hindsight: I would have worked abroad more

The biggest risk you have taken? I'm not a dramatic risk taker, although many decisions could be counted as a risk

Name three ideal dinner guests: Billy Connolly, a hilarious story teller; Muhammad Ali, a childhood hero of mine; and Pink Floyd for the after dinner show

Your biggest career achievement: Building high performing teams

Industry bugbear: I would accelerate the integration of cloud-based systems. There is too much fragmentation



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Gibbs goes for growth

MyPhones Sales Director Paul Gibbs' strategic language is as clear and concise as his objectives, and he leaves us in no doubt about the extent of his channel expansion ambitions.

Gibbs says MyPhones has come through phase one of its channel campaign with flying colours, now he is embarking on the second phase having joined the ten year old hosted comms provider in March as a visionary sales chief. On arriving from Gamma where Gibbs spent a year as Head of UCaaS and Mid-Market, he wasted no time in giving the megaphone to what he says is the channel's 'best kept secret in hosted telephony'. "With 72,500 live users on the platform MyPhones has grown quietly, steadily and without making a splash," said Gibbs. "The timing is perfect to bring something refreshing to the channel and I plan to take it to a wider audience. I want us to move into the top five hosted providers in the UK, ideally the top three."

Gibbs drew attention to a number of strategies but he believes his biggest opportunity right now is timing. "Many resellers are looking for their next partner, their next recurring revenue stream and ultimately a technology that will set them apart in a crowded market," he stated. "In the current situation we have seen many resellers review their supply chain and consider new partners.

"We have already taken on a number of new partners due to this factor. Timing wise it is important for resellers to look for a product that can offer richer margins,



Paul Gibbs

I want us to move into the top five hosted providers in the UK, ideally the top three

nimble development and most importantly a long-term partnership."

MyPhones was acquired by Livingbridge-backed Southern Communications in April 2018 and in its year ending March 2020 generated £2.3 million revenues, with group turnover at circa £86 million. "MyPhones is our own IP which puts us in a small group of providers that can steer their development with the future in mind and bring new features to life quicker than most," added Gibbs.

"With the current coronavirus impact we are seeing end users scrabbling around and provisioning fragmented applications which may not be fit for business use. The big question is how secure is my data and is this a

business built application. We see full MS Teams integration as the next piece of the puzzle providing the benefits of both platforms, both built solely for business under one subscription."

Recurring revenues

The importance of recurring revenues is clearer now more than ever before, believes Gibbs, and resellers must ask what percentage of their business is built on recurring revenue. "If it's less than 70 per cent it may be time to grow the recurring ratio," he commented. "Resellers built on selling one off leasing deals will be struggling – that tap has been turned off. We are helping our resellers upskill to use our technologies as sales has changed for the foreseeable future. We

are also driving platform enhancements which take us into new verticals. The channel may need to expand on its potential and change its way of engaging forever following the lockdown."

Gibbs first unlocked his comms career potential in 1997 at Integra Networks, from where he moved to MTV Telecom for seven years, and then to Westcon. In 2010 he first joined Gamma as a BDM and became Head of Channel within three months. Then, after a brief spell in Scotland working for a reseller Gibbs arrived at TelcoSwitch and launched its reseller channel offering, later rejoining Gamma. "I love being in the channel and have developed some great relationships along the way," stated Gibbs.

It was just two weeks after he joined MyPhones that the coronavirus pandemic took hold, but it did not stop the company from ramping up already strong efforts to deliver a product that Gibbs claims will put it in 'a new bracket'. "MyPhones V3 includes a new portal that will be slicker and easier to use, a full rebrand of the business, new collateral and a fully interactive configurator which will make it easy for partners to understand their blended buy price and place orders," commented Gibbs. "And we will have full Microsoft Teams integration. This will offer the full UCaaS suite of Microsoft underpinned by the PBX functionality of MyPhones." ■

Just a minute with Paul Gibbs...

What talent do you wish you had? To multitask

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I am a film geek and tend to mentally retain the scripts

What do you fear most? Multitasking

One example of something you've overcome: I broke my leg and spent three weeks in intensive care. It gave me a new perspective on life

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? I would love to run a high-end tailors

What possession could you not live without? My Peloton bike

The best piece of advice you have taken: Play the long game and don't be a quick buck merchant

Name three ideal dinner guests: Muhammed Ali, an icon; Winston Churchill to hear his opinion on what is happening right now; and Alan Sugar, he must have some great stories

Your biggest career achievement: The longevity of my relationships. I am proud to call a lot of them friends

Industry bugbear: The 'cowboys': Those few taint the masses unfortunately

How would you like to be remembered? As a good guy in the channel

Top tip for resellers: Recurring revenue is king, and don't burn your bridges



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Driving value creation in c

In what has been an unprecedented year, Comms Vision 2020 (11th-13th November, Gleneagles Hotel) will chart the next big comms market shifts, map the professional services competitive landscape, and explore your potential to create customer value, loyalty and sustainability in times of unparalleled market disruption and change.



The then Minister for Implementation Oliver Dowden CBE opening 2018's Comms Vision Convention

Have you considered how much the professional and managed services world will change? Do you have a clear understanding of what will underpin your place in the New Comms Universe – an Age of Powerful Digital Alternatives, Data Supremacy, the Billowing Public Cloud and Unprecedented Competition? Comms Vision 2020 will provide the clarity you need about where we are now in this truly unprecedented year, where the real value of tech companies will reside and the critical role of your organisation's human capital in helping you get there.

Comms Vision 2020 will explore the impacts of market trends and technological forces driving industry change and customer value creation, and how you can prepare your business for sustainable long-term growth

The sum of major trends in public cloud infrastructure procurement, the rise of data-defined business models and the primacy of technologies such as AI – and the march of mega-disruptive alternative providers – is pushing the professional services world into a period of significant change. Not to mention the impact of Covid-19. Already, customers are far

more exposed to substitute products and services from new suppliers – and users are more demanding of speed, quality and agility from their service providers. Meanwhile, digitally adept and innovative challengers are emerging in the sector, and resourcing models are being disrupted as major public cloud providers and tech giants continue to gain

market share and show great interest in pioneering the wireless connectivity space.

Collision course

That there is no basis from which to launch a definitive claim to existing markets is the ICT sector's Achilles heel. In truth, the traditional industry players are wide open to forces beyond their control. So much so that the

conventional comms channel and its early stage cloud evolution could merely be the precursor to something far bigger – an all-out global revolution in communications driven by Super Disrupters with a strong influence over the future of cloud computing and ICT procurement trends. These Super Disrupters – Microsoft, Amazon and Google etc –

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Disruptive times

and the traditional comms sector are colliding, therefore Comms Vision 2020 will take a hard look at the evolving Collision Zone and assess the channel's place in an age of ever intensifying competition, business model change and customer value shifts. Against this backdrop we must ask a cardinal question: What will be the channel's true relationship with customers in this massively transformed and data-centric space?

ICT spending goes public in the cloud

The public cloud market displays strong growth in all regions of the world and Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Alibaba continue to strengthen their grip. Data released late last year by Synergy Research Group shows that these leading four providers of public cloud services accounted for 72 per cent of the worldwide market for IaaS and PaaS in Q3, up from 57 per cent at the beginning of 2016. Amazon's worldwide market share has held steady at around 40 per cent, while Microsoft, Google and Alibaba have all made gains.

Synergy estimates that worldwide spending on public IaaS and PaaS reached \$20 billion in Q3, representing over 80 per cent of the total cloud infrastructure services. Hosted and managed private cloud services, such as those provided by the channel, make up the rest of the market, which it could be argued is under threat from the strong advances made by the big four, especially in light of their growth expectations.

"It has taken just eight quarters for the public IaaS

and PaaS markets to double in size and our forecast shows them doubling in size again over the next eleven quarters," commented John Dinsdale, who is a Chief Analyst at Synergy Research Group. "As spending on public cloud services continues to grow rapidly, the top four cloud providers are strengthening their grip on the market.

"Some of the companies outside the top four are growing at a reasonable pace, but the reality is that in aggregate they continue to lose ground to the market leaders. Outside of some niche services and geographic regions, this is a game where scale of operations, geographic footprint and global brand are key competitive advantages."

Market rivalry set to intensify

The impact of Super Suppliers, the power and demands of data savvy customers, and the proliferation of substitute products and services all point to more intense market rivalry. The primary drivers of this shift will be the most digitally capable powerhouses with the resources to self-sustainably advance their market positions. But to what extent will the channel be disrupted? And how far will the Super Giants purvey additive or substitutive products and services? Responding to these vital questions, Comms Vision

2020 will provide clarity about where we are, and need to be, on the spectrum between existing business models and the emergence of new competitive forces.

Disrupting tradition and going data-first: Assessing new approaches to business model innovation

To create mechanisms for future value creation we must understand where customer value is moving to – destination data – and how to reposition your organisation to capture that value. Success depends on having a clear view of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead and the shifts that need to be made in your business. Why? Because it is true that Data is King, and that we will see the rise of data-first solutions providers.

More and more customers expect data analytics services that offer real-time insights. A key question is how these priorities will redefine the professional services model, which must adapt to the demands of customers who value insights gleaned from data harvesting, control and management. Data generation and capture will prompt new approaches as data becomes core to the value received by customers. Therefore the real value of tech companies rests in a combination of technical and business understanding, IP ownership and the harvesting and management of data.

Continued on page 40

It takes Vision to be a leader

Comms Vision (11th-13th November 2020, Gleneagles Hotel) is the leading annual leadership forum for CEO, MD and CTO delegates making up the major league of the UK reseller community. Places are limited and by invitation: If you would like to join us this year, please register your interest to attend at www.commsvision.com

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Continued from page 39



Capitalising on ten tech sector shifts

No sector is immune from business model revolutions such as those brought about by Über and Netflix. To fully capitalise what is currently happening in the comms sector it is important to understand the trends that are driving the potential for big shifts in the channel's tectonic plates.

Maximising data-centric customer value shifts

There is a fundamental shift in the industry towards a data-led services approach with a high level of personalisation. Now, it is key to look at what the future has in store as organisations move towards cognitive technologies such as Big Data Analytics, Machine Learning, Natural Language Processing, Artificial Intelligence and Robotic Process Automation. All of which could potentially and over time be packaged without complexity and offered by Super Disrupters as simple Big Button Comms, meaning that smaller service providers need to operate creatively in niche markets to create their value.

Innovate your way to success in niche industries

Uncovering opportunities for niche sectors to harness technology is one way to differentiate and secure your future. Comms Vision will explore the reasons why developing a niche market technology practice today could be key to success. And we will see examples of applications and use cases

of AI, ML and IoT that will get you under the skin of specific industry sectors. Remaining relevant in an era of ever expanding choices, and being able to stand your ground by delivering innovation to niche sectors, will likely hinge on leveraging ideas, creativity, insight and personalisation, from a data-centric standpoint. So define your future today. Innovation by definition means more growth.

Understanding the critical role of human capital strategies in times of change

As business transformation continues to accelerate as a top business priority, is your talent strategy keeping pace? Human capital strategies are playing an ever increasing role in the sustainability of organisations, none more so than in the fast paced ICT sector which also faces a critical skills gap. Investing in human capital, managing people to improve retention and engagement, and maximising the value of your people resources has never been more important, nor challenging.

Do you know your organisation's ability to learn and innovate? Do you understand how talent innovation can improve business performance? Can you identify the 'people factors' that will drive growth and value; and why a range of capabilities, experiences and diverse perspectives is key to embracing fresh opportunities, delivering improved customer experiences and relishing new challenges? Comms Vision will seek to address these complex questions and provide important insights into how you could culturally align these imperatives with your own long-term business goals.

Disruption and opportunity in the connectivity space

Comms Vision will also explore developments in Fibre, 5G, Wi-Fi 6, and nod towards the grand satellite projects of Mega Disrupters. Is it time to look beyond the boundaries of our immediate experience and view the future from altitude, and ask searching questions? Could the cloud computing Super Giants, those truly global brands, utterly transform business communications? Comms Vision will bring clarity to developments in the developing superfast connectivity space, and examine the potential challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The Connectivity Shift: Fibre, 5G, Wi-Fi 6, satellite and the grand projects of Mega Disrupters. What does it all mean?

The Super Disruptor Shift: The influence of tech giants creating market alternatives continues to strengthen.

Customer Value and the Shift to Data: New business models are emerging that prioritise value in data rather than the product or service. Capturing future customer value and making the transition to become data-driven solutions providers is key.

The Digital Procurement Shift: The digitisation of the path to purchase and rise of disruptive retail models have emerged as consumers fully embrace digital. The influence of consumer purchasing behaviour on future business models in the channel is a key determining factor.

The Innovation Shift: Companies are turning to tech-enabled innovation with growth, relevancy and competitiveness their top objectives – and many will seek help from external partners. Is your business Innovation Ready?

The Customer Experience Shift: Value is no longer created in the transaction, but the engagement and interaction.

The Shift from Products to Services: Value is also created in the consultation, the problems solved, and a cloud services-based subscription model. Speed of execution and completeness of action are also key considerations

The Personalisation Shift: The rise of personalisation will attract ICT spend as buyers shift towards customised products and experiences underpinned by AI and other developing and intelligent technologies.

The Generation Z Shift: Collaboration and social networking technology in the workplace is highly valued.

The Shift to Big Button Comms: Could easy to source, deploy and consume business grade ICT services provided by tech Titans eventually turn conventional provision on its head, increasing the threat of disintermediation as end users get more tech and application savvy?

Comms Vision 2020 will explore all of these market shifts and more – visit www.commsvision.com

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Marketing key in Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic offers every reason to focus harder on your marketing strategy, according to our panel of channel experts...

During a recession many feel inclined to increase short-term profitability, writes **David Sparrow, Managing Partner, Blabbermouth Marketing.** At the same time marketing budgets are often considered an area where significant cuts can be made. But according to the Harvard Business Review, during the last recession businesses that maintained their presence also recovered the quickest. Therefore, maintaining and building your brand now will place you in the best position to recover once social distancing measures are lifted, and legions of businesses are clamouring to invest after



David Sparrow

spending this time planning future expenditure. Especially considering that many decision makers now find themselves with more free time. It would be naive to assume managing directors and CEOs are sat at home, twiddling their thumbs. Instead, they will research the products and services that were already on their 'shopping list' with

an emphasis on sourcing products that enable them to return fitter, faster and more agile than before.

Brand awareness

B2B sales funnels are typically longer than B2C counterparts, and longer sales funnels make brand awareness even more crucial. The overwhelming advice is (unless your very existence

requires you to cut costs) to continue investing in your long-term brand and sales campaigns. Equally, don't halt existing customer campaigns. You've already done the hard work in actualising those relationships, so don't present your 'bread and butter' with an opportunity to question your suitability by staying silent.

It's also important to remember that this is not a typical recession, this is a global health pandemic that has already affected us all, and it is vital that your marketing is sympathetic to this. Opportunists will not be rewarded if they don't show humility and warmth, so campaigns must demonstrate

your compassion and ethics instead of aggressive sales tactics.

Also, be mindful that Share of Voice (SoV) is directly correlated to market share (especially true in our market) and companies that advertise, network and contribute tend to outlast those that focus solely on activation. As new activations begin to slow, reducing advertising spend could be one method to improve profitability, but this will be counter productive to long-term profitability as reducing SoV will impact your market share when the economy bounces back and there's arguably more business to win than pre-Covid-19. ■

Keeping a watchful eye on how your business customers are likely to adapt once the crisis is over is key, writes **Louise Abbey, Head of Customer Marketing, 9 Group.** So what are you trying to accomplish from your marketing today? Are you simply letting your customers know that you're still open for business? Have you got an eye on customer retention? Or are you positioning yourself to thrive in a post-Covid-19 economy? Being clear and realistic about what you're trying to achieve focuses you to deliver real results. Sounds simple, but it's often overlooked.

Recycling old material is not an option as communications that were created before

the pandemic will likely clash with today's reality. This applies to everything from product offers to copywriting and imagery. So carefully tailor the tone of your messaging to the current climate. Reassuring and sensitive language is key and will help to make your campaign even more relevant to the audience. Positive and conversational language will work well, as will encouraging your customers to contribute to the discussion.

Content is key

Audiences gravitate toward content that has meaning and relevance – therefore focus on what's important today: Instead of leading with a product, consider your customers' reality – are their



Louise Abbey

challenges predominantly around sales, or is customer service a focus? This will allow you to pitch something which resonates. Include imagery that reflects social distancing. Think about home workers and images of individuals rather than public places and big groups. It's subtle but it matters. The main stock imagery sites have responded to the situation and you'll find no shortage of options to choose from.

Take your events and meetings online. Hosting a live session on LinkedIn is a great way to stay connected. We have seen partners run a live Q&A session about home working solutions. Some have even included a special guest who they have interviewed, and have helped to teach their audience how to do something new.

The phrase 'new normal' is already becoming tired,

but the fact remains that the world is unlikely to go back to how things were at the beginning of 2020. Purchasing trends are rapidly shifting as the pandemic lockdown has changed all aspects of our daily lives. New trends are likely to stick around and evolve even further.

Employers who were obliged to offer home working to employees are suddenly alert to the benefits as they have seen productivity soar. Employees are thriving as their commute has disappeared and their work life balance is in a stronger place than ever. Preparing solutions and campaigns which resonate with this new landscape will put you in a position of strength. ■



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lockdown



Candice Cunliffe

To max out your marketing potential and succeed through the lockdown you need to do two things, **writes Candice Cunliffe, Managing Director, F6 Agency.** And you need to do them together for the best results. The first is to switch up your marketing tactics immediately and adapt to the situation that you (and your customers) are now in by changing up your day-to-day marketing and doubling down on the most impactful tactics.

Speed of action counts

You can do this quickly by nailing your web presence. Now that digital is king, websites truly are every business's shop front. Is yours easy to find on Google and easy to use? Social media usage is rising – are your social accounts set up and active? People are checking their inboxes more often – are you sending them compelling messages about your top products and services? And off the back of those messages, are you changing your processes, products and services to help your customers?

Empathy is important, but emotional messages from CEOs won't cut it. Show that you care by putting measures in place that make a difference in peoples'

lives, whether that's pricing changes, new SLAs or better customer service.

Don't risk being out of sight and out of mind. You've got to be where your customers are – online. So focus on your digital marketing content, webinars, social campaigns, ads and SEO.

Strategise now, not later

The second thing you need to do is start planning for 2021 and beyond. Real growth comes from long-term investment; and very soon the world's going to be facing a recession. There's only one weapon that can protect you against widespread economic downturn – your brand. You may have the best product in the world but if your brand doesn't communicate that, what does it matter? Perception pays. And when budgets get even tighter than they are now, the experience your brand provides customers with is what'll keep them coming back to you for more.

So keep investing in your brand. Align every aspect of your business with your mission and core values, build credibility across the industry, and turn your customers into diehard fans. The businesses that succeed in doing so are the ones who'll thrive, even in the hard times to come. ■

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COMMS DEALER | MAY 2020 | 43

Could home working become



Whatever the Government decides in the next month or so, the COVID-19 pandemic will prevent the ICT channel from doing business conventionally for the foreseeable future.

The lockdown may be eased slightly, but social distancing measures will remain in place, so travelling for meetings, or simply commuting to the office, may be off the agenda for some time to come.

Channel businesses like those featured in the month's Kaleidoscope, have been selling remote working and business continuity solutions for years and some may decide to implement some aspects of remote working permanently. There is no denying that well managed conference calls can replace physical meetings, thereby decreasing travel costs and increasing the time to do other things.

Before the Coronavirus hit, the bigger crisis was and remains global warming, so why not be greener and encourage home working both internally and externally and sell more solutions in the process? As reported in the national press recently, it appears many people, having become accustomed to home working, are pushing to maintain the status quo indefinitely for health and lifestyle reasons.

This said, home working is not all sweetness and light. We hear of some comms and IT business that have never been busier and isolation can lead to more stress and in some cases staff burnout. Even with video conferencing, the lack of being physically present in the same working space as someone suffering psychologically makes this harder to recognise.

In an article for smallbusiness.co.uk, Steve Arnold, CEO of absence-management platform e-days, says that making conversations on mental health and employee wellbeing in the workplace normal needs to be encouraged. "If you do not already have a system in place to handle this, then it is highly recommended, as it is important for your employees to feel they have the support if ever they should need it. As a case in point, see the 'Don't suffer in silence' article penned by Focus Group joint MD Chris Goodman on page 32.



LOUISE ABBEY
9 GROUP

"Our teams continue to demonstrate their dedication to providing partners with exceptional service, while working from home. We created a responsive communication plan, tailored to the current situation. Our goal was to keep our partners and teams connected through regular communications, which aim to be clear and informative. Alongside the important operational updates, we share positive stories and photos along with fun things such as playlists and movie recommendations. We have had a fantastic response – the communications are keeping everyone connected, despite social distancing. The marketing team supports partners by providing clear and concise customer communications and campaigns. These materials were designed to comfort and reassure customers, while advising them on how our partners can support their business. We hear that customers have been patient and hugely appreciative of the support our partners are providing. These anxious times bring frustrations, but the best of human nature can rise to the challenge."



DAVID ALLDRITT
HIGHNET

"Most businesses in our sector have all the tech and the required know-how to deploy 100% home-working. However, maintaining the wellbeing of staff and their team cohesion can be challenging. To help us in this we use Yammer not only for formal company information but also for non-work chat within a 'Social Media' group. We also have daily 'coffee break' meetings via Teams, making it easy to stay connected with colleagues in our virtual staff lounge. Whilst it is easy to reach partners and customers by email and social media, getting the content and tone right is less straightforward. We've been communicating regularly as trusted advisors, listening to our marketing experts, and listening most carefully to the issues our customers raise. The selective targeting of our messages will be key as restrictions begin to lift and customer focus changes from survival to recovery, and finally to growth."



JULIE INGLIS
KUBE NETWORKS

"We continue to communicate with customers across the usual methods of ecasts, providing industry updates and guidance on how to make remote working, call handling and network security the best it can be in line with their business objectives. This is a great time to progress projects with customers as well as reviewing and enhancing network security and enabling changes in how they operate and communicate going forward. New product trials on hosted and security products are also on the increase and as a Cisco Premier Partner there are some great incentives for customers to take advantage of. We have found customers very receptive to these reviews, as they have time to focus on projects which perhaps were not high priority previously, as a result there are some fantastic discussions taking place with many of our customers on a regular basis."



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JULIE MILLS
TRAIN2WIN

"When we first developed our virtual onboarding and 'assisted plug and play' services, we could never have imagined their importance in a situation like today's. Not being able to get onsite is a new challenge to many channel partners, but we're able to step in with a tried-and-tested approach. We're also busy helping partners who see now as a good time to switch comms platforms, as a lot of this work can be done remotely. Like everyone, we've had to close our offices, but the team are doing brilliantly working from home. You've really got to try and support your staff at times like this – as well as the customers who intend to stick by you no matter what – and at the very least take time to show your appreciation. This is when people's true colours start coming through and I think the comms channel has so many people to be proud of."



SHARON MCDERMOTT
TRENCHES LAW

"To a great extent, we were well equipped to make the shift to home working. When we expanded our office infrastructure to three sites, we invested in a robust, IP-based phone system that allows us all to stay connected with a UC solution irrespective of location. We also each have high-speed broadband at home. We now attend many more industry briefings, and update all clients by phone/email with the latest insights – ensuring they're clued up on the evolving landscape while encouraging them to think beyond the pandemic so we can all get ahead of the curve. We've ramped up the advice we share to the wider industry on our personal social media channels too. With everyone working so hard, we're keen to protect morale. Daily planning calls are keeping everyone focused and motivated, online training is being continually delivered by our senior management team, and our weekly quiz and fizz over Zoom has become a favourite!"



MARK CURTIS-WOOD
VAIONI

"We already had a strong, people-first strategy in place which made it easier for us to implement WFH and business continuity plans immediately. To keep everyone engaged and entertained, we've launched several initiatives including encouraging video-chats to stay connected and regular daily virtual huddles. Fun at 5 - which normally takes place on Friday at the Fibar - has moved to a virtual bar and along with Wellbeing channels on Teams and WhatsApp, staff can now share resources such as guides to managing isolation, as well as articles, quizzes and brainteasers. As a provider of critical services, we have remained 100% fully staffed and operational. We're keeping in touch with our partners through weekly business updates but are also making sure they have access to support and resources to help them through this period of uncertainty. We are also using downtime to review our processes and make them stronger for the bounce back."



TIM MERCER
VAPOUR MEDIA

"As a cloud specialist we embraced flexible and remote working way before COVID-19. Our boardroom is set up to become a video conferencing room with the click of a button, for example, which means we can be in 'face-to-face' contact with someone almost instantly. This familiarity with video meant we didn't have to culturally adjust when the world moved en masse to tools like Teams and Zoom. Overall, we've defaulted to video for complex project discussions or advanced conversations surrounding upcoming deals, which we would usually hold in person. It's as close to 'round the table' as we can get. Internal team huddles usually take place via video too. Our management team is also working extremely hard to maintain morale and the sense of camaraderie among employees. Our people make Vapour what it is, and the potential psychological impact of lockdown which has been widely reported on in the media, is something we readily acknowledge."



IAN ROWAN
WILDIX

"Routine is the best advice I can give to anyone working from home right now and coping with the changes the lockdown has brought upon us. To keep in touch with our partners we are lucky to be involved with a technology that is designed to do just that and daily we leverage our platform to reach out to new and potential partners. We are hosting a series of technical and sales online training sessions, under the government furlough scheme. Staff that are furloughed are not allowed but encouraged to learn and this is covered within the government's furlough payments. This not only allows us to keep our partners updated, but also helps keep the communication channels active. When lockdown is over there will be many obstacles faced by sales teams and new opposition given. The last thing we would want is a lack of knowledge to be a barrier a salesperson cannot overcome."



SUE ELLIOT
WINDSOR TELECOM

"We want to be as helpful as possible to our customers and more than ever that means giving practical advice and focusing on straightforward things they can do right away, with our account managers being really hands on supporting implementation. When COVID-19 struck we reduced our contract lengths to make it easy for customers to put in place immediate solutions for managing their comms from home and allow a move to more future proofed solutions as and when they're ready. This took away a lot of fear and uncertainty at a time when this was already in abundance. We are fully working from home ourselves. We've always embraced flexible working and as a cloud-first business the transition was pretty straightforward. We're using a combination of our own Cloud Telephony service, integrated with Microsoft Teams and Office365 for collaboration with our customers and colleagues. We're a close-knit bunch so daily team calls, clear priorities and twice weekly quizzes are keeping morale, motivation and productivity high."

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TTG appoints COO



Michelle Atkinson

THE Technology Group's (TTG) Service Director Michelle Atkinson has been promoted to the role of COO as the company seeks to hit £15 million turnover by 2022 through a combination of organic growth and acquisition. "The growth in the business has been tremendous since I joined, which is a trend we aim to continue," commented Atkinson. "We anticipate big expansion as businesses increase demand for greater flexible working and reshape their operations post-coronavirus. My focus

is to make sure that we have the infrastructure we need to see new acquisitions dovetail into our existing business as well as helping us to maintain strong, consistent growth." The Technology Group is headquartered in Leeds with offices in York, London and Welwyn Garden City. The company has 42 staff, 900-plus customers and telephony solutions in 24 countries.

Also on the move...

EXERTIS has stepped up its digital strategy with the appointment of Vishal Chhatralia to the newly created role of Chief Digital Officer with a remit to expand digital transformation initiatives across the Group. Key focus



Vishal Chhatralia

areas will be the customer experience, marketing, digital services and operational efficiencies. Chhatralia joins from Electrocomponents (known as RS Components) where he spent 15 years in senior roles across category management and digital, most recently as Global SVP for Innovation. Tim Griffin, Exertis Managing Director, said: "This is a key role and Vish is a highly experienced leader with a proven track record in generating digital and e-commerce solutions."

CANON has pulled in Tony Wills (pictured below) as Document Solutions Business Unit Director for UK&I, bringing over 35 years global industry and leadership experience across both the Corporate and SME environments, including time in Xerox, the reseller channel and 25 years in senior roles within Canon. He originally joined Canon in 1984 and was appointed Marketing Director



for UK&I in 1999. Yusuke Mizoguchi, Senior Managing Director, Canon UK&I, said: "Tony's international sales and marketing experience, spanning direct and indirect sales, will ensure he is able to deliver our strategic goals and drive growth in all areas of the Document Solutions organisation." Wills added: "The current environment is challenging for all but I see this as an ideal time to look to the future and make the necessary adjustments to the organisation."

EX-BT GROUP Chairman Sir Michael Rake has joined the board of Huawei Technologies UK. The former President of the Confederation of British Industry has operated as an



Sir Michael Rake

adviser to the company since 1st January 2019. Rake said: "The importance of good communication infrastructure has never been more vital as the Covid-19 crisis emphasises every day. We are all getting used to working and communicating in different ways in these difficult times, and I look forward to working with Huawei UK again on the next generation of technology as the company extends its 20 year track record in the UK." Rake is also Senior Business Adviser at Chatham House and Chairman of the Advisory Council for Better Business.

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