



Billingham on why preparation is key to avoiding a hard exit p26

Ambitious FluidOne CEO set for next expansion phase p30



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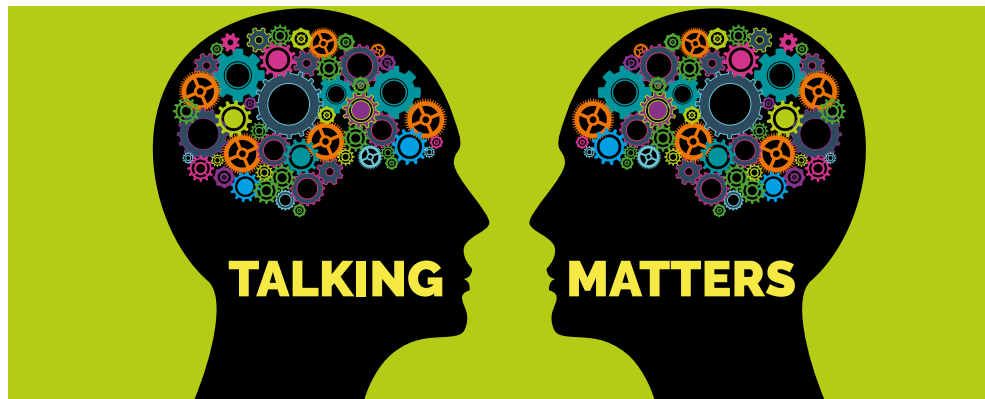
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This month's movers and shakers



Mental health: It's time to talk

THE Covid-19 crisis has sparked a surge in mental health issues and the ICT industry has been urged to act to prevent further tragedies such as the recent suicide of Fusion Voice and Data Sales Director Nick Dutfield.

CAMPAIGN

New charity Mental Health Associates fears the pandemic and subsequent economic melt-down could put affected people into a spiral of anxiety and that a 'fear of failure' is putting men particularly at risk.

"More men die from suicide than on the roads, yet the sums spent on road safety and preventing mental health problems are miles apart," said MHA CEO and founder Peter

Orr. "We are not in any way excluding women and we hope they will also feel they can talk to us. But as wrong as it may be, the ICT industry is largely male orientated and men who suffer from a 'macho' belief that they should 'man up' and get on with things – no matter how anxious and powerless they may be feeling – may need a more direct approach to addressing their problems."

MHA is urgently training a team of experienced and 'indus-

try aware' associates who will act as a friendly ear for men and women who need to talk through their pressing issues.

Orr hopes that the whole of the comms sector, especially larger organisations, will get behind MHA to help fund additional associate training. "We cannot lose another person like Nick Dutfield when a talk with somebody who has empathy and understanding could make the difference," he stated.

Full report on pages 24-25



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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

THE comms channel has been virtually male dominated since the day it was born, and has been resistant to change, which perhaps reflects a universal psyche that reinforces a serious matter other than the diversity issue. The

sector cannot be stuck in its old ways, and its archaic 'structures' are at last dismantling, but not quick enough. It is time to accelerate change by shining a light on what it is to be progressively modern, diverse, and human.

Mental health is too important and sensitive a subject to be swept under the carpet. Like diversity, it has become a big issue of the day – and the comms sector seems particularly afflicted, primarily, because of its overwhelming 'maleness', which, says Mental Health Associates (MHA) founder Peter Orr, puts men especially at risk in terms of their propensity to suffer mental illness, and in greater numbers, according to the science (see page 24).

Dealing with mental illness still resides in a dark age. It is still too little understood despite its up-to-the minute link to the day-to-day pressures of life, made all the more challenging for people, both male and female, who already struggle with personal, private demons, and have nowhere to go for help.

In this issue of Comms Dealer we attempt to help write a new narrative and haul mental illness out of the shadows and into a spotlight. For sufferers, the first step towards seeking help can be the hardest to take, and our close alignment with the new charity MHA is intended to raise sector-wide awareness of this much needed step-stone towards non-judgmental support from industry aware counsellors who act as a conduit in the healing process for men and women.

With full industry backing, we can show the world how progressive, modern and open this sector could be, which, as a model to follow, could attract a more diverse pool of candidates.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Union Street snares ebillz

UNION Street Technologies parent company Aurora, owned by serial tech entrepreneur Matthew Riley, has acquired Shaftesbury Systems from Chess, developer of the ebillz billing platform.

The deal comes just weeks after Union Street merged with Aurora and creates a billing powerhouse that provides software services to over 900 partners that bill in excess of £2bn per annum.

Riley is Chairman of the combined businesses, which operates under the Union Street moniker, and Vincent Disneur has been appointed as MD.

Shaftesbury Systems was established in 1995 and became one of the first entrants into the billing software market and, much like Union Street, one of the first companies to provide independent billing solutions for the channel.

By 2010 the firm provided its ebillz platform to over 150 comms providers, at which time it was acquired by Chess, becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of the company.

Disneur said: "By combining the resources and talents of these billing businesses we can provide new levels of service



Vincent Disneur

and support for our partners. In addition, the significant new investment and expertise will help us to ramp up the R&D of our solutions."

Disneur also claims that the recent wave of consolidation would add extra resilience for channel partners' billing processes. "If the unprecedented events of 2020 have taught us anything, it's that sourcing a business critical service such as billing from an under resourced supplier puts comms providers in a vulnerable position."

See page 22

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IoD gong handed to Astro CEO

ASTRO Technology Group CEO Steve Hodges has been crowned Director of the Year at the Institute of Directors Awards 2020 in the SMB up to £5m turnover category for London and South.

The judges said: "Steve seems a real powerhouse of positivity and hunger for change and growth. He gives the impression of being demanding of the best and working at pace but recognising of the need to take people with him."

Hodges commented: "This award helps recognise the fact that, while it is important for youngsters to give themselves the best start through formal education, if that isn't the best option for some, or doesn't work out, there is still a path to achieving great things through hard work, determination and other support channels, be that apprenticeships, mentors or even friends and family."



Steve Hodges

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NEWS ROUNDUP

SSE Enterprise Telecoms is to nearly double its number of unbundled BT Exchanges in just over a year, reaching around 80% of UK business premises. The expansion sees SSE deliver connectivity to Three UK with 198 exchanges already deployed and 259 soon to become available, enabling the operator to boost 4G services and build 5G networks. Sarah Mills, Sector Director for Network Operators, SSE Enterprise Telecoms, said: "This next phase of our expansion has more aggressive scale and delivery timelines than ever before. Our vision to support UK innovation is anchored in 5G and edge computing, and we're just getting started."

OPENREACH has added 67 more locations to its Fibre Cities programme. Work will begin in March 2021. To date more than 560 towns, cities, boroughs, villages and hamlets have been included in the Fibre First programme, a £12bn project to build full fibre technology to 20 million premises in the UK by the mid-to-late 2020s, assuming the right regulatory and political fibre enablers are in place, said the firm. Openreach's website has been updated with a simplified view of the build programme, including indicative maps.

BT unveils Ethernet FTTP offer

BT WHOLESALE'S business connectivity portfolio has been boosted with the addition of an Ethernet FTTP solution, giving access to network speeds of up to 1Gb with ultra-low latency, said the firm.

BT Wholesale claims to be the only provider in the UK offering SoGEA (Single Order Generic Ethernet Access) and FTTP on both its broadband and Ethernet portfolios.

Paul Beacham, Senior Manager, BT Wholesale, commented: "As the UK prepares for the withdrawal of the analogue PSTN network in 2025 and begins to migrate towards fully digitised networks, businesses need future-proofed connectivity solutions that support their digital transformation journeys and their demand for greater bandwidth and speed."

"With Ethernet FTTP, we're responding to increasing customer needs for network speeds and reliability."

"The announcement also reinforces BT Group's investment in full fibre. We're committed to growing our FTTP coverage across the UK and are accelerating our FTTP build to reach 20 million premises by the mid-to-late 2020s." See p32

Barclay gets UK CEO role

MICROSOFT UK's Chief Operating Officer Clare Barclay is poised to take the CEO role following the appointment of current chief exec Cindy Rose as President of Microsoft's business across Western Europe. Both appointments take effect on 1st October.

Rose succeeds Vahé Torossian who is to lead Microsoft's Business Applications Division at the firm's HQ in Redmond.

Ralph Haupter, President of EMEA at Microsoft, said: "Cindy's appointment is down to her success in leading the UK over the last four years. That was based on her laser focus and building an inclusive and healthy culture."

Barclay has worked at Microsoft for 22 years across a number of sales, marketing and leadership roles.

Prior to being COO she led the company's work with SMEs and network of 25,000 UK partner organisations in what Haupter describes as one of the most cloud-forward regions.

"Clare brings deep insight and exceptional leadership qualities having repeatedly built high-performing teams across Microsoft," he added.



Clare Barclay

Barclay said: "This year has not only challenged us, it has also shown how technology can help us all thrive and adapt."

NEWS ROUNDUP

PANGEA has added 5G networks and a bulk postcode checker to its UK mobile coverage map. The firm made its mobile coverage checker available to the public in June and adding 5G networks to the platform enables partners to keep track as 5G networks roll out across the country. "Pangea encourages partners to plan their 5G solution deployments in advance," stated MD Dan Cunliffe. "It's a good time to do so as the UK Government has introduced new laws that make it easier than ever for MNOs to deploy 5G networks." Cunliffe also noted that partners can use the new bulk postcode checker to upload multiple postcodes and check their coverage simultaneously.

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Richard Burke

ARROW Business Communications has strengthened its IT and Microsoft capabilities with the acquisition of Glasgow-based Click Networks, its second IT related acquisition in recent months.

Click Networks was established in 2005 and provides IT managed services and cloud services. It supports over 150 businesses and as a Microsoft Gold Partner has migrated over 30,000 assets to the cloud.

“The in-house help desk and field engineer teams will expand Arrow’s existing IT team and enable us to provide broader consultancy, support and services across England and Scotland,” said Arrow CEO Richard Burke.

Click Networks MD Mark Mahaffy added: “Being part of the Arrow family will allow us to enhance our existing capabilities and further support our clients across the UK.”

NEWS ROUNDUP

GAMMA partner Adept Technology has gained access to additional training, support and premium marketing packages following its designation as a Platinum Partner. Adept CEO Phil Race stated: “Our long-term strategy embraces a focus on key partners and the achievement of Platinum Partner status is recognition of this.” Daryl Pile, MD for Channel at Gamma, added: “Adept will benefit from additional resources, support and staff training through dedicated Platinum courses on the Gamma Academy.”

EXERTIS’S Pro AV resellers have received a boost following the release of an additional £10m of credit. The Pro AV division has also introduced enhancements to its solutions bundles for home working, huddle spaces, meeting rooms and boardrooms. “It’s been a difficult time for the AV industry,” said Ian Aitken, Exertis Pro AV Director. “We are certain that the industry will bounce back stronger than ever and to help our customers we are providing extra credit.”

Zen’s elevation of purpose beyond profit is rewarded

ZEN Internet’s mission to pursue ‘purpose’ as well as profit has taken a leap forward with B Corporation certification.

Zen is said to be the largest B Corp accredited telecoms service provider in the UK and joins a community of over 3,500 certified businesses globally (including 330-plus in the UK).

Organisations are required to implement and maintain processes which enhance social and environmental contributions, with a particular focus on five key impact areas – Governance, Workers, Community, Environment and Customers.



Richard Tang

Examples include energy supplies, waste and water use, worker compensation, diversity and corporate transparency.

To complete the certification, an organisation must legally embed their commitment to purpose beyond profit in their company articles.

Zen founder and Chairman Richard Tang said: “From the moment I started Zen my philosophy was to create a company that made a positive difference to the wider world, not just the bottom line. This accreditation backs up the years of hard work to make this happen.

“For too long companies, particularly large companies, have focused on short-term profits to the detriment of all else. Zen wants to show its customers and the industry that we can be a successful and profitable company, without compromising our values.”

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NEWS ROUNDUP

PANGEA has launched 5G connectivity services using its new 5G router. Speed tests across London averaged at 270Mbps, which was 4.5x the 67Mbps speeds of 4G at the same spots. "Channel partners can provide their customers with fully fledged 5G solutions right now, without needing to wait any longer or change up their tech," commented MD Dan Cunliffe. "It'll open up new revenue streams with rapid deployment solutions for remote construction sites, ultrafast mobile broadband for offices and pop-up shops, resilient low-latency connectivity for healthcare providers, and more."

A PARTNER Pack rolled out by SaaS provider Highlight enables resellers to more easily add value, according to Bimal Modha, Sales Director. "Rather than battle with different sets of tools or take on the expense of investing in their own portal, resellers can use the insights from Highlight to stay informed about the connectivity services they are buying, and the level of service they're delivering on to their customers," he explained. "This helps them sell more margin-rich services and reduce churn by improving customer relationships."

Top exec hire for FluidOne



James Arnold-Roberts

FORMER G3 Comms CEO James Arnold-Roberts has joined network aggregator FluidOne as Chief Revenue Officer (reporting to CEO Russell Horton), a new board level role designed to boost plans to treble the size of the firm over the next five years.

He co-founded and led Genius Networks which merged with G3 Comms where he was CEO and steered the company to a successful MBO in 2019.

Horton said: "James will be an integral part of the team to help achieve our new 2020 vision and five year plan. We look forward to supporting him in shaping the sales and marketing strategy and to build on our existing talent to ensure we

have a best of breed sales and marketing engine as we continue to grow.

"We have a series of acquisitions in the pipeline that will complement our existing services, including IT services, UC and advanced security and James's role as CRO is key to the execution of our vision as we scale the business."

Arnold-Roberts added: "My experience in connectivity and UC, leading teams to deliver consistent organic growth, coupled with an in-depth knowledge of private equity, puts me in a great position to support Russell and the FluidOne board to deliver on their vision."

Horton outlines his strategic growth intentions – page 30

Connexin poised for expansion

HULL-based smart city firm Connexin has raised £80m in funding from Whitehelm Capital to support demand for smart networks in cities and the enabling infrastructures.

"This financing validates the digital transformation we have delivered within cities, communities and the utility sector through our innovation in the smart infrastructure and IoT space," said Connexin founder and CEO Furqan Alamgir.

Tom Maher, Head of Business Development at Whitehelm Capital, said: "Connectivity has become more important than ever, and we have identified a significant need to invest in regional networks and support local communities.

"In addition to the initial commitment of up to £80m, Whitehelm has earmarked further capital for investment through the partnership."

Alamgir added: "This investment isn't just about Connexin. It affects every community. Everyone deserves clean air, tidier streets and safer roads.

"By allowing all communities to have access to digitally connected infrastructure, it enables connected devices to speak to one another."

NEWS ROUNDUP

MORRISON Telecom Services (part of M Group Services) has bagged a contract to support Openreach's £12bn full fibre project. As part of the contract Morrison Telecom Services will be responsible for construction tasks such as surveying, building, testing and supporting Openreach to commission the network. Pat Carolan, MD of Morrison Telecom Services, said: "This contract award provides us with an opportunity to play a key role in the delivery of ultrafast connectivity to homes and businesses in these local communities."

ERICSSON'S play in the 5G space has been boosted by the acquisition of Cradlepoint, the US-based wireless edge WAN 4G and 5G enterprise solution provider. Cradlepoint will become a fully owned subsidiary of Ericsson while operating under its existing brand. Börje Ekholm, President and CEO of Ericsson, said: "The acquisition is key to our strategy of helping customers grow the value of their 5G network investments. Combining the scale of our market access and relationships with the world's biggest mobile operators we are making a strong investment to support our customers to grow in this exciting market."



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Fidelity backs trio of top rugby stars



Fidelity Group scores with Luke Baldwin deal

FIDELITY Group is continuing its sponsorship of a number of top-flight rugby players despite the ongoing impact of Covid-19 which has decimated the sporting calendar.

The solutions provider signed a deal with Argentinian international forward Tomas Lavanini of Leicester Tigers last season and for the Premiership season ahead is backing South African flanker Kobus van Wyk and Dragons scrum half Luke Baldwin.

The relationship with Leicester Tigers came about after Fidelity won a tender for a new Gamma telephony solution

backed up by an Akixi monitoring system for Leicester Tigers and were invited to sponsor a player as part of the deal.

“Through this journey we were invited to become more involved with our clients and become a part of the rugby family,” commented Marketing Manager Niki Foote.

“We felt this opportunity would fit perfectly with our values of loyalty, trust and delivery, and sport is a passion with so many people in our company.

“Matthew Farr, our Welsh Business Development Manager has a passion for rugby both on and off the field which led to

the involvement with Dragons in Newport.”

Fidelity implemented its IoT system Buddy Ohm to monitor Dragons’ energy usage which will be particularly important with so many games taking place under floodlights.

“These sponsorships give us great exposure across the UK and we’re looking at working with more clubs and various sports where we can bring our expertise to support them during these challenging times,” added Foote.

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

Sanchez rides in aid of MHA

THE tragic suicide of Fusion Voice & Data Director Nick Dutfield spurred close friend José Sanchez to get on his bike and raise money for new ICT charity Mental Health Associates (MHA).

“Nick was a great friend and his death was a sad loss and a shock to us all,” said Sanchez. “He was suffering from mental health issues and I wanted to raise money for MHA, so I set out to ride 127 miles from Flitwick in Bedfordshire to Overstrand near Cromer.

“My message to all reading this is speak to someone today,

someone you haven’t spoken to in a while or a friend, colleague, parent and ask them how they are. My heart felt prayers go out to Lisa, Molly and Charlie, Nick’s family, at this difficult time.”

MHA CEO Peter Orr said: “A huge thank you to Jose for his fundraising efforts and to all of those who sponsored him. This has given the charity a great start. We now have seven Associates funded to complete mental health awareness training and our helpline service is up and running.” See page 24



José Sanchez

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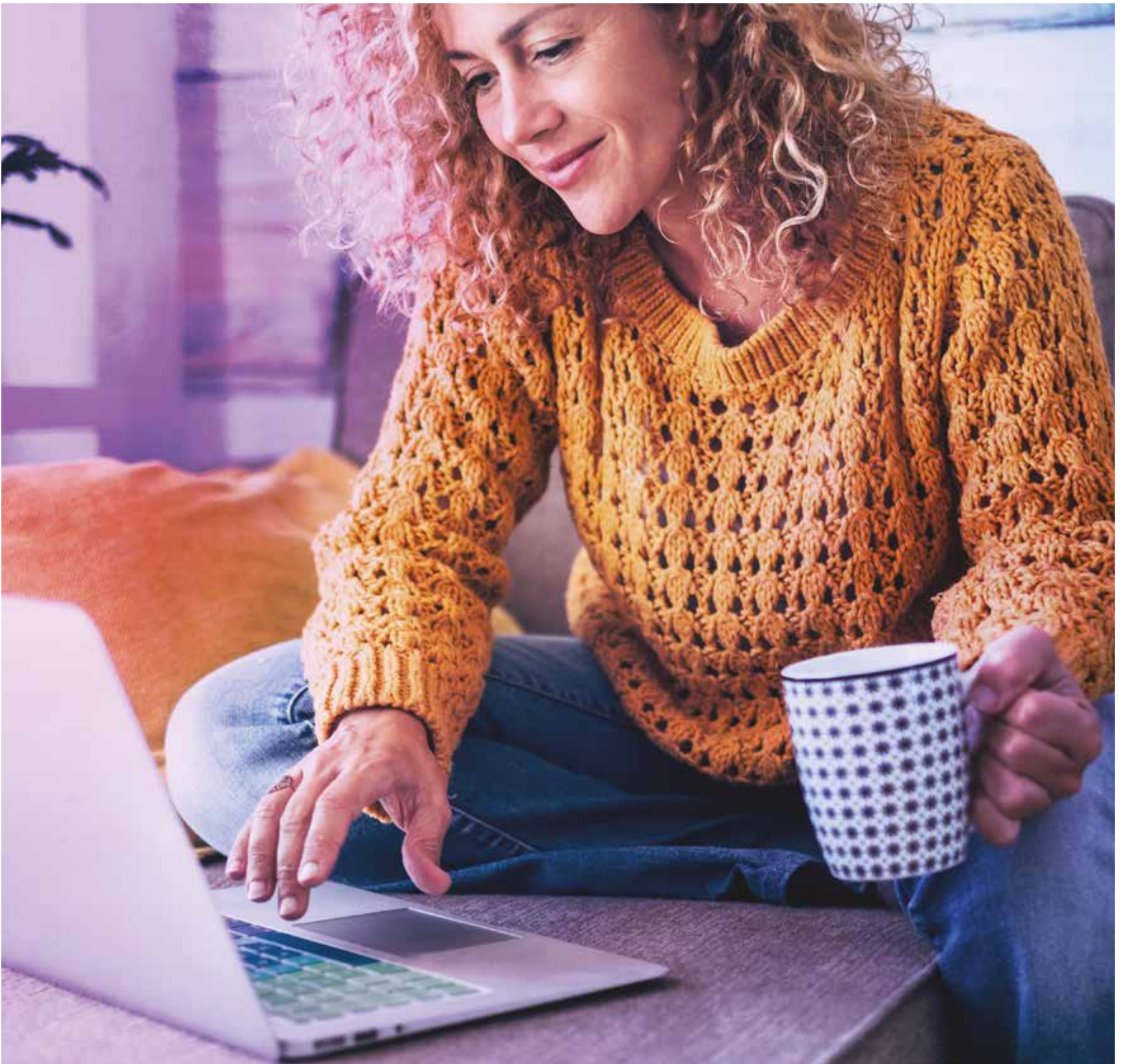
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Energy for Orchard growth is driven by Fidelity marketing

LONDON based Orchard Solutions has seen a shift in its business paradigms and is now mainly concentrating its efforts on offering customers highly beneficial energy deals, which are now much needed during the Covid-19 pandemic. After seeing that Carphone Warehouse had launched Business Energy Saver, Orchard set up a partnership with Fidelity Energy towards the end of 2018 and since then the company has flourished as an energy reseller.

After almost two years of the energy partnership commencing, Director Ben Davies explained how he has progressed with selling energy to his base. "Energy remains the lowest touch product I have ever sold and I have to give a lot of credit to the team at Fidelity Energy, whose continual support and advice make the whole process easier for me, so I can focus more on the business development side of my role."

Fidelity Energy has also been assisting its partners from a marketing perspective, to maximise on leads and offset any revenue lost due to the pandemic. Davies said the marketing support from Fidelity Energy has helped him and his team land further deals and commission. "Our team at Orchard Solutions is very small, so we do not always have the excess resource or time to invest in vital areas, such as marketing, to broaden our reach. As with all businesses, we felt the initial impact of the pandemic, but the team

at Fidelity reached out to offer their services to support us even more.

"We had a quick call with Fidelity's marketing team and advised them on the type of material and message we felt would be best suited to target our customer base. They soon got back to us with bespoke content, to our specifications, for us to use. Shortly after sending out the marketing campaign, we quickly saw results and managed to secure further energy deals, with one worth just shy of £20,000, with 80% of this being paid on signature!

"We were concerned about the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, but the Fidelity team ensured we were kept informed of market movements. This meant we were able to keep our customers and all potential leads engaged, continue to build their trust in using us as their point of contact for their business energy and, as a result, we have achieved some great new business deals.

"We have seen a change in business patterns, where energy is now the main service we offer and are working on the next steps of our marketing strategy. Energy is such a great addition to any business as almost all your customers require energy procurement. With the help of the Fidelity team, who are always there to give advice, it is now easier to navigate than the telecoms industry and has been the most rewarding and fruitful product we have sold as a business."



Ben Davies

Bechtel to support CityFibre roll outs

BECHTEL is to support a major acceleration of CityFibre's full fibre roll out having been awarded a total of up to £1.5bn in construction contracts, mobilising across 29 towns and cities where CityFibre had not awarded contracts.

Bechtel is best known for the delivery of major infrastructure projects and has broad experience in the communications infrastructure market.

CityFibre CEO Greg Mesch commented: "The demand for world class digital infrastructure deployments from the Government, Ofcom and our current and prospective customers is increasing by the day.

"Bechtel's expertise in the delivery of national infrastructure projects will complement our existing teams and ensure we can rapidly increase the number of parallel build projects, while still delivering the high quality of network demanded by our customers and theirs.

"Delivering full fibre nationwide by 2025 is a critical target and a huge undertaking. We are



Greg Mesch

determined to be a major contributor to this target."

John Williams, Bechtel's UK Infrastructure MD, added: "We will be bringing our skills in rapid mobilisation and large scale infrastructure delivery to the team. Our agreement with CityFibre is part of a strategy to diversify and align our UK business with the emerging growth sectors of the economy."

The first wave of construction contract awards under

CityFibre's Accelerated Tenders Award Programme are expected in the coming weeks.

The new projects will create thousands of jobs across CityFibre's construction partners. By the end of 2021, it is anticipated that network construction will be underway in more than 100 towns and cities across the UK.

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

30 year old Direct Line gains Gamma Gold Partner status

DEESIDE-based Direct Line Communications has bagged Gold Partner status from Gamma as it approaches its 30th year in business.

Direct Line now employs 11 staff and is also accredited for Cyber Essentials and is Safe Contractor Approved.

Founder Paul Wood, who runs the firm alongside his wife Lynne, has seen a big shift in the way businesses have upgraded their equipment and systems to meet the Covid-19 challenge.

"A lot of the technology being used now has been around for years, but most firms



Lynne Wood

has come as a shock to the system," he said. "Whether that be video conferencing and other platforms, the culture and way of working has shifted dramatically and will probably never be the same again."

Lynne commented: "This was already a sector that changes rapidly, so you can imagine the developments we've seen over the years, but nothing like the challenges of past months. We have been very busy, and that brings pressure, but working in partnership with clients has enabled us to get through it successfully to this point."

and their employees have never really had to use them, so it

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NEWS ROUNDUP

A REVOLUTION in working trends is reflected in the shift from audio solutions to video, according to conferencing firm Konftel which, for the first time in its 32 year history is selling more video equipment than audio. UK Sales Director Jeff May says video centric solutions now account for 65% of demand compared to standalone audio sales. "Eight out of 10 website enquiries are now video based. Everyone should be selling video – the genie is out of the bottle," he stated.

ACCENTURE has consolidated its cloud capabilities under a new brand – Accenture Cloud First – a multi-service group of 70,000 cloud professionals launched with \$3bn investment. Accenture reported circa \$11bn in cloud revenue in its fiscal year 2019. "Covid-19 has created a new inflection point that requires every company to accelerate the move to the cloud as a foundation for digital transformation," said Accenture CEO Julie Sweet. Paul Daugherty, Group CEO, Accenture Technology, added: "With most businesses currently at only about 20% in the cloud, moving to 80% or more rapidly and cost-effectively is a massive change that requires a bold new model."

Fibre builds speeded up

A NEW tool that automates the investigation, creation and distribution of wayleaves will help to speed up connectivity builds, claims its developer.

The system is designed to handle tens of thousands more wayleaves per week without the need for any additional human resources. Telecoms law firm Trenches Law has ploughed more than 600 hours into the development project.

"Recognising the mounting volume of wayleaves being required by network operators – not least as the UK gears up to become gigabit-ready by 2025 – Trenches Law sought to devise a solution to help accelerate clients' builds," stated Trenches Law's Operations Director Terry Daniell.

"Unable to find any ready-made technology capable of achieving this challenge, the team embarked on its own development project.

"Now, clients can send a digital map of their network build phase to Trenches Law and the new system will automatically interrogate Land Registry and other databases to identify all relevant wayleave stakeholders.

"A mailing house integration enables the system to automati-



Terry Daniell

cally produce all relevant documentation and prepare everything to be distributed."

The project is the brainchild of Daniell, who also noted that a workflow triggers a green light when all build dependencies have been resolved.

"On average, 20-30% of properties in a build project require wayleave consents," he added. "However, the complex wayleave process is embarrassingly outdated. Its manual nature takes up too much time and is consequently far more expensive than is necessary in a digital age.

"We sought to challenge what has become an industry norm, and the result is the ability to execute the wayleave process quicker, easier, and with a greater degree of accuracy."

Verboss in key smart site roll out

A HIGH profile smart building project at 22 Bishopsgate in central London has been underpinned by 100Gbps connectivity provided by Verboss.

The fibre service over 1.275m square feet helped 22 Bishopsgate become a WiredScore Platinum building, said to be the highest certification for infrastructure, wireless coverage, connectivity and power.

AXA IM – Real Assets, the developers behind 22 Bishopsgate, commissioned Verboss to install a high bandwidth service with dual resilience across the 62-storey tower.

"22 Bishopsgate is setting new standards for workspaces in London and reliable Internet connectivity is essential to not only its tenants, but its core operations," stated Timothy Creswick, Verboss CEO.

"We immediately understood how critical our service would be. This is essential infrastructure and waiting weeks for installation is no longer acceptable. Our service allows tenants to move in and get connected within a matter of days."

The 100Gbps service also supports facial recognition, environmental sensors and advanced energy usage analytics.

NEWS ROUNDUP

A MULTI-million-pound contract awarded to CityFibre by Three will see the fibre infrastructure provider connect an additional 1,300 mobile masts across 59 towns and cities. CityFibre is Three's preferred provider of backhaul connectivity outside London and has so far supported the roll out of 5G at more than 100 locations across the country. This latest deal more than triples Three's initial commitment and gives the operator access to small cell access points in each of CityFibre's city-wide networks.

LONG standing Gamma partner HighNet Telecoms has been awarded Platinum Partner status based in the main on sales of Horizon. In early 2020 HighNet surpassed 10,000 active subscribers on the platform. HighNet Director David J Siegel said: "Since 2002 we have enjoyed a collaborative relationship with Gamma and during recent times have seen just how much our partnership adds value to businesses." Daryl Pile, MD for Channel at Gamma, added: "In recent times, as the UK was forced into lockdown, Gamma and HighNet worked side by side to deliver an agile remote working solution, Horizon Collaborate, to more than 2,400 customers."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

Knight shepherds Union Street deal to completion

THE role Knight Corporate Finance played in helping to seal the merger deal between Aurora and Union Street Technologies has been praised for the thoroughness of its diligence process.

Knight Corporate Finance advised the shareholders of billing software business Union Street on its sale to Aurora, which is owned by serial tech entrepreneur Matthew Riley.

Union Street shareholders Tony and Sara Cook approached Knight in early 2019 to consider their strategic options for the business.

Knight conducted a dry run diligence process (Knight Vendor Assist) to ensure the business was ready for a transaction and highlighted the most appropriate options, with



Adam Zoldan

the management team keen to remain with the business.

Knight approached a pre-qualified group of industry buyers for a trade sale and institutional investors for a management buyout, enabling the shareholders and management team to assess all of the options.

Adam Zoldan, co-founder and Director at Knight Corporate Finance, comment-

ed: "We had great interest from private equity and there was an opportunity for the management to takeover the reigns of the company. However, the opportunity to join forces with Aurora was unique.

"It enabled a full exit for the founders while presenting a great opportunity for management, backed by the resources to drive the business forward."

Tony Cook, the former CEO of Union Street Technologies, commented: "I knew the process was likely to be challenging. Until we started the journey we did not fully realise how complex and demanding the transaction could be.

"Adam and the team overcame a number of obstacles, including keeping the conversations going through lockdown at the height of the pandemic and successfully defending our position on key commercial points in diligence to ensure that we were not susceptible to any late price negotiations."

Zoldan added: "Lockdown hasn't stopped the channel, and we have successfully delivered another deal in what is our eighth completion in the past six months." See page 26

A REFURBISHMENT and recovery service for end-of-life devices has been established by Pure Technology Group (PTG) following a link up with IT asset recovery specialist S2S. PTG's Group COO Cliff Fox says refurbishing a laptop through the scheme will save the equivalent of 250kg of CO2, and will see corporations spend, on average, 50% less than if purchasing a new product. "zeroC offers a cost-effective and greener alternative to simply buying new," he said. "Now, more than ever before, there's a huge emphasis on the impact companies are having on the environment and how they can reduce their carbon footprints, while also positively impacting their bottom line." Fox hopes that the launch of zeroC will contribute to a mindset shift, promoting a more circular way of thinking about tech.

Human touch critical to good service says Farrell



Patricia Farrell

GAMMA Customer Operations Director Patricia Farrell believes introducing a 'human touch' to customer engagement is vital to improve service levels and unlock business transformation.

Speaking in advance of National Customer Service Week (October 5th-9th) Farrell said that despite digi-

tal advancements in Robotic Process Automation and AI, UK customer satisfaction has flatlined in the past three years.

"Real transformation can only happen when businesses ensure that the design of systems and processes truly has the 'human' at the centre of it, from creation to delivery," she said.

"People are key to this process. Of course, digital programmes and augmented digital capabilities are paramount in terms of transformation, but fundamentally people are at the heart of any organisation.

"There is a clear link between improving employee engagement and an increase in customer satisfaction. Empowering and giving employees the belief and ability to achieve more is vital. Our future is in our people, combining technology and human interaction in an ever-changing competitive environment."

During National Customer Service Week Gamma will share insights into the work of its customer service team.

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



A TEAM of 'high climbers' from Focus Group are aiming to scale the height of the world's tallest mountain, Everest which stands at 29,028ft, but undertake the challenge at Focus House and regional offices in Kent, the south midlands and Scotland. The Everest Endeavour team will scale the staircases of 1,974 floors and have set a fundraising target of £10,000 in aid of Community Action Nepal. "Behind this fun activity is a serious objective – to raise as much money as we can for the most vulnerable people of Nepal, the villagers of the high Himalaya," stated joint MD Chris Goodman. "We're team players at Focus Group and each person's efforts will be contributing to our overall goal." Pictured: Chris Goodman with adventurer Neil Laughton.



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Plethora of reasons to g

For DWS Sales Director Garry Grows it's hard to believe that many of the channel's comms resellers do not sell mobile. It is a scenario he is seeking to reverse urgently, and during Margin in Mobile he put forward irrefutable arguments to advance his cause.

Why aren't all comms resellers selling mobile? It's a question that perplexes Grows every day, and one he hopes to resolve with sound arguments. "Don't be reticent," he stated. "Mobile will gain in dominance and this market will continue to grow. There is growth across all businesses from small firms to call centres and home workers. Everyone's going to be wanting mobile, and I passionately believe that mobile comms is going to play an even more important role in the channel."

Mindset is the ultimate barrier to many resellers adopting a mobile strategy, noted Grows. The main reasons preventing some resellers from adopting a mobile strategy, he said, range from a belief that they have missed the market and that there are already too many connections, to a lack of knowledge about mobile, the idea that the market is too risky with long-term contracts, complicated billing and 'we're doing OK as we are'.

But customer calls for channel partners to deliver transformative change will achieve nothing unless a mobile proposition is able to be deployed. "How can you operate in the comms marketplace and not sell



Garry Grows

Everyone's going to be wanting mobile, and I passionately believe that mobile comms is going to play an even more important role in the channel

mobile?," stated Grows. "You don't need to be a mobile specialist, but as you move forward you have got to be in the mobile

arena. The era of being tied into long contracts is over. We offer 30 day contracts to partners." Look at mobile and you can

see all the elements that align with the needs of today's businesses, especially since Covid-19 triggered a new way of working. "The remote

working trend began two years ago with early adopters, but Covid-19 has accelerated that to the nth degree," noted Grows. "It's now BAU and we are seeing home broadband hammered by work and domestic demands with kids downloading and streaming videos. This has created a massive opportunity for mobile as a solution to the bandwidth challenges of working from home."

The impact of Covid-19 on DWS has been, as with most if not all organisations, stark. The company swiftly executed its DR plan and its 350-plus people are working from home, and won't begin a return to office life before April next year. "It's working brilliantly for us," stated Grows. "When we do go back the offices won't be the same. How we want to operate is under review."

It's not just about home working, he pointed out, it's also about working from anywhere. "The reality is that remote working is here in a big way and will only go from strength to strength," he added. "The biggest mobile revenue driver now is data. It wasn't long ago that the average usage was three to five gigs, now it's over four times that. Our partners are usually selling 20 gig SIMs or unlimited. They are flexing and taking advantage of data pools and

et into mobile

bundles. The days of giving users a discreet amount of data to use are long gone.”

Another key driver is UC. There has been much talk about UCaaS, the move from capex to opex, and from on-premise to the cloud. Now, noted Growsns, it’s about bringing that traditional telephone line, traditional calls and the mobile piece together, enabling people to operate from anywhere at any time. Thus, the default setting of

disappointed – and over the past two months we’ve done more than 20,000 connections per month.”

One thing should be clear. Arguments in favour of selling mobile have as much to do with revenue protection as they do revenue generation. And it would be folly for resellers to change direction only when their economic interests are directly threatened. “Mobile is not only a new revenue stream, it’s also defending

strategy is to bring best of breed products to the channel, which often means making the complex simple, which it does via its portal. “Partners can provide, support and make SIM changes on the portal in real-time, for example, and the portal can be configured in different ways,” noted Growsns. “Everything bar ceasing a line can be done via the portal.”

In a quest to make the process even slicker, Growsns observed that some partners are using APIs between end user deployed systems such as CRM straight through to the networks. “That makes the process more streamlined,” he added. “If a larger organisation wants control of their asset base the user can have that control with certain constraints.

How can you operate in the comms marketplace and not sell mobile? As you move forward you have got to be in the mobile arena

many customer conversations may soon be mobile.

“The smart thing to do now is think strategically, plan ahead and look at the users you have across the entire customer base,” explained Growsns. “Resellers can sell an individual user bundle, and partners are buying data pools to make more effective use of that data by averaging it out across their customer base. This drives up margins significantly. The old adage – it’s not what or how you sell, it’s what you buy – applies very much now in the mobile data world. Through buying smart you can deliver a better service to customers and make more money.”

Growsns pointed out that not long ago DWS partners were selling 5,000 connections a month. “When we reached 10,000 we thought that was brilliant,” he added. “Now, if we do less than 15,000 we’re

existing revenues,” said Growsns. “If you’re not selling it to your customers someone else will. Then they’ll be after what you’re providing. So maximise your relationship with customers and promote your mobile capabilities.

Strategic approach

“A key point is that many people think mobile is simple. That’s true – but to get the most out of mobile you have to work in a certain way, so we’ve wrapped up our mobile specialist teams – in provisioning, support and sales. That resource is available to help guide and coach partners, and help them maximise the mobile opportunity by, for example, utilising data pools. This approach is progressing really well.”

We can all clearly see that the mobile market presents an extraordinary opportunity for the channel, and DWS’s

“The big vision? Why would the end user want a portal? Businesses have CRM and accountancy systems etc, so why not go into a CRM system with a support ticket that goes straight to the relevant suppliers? That way there’s less systems, less scope for error and it’s more efficient. That’s our vision... to make the platform side of things for our partners and their end users seamless and easy.”

Not surprisingly, Growsns noted a strong correlation between the company’s NPS scores and its advances into the mobile marketplace. Its score now sits at 50, significantly up, and the most positively market area is mobile. “Partners are now seeing mobile as a key asset to their business,” he stated. “Guidance and coaching from suppliers is important, and how you buy is key.” ■

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Gamma signals mobile ma

The mobile market presents an extraordinary opportunity for the channel which is directly reflected by Gamma's 'market disrupting' partnership with Three, according to Gamma's Head of New Business Mark Lomas and Three's Partner Manager Mark Earlam.

As Covid-19 impacted organisations become more aware of their communication needs and the benefits of going digital, their ICT provider partners when accounting for their activities will become ever more challenged if mobile is not featured. In seeking to give partners what they need in the mobile and UCaaS space Gamma has deepened and evolved its relationship with Three over the past 12 months and positioned the partnership as a transformative force in the channel. "Together we will disrupt the market," stated Lomas. "We will bring a disruptive tariff set and provide a level of flexibility that has not been seen before. Watch this space."

According to Earlam the partnership represents a turning point that has directed Three's attention to the booming post-lockdown cloud and mobile markets. "For Three the partnership is all about giving Gamma access to the best parts of our network and pushing out into the business space where Three doesn't traditionally play," stated Earlam. "Gamma will have network parity once we complete testing. The key is around our bandwidth spectrum. 5G is an exciting opportunity for us, Gamma, partners and businesses."



Mark Lomas

The hybrid model is unique to the industry and allows us to take advantage of new technology like 5G more quickly

5G forms part of Gamma's medium to long-term strategy and it's one of the reasons it partnered with Three. Another reason for the link-up was to bring to the channel a feature rich full UC experience. "Therefore we transitioned away from operating as a full MVNO to a hybrid model whereby we moved some of our functionality into the Three

cloud," explained Lomas. "The hybrid model is unique to the industry and allows us to take advantage of new technology like 5G more quickly. We are in a testing phase and will be launching in the early part of Q1 next year.

"We will roll out Voice over LTE and native Wi-Fi calling as part of the upgrade. But for

the here and now it's about giving control, functionality and flexibility to the channel supported by our Covid Recovery Package, with 30 day rolling contracts and unlimited data promotions, to provide flexibility as the situation develops."

The underlying message Gamma has long pushed out to the channel is one of

business continuity and 'what happens if...?'. "We didn't expect a global pandemic, but that message is now driven home having jumped forward three years in six months," stated Lomas.

Initially, Gamma saw its data usage drop which was substituted by home Wi-Fi connections. That, noted Lomas, creates its own problems around cost, data caps and poor quality etc. "But a 4G SIM gives a better experience," he added. "As with every service there has been a 'Covid-19 effect' in mobile. For example, with help from partners we delivered thousands of connections to school pupils that had no data connectivity at home.

"One of the biggest impacts we have seen relates to channel partners that had little desire to add mobile to their portfolio. Due to the pandemic they needed to adopt this service immediately and we developed support packages for the channel across all services, generating over £1 million in automated credits. Now we are slowly moving back into the working environment we are supporting partners with a Covid Recovery Package."

Three is investing £2.5bn over five years into its infrastructure and cloud core network to reduce downtime, introduce self-

Market disruption

healing and in-built AI, and to support 5G services and other technologies it has brought out. The company has so far rolled out 5G to circa 600 sites and will continue through to 2021 – and all 4G and 5G data traffic will be transitioned to a new cloud core.

Capacity counts

“This is massive for Three,” added Earlam. “It allows us from a capacity point of view to support growth in data and the transition to 5G.

We believe that mobile is the core of any UCaaS proposition, even more so when 5G becomes readily available

We’ve also seen 4G speeds continuously improve. For us it’s about the broader picture: We are in a great position with 3G, 4G and 5G, improving service levels and working to extend rural services. Backhaul is also key and our partnerships in a network infrastructure context include Nokia,

Ericsson, CityFibre and Virgin Media Business.”

According to Lomas, from a 5G perspective the 100 megabit spectrum is key and he says Gamma is going to be the only MNO with this spectrum. “Our partnership with Three is going to guarantee us a full fat network experience,” he added. “Gamma will enable the channel to gain access to this and the full power of new technologies. We’ve heard lots about 5G and

the endless possibilities it will offer, but these will take time to deliver. Therefore, 4G is as important as ever. A reseller’s near-term strategy should simply include adding mobility to their portfolio if not already present, and ensure they are at the heart of their customer’s UCaaS platform. The pandemic and

the new way of working has made that decision for channel partners.”

Lomas has also noticed an increase in ISPs moving into the mobile space, allowing them to offer UC and provide 5G back-up when they become available. “Our private APN proposition will enable these companies to control mobile data in the same way they do fixed data, with data routed directly off the Gamma network into their infrastructure,” he stated.

Part of Gamma’s strategy has been around FMC, which has effectively evolved into UCaaS. Now, the focus is on the customer experience and seamless processes. “Another common trend is that each partner wants more flexibility in their UC offering,” said Lomas. “It has to be a robust network, simple to deploy, simple to use, simple to make amendments and be provided and supported by one supplier. If you can’t supply mobile SIMs, a telephony platform and connectivity you’re not fitting the end customer’s strategy.”

In the IT market, observed Lomas, the addition of mobile and voice services is an important way of generating new revenues and margins, but more importantly it protects their customers from comms resellers entering the IT space. “The end client wants to purchase from one supplier, and if they don’t have mobile services at their disposal they will be at risk as someone else will come along and take their lunch,” warned Lomas. “We believe that mobile is the core of any UCaaS proposition, even more so when 5G becomes readily available.” ■



Mark Earlam

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Reasons to connect with

Two things are clear. One is that the IoT opportunity is growing by the day. The other is that eSIMs should reside at the centre of a reseller's IoT strategy, according to Jola's CTO Adrian Sunderland.

As a spearhead into the UK's new IoT age, Jola has pioneered eSIMS in the comms channel, and Sunderland wasted no time in giving Margin in Mobile delegates a crash course on the capabilities of eSIMs and their place in the market. eSIMs in the consumer space, he noted, enable an Apple Watch or Fitbit to have a cellular connection. "In the context of resellers and the IoT, that's not an interesting capability," he stated. "The eSIMs we are interested in can be deployed in devices that can be reprogrammed remotely. M2M eSIMs can be deployed in any device ever made with a SIM slot."

There is no lock-in with eSIMs as they are not owned by the operator, unlike conventional SIMs. And if a user's requirements change due to geographic or regulatory alterations for example, the SIM may need to be changed, which for a traditional SIM could be expensive if it's deployed at the top of a wind turbine or in an oil field in the middle of a desert. "Changing the SIM would be very expensive if not impossible," explained Sunderland. "But the ability to reprogramme an eSIM remotely and repurpose it with the right profile for particular circumstances is a powerful capability."

The more Jola became involved in the larger



Adrian Sunderland

We are in control of every packet that goes through the network. This allows us to deliver the five per cent that differentiates our connectivity from operators and aggregators

mobile broadband and IoT opportunities the more it found that SIMs from mobile operators were solving 95 per cent of problems. "But being an MVNO puts us in full control of the service," stated Sunderland. "We started our MVNO journey at Mobile World Congress last year – all around eSIM and 5G – that's all everybody

was talking about. It was clear that if we were to build a mobile network we must build it from the ground up to support the latest technology. Today we can say that every SIM on our network is an eSIM. We are in control of every packet that goes through the network. This allows us to deliver the five per

cent that differentiates our connectivity from that of the operators and aggregators."

Business cases

Two examples of scenarios that sit within that five per cent bracket occurred during lockdown. One customer needed connectivity for NHS district nurses who relied on a mobile solution

based on a single network but experienced coverage problems. Pre-pandemic the nurse would revert to the local GP or nearest NHS base when experiencing poor coverage. But suddenly, because of Covid-19, that remedial action was no longer an option. Good coverage was required along with secure access back into the NHS network. With eSIMs Jola achieved that quickly.

The benefits of Jola's service are no less evident in the education sector. Not all children have fixed line broadband or a spare laptop, and when the lockdown kicked-in local Government regions searched high and low for laptops and mobile broadband connectivity to get pupils without those resources connected back to their school. "But giving children access to the Internet without control and filtering in place is not an option," noted Sunderland. "So Jola deployed connectivity and SIMs with content filtering built into the service."

The company is a channel-only supplier and segments the channel into telecoms resellers, ISPs and MSPs. "Telecoms resellers have been really busy during lockdown," added Sunderland. "We've been supplying them with remote working solutions and remote education solutions. They've been gobbling up unlimited SIMs often bundled with managed routers

eSIM potential

because they need to provide connectivity where fixed line broadband installations had been delayed.

"MSPs are becoming much more involved in the IoT. This technology is being adopted by all kinds of different industries. At one time there was IoT specialists, now IoT is not cutting edge, it's standard, it's the way manufacturing and monitoring happens, so businesses are going to their trusted MSP and asking for

customers that IoT is going to be good for them," he stated. "Resellers are good at building trust with customers and responding to pull demand."

Sunderland also suggested that the emergence in a reseller's customer base of a requirement for IoT is a near certainty. "The customer may think they can make their production, distribution or logistics more efficient, for example, and consider IoT as a solution," he added.

match them to solutions," explained Sunderland. "If a reseller has not billed mobile before it can be a little involved with different types of usage, charge codes and call classes. But with over 750 mobile resellers we have relationships with every billing company in the UK and help overcome this potential challenge."

A far bigger challenge Jola helps partners overcome for their customers relates to the high cost of operator lock-in, which Sunderland says cannot be overstated. It also represents an emerging and timely opportunity for resellers to exploit. "The pioneers of IoT connectivity deployed their solutions three to five years ago and they are now coming up for renewal," he said. "We worked on a project recently for a large operator of car parks as their mobile provider locked them in with completely the wrong tariffs.

"The car park business wanted to deploy technology such as image recognition, CCTV and number plate capture on the same service. Even though the tariffs were on three year contracts and were out of date the operator would not facilitate an M2M solution despite having one in its portfolio. The business side of that operator didn't want the revenue to go to the M2M side of the business. Only when the organisation was faced with a six figure inflated cost did they look around for an alternative and found one of our resellers. They are now on a journey to take back control of their connectivity, which is making them more efficient, saving them money and removing the headaches."

The ability to reprogramme an eSIM remotely and repurpose it with the right profile is a powerful capability

help with IoT solutions. In that space we have the SIMs, IoT gateways and the custom software, and we have a strong partnership with AWS in terms of data destination."

He also explained that MSPs look for connectivity delivered often over Ethernet, a VLAN or delivered straight into a public cloud. "The ISPs want to use the L2TP protocol," added Sunderland. "They are experts at terminating broadband and managing large broadband networks in terms of hundreds of thousands of end points, so we added the L2TP capability to our eSIM enabling ISPs to consume and deploy mobile connectivity just as easily as they do fixed line connectivity."

In the reseller world Sunderland tends to observe 'pull demand'. "Most resellers do not have a huge team of product managers and product developers who then try to persuade

"That customer then speaks to the person they trust, their MSP who already supplies the SIMs and the broadband, but probably not the IoT.

Getting on message

"All of our marketing is about making such resellers aware that we exist as the trusted partner to them, so that they can deliver the end-to-end solutions to their customers and we hold their hand along the way. Once they win the first, second and third deal they quickly understand that they have value to add in bringing together the different components of an IoT solution. And once deployed it's very low cost to support."

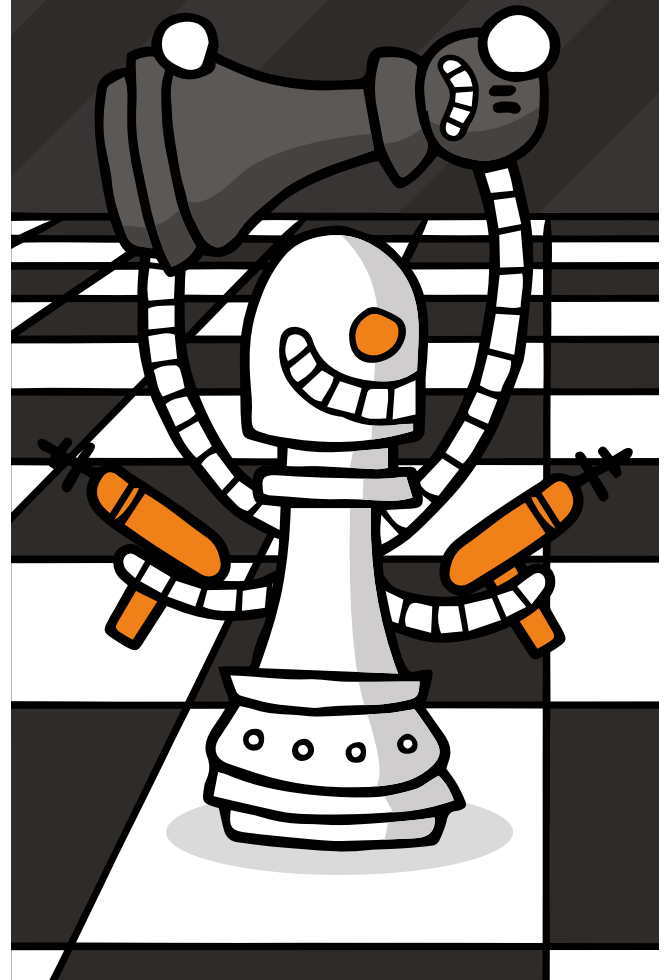
In July during lockdown Jola signed up 34 new mobile resellers. "The reason we can do that is our onboarding process, which includes teaching on portals, how to manage the products and identify opportunities in existing customer bases and



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Leasing opportunities

In discussing the mobile market opportunity for comms and IT resellers and the buying options available to clients the benefits of leasing become instantly apparent, according to Shire Leasing National Sales Manager Dan Mackrell.

Mackrell's message on the benefits of leasing is loud and clear and easily understood, but financing mobile deals is nothing new. In fact, leasing has been an option in mobile sales for many years, but it became more readily used around five to six years ago when most of the major networks did not provide upfront commission for signed contracts. "There's some fantastic SIM-only contracts in the wholesale environment, but then dealers are faced with the upfront capital costs of handsets," stated Mackrell. "The rise in the cost of handsets has driven demand for leasing."

For mobile-only deals Shire Leasing finances the handsets, the software and accessories, all typically funded over two or three years. "Occasionally we see mobile included in an on-premise or off-premise solution, so we can push the terms out, possibly to four or five years depending on the customer's requirements," explained Mackrell.

The benefits of leasing to a channel partner are many and varied, he noted, and also essential. "If a reseller offers a solution just on a capex basis when a competitor proposes both, you're already at a disadvantage from the



Dan Mackrell

We are almost at the same proposal levels now as pre-Covid-19. This is without doubt the best place to be from a leasing point of view at the moment

outset," he added. "Resellers should give customers as many opportunities to say yes I want to do business with you as possible. Spreading the cost is an advantage."

Ongoing opportunities

Furthermore, noted Mackrell, leasing is a sticky product. "Typically we would have a title arrangement with partners which means that at the end of the lease agreement we offer title back to the reseller," he said. "This gives them an opportunity to go back to the client and offer a new technology or resign them."

In comms the average order value is just over £20,000

– across the business as a whole the average is £7,000. But anything to do with an upfront cost can be financed, from a single mobile handset to millions of pounds worth of kit. "We pay out immediately," stated Mackrell. "The dealer gets the money upfront while the customer pays 'on the drip' to us. Some of our partners take the opportunity to put commission into our lease rates. Because margins are fine on the handsets we try and boost that with commission while resellers still look to make that recurring revenue profit."

As with any asset or solution acquired by a business

it's either going to make money (generate profit) or save money in efficiencies. "So rather than say to a customer this is £20,000 or £30,000 upfront enjoy a return on investment over five years, say take it today via leasing and literally be in profit," urged Mackrell. "The customer understands that it's a depreciating asset and that technology is moving quickly, and may opt to use someone else's money to acquire the use of that tech and keep their own cash in the business. Now, it's more important to preserve cash."

Mackrell noted that Shire Leasing has operated in the ICT channel for 30 years,

and that circa 50 per cent of its turnover is generated by this space. "When the crisis hit we were inundated with requests for payment holidays or people not paying," he commented.

"On analysis, the lowest default rate and request for payment holidays was in the ICT channel. We are almost at the same proposal levels now as pre-Covid-19. This is without doubt the best place to be from a leasing point of view at the moment."

Finance providers live and die by the strength of their credit policy, and Mackrell pointed out that Shire Leasing is supported by British Business Bank and provides FinTech solutions, which are all available through portals and APIs, therefore making leasing easy for partners to use. The firm has also recently been appointed as a finance provider for Mitel.

To help the process Shire Leasing has just teamed up with Proposition Pro, a product from Tariffcom that enables dealers to configure a mobile solution with different SIMs and handsets, and place the order along with contracts, and use e-sign to close business remotely. "By making Shire Leasing's services available via Proposition Pro the sales person's journey is as short and efficient as possible," added Mackrell. ■

Pangea focuses on taking partners into the new age of IoT

Sell mobile! says Abzorb

From the outset Pangea's sole focus has been on IoT and preparing partners to monetise what has become a maturing market. Now, as a multi-million turnover business working with hundreds of partners, Managing Director Dan Cunliffe says his focus is ever sharpening as new opportunities emerge.



Dan Cunliffe

I'm trying to get partners into the groove of where it's going. The market growth stats are there for everyone to see

In contextualising his market vision Cunliffe emphatically reaffirmed Pangea's commitment to IoT and helping partners from all quarters deliver an IoT capability into any sector. "We started the business with two important goals – to be channel-only and to only work in IoT," commented Cunliffe. "We don't sell Ethernet, broadband, or anything that distracts us from focusing on delivering our focus. That's what mobile customers want to hear. We're never going to do the pre-Ethernet and Ethernet side of the product set."

Today, Pangea has hundreds of partners selling IoT products and has deployed in 51 different countries. The market opportunities range from small connectivity per device smart metres and sensors through to connected cars, Wi-Fi vehicles to luxury boats. "Low hanging fruit surrounds us," added Cunliffe. "We bring the ability to add an IP layer, to add multi-networks and content filtering, all products that help partners

win bespoke deals as well as traditional ones."

Strong foundation

Cunliffe pointed to unsteered multi-networks, a single service which connects to all of the networks and operates out of the box. It's a central product that functions as the foundation for layers of capability, such as static IP and WANs. "The next level is content security and content filtering at network level," he added. "It's about being able to control and enable the right kind of traffic on any device. And it's easy to replicate such solutions."

One hotbed of opportunity cited by Cunliffe is the construction sector. "This has been a great market," he added. "Construction companies are always needing to connect on site or move around sites,

and engineering firms need devices to monitor what they are doing. Traditional vehicle telematics is another quick win."

Pangea launched a L2TP service for ISPs in November, enabling them to deploy 4G quickly on a multi-network basis. "We've taken that a step further during Covid and started to think about how 5G can have an impact," explained Cunliffe. "Some sites might be long-delayed, so faster speeds and better latency, which 5G provides, is something we are looking at. It brings together the Ethernet and mobile strategy."

During the Covid-19 outbreak Cunliffe has observed high levels of 'empathy' within the comms industry, as it pulls together and drives deals for mutual benefit. This approach, he believes, should be applied by resellers to their customer bases, where projects on hold might offer an opportunity to engage with clients and assess whether things can be done differently for the time being.

"By sticking together and working with existing customers we can drive revenues," he added. "Reseller should think about their customer base and identify which ones would benefit from IoT solutions. We help to audit customer bases. I'm trying to get partners into the groove of where it's going. The market growth stats are there for everyone to see."

Having no mobile proposition is detrimental to a reseller's prospects, and they should be doing everything in their power to get in touch with the opportunity at their fingertips, says Abzorb's Head of Indirect Channel Mark Riddell.



Mark Riddell

It's increasingly clear that in the eyes of most if not all customers, comms resellers that do not offer mobile solutions will not up to the job as conversations will inevitably focus on mobility. "Businesses are assessing how they move forward, and that will include mobile broadband," commented Riddell. "The evolution and roll out of 5G will make that an obvious choice. Don't hang about: Mobile is the place to be and there is money to be made."

Market sweet spot

He noted that the sweet spot for Abzorb's partners is £1 million to £4 million turnover businesses; and also pointed out that Abzorb nevertheless counts among its customers some big names including National Networks. "We are finally seeing the adoption of hosted communications across the piece," added Riddell. "The 2025 switch off is a big driver for IP voice which also lends itself to remote working."

He claims that in a mobile capacity Abzorb's biggest USP is offering 100 per cent white label wholesale across Vodafone, O2 and EE. One upside is that if a customer wants to flip from one network to another they can do so without penalty, noted Riddell.

Abzorb started its commercial life as a mobile dealership business and now has 180 wholesale mobile partners. "We've evolved with technology, moved into data and hosted, and it's going to be about those sticky overlay services," added Riddell. "Our foundation is around our portal. It is key for small to medium sized resellers to go to a single portal where they can transact all of their products and services and have a single throat to choke, allowing them to focus on sales.

Launching hosted through the portal was a key step for the firm, enabling partners (through a single pain of glass) to order, for example, a combination of leased lines, FTTC, FTTP, DSL, hosted seats, SIP channels and a blend of mobile connections, all provisioned via a single portal and single bill on a single contract. "It's about transacting as painlessly and easily as possible, and allowing partners to be as autonomous as they can be while providing the level of service the customer is looking for," commented Riddell. "We also deliver APIs to partners that have their own environment."

Meet a man with a plan

Since the merger of Union Street Technologies, Aurora and Shaftesbury Systems much attention has focused on the strategic realities underpinning the combined group's growth plan. Here, Vincent Disneur, Managing Director of the billing powerhouse, reveals all...

Disneur can reasonably claim that the merger of Union Street, Aurora and Shaftesbury Systems has sent a shockwave through the channel's billing community. "By combining the resources of these three businesses we have created a billing and provisioning powerhouse for the channel, employing circa 200 personnel and serving over 900 partners that collectively use our software to bill around £2 billion per annum," he said.

Now at the helm of a significantly larger independent cloud-based billing and provisioning software business, Disneur says the enlarged entity holds far greater potency. "The combined knowledge and expertise of our team coupled with greater investment and development muscle will add significant value to the telco and IT reseller markets," he claimed. "Billing and provisioning are inextricably linked and when the two processes work in harmony numerous productivity and efficiency benefits can be unlocked. Our plan is to revolutionise the sales to bill process for the benefit of the channel."

Because of the trend towards convergence, CPs are increasingly evolving into single source suppliers for comms, IT and an ever-increasing range of services

for end user customers. Clear and consolidated billing is highly desirable for end users, so being able to combine all these service charges into one bill is a major selling point for CPs. "To achieve this a billing platform must be able to process and categorise all recurring and one-off service charges in addition to any rateable charges for call traffic, subscriptions, licenses and more," said Disneur.

He also noted that there are significant obstacles posed by increasing pressure on prices and the shift towards bundles and 'all-you-can eat' subscription models. "Effective billing and revenue assurance must be key to CPs' strategies for overcoming these challenges and ensuring profitability," added Disneur.

"Consolidating all billing into a single system doesn't just offer benefits for end users, it can deliver massive improvements to CPs' operational efficiency by providing complete and continuous visibility of customers' profitability without having to collate data from multiple systems. We've introduced a number of features into our software to enable CPs to effectively consolidate their billing and also provide consultancy services to help them achieve this."

Furthermore, the transition from copper to fibre along



Vincent Disneur

Our plan is to revolutionise the sales to bill process for the benefit of the channel

with the migration from traditional fixed line services to mobile and data will create a more varied supply chain, as will convergence and the growing opportunities available in the IT space.

Growth potential

"The rise of the subscription economy along with other changes in customer behaviours and expectations also present the channel with potential for growth," stated Disneur. "Billing vendors must support their partners with solutions that assist in the monetisation of emerging opportunities."

Full fibre roll out and the closure of the PSTN means that transitioning customers

to VoIP must also be a priority. However, with margins continually under pressure, generating growth from VoIP services remains a challenge. For CPs that have come to enjoy the least cost routing options available with Openreach's carrier preference service, VoIP could in some ways be a step backwards with a significant loss of control over how CPs' estate traffic is routed. "One of our objectives is to help CPs redress this imbalance and ensure the profitability of their VoIP services," noted Disneur.

CPs now expect their billing platform to deliver the same mobility, accessibility and collaboration benefits

offered by other cloud-based software. They want to be able to access their billing system from anywhere, at any time, on any device. "To meet this demand we've made two enhancements to our aBILlity billing platform," explained Disneur. "First was to relaunch it with a new web-based user interface, having redesigned the platform from the ground up. Second was to launch a mobile app for aBILlity which was designed to complement the existing features of the core platform, providing a high-level overview of billing activities and access to customer information. Both the app and the web client have been met with positive feedback from our partners. This will continue to be a focus area for development in the coming months and years.

"We're also looking to introduce increased capabilities for supplier integration. The objective is for aBILlity to federate the ordering systems of multiple suppliers so that orders for various products and services can be placed simultaneously with all related charges set up in the end customer accounts ready to be billed when services go live. In tandem with these developments we're working on highly configurable workflows which will allow CPs to control how orders are managed as they progress to fulfilment." ■



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Seeking help is not a sign

A new charity, Mental Health Associates, has been set up to help people suffering breakdowns and stress. Never in our industry has a 'first response' service been so badly needed.



In an interview with the Sunday Telegraph, Kit Harrington, who played protagonist Jon Snow in the much-lauded Game of Thrones saga, makes a highly pertinent observation.

"I feel that emotionally men have a problem, a blockage, and that blockage has come from the Second World War, passed down from grandfather to father to son," he said.

"We do not speak about how we feel because it shows weakness, because it is not masculine."

That, in a nutshell,

summarises an issue which besets men in our industry. Not that mental health problems do not affect women. Of course, they do. Women in full-time employment are nearly twice as likely to have a common mental health problem as full-time employed men (19.8% versus 10.9%).

It's a sad fact however that our sector is male dominated, and it is largely men who get dragged into mental anguish because of a macho mindset which goes back decades.

Ollie Martin, Founder and

Director of men's health consultancy Get Curious, believes there's still a stereotype that 'real men' shouldn't show weakness.

Martin runs activities for men that find it hard to talk. His experience has stemmed from working with the police and now extends to men from all walks of life.

"There are too many unhappy men in the world. 73% of adults who 'go missing' from home are men and nearly one third of men admit that they have developed an 'ostrich' attitude towards their health and are nearly three

times more likely than women to become alcohol dependent," says Martin.

"Throw COVID-19 into the mix and mental health has deteriorated by 8.1%. Do we need to mention men's suicide statistics?"

Well yes, we should, as they make shocking reading. Even before the pandemic, According to CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) suicide is the single biggest killer of men aged under 45 in the UK. In 2018, 75% of all UK suicides were male.

In its report on the impact

of the COVID-19 pandemic on suicide rates, The Oxford based International Journal of Medicine states that the COVID-19 crisis may increase suicide rates during and after the pandemic.

"Mental health consequences of the COVID-19 crisis including suicidal behaviour are likely to be present for a long time and peak later than the actual pandemic. To reduce suicides during the COVID-19 crisis, it is imperative to decrease stress, anxiety, fears and loneliness." it states.

Martin believes the answer is that we need

Leaders open-up on their own personal challenges...



CHRIS GOODMAN, JOINT MANAGING DIRECTOR, FOCUS GROUP

"In 2005, everyday things like traffic jams, flights, presentations – saw

me experience terrifying panic attacks. Within weeks I was in pieces, too nervous to leave the house. I sought help and was prescribed medication (SSRIs) to combat General Anxiety Disorder.

"Slowly, I re-joined the rat race, but in 2012 they were back – with a vengeance! I briefly engaged in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), had a few sessions with a counsellor and was once again given medication by my doctor. It took about six months before I felt back to my old self. Poor mental health is not suffered exclusively by the less well off or the weak; it can affect anyone. My message is simple: don't suffer in silence – you are not alone."



JAMES EMM, OAK INNOVATION CHAIRMAN AND MHA ASSOCIATE

"If someone has a broken leg or, topically, Covid-19, the injury or illness is obvious, and

friends and family are immediately sympathetic. People close to someone suffering a mental health issue however may not understand what the person is going through. A few years ago, a combination of overwork, a very unpleasant burglary, and my natural inclination to be anxious resulted in a severe breakdown. I survived, but there were days...

"Now, due to correct medication and therapy, I am very well. I am certain that had I sought treatment before the darkest hours, so much pain could have been avoided. My advice is simple. Do NOT feel ashamed and seek help quickly. MHA is here to help, and your approach will be welcomed warmly and confidentially."



PETER ORR, TELECOMS CONSULTANT AND MHA FOUNDER

"Most people who know me or who have worked with me would say I am the life

and soul of any party. How things change. Going from managing lots of people and then transitioning to being a consultant affected my mental health more than I realised. In truth, my mental health difficulties started with the death of my parents. I found it difficult to speak to anyone, family, friends, colleagues.

"I didn't want to be a burden. I went to the darkest place a person can go because I didn't talk to anyone or seek help. With the intervention of medical help and family, the darkness was lifted. Bad days have followed but my wife knows what to look for and makes me talk."



Let's get talking for Mental Health. Support MHA now.
Call 0330 1244338 or email Peter.orr@mentalhealthassociates.co.uk

gn of weakness

to encourage and educate men to show emotion, express feelings, show vulnerability and seek professional help.

"The problem is that those words alone create barriers, so men continue to 'man-up' and suffer in silence. Especially if you throw in the words mental health, GP, counsellor and therapists. "Is there a middle ground? Yes. Men have measurably lower access to the social support of friends, relatives, and community. Peer support groups can provide a comfortable, no barriers to entry space for men to come as themselves and share life challenges openly, amongst other men, discovering tools to cope, challenge and seek change in their lives, with a community supporting them."

Such a thought process has led to the establishment of Mental Health Associates, a new charity set up by telecoms veteran Peter Orr and a group of trustees. They aim to act as a 'first response' resource for people in the ICT industry who may be suffering from any sort of mental health problem.

"Mental health first aid, awareness and early detection is our aim," explained Orr. "We have first-hand experience of poor mental health. We aim to provide information to direct people to the right path, having listened to them first. When you have poor mental health making the right decisions for yourself is not easy.

"We provide this service free and we want to make it as personal as possible

for our industry. We also offer companies mental awareness workshops or presentations, also free of charge.

"I started MHA with the view of helping people, having struggled myself for several years. We are not consultants or therapists, but we will all be trained in mental health first aid and so will the Associates we take on. The trustees and I have 200 years of industry experience and we understand the pressures people face in ICT. Our aim is to have over 50 to 100 Associates.

"Of course, there are many organisations covering mental health, which is great and many we aim to use. We will be recommending people to the place we feel would best suit their particular mental health concern.

"Our prime aim is to be a listening post and to provide a peer to speak to who knows the industry and its particular challenges."

As a trustee, Bob Swallow underlined that whilst rewards can be significant in ICT, the pressure to succeed causes incredible stress.

"Feelings of isolation, inadequacies and fear of failure can be unbelievably difficult to deal with," said Swallow. Anyone who is experiencing any of these feelings needs to talk to people who have been in those situations, somebody who can truly empathise and can hopefully put them in contact with trained people who are able to really help them. This is something I hope we can definitely achieve." ■



MHA Aims and Objectives

A personal message from founder Peter Orr
I suffered from poor mental health personally, which lead to a failed suicide attempt. Looking back that made me realise I needed to help others by sharing how to recognise the signs and getting people to talk about their mental health.

- I want to address the stigma in talking about poor mental health within our industry
- I thought long and hard about what would have helped me
- I want to offer advice, support and raise awareness about mental health and emotional wellbeing in our industry
- I want to recruit a network of associates who will offer local peer support
- Timely and relevant information will help people access the right help at the right time
- It is important to me that MHA reflects the ethos and pressures in the ICT industry
- I want to ensure that MHA raises awareness and promotes understanding of mental health issues and triggers

We need financial help to fund these aims and we need more Associates willing to get professionally trained and join our support team.

If you can help in any way please contact me by email peter.orr@mentalhealthassociates.co.uk



Lisa and Nick on their wedding day

On a warm, ordinary morning in early August Fusion Voice & Data Director Nick Dutfield ended his life for a reason only his mind dictated at that time, leaving behind his wife of 24 years Lisa and two teenage children, Molly and Charlie.

As Lisa bravely describes here, he had led a completely normal life until the last few days of his life when the worries of the effects of Covid -19 led to a 'brainstorm' and unbearable anxiety that he could not cope with.

"Nick was a larger than life character, very outgoing with so many friends and he just loved life. He was smart, successful and knew his industry inside out. He was also an extremely loving, loyal husband and an incredible Dad.

"He was diagnosed as mildly bi-polar in 2011 and his condition was fully controlled with very low levels of medication and it did not affect his life in any way for a decade, until Covid-19 hit. He was feeling low and worried about what the pandemic was doing to business and the economy.

"Nick and I were so close. We talked about everything. He didn't dwell on the topic of being bi-polar. In fact, he was sceptical that he even had the condition! And he really only spoke to me about it. Nick never came across as being desperate or suicidal. Never.

"He had what we believe was a manic episode during lockdown. He actually felt great. He was full of constant energy and enthusiasm. It was really only the last four days when he hit that fatal 'low'.

"The shock and pain, the ripple effects that have been caused to us by his death as a family, are indescribable. Nick has left the hugest of voids in our lives – one never to be filled. Molly and Charlie and I have lost our best friend and our most favourite person.

"I do believe men struggle to discuss their innermost fears and worries. I think Nick may have found a service like MHA helpful. If anyone feels they are struggling in any way, shape or form with their mental health or finding it hard to cope – just reach out – there are so many people out there to help."

Let's get talking for Mental Health. Support MHA now.
 Call 0330 1244338 or email Peter.orr@mentalhealthassociates.co.uk



Billingham on how to av

The future pathway of any business has nothing to do with fate and everything to do with strategic preparation, especially when considering exit planning where vendors must emerge as the most attractive prospect in a competitive field, according to Paul Billingham, co-founder and Director at Knight Corporate Finance.

Deciding to sell a business or seek investment is a big decision – perhaps an even bigger decision rests on how business leaders should go about the process of achieving their goals. There are many elements to a transaction – it is not just about price – and the overall intensity of the experience is far more complex than vendors new to the process expect. “A number of vendors underestimate how complex a transaction is until they are in one,” stated Billingham. “Due diligence and the level of information required is far more detailed and onerous than it used to be, and buyers and investors are incredibly demanding.

“Most vendors are fully focused on their business, so understanding the intricacies of a process and the range of options available is unlikely to be a priority. For most vendors, they only go through a process once, and you only really learn having gone through it. That is what businesses like Knight are there for.”

A transaction should not be win-lose, but win-win for both sides, which is another reason why Knight urges vendors to fully consider professional advice. “Deals are only successful if they work for both parties, so



Paul Billingham

A good corporate finance adviser will not only ensure you have the best advice around the many nuances of a deal, but also act as a conduit between buyer and seller, and ensure the transaction maintains momentum and any issues are dealt with efficiently

tactical approaches are key,” added Billingham. “It surprises us that some vendors try and undertake a process themselves without corporate finance advice. We always stress to vendors that if they do not choose Knight to support them, they should choose someone with the knowledge and experience to prepare and get them through a transaction. These processes are difficult,

emotional and taxing, and if anyone has any doubt as to whether to use a corporate finance adviser or not, we would encourage them to talk to someone who has been through a transaction. If the seller has an adviser it can take the heat and emotion out of a very demanding and stressful process. A good corporate finance adviser will not only ensure you have the best advice around the many

nuances of a deal, but also act as a conduit between buyer and seller, and ensure the transaction maintains momentum and any issues are dealt with efficiently.”

Planning time

Billingham also noted that when someone is focused on running their business day-to-day they often don't have time to think about what they want or what

they could achieve from a transaction. “They don't have time to sit back and reflect on more strategic options,” he added. “And there is often a misunderstanding as to what adds value to buyers and investors, and what detracts from it.

“There is also a lack of understanding of the wide range of options available to vendors. One thing we always like to do at the outset is fully understand what is driving the decision to start a potential process, so that we can set out the various strategic options available. Setting expectations with vendors from the start is important, and sometimes we have to disappoint people if we do not think a valuation can be achieved or a process completed at the present time. Preparation is obviously key, and as stated, this has never been more important.”

Billingham explained that every process is bespoke as all businesses, even those operating within the same sector, are quite different. More importantly, he emphasised, every vendor has a different set of priorities. “No two transactions are the same,” he added. “So we have introduced Vendor Assist, a dry run due diligence process aimed at ensuring a business is prepared for a transaction.

Avoid a hard exit

It also highlights any potential risks to a process being successful. Vendor Assist has had a significant impact on our transactions through higher completion rates, shorter timescales and maintaining valuations."

The outlook for ICT resellers from an M&A perspective is still positive. Despite the economic impact of Covid-19 Knight Corporate Finance has completed eight transactions since the end of March, and many other deals have been completed across the sector. Valuations are holding up well and there is a good balance of buyers, investors and sellers, observed Billingham. "Private equity has retreated from

not come in until April 2021 at the earliest. "Having seen a 90 per cent reduction in the Entrepreneurs' Relief allowance in the last Budget, business owners will be wary of potential changes to the standard rate of Capital Gains Tax at the next Budget," added Billingham. "Any increases in these rates will potentially reduce the number of sellers in the market, or make private equity less attractive as an investment option, so we will be watching closely."

Robust sector

Covid-19 has obviously impacted all businesses in the sector and created a number of challenges for M&A and investment. But

If the seller has an adviser on board it can take the heat and emotion out of a demanding and stressful process

a number of sectors since the start of lockdown, and the sectors where they see a high quality of earnings like ICT are arguably more attractive than ever, as they still need to continue making investments," he commented. "Despite the economic uncertainty from the Covid-19 crisis, and potentially difficult Brexit related challenges ahead, we see no reduction in demand from trade buyers and institutional investors for well managed profitable ICT resellers."

The biggest risk he sees to the M&A market is material changes to Capital Gains Tax, but the announcement from the Chancellor that there will be no Autumn statement means that any changes will

many of the private equity backed trade buyers in the market nevertheless need to acquire to achieve their growth plans, so Billingham has not seen any downturn yet. The situation could change as furlough schemes come to an end and the wider economy is impacted materially, he observed.

"Talking to a number of business owners recently, the Covid-19 crisis has led to some reflection on personal aspirations" he added. "Knowing your exit plan and preparing for it thoroughly does not mean that you have to execute now, but we firmly believe that those with a plan and are prepared will be able to move quickly in the event of 'Black Swan' events like Covid-19."

Knight's recent transaction with Union Street Technologies demonstrates how good planning and preparation can overcome unforeseen challenges, as this was a process started before lockdown and primarily focused on private equity, which subsequently switched to a trade transaction when it became clear that was the better option.

Union Street Technologies' CEO at the time, Tony Cook, commented: "I knew the process was likely to be challenging. Until we started the journey we did not fully realise how complex and demanding the transaction could be and the value of having Knight as an advisor."

Knight is in its 12th year of operating almost exclusively in the ICT sector, and the company prides itself on being well referenced by clients such as Cook, but also by buyers on the other side who know that the company has integrity and runs a thorough and diligent process. "We help our clients understand what is the art of the possible and help them focus on their own aspirations for their business," commented Billingham.

"Our advice is to understand what is possible but not to focus on what deals their peers claim to have achieved or 'multiples' as these can be misleading. The only important factor is for vendors to achieve a deal that meets their ambitions and goals. This is the starting point when we begin working with a business. We will look into this in more detail at the this month's ICT Investment Forum."

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Redefining monetisation

On-demand insight of financial performance is critical to the success of service providers in a fast moving market – that means more than a collection of Excel reports generated once a month, says Strategic Imperatives Chief Operating Officer Tim Sayer.

The connectivity revolution is transforming the channel, the services it offers and traditional business models. "This should be welcomed – not feared," said Sayer. "It is an opportunity for service providers to deliver game-changing services; but the transformation will be cumbersome and painful for those who do not re-evaluate their monetisation strategy. They risk losing revenue and market share to digital native start-ups and hungry new entrants."

Strategic Imperatives provides monetisation, billing and subscription solutions and works with partners to monetise the new commercial landscape. Its Elevate billing platform supports a varied customer base with different business and billing models. The company's customers are typically medium to large service providers undergoing a transformation programme, as well as start-ups or smaller service providers with a mind to disrupt the market.

Strategic Imperatives now has over 200 channel customers and an enterprise client base that includes many of the UK's largest service providers such as BT, Vodafone, TalkTalk, Fujitsu and Verizon. "We are a team of technologists that thrives on challenging the status quo and creating



Tim Sayer

The billing experience is the make or break that can turn a one-time buyer into a lifelong customer, or even an evangelist

solutions that shake up the channel, liberating it from its reliance on legacy systems and processes," commented Sayer.

The market demands that billing platforms are able to process data in near real-time and respond to customer, product and pricing changes immediately to provide an up-to-the-minute picture of how a business is performing. "This enables service providers to monitor turnover, profitability and margins in real-time to ensure targets are being met and react quickly

with promotions or sales campaigns that target specific products or geographies when needed," added Sayer.

Redefining monetisation

Strategic Imperatives positions its proposition as a primary enabler of this transformation by, claims Sayer, redefining how the channel monetises the new connectivity ecosystem. "Elevate empowers service providers to meet modern monetisation challenges and opportunities, and scales with their ambitions," he stated. "Disruptive competition is fierce and the need to

compete and exploit new opportunities from 5G, OTT and IoT is more important than ever. The reinvention of billing systems into a modern monetisation platform is at the forefront of this transformation."

According to Sayer, a truly hybrid subscription and usage economy is challenging the channel's commercial model, and the viability of the traditional service provider. "Perhaps the most important motivation for this reinvention is a response to customers' increasing leverage in the marketplace,"

observed Sayer. "No matter what service or product a potential customer needs, they have an unprecedented number of service providers to choose from.

"When the user experience falls short in any way, that customer can easily choose to spend their money elsewhere. While the sales process is critical, the billing experience is the make or break that can turn a one-time buyer into a lifelong customer, or even an evangelist," added Sayer.

Modern service providers are realising the need to transform and become digital telco experience providers, and this goes beyond convergence of networks and services. "It involves changes in ways service providers interact with their customer, the use of intelligent analytics and reinventing their billing processes to become lean, agile and innovative while keeping customers at the heart of their business," noted Sayer.

"Service providers also need to smooth their revenue curve and customers expect to choose when they receive their bills, so modern billing platforms must support flexible billing cycles and anniversary billing where the bill cycle day is set automatically upon activation, or by allowing customers to choose their preferred bill cycle day."



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n strategies

The telecoms supply chain is getting more complicated, and with IoT, OTT and cloud services becoming a standard offering and the 5G promise of multi-layered services close to being a reality, partnering with technology and OTT service providers is increasingly essential to broaden product offerings and target new revenue streams. The service provider's role within this new value chain will vary and will need billing and transaction data to be integrated across all partner

overview of their business and of individual customers."

Strategic Imperatives invests over 30 per cent of revenue back into R&D, and works with a number of international technology partners including Amazon, Transatel and GoCardless to roll out new Elevate modules to support real-time payment integration, an out of the box MVNO capability and subscription management.

"Our longer-term strategic focus is creating an enterprise

make this insight available to operators and resellers of any size," noted Sayer.

With the UK entering a recession and fall out of the Covid-19 crises continuing to take its toll, managing payment and debt as well as the flexibility to offer alternative payment methods and support for partial payments is paramount, and that functionality belongs in the billing system rather than a series of spreadsheets or home grown solutions, believes Sayer.

The vision is to utilise our cloud-native architecture, innovation and a dose of fresh thinking to make data insight available to operators and resellers of any size

systems for accurate billing and clear accountability.

"The primary vehicle for digital transformation in billing is the adoption of modern, cloud-native billing platforms that will act as a vehicle for change rather than a barrier to growth," commented Sayer.

"Such platforms keep service providers ahead by launching new products and services at lightning speed, managing complex billing models with ease and providing a rich insight into financial performance and customer behaviour. Billing is no longer just about creating invoices. Elevate collects payments, records what invoices have been paid, takes ad-hoc payments and provides the service provider with a full financial

scale Business Intelligence and Big Data framework through our collaboration with Amazon," explained Sayer. "The introduction of our predictive analytics capability will enable service providers to transform the massive volume of data they have at their disposal into valuable customer insight, facilitating a real-time view of customer behaviour, preferences and requirements, and enabling service providers to offer targeted propositions that improve customer loyalty and profitability.

"Our investment will enable customers to truly understand their base through our use of Big Data principles and predictive analytics. Our vision is to utilise our cloud-native architecture, innovation and a dose of fresh thinking to

"When we designed Elevate, it was obvious that the batch driven approach to billing was well past its sell by date," he said. "A service provider's product catalogue, price plans and promotional activity are not point in time activities and it makes little sense for a billing system to prevent future dated changes. Elevate enables service providers to plan ahead by creating price plans and promotions to kick in at a predefined date in the future (or the past). A seasonal promotion, a new customer discount period or a time limited price reduction used to retain potentially churning customers are all supported."

In this dynamic and fast-moving environment, standing still is not an option. Service providers must ensure that their monetisation platform seamlessly supports their growth strategy rather than be constrained by it. "In short, what service providers need from their billing supplier during these challenging times is financial stability, service continuity, product agility and a true partnership approach," concluded Sayer. ■

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Horton set for next growth

FluidOne CEO Russell Horton had a clear and meticulously thought out vision for growth when he took the job in 2018. Since then he's acted decisively on nailing the first phase of priorities and has now set his sights on executing the next strategic steps in his five-year plan.

Livingbridge invested alongside the FluidOne management team to acquire the firm from the Rigby Group in February 2019. As the Rigby Group invested acting as private equity, this was a Secondary Buy Out (SBO). **At the time Horton set out plans to triple revenues over the coming five years – how is the plan progressing?**

The strategy for the first year in our five-year plan was a focus on growing organically and building a mergers and acquisitions pipeline. We recently finalised our 2020 statutory accounts, marking our first full financial year post the SBO. We have exceeded our EBITDA growth budget and delivered good revenue growth. On the M&A front, we invested in external corporate finance support in addition to Livingbridge supporting the activity, raised a new acquisition fund with HSBC, profiled over 400 targets aligned with our strategy, met with over 50 companies and progressed several of these meetings to detailed discussion stage.

Just as we agreed heads of terms for what would have been our first acquisition in March, the UK went into national lockdown. Since July we have seen activity accelerate and we are currently in the final



Russell Horton

Our industry provides a vital service to UK businesses, and resellers with ambition, a customer-first focus and innovation can make the most of the opportunity

stages of completing an acquisition and are on track to meet our March 2021 acquisition targets, despite the pandemic. The key product areas that we seek to develop by acquisition are advanced security, IT cloud managed services, UCaaS and CCaaS. We will continue to organically improve our services in connectivity, SD-WAN, mobile and IoT.

What surprised you when researching potential acquisitions?

When reviewing several IT businesses as part of our

acquisition strategy, I noticed that they collectively achieve much higher customer satisfaction than the majority of the telecoms industry, mostly due to the problems in getting connectivity installed and in supply chain service levels on which the telecoms industry relies. FluidOne and resellers put in a huge amount of effort to compensate for this service gap in the supply chain. But many elements are outside of our control. To significantly improve the customer experience there has to be a transformation

in the service delivered to install connectivity from the main carriers.

How are you supporting your leadership strategy?

We have created the new board-level role of Chief Revenue Officer and recruited James Arnold-Roberts to play a key part in the next stage of our growth. James has strong channel experience having co-founded and led Genius Networks, which he then merged with G3 Comms becoming CEO and leading it to a successful MBO in 2019. We have ambitious

plans to treble the size of the business over the next five years through organic growth and acquisition, and James' role is key to supporting this strategy, broadening the skills in the executive team joining myself, Chris Rogers co-founder and COO, and Hemant Patel, CFO on the group board.

How has the FluidOne portfolio evolved?

I have seen significant improvements in the core platform during my first two years at FluidOne, with over 30 suppliers interconnected to our software defined national fibre network, called Platform One. In the previous financial year we expanded our core product sets, widened our SD-WAN capabilities and overhauled our digital capabilities which includes a website rebuild and customised integration with Salesforce and HubSpot.

On the product side, we expanded our core connectivity portfolio in 2019, and in 2020 we launched 8x8 Unified Communications to channel and mobile connectivity. We are also in the process of finalising and launching a Layer 2 mobile solution to give access to multiple mobile networks, with further enhancements to our DASH portal set to be released before Christmas. Following on from this we

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growth phase

will be aiming to bring advanced security services to the channel in 2021.

With over 30 suppliers and services on net we are one of the most connected network aggregators in the UK. Given these achievements and the SBO, we have completed my initial 2018 vision and the first stage in our long-term strategy. We are ahead of target on EBITDA growth, remain above average for our sector in terms of revenue growth and have maintained a low customer churn at 2.4 per cent of revenue.

How are you driving growth in the channel?

The first step was to ensure that we had a clear strategy and message to the market. In 2018 we met with our key partners and prospects to take on board their feedback on where we needed to improve and implemented a roadmap of ongoing improvements. We were lucky enough to be a sponsor at the Comms Vision event for the last two years and the feedback at the 2019 event was excellent.

We had succeeded in getting the message across and building our brand within the channel. We now have over 200 resellers and dealers. They contribute a significant proportion of our business and are vital to our success and growth. Under the leadership of Lee Rossano, the channel team goes from strength to strength.

What are the key elements of your partner strategy?

We will continue to provide connectivity services in the market to all of our reseller partners. The focus will then shift to a subset of partners that we will build

more strategic relationships with in order to support and accelerate their growth, such as in the adoption of 8x8 or a virtual core network. Another growth area will be expanding our dealer channel, particularly where they face mid-market or enterprise customers and require 'sell with' support.

What is your biggest opportunity?

Without connectivity in its various forms there is no cloud. The drive for digital transformation to increase cloud adoption in IT and communication services plays to our vision at FluidOne, to become the best quality connected cloud solutions provider to UK businesses. Platform One puts us in a position to deliver cloud services on net, a better ability to control quality, service and security, which combined with our plans to acquire in IT, UC and security will allow us to provide joined up services from end user device to application.

How optimistic are you for success in 2021 and beyond?

These are uncertain and challenging times. However, they are also full of opportunity for FluidOne and our partners, including the acceleration of migration to the cloud, increased investment in business grade home working solutions and end customers willing to change suppliers to deliver flexibility and cost savings. A healthy acquisition pipeline also presents a significant opportunity for the new year. Our industry provides a vital service to UK businesses, and resellers with ambition, a customer-first focus and innovation can make the most of the opportunity." ■



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Supporting an all-IP era

An all-IP existence requires the critical laying of a digital foundation and then building upwards – that means having access to superfast, resilient connectivity, writes Paul Beacham, Senior Manager, Data Networking Portfolios at BT Wholesale.

As we find ourselves in a period of transition between lockdown and a return to the office, we are provided with an opportunity to examine how the enforced changes have impacted channel partners and their customers. For the vast majority of organisations, the lockdown required rapid adaptation and the adoption of digital tools. Companies had to think quickly, and CPs were there to help ensure disruption was minimal.

Facilitating new digital requirements wasn't as simple as just providing and integrating tools, it meant ensuring that organisations had the connectivity needed to support them. Now, however, many businesses find themselves with a decision to make around how best to organise workforces and use digital tools longer-term. This is just the tip of the digital iceberg. The lockdown has forced companies to look more closely at their infrastructure and consider a deeper digital cultural shift that is built on connectivity and a switch to all-IP.

Many companies are now on their digital journeys. While some have had plans accelerated, and others have started from scratch, the immediate digital adoption choices have also made them consider their deeper

needs and how they can aid resilience. In fact, IDC argues that businesses leading in digital transformation are significantly less vulnerable to the pandemic, and companies are beginning to understand how a robust digital infrastructure can boost continuity. Companies will find as they adopt more digital tools that not having access to a consistent, high-quality network is akin to building a house on unsteady foundations. Similarly, this transition comes at a time when the industry is prepping itself for the switch-off of the analogue-based PSTN. In 2025, there will be a shake-up of how connectivity can be delivered, and CPs should harness this opportunity.

With customers needing to add more robust digital capabilities now, the move away from analogue to an all-digital, full fibre set-up provides the foundations needed to add resilience and ensure continuity. The switch-off is coming and businesses that take the proactive step to all-IP are future-proofing themselves. CPs must explain how it will enable them to harness the many digital opportunities that are going to present themselves over the coming years.

Access to a superfast network will increasingly become a critical business component as companies adopt a more digital-first



Paul Beacham

Access to a superfast network will increasingly become a critical business component as companies adopt a more digital-first mantra

mantra. It's therefore vital that CPs help customers to understand that they must think about the complete end-to-end connectivity path, from the network to their infrastructure.

Future networks

Not all networks are created equal. Supporting an all-IP future is dependent on a network that provides the necessary high bandwidths and scalability, with capacity utilisation kept at a manageable level that ensures there's always headroom for spikes in demand. This is achieved through consistent full end-

to-end network investment, so CPs must provide customers with the whole picture around providers and the complete offering.

It's also important that CPs provide a number of options that give customers choice on the best available speeds and budgets. Fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) and Single Order Generic Ethernet Access (SoGEA), which provides broadband or Ethernet without a phone line, are two examples of technologies that sit in each other's footprint to provide connectivity to a vast majority of the country.

It's also imperative to remember that companies are now more than likely entering a period of fiscal caution. The economy is unpredictable, and organisations are looking to find their feet again after a lockdown which saw some greatly decrease trading. Therefore, despite having a desire to adopt more digital capabilities, they do not want to, and are unlikely to be able to invest heavily or engage with multiple vendors which elongates installation times. CPs must keep this at the forefront of their thinking when servicing customers.

Ultimately, while many may have had a knee-jerk reaction to the lockdown, now that the dust is settling and we find ourselves in this period of transition, CPs can help customers to think more strategically about their long-term digital needs.

There is a greater understanding of how digital infrastructure with superfast, reliable connectivity at its core can aid resilience and make organisations more robust. With the PSTN switch-off also on the horizon, companies that embrace an all-IP existence now will experience enhanced performance and growth, through the ability to support new digital initiatives and take advantage of the bow wave of digital opportunities that are coming. ■

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Dynamism drives billing

Few sections of the comms channel ecosystem are as dynamic as the billing fraternity, and the signs are that an already speedy software development environment is set to accelerate further as big ambitions, partnerships and roadmaps spin into the next phase of development.

A new driver for competitive innovation has emerged in the channel's billing sector following the merger of Aurora and Shaftesbury Systems with Union Street Technologies. "History shows that competition drives innovation as well as commercial competitiveness, and this is true in the billing market," said Inform Billing Managing Director Shaun Bodsworth. "Some might argue that when larger and more powerful players seek to gain advantage through size alone it becomes detrimental to the customers and market they serve. It is paramount that resellers have legitimate choice in all elements of their supply chain, even more so in the current climate. I hope to continue to see billing providers across the industry benefit from both new entrants and new offerings in the market."

Bodsworth noted that an ongoing development

roadmap is critical to success in the fast-paced comms industry. "To date we have invested over £2 million into our Eclipse NG billing platform and continue to plough 45 per cent of revenues back into developing the software, focusing on API driven integrations and end customer self-service options," he explained. "We are currently introducing a range of partnerships and integrations with complementary applications and third party carriers to offer joined up solutions. Our roadmap will see us continue to develop enhancements that enable automation to ease and simplify the billing process."

With customers spanning traditional telecoms, IT, mobile and IoT as well as utilities, waste management, banking and even hospitality all using Inform Billing's software, Bodsworth is developing partnerships in diverse markets relevant to the subscription economy,



Shaun Bodsworth

It is paramount that resellers have legitimate choice in all elements of their supply chain, even more so in the current climate

opening up future opportunities for both the company and the channel, he pointed out. This all builds on a decade of growth.

"We celebrated our 10th anniversary in business at the start of 2020 and continue to grow in terms of profit, revenue, staff and customers," said Bodsworth. "With circa 300 resellers we are maintaining our growth plans and are currently on a recruitment drive to help us to fulfil those aspirations. We also recently signed a deal on a new head office, providing a modern collaborative space for our 30-plus team to come

together when we are fully able and when required."

Flexibility

Inform Billing offers its software as a managed bureau service or on a self-managed basis. "During Covid we have tried to be as flexible as possible," added Bodsworth. "We have helped a number of our self-managed customers by providing temporary bureau support where staff were furloughed and it made sense to outsource to our team. The flexibility within Eclipse means resellers can opt to give payment holidays and temporary

discounts to specific customers – with charges automatically recommencing when the period is up.

"Through the reporting suite it's straightforward to manage costs, understand profit and most importantly, know if an individual customer is making you money. Part of any good service is staying close to individual customers' needs and being able to respond and adapt to changes in their requirements."

Tekton Head of Operations Harry McKeever agrees that businesses have to be responsive and flexible to the needs of customers, therefore their billing platform has to be accurate, automatic and customisable. That's not all: "Flexibility seems to be the word of the year for the channel," he said. "Also, with SaaS products becoming so popular and margins so small, billers must be able to include those value add services from day one, as well as any other in-life products or custom bolt-ons, to maximise revenue."

Referring to Tekton's billing platform, called Zoey, McKeever said strong self-care functionality is helping billers spend more time in meaningful conversations with their customers and less time dealing with easy solves. "Plus, it gives customers more control over their infrastructure, meaning happier customers too," he added. "Ensuring our clients have the ability to integrate Zoey within their existing systems is another trend. And margin analysis is vital for businesses looking to maximise their income in such a competitive

Continued on page 36



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Continued from page 34 industry. Therefore incorporating more data points to enhance AI-driven insights will be key."

As a cloud-based platform, API integrations were built into Zoey from day one. For example, self-serve was one of the foundations of the platform. "Now, end users can manage their accounts, perform SIM swaps and set usage caps and alerts to ensure they have as much control over their organisation as possible, while optimising the reseller's time," commented McKeever. "Adding more self-service functionality is important to our long-term strategy and we're looking to enhance the customer portal with more functionality in the coming months. We want our partners to be free to bill with no restrictions and complete privacy."

Even before coronavirus, pointed out Intelligent Billing (formerly PRD Technologies) Managing Director Simon Adams, there was a move towards a more automated approach. "Covid has fast tracked that trend, and many businesses have needed to furlough staff which means those left in the company may not be fully up to speed with billing," he said. "Having a system that does all the hard work not only



Harry McKeever

Incorporating more data points to enhance AI-driven insights will be key.

delivers peace of mind but also ensures accuracy and speed. Moving forward, I see that automation and integrations are just going to accelerate. And the convergence of platforms, with more resellers moving to offer IoT and SaaS, means that billing needs to keep up with the fast speed of technology developments."

Adams said Intelligent Billing's platform also supports demand for data and its analysis. "Data will drive plans for the future, so accuracy of reporting is essential," added Adams. "Alongside this, further integrations, automations and APIs continue to come

off the production line. Meanwhile, with Brexit looming, the requirements for multi-currency and multi-lingual capabilities are likely to increase. Our roadmap will never stand still."

Key trends

Adams sees the direction of travel as being in emerging markets such as cloud distribution, print as a service, Internet per-click and IoT. "In terms of diversifying, our platform has been supporting big players in cloud-based application billing," he added. "For example, Westcoast Cloud attributes its ability to grow from an £18 million to a £75 million per annum turnover business to our billing software."

Billing needs to be more than simply a processing function, pointed out Nick Jarrett, Head of Revenue Management & Billing at 9 Group. He says there is an opportunity for service providers to deliver value add by supporting partners with a managed billing and support wrap. "Partners now expect a more human level of support beyond the processing and production of their customers' bills," stated Jarrett. "This can include follow up support, the management of customer billing queries,

commercial insight and helping partners to make sense of their billing data."

Identifying changes to customer behaviours allows partners and service providers to get ahead of risks and opportunities. Over the past six months most UK organisations have experienced significant changes in behaviour from their customers. Rather than basing re-forecasts on predictions and gut feel, billing data has allowed 9's partners to gain clear visibility of changing trends based on facts. An example is customer call volumes.

"We have observed that call volumes have naturally reduced as many businesses switched to home working and staff were placed on furlough," added Jarrett. "But the duration of customer calls increased. This data leads us to question why, so that we can support partners to better understand and leverage this information. Data intelligence has always been a priority, but situations like this really bring them into play in a practical sense."

Looking ahead, partners will want to see more recurring revenues, bundled calls and a switch towards a more IT focused product set to accompany their existing telecom portfolio. "We see potential for customers to begin paying a single, clean charge for all the IT

and telecoms services they need on a per-user basis," commented Jarrett. "Longer term, it's important to further develop a data led approach, to help support partners to better understand their customers and opportunities. Understanding what customers buy, how they buy and their usage can deliver a high level of business intelligence. This, teamed with automation can allow customers to self-serve with adds, moves and changes, as well as supporting upgrades and the cross-sell of other products."

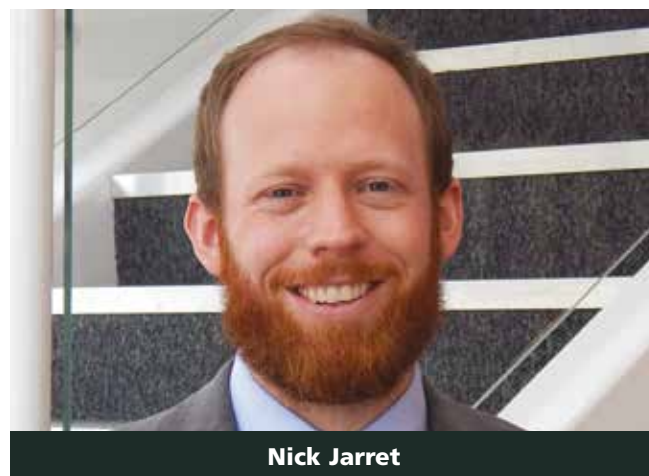
Improved business intelligence and automation may allow partners to take a more click-and-play approach to their billing, while boosting sales at the same time, pointed out Jarrett. Therefore, 9 Group is also developing more of a self-serve approach, whereby partners and their customers will be equipped to access and interpret their own data.

"We want to present sales opportunities and enable users to have the information readily available to make informed decisions, and the controls to act when they are ready to implement," commented Jarrett. "By developing a more automated approach around sales and order management, we are looking to present partners with information to encourage new sales and up-selling opportunities." ■



Simon Adams

The convergence of platforms, with more resellers moving to offer IoT and SaaS, means that billing needs to keep up with the fast speed of technology developments.



Nick Jarrett

Partners now expect a more human level of support beyond the processing and production of customers' bills.

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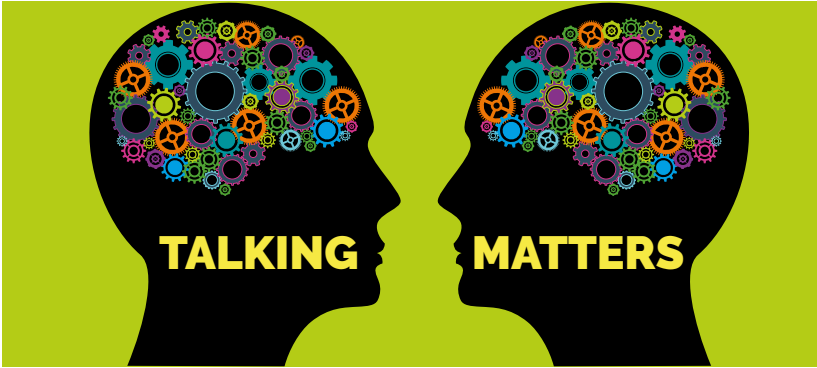


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Our front-page story and special feature on pages 24 and 25 highlighting the issue of Mental Health in the ICT industry aligns with World Mental Health Day on October 10th, organised by the World Federation for Mental Health.

In advance, President Dr Ingrid Daniels has relayed some shocking statistics compiled by the World Health Organisation: "About 450 million people live with mental disorders that are among the leading causes of ill-health and disability worldwide. In 2018, The World Economic Forum noted that mental health disorders are on the rise in every country in the world and could cost the global economy up to \$16 trillion between 2010 and 2030 if a collective failure to respond is not addressed.

"Every 40 seconds someone dies by suicide. Annually, this represents over 800 000 people, which is more than people dying by war and homicide put together. For every suicide, there are many more people who attempt suicide every year. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds while 79% of global suicides occur in low and middle-income countries."

Every suicide is a tragedy that affects families, communities and entire countries. Read the heart-breaking words from Nick Dutfield's wife (page 25) and you'll get a picture of the long-lasting and devastating effects on the people left behind.

As the heartbeat of the ICT Industry, it's why Comms Dealer is giving new charity Mental Health Associates as much support as possible to help prevent further unnecessary tragedies. It aims to give people the opportunity to talk to trained counsellors that know our sector and the pressure they may be under.

As we move into the colder months with, potentially, a more virulent spike in Covid-19 cases and further restrictions on our normal business life, we hope ICT industry leaders will rally to this cause by not only being more aware of their own people's issues but by also supporting MHA with what it needs most,: the cash to fund more counsellor training. If you can help in any way email peter.orr@mentalhealthassociates.co.uk



IAIN SINNOTT
VANILLA IP

"The mental health of our teams is a real challenge, Covid-19 or not, because the sufferer often hides their suffering, especially from their closest friends and loved ones. To meet this challenge, I have always tried to incorporate some key elements into my management plan as follows: the role of a manager is to help each team member reach their full potential; the business must create a safe environment in which each person can flourish; 1-2-1 meetings should be regular, consistent and about the individual; we should enquire about their work and personal state every time and pay attention to the consistency of their response; we should invite people to share concerns about colleagues, safe in the knowledge that we will respond with subtlety and care; we need to recognize that mental health issues don't always have logical triggers, but common pressures and perceived failings can contribute."



PAM WILLIAMS
GAMMA

"As we hit the six-month mark since lockdown the stresses of our new normal have become more than apparent. Prior to the onset of Covid-19, Gamma offered the Employee Assistance Programme with mental health first aiders across all offices trained to support employees. As we went into lockdown, both the physical and mental wellbeing of our staff was a key business concern. With employees isolated at home, symptoms and changes in behaviour could go unnoticed. Reacting quickly, we launched a Wellbeing Channel, with areas focused on mental health support, working from home best practice and virtual social events ensuring connections between colleagues can be made. Managers played a critical role in checking in daily with their people. One of Gamma's core values is Stronger Together and we're incredibly proud of our employees who have rallied together during this crisis to support those in need."



TERESA O'CONNELL
DWS

"At DWS, we are increasingly aware of social isolation and the effects it can have on our mental health. To coincide with National Suicide Awareness Month in September, we launched our 'Reaching Out' campaign to all our staff, designed to keep us all talking and supporting one another. This included an online workshop covering the effects of social isolation and suicide awareness, produced by Zero Suicide Alliance, which has helped us to build on the conversation about mental health across the business. We also have teamed up with Solent Mind to deliver some online training on 'Managing Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace' to our managers. This is designed to equip managers with the tools they need to identify the signs of anyone struggling with their mental health and how to have these difficult, but extremely important, conversations."



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ALAN SHRAGA
FIDELITY GROUP

"As managing director, my role is to help guide our employees and colleagues to an outcome I feel is best for all. We have two video calls every day, so everyone gets to see each other and get some encouragement for the day ahead. I think it is vital that we all keep connected. We also had 'Back2Work' kit bags made for all our staff which we then rolled out to customers with their own coffee travel mug, water bottle, mask, hand sanitizer and a bag to put it all in. Last, but not least, we have hosted team quiz nights via video which have been themed to ensure all our team members have had a fun night of entertainment. I believe this has helped team members feel comfortable to discuss their feelings with colleagues on how home working and lockdown has affected them."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA.

"We were devastated to hear about the loss of Nick Dufield from Fusion Voice & Data and we salute Peter Orr for setting up the Mental Health Associates charity. We are committed to do what we can to support those who may be suffering. The biggest challenge we face is not knowing what to look out for or how best to help. The Office for National Statistics ran a survey between October 2019 and April 2020, reporting a 21% increase in adults suffering from high levels of anxiety. We check in on all employees with regular video calls and online social events. We also communicated help available via our benefits programme which includes a 24/7 confidential helpline, online doctors' appointments, as well as online fitness and healthy eating programmes. It is a start, but we could do more to reassure people that it is ok 'not be ok'."



VICKI COWPERTHWAITTE
NINE GROUP

"We never shy away from the subject of mental health. The current circumstances have taken their toll. Communication and clear signposts to professional support create a safe and positive culture which encourages openness, however there will always be those individuals who suffer in silence. Home working may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, so 9 provides access to professional counselling services, which can be accessed discreetly and anonymously. In addition, we have also introduced a weekly staff newsletter. The content is purely driven by our staff, who are encouraged to share their stories, and to provide advice around how to battle some of the common problems we are facing. Managers are also equipped to handle conversations about mental health and technology plays a vital role in keeping teams connected. This includes regular check in calls, finding ways to stay social, and being able to identify signs for concern."



AYSHEA ROBERTSON
ZEN INTERNET

"Mental health is an area that rightfully gets a lot of airtime and is a key focus of our health and wellbeing strategy. That has proved crucial in navigating a remote working environment. Factors such as financial wellbeing, work-life balance, caring responsibilities, and relationships can all have an impact on a person's mental wellbeing and the pandemic has further compounded challenges in these areas. We always had several initiatives in place to support mental wellbeing and we have now put added emphasis on those activities that can be executed remotely such as virtual mental health awareness sessions. Also, mental health first aiders are always on hand to deliver virtual sessions throughout the pandemic. Having a positive and empathetic company culture with supportive colleagues and managers is a good start. It leads to engaged people and high performance, but let's not forget the significant positive impact it also has on mental wellbeing."



KATE BRUNNING
VIRTUAL1

"When it comes to our employee's mental health, we're committed to supporting our people in any way we can. We have 16 mental health first aiders all trained to spot the signs of someone suffering in silence. Our people are consistently reminded about our support mechanisms, such as our EAP and Vitality self-referral. Our recent training sessions, calling on external experts, focus on building a positive mindset to enhance mental resilience during difficult times. Additional workshops, in partnership with Mind in Harringay, will launch around World Mental Health Day. Throughout the pandemic, we've been as flexible as possible regarding home working and have opened the office for people that feel that this would improve their mental wellbeing (in accordance with government guidelines). Finally, our people can now also expense their gym memberships, as exercise can be crucial to maintaining positive mental health."



GAVIN JONES
BT WHOLESALE

"At BT, health and wellbeing is at the heart of everything we do. Our internal online service such as 'Your Wellbeing' provides tailored information for everyone in the company, that make the difference in a socially distanced world. We also understand the challenges our customers are facing during the pandemic, SMEs being the hardest hit. In July, we launched our Small Business Support Scheme, with ten initiatives in place to help businesses navigate through the uncertainty. We're soon launching a wellbeing and mental health toolkit which aims to help businesses look after their own and their staff's wellbeing. The disruption from the pandemic has left many businesses and employees struggling emotionally, as well as financially. Our research with Small Business Britain highlighted 20% of small businesses felt they needed mental health support so we're bringing our own expertise around maintaining wellbeing and mental health direct to our customers."



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A question of change

The comms industry can sometimes seem trapped by its heritage of sustaining a less than diverse character, but this continuation is far from inevitable, according to Jola Marketing Director Cherie Howlett who raises some key questions, and shows how exposure to opportunities in ICT can change the aspirations and career directions of young people.

Anyone attending a comms channel conference will note almost universal maleness. But a greater representation of female business leaders could be afoot, believes Howlett, if certain preconditions are met. She said: "Speaking as a female who started up on her own with a team of channel veterans, I often ask myself – why are there so few female MDs in the channel? Jola has grown rapidly from a blank sheet of paper in 2014, due in no small part to the policy of diversity and inclusion we adopted from the start.

"We hire well and offer our employees career progression, investing in training and mentoring programmes, which has resulted in support agents moving into product management and provisioning agents moving to accounting positions. The apprenticeship scheme we started in technical support in 2018 has been so successful that we have expanded it to other departments."

To promote greater diversity Jola takes special care of the wording in its job adverts to avoid unconscious bias, resulting in a greater number of applicants and successful hires that advance the diverse nature of the business. Howlett has also witnessed first hand how exposure to

something different sparks fresh thinking, plants seeds of ambition and steers changes in direction.

"My daughter just turned seven and aspired to be either a teacher, beautician or a YouTuber," she commented. "After spending six months listening in on conference calls and webinars during lockdown she now wants to run her own business using data SIMs in pet-cams, so owners can check in on their pets in her care. She wants her business to be as well-known as Pets at Home and has some interesting ideas on how to build her brand using social media."

The theme of exposure to new possibilities underpinned a two week programme Jola rolled out last year, through which it introduced a teenage girl to the comms industry and its career opportunities. "She has just started a two year business management course at a local college, having previously considered a career in beauty therapy," said Howlett.

As a Director of a channel-only business she is often asked why there are so few females in senior positions in the comms sector. "What is going wrong?," she asked. "Why are we attracting fewer women than other



Cherie Howlett

The more diverse the industry, the better we can meet the needs of our customers and the faster we will grow

sectors? Is it our recruitment policies? Or is it something else entirely? Is there a myth surrounding our industry that you have to be a techie to be involved in it? If you don't have your own home network with guest Wi-Fi access and Alexa controlling your mood lighting, you won't be welcome? Or are other sectors more appealing to women?"

Key statistics

Some say the problem starts at school with fewer females being encouraged to study STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. According to recent UCAS

data provided by HESA, 35 per cent of STEM students in higher education are women and only 15 per cent are studying computer sciences. 2019 Workforce statistics state that there are now over one million women in STEM in the UK. But the proportion of tech roles filled by women has flatlined at 16 per cent since 2009.

"Others say recruitment is a problem, that not enough females are applying for advertised roles in our sector," noted Howlett. "Maybe we should also look at promoting the opportunities available in our sector to students,

apprentices, graduates and professionals in other sectors? Could we do more to mentor and promote those we attract? By working closely with CEOs/MDs/ CFOs/CTOs/CMOs could we develop a more diverse management team?"

Howlett also hypothesises that the matter could be, in part, addressed via a greater home life balance as well as in the workplace. "Looking at the marital status of individuals running organisations across all sectors, many are married with families," she said. "The majority have someone at home they can rely on to support them. Maybe we should be looking at work-life balance and shared responsibilities at home to achieve equality at work. Maybe this shift would help avoid burnout, promote better mental health and improve decision making, resulting in more profitable businesses and happier home lives across all sectors.

"I hope more females will rise to the top of their organisations and expect to see more women starting their own businesses in the current climate. The more diverse we are as an industry, the better we can meet the changing needs of our customers and the faster we will grow." ■



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THE ICT CHANNEL'S SUPERSTARS WILL BE CELEBRATED AT A COMMS NATIONAL AWARDS CEREMONY STREAMED LIVE FROM LONDON ON OCTOBER 22ND AND A SPECIAL WINNERS LUNCHEON WILL BE STAGED ON FEBRUARY 24TH, 2021

The Covid-19 pandemic and economic havoc it has wrought has not stopped ICT resellers and suppliers from putting together some amazing solutions and channel support programmes and nothing is going to stop us from recognising their efforts at the 2020 Comms National Awards.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, we cannot run a physical awards ceremony this year, but the finals event will be streamed live from London on October 22nd and finalists and everyone gathered in 'bubbles of six' across the UK who are keen to celebrate being part of this amazing industry can be assured of a night to remember.

Given that so many people in our industry were furloughed in March and many remained tied to their home offices, the standard of entries this year has been exemplary and our esteemed judging panel will certainly have a mammoth task in the next few weeks determining the winners from such a quality field.

Back in the spring, we acknowledged the phenomenal work people in our industry were doing as 'key workers' and we will be rewarding those efforts this year with The 'Keeping Britain Working



'This is such an exciting idea. Broadcasting the awards 'live' from London in Eurovision style with a professional host and all the usual glitz and glamour will be great fun and to see all the finalists from all over the UK lined up on a big screen will be a sight to behold. I hope all the shortlisted companies will get involved and make this the channel's best on-line party ever!'

Terry O'Brien, Managing Director, DWS

Awards' which have garnered entries from resellers and channel suppliers all over the country.

Overall, the amount of entries received has been astonishing, and we aim to reward and celebrate with our finalists via our glitzy on-line awards event on Thursday October 22nd.

We hope everyone in the industry will join us via a log-in we will be sharing soon. We will also be staging a special winners' luncheon in London on February 24th, 2021.

In the meantime, you can view the list of Comms National Awards finalists opposite.

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A WORD FROM OUR CATEGORY SPONSORS...



"Always a highlight in the calendar, the Comms National Awards brings together the industry for an unrivalled night of fun and celebration. Inform Billing is proud to support the awards in 2020 and whilst we sadly cannot all be together, the broadcast will no doubt still be spectacular, with a few surprises along the way! The virtual format this year provides a unique opportunity for wider teams and even friends and family to all share in the occasion and that special moment when a winner's name is announced. Good luck to all the finalists, we hope you enjoy the show."

ELLIE ALLSEYBROOK
HEAD OF BUSINESS GROWTH
INFORM BILLING



"Much like ourselves, the CNAs champions excellence and outstanding achievement within the channel. This year's CNAs is sure to be a little different

to those of years gone by but, thanks to the efforts and innovation of the Comms Dealer team, it's certain to provide all the glitz and glamour that we've come to expect. We're very much looking forward to this year's CNAs and, on behalf of myself and the Union Street Team, may I wish the best of luck to all this year's finalists."

VINCENT DISNEUR
MANAGING DIRECTOR
UNION STREET TECHNOLOGIES



"As long-standing supporters of the CNA Awards, it's great to see one of the highlights of the events calendar still taking place to recognise the exceptional talent within

the ICT channel. As part of our work, we see the incredible amount of effort and creativity that has continued in the most challenging of environments and it's important to recognise and celebrate this success. We are proud to be sponsoring the Entrepreneur of the Year Award at this year's CNAs and congratulate all of the finalists, all of whom have greatly contributed to our industry and of course have ensured that we keep Britain working."

ADAM ZOLDAN
DIRECTOR
KNIGHT CORPORATE FINANCE

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 ** Distribution of weekly email newsletter (1st January 2019 to 31st December 2019, Average Distribution 9,409)

Peterson promoted



Scott Peterson

MITEL'S President of International Jeremy Butt has departed the business and SVP for Americas Scott Peterson has been promoted as Chief Revenue Officer responsible for driving the vendor's global revenue growth. Peterson joined Mitel in 2019 as a spearhead for its UCaaS solutions and was promoted to Senior Vice President, Americas, earlier this year. He has more than 20 years experience in business communications and has led technology teams in more than 25 countries.

Prior to joining Mitel Peterson held multiple executive positions with Verizon during a 15 year tenure that included a role as Global Vice President of Verizon's Media and Entertainment vertical and General Manager of its \$2bn SMB practice.

Mary McDowell, President and Chief Executive Officer, Mitel, said: "Scott has become a pillar of our executive team, bringing a high performance values-based leadership style that not only inspires the people around him, but drives results. By aligning our global go-to-market teams under his direction, Mitel will be able to deliver a richer, more consistent experience for our partners that will help us to accelerate our strategy and better meet customers' needs."

Peterson added: "In today's unpredictable environment communications and collaboration technologies are fundamental to helping organisations stay connected.

I will work with our global team and channel community to continue helping businesses fortify their communications capabilities on a global level."

Also on the move...

NIGEL Dyson has joined MyPhones as Head of Development. He brings 25 years experience in software development and team leadership and will work alongside Sales Director Paul Gibbs and Managing Director Andrew



Nigel Dyson

Robinson to drive the business. The move reaffirms MyPhones' commitment to build on the market advances made by its Altos white label telephony platform. Robinson commented: "MyPhones has seen a huge increase in resellers signing up over the past 12 months and this role is key to continuing to deliver on the requirements of our partners and customers." Gibbs added: "With Nigel at the helm of development our partners can expect more features that will give them the edge in winning business." Partners were updated on more developments during MyPhones' Partner Day on 6th October.

INTRALAN'S Tim King has been promoted to the Sales Director role. He was previously Cloud Sales Manager and joined IntraLAN from CoreAzure, the Microsoft integration partner



Tim King

specialising in Azure. Prior to CoreAzure, King was Sales Director at IT service provider HTL Support. He also spent two years at TIG and Doherty Associates. IntraLAN CEO Andy Horn said: "Tim's far reaching experience working across multiple technology disciplines makes him an invaluable leader for our customer base, many of whom are embracing rapid digitisation and overseeing an evolution in the workplace." King added: "This is a critical moment for many businesses as they implement new strategies for how their workplaces and IT will function."

A DOUBLE-hire by Network Telecom has expanded its senior leadership team. Steve Webb joins as Director of People and Culture, moving from BT; and Paul Roscoe take the Director of Operations role, moving from Vodafone. Duncan Ward, CEO, said: "Steve and Paul will be pivotal to our development in terms of product portfolio, customer experience and culture."

MIKE Newell has joined managed network provider Isumo as Sales Director. His previous experience includes stints at Wavenet, BT, Cable&Wireless, Easynet and Babble Cloud. Isumo's customers include national and international businesses with WAN, LAN and Wi-Fi installations globally. "My background has always been sales, selling SD-WAN solutions, VoIP and on-premise telephony," said Newell.



Mike Newell

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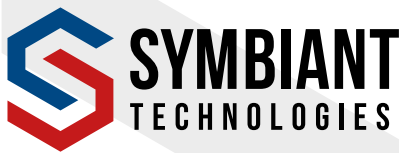
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