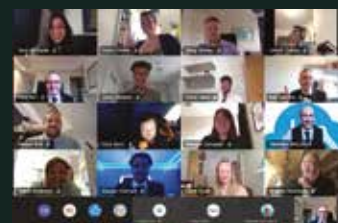




Block chief on how he got to 'where all the action is' p30

Industry unites as thousands relish Awards live stream p44



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## THE HEARTBEAT OF THE UK ICT INDUSTRY

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**Comms People**  
This month's movers and shakers



# Channel poised for influx of PE

**THE comms sector is set for unprecedented levels of investor and M&A activity as PE players scramble for a slice of the vibrant ICT channel's ongoing growth potential and ever entrenching credibility.**

### SPECIAL REPORT

Investors are rushing to buy into the fast moving comms channel armed with significant firepower and it's full steam ahead.

"Private equity has so much dry powder," stated Megabuyte Chief Analyst Philip Carse.

"Valuations have held up, and there are new investors looking at the telecoms sector.

"One CEO of a PE-backed business said recently he'd been approached by three funds

that had never invested in the comms industry before.

"They suddenly recognised the resilience of the sector.

"Everyone wants recurring and mission critical revenues, so valuations are strong, and PE backed businesses are getting into the M&A game and major buyers are now returning to the M&A fold."

FPE Capital Managing Partner David Barbour (pictured) noted that ten years ago reselling was 'a near dirty word in

PE'. "Resellers have been the forgotten niece, but they are becoming a vibrant and exciting part of the economy with lots of growth, and growth is the key to everything," he stated.


"We are entering an exciting time and the era of remote working means we are not tied to hiring expertise within a commutable distance. This is a chance to upgrade people into this sector. We all need to get this segment really driving."


**Full story on pages 16-25**

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

AS IS THE case across the world, the channel and UK plc have been rocked by Covid-19, but for the channel it could be a case of emerging into a potentially better place, as market adjustments prove propitious and macro industry change factors such as the

2025 PSTN switch off come ever more into play. Perhaps, ironically, many businesses operating in the channel and across the nation are more unified despite the dispersed nature of working from home, gelled by peoples' greater use of collaboration technologies which bridge physical space in an instant. Zoom calls have quickly become naturalised by users and the sense of being distant that was initially felt no longer applies so much, as people are pretty much in the room with you and it is BAU, with a little more focus and therefore more meaning.

Such instances of enhanced collaboration were epitomised at last month's Comms National Awards event which, despite its virtual nature, generated a wave of channel interest, unity and togetherness not seen before in celebration of industry excellence, all reflected in a barrage of social media activity that perhaps would not have been so intense and pervasive should the event have been staged as normal (see page 44).

That Covid-19 has accelerated digitalisation and unlocked latent potential is an understatement. The pandemic has got people thinking about moving forward in a different way, rather than returning to pre-pandemic modes of operation. Whether this is enough of a spur to help the industry meet its 2025 targets is another matter. More tangible is the release of enhanced potential across the board and in contexts that until now we did not imagine.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

• WHY resistance to establishing a policy of organisation-wide disruptive thinking could pose a risk to the long-term sustainability of your business – see page 38.

# Air IT snares acquisitions

AUGUST Equity Partners backed Air IT has strengthened its influence in key regions following the acquisitions of London-based IT MSP Netstar UK and Birmingham located MSP Microtrading.

The financials of the deal were not disclosed.

Air IT has doubled in size over the past nine months and like Netstar and Microtrading has maintained organic expansion, delivering over 20% year on year growth, jointly serving over 800 clients.

"Since the August Equity Partners investment the team has been hunting for solid businesses," said Air IT CEO John Whitty. "Netstar and Microtrading are both capable, successful and exciting businesses with talented teams, which will result in the doubling of staff to 140 people.

"These acquisitions represent the first step towards achieving both our organic and acquisitive goals which is supported by a strong and mature pipeline of similar deals."

Founder and MD of Netstar Mit Patel added: "Our clients will benefit from a broader service portfolio, including cyber and BI solutions."



John Whitty

Andy Penlington and Neil Marlowe, the joint MDs of Microtrading, added: "We have spent almost 40 years developing and growing our business into a successful and agile organisation, and the time is right to take the next step and allow our customers to benefit from our significant joint capability and technical investment.

"The Air IT values and culture are close to those already present within Microtrading, which will make the integration of the businesses much easier."

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# plan.com refinances for growth

A NEW phase of growth beckons plan.com following a refinancing deal co-arranged by Barclays Corporate Banking and Santander Corporate and Commercial Banking.

The deal aims to enhance plan.com's SaaS platforms such as my.plan, develop its hosted offering and support the company's acquisition strategy.

Neil Kelly, Chief Financial Officer, commented: "Completing this transaction via a completely remote process, during a global pandemic, is a positive indicator of market confidence in our sector."

Greg Doran, Northern Head of TMT for Barclays Corporate Banking, added: "Despite the challenges we've been able to structure a deal to support plan.com on its growth journey."

The Isle of Man-based tech and platform provider was ranked number one in the 2018 Sunday Times Tech Track 100.



Neil Kelly

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NEWS ROUNDUP

OLIVE CEO Martin Flick has been named as one of LDC's Top 50 Most Ambitious Business Leaders for 2020. Flick joined Olive in 2013 when the firm turned over £10m and employed 40 staff. "In three years we got to £30m and 150 staff," he stated. "Olive has pivoted from a mobile phone business to one of the UK's fastest growing managed cloud communications providers. I have a burning desire to realise Olive's potential and build an international player. It's about being big enough to change the market dynamic." The company will announce a number of acquisitions over the coming months.

FIVE gongs have been scooped by high flyers in the channel billing world, presented at the inaugural National Billing People Awards staged virtually by industry body Billing People. "The work carried out by billing teams is essential both to compliance and customer satisfaction – the channel could not function without them," commented Vincent Disneur, MD of Union Street Technologies, which was Platinum sponsor of the online event. Collecting awards were Glemnet, Pragma, Lily, FourNet and Virocom.

## FPE backs key SaaS firm MBO

MANCHESTER-based CCaaS specialist MaxContact has undergone an MBO led by CEO Ben Booth and backed by growth investor FPE Capital.

Booth and the management team developed the MaxContact SaaS contact centre and CX platform and each invested alongside FPE.

The company has a strong presence in the BPO, financial services and utilities verticals.

FPE's backing is the first outside investment in the business and sees a full exit for the founder family shareholders.

Lars Pedersen, CEO of FPE investment Questionmark, has joined the board as Non-Executive Chairman.

Booth said: "FPE has experience in technology, SaaS in particular, and we will accelerate our product roadmap and invest in go-to-market capabilities."

David Barbour, Managing Partner at FPE, added: "The case for brands to improve their customers' experience and scale their own operations by moving to a cloud native solution such as MaxContact's is proven.

"We will be supporting Ben and the management team in capitalising on that trend in the coming years." See page 22

# Pragma sets up digital biz



Tim Brooks and Will Morey

A NEW business set up by Pragma provides resellers with a single resource for digital services and capabilities.

According to Pragma MD Tim Brooks demand for white label digital services is increasing, prompting Pragma to consolidate its digital portfolio in one place, including Web Listings which has proved especially popular.

Commenting on the new company, called Candio, Brooks stated: "Candio's digital services help resellers to generate a recurring stream of revenue. We have a dedicated team in place and a roadmap of new services, all designed to enable resellers to boost their recurring revenue and margins."

During the lockdown Pragma saw digital services grow by over 600% as resellers looked to provide services that could be sold and implemented remotely, noted Director Will Morey.

"Founding Candio enables us to focus on this part of the business," he commented.

"The growth we have seen has been explosive as digital services are more important than ever to resellers and end users seeking to digitally transform their business."

NEWS ROUNDUP

KONFTEL UK Sales Director Jeff May has swung a spotlight on the emerging hybrid nature of video solutions which he says will become prevalent over the coming months. "After the initial explosion of home working practices we expect to see major growth in hybrid video solutions suitable for boardrooms and huddle rooms and also dedicated home working environments," he stated. "Covid-19 has shown that some people want to work permanently from home, others prefer the office while many want a mixture of both. Hardware and software that ticks the boxes across all three categories will accelerate much further forward."

## comms dealer

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# New investor hunts targets



Andrew Harman

AN INVESTMENT firm set up by former Annodata execs Joe Kelly and Andrew Harman is targeting IT services, security, telecoms and managed print businesses seeking monetary and advisory support.

The company, called Strive Capital, is also on the hunt for acquisitions to advance its 'aggressive' growth strategy.

"We are passionate about technology, as well as creating new jobs and opportunities for individuals – particularly at this challenging time – therefore we are seeking majority or significant minority positions," said

Harman. "The financial muscle behind us means we have the ability to move rapidly when we spot the right opportunities."

Strive has already secured a share acquisition of education sector Apple reseller Academia, landing a 75% stake.

"Having acquired a major shareholding in Academia we see huge potential to significantly enhance its managed service offering into complementary product lines and markets," added Harman.

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## NEWS ROUNDUP

EASTBOURNE-based Lighting Fibre's local FTTP roll out is set to speed up following investment from Foresight Group. The full fibre provider will kick off the next phase of deployment in Eastbourne and Hastings as part of plans to serve 100,000 homes and businesses. Lightning Fibre COO Ben Ferriman commented: "With funding now secured we can accelerate our build programme, providing multi-gigabit full fibre broadband to everyone we pass."

BDR Group Chief Executive Bahman Rahimi has been ranked among LDC's Top 50 Most Ambitious Business Leaders for 2020. BDR has grown its turnover from £8m to £30m in three years and Rahimi has set his sights on achieving £100m turnover within five years. The company counts global retailers among its customer base and during the early stages of lockdown it secured a significant NHS IT contract, supporting five hospitals in Kent. Rahimi commented: "We delivered the work problem-free. That was one of my proudest moments."

# Regulations drive demand for telematics and tracking

CHALLENGER Mobile Communications is gearing up for the introduction of London's Direct Vision Standard (DVS), adding Trakm8's telematics and vehicle camera portfolio to its fleet management solutions.

The new standard will require the majority of HGVs driving through central London to add additional sources of indirect vision to avoid fines.

"Similar regulations are expected to come into force in other cities and regions in the future, increasing the importance of fleets having a robust set of telematics solutions,"



Jeff Eamens

commented Challenger MD Jeff Eamens. "Challenger has offered tracking services for many years but this has always been one of the smaller parts

of our business. Now we see great potential for growth in this sector, given the efficiency, safety and reliability gains such systems can offer."

# Tired of sharing your bandwidth?

Kids games updating—again



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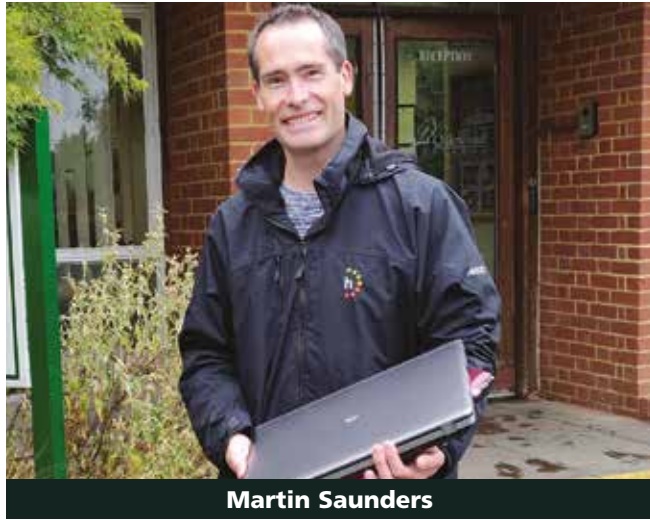
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NEWS ROUNDUP

STRATEGIC Imperatives has added a SoGEA provisioning capability to its CPconnect unified provisioning gateway. "With the Openreach PSTN and ISDN switch off planned for 2025, service providers face a challenge to migrate an average of 50,000 customers per week to VoIP-based products," said MD Wail Sabbagh. "Since traditional connectivity methods and telephone lines will no longer be supported by this date, SoGEA provisioning is an important steppingstone for service providers to transition their customers to standalone broadband products without traditional line rental. SoGEA will shake up the UK telecoms market."

OAK Innovation's Clarify recording and speech analytics solution has been adopted by Techland, providing Microsoft's Graph API integration. Gareth Nunn, Sales & Partnerships at Techland, said: "Recording is an essential business tool for many organisations. Clarify will help partners to address a wider range of opportunities driven by Microsoft Teams and Clarify recording adoption." William Emm, CEO at Oak Innovation, added: "We look forward to addressing the growing market for flexible working solutions together."

# Aid for IT-lite kid learners



Martin Saunders

A SCHEME to provide IT-lite school kids with technology that will enable them to study from home has been launched by Highlight Product Director and Horley Town Councillor Martin Saunders.

He is seeking volunteers to spread the Level Up appeal which has received 180 donated laptops (at the time of writing) from businesses and individuals for disadvantaged children in Horley to keep permanently.

"The 'new normal' for school children today and in the future includes the flexibility to learn at home using online resources," stated Saunders. "Unfortunately, some families

cannot afford IT equipment to support their children studying at home. These disadvantaged children are missing out."

Despite the work of Highlight, many children in Horley and across the UK are left without the facilities to properly further their education.

Saunders hopes volunteers will come forward to take the project to other areas.

"We are making great progress and the generosity of everyone involved has been overwhelming," he said.

"However, we've some way to go to ensure that every child has access to the technology they need."

# Ricoh seals MTI Tech' acquisition

RICOH'S presence in the European IT services market has been strengthened by the acquisition of solutions provider MTI Technology.

MTI has three sites across the UK and for the past 20 years specialised in cyber and data security, data centre modernisation, IT managed services and IT transformation services.

The company employs over 200 staff and will continue to operate under its existing name.

According to MTI's CEO Scott Haddow the deal will benefit MTI financially and position it in the global market.

"Our mission is to help customers accelerate digital transformation by modernising their IT systems and refining IT operations with security assurance as standard and privacy by design," he stated. "Becoming a Ricoh company means we can take this to the next level."

Ricoh Europe CEO David Mills stated: "This acquisition enables us to expand across EMEA and to build on our competences in data centre transformation, cyber security and other IT transformation offerings."

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# Sabio ups Genesys partners



Jonathan Gale

HORIZON Capital backed Sabio's multi-vendor capabilities across EMEA have received a boost following its acquisition of Anana, a Genesys partner.

Anana was established in 2001, operates out of offices in the UK and South Africa, has over 100 employees and holds Genesys Engage, Cloud and AppFoundry accreditations.

"This is an important acquisition that builds on our earlier addition of two Genesys partners – Coverage Group in France and Team Vision in Spain – to position Sabio as a key Genesys partner in Europe," said Sabio CEO Jonathan Gale.

Chris Woodward, Anana's CEO, added: "As part of Sabio we'll be taking advantage of the latest cloud and AI innovations to help our customers deliver high value, personalised experiences at scale across human and digital touch-points."



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# Scottish firm pocketed by Focus Group

BOWMARK Capital backed Focus Group has strengthened its presence north of the border following the acquisition of Glasgow-based Resource Telecom Group.

The Scottish firm also has an office in Edinburgh and was founded by MD Graeme Edgar in 1997.

Knight Corporate Finance advised the shareholders of Resource Telecom, its eighth deal in the last six months.

“The robust nature of ICT businesses, generating high levels of recurring revenue has resulted in strong competition and maintained valuations,” stated Adam Zoldan, Director at Knight Corporate Finance.

According to Edgar, leveraging the expertise of the boutique adviser for the technology and telecoms industry was key.

“Knight delivered a number of strong written offers and negotiated a deal that met our aspirations financially,” he said.

The transaction follows two particularly high profile deals managed by Knight Corporate

Finance during lockdown. In July Kerv merged three businesses with private equity backing to bring a new player to the market. And Knight advised Union Street on its merger with Aurora in early September.

Zoldan added: “With the exception of the first few weeks of lockdown, buyers, investors and funders have remained as hungry as ever for deals across the channel.

“Six of the eight transactions we delivered over lockdown involved a PE sponsor, showing the confidence in the channel from the investment community where we are seeing strong cash generation and growth prospects result in ICT assets being highly sought after.”

Knight Director Paul Billingham said: “With over 120 transactions under our belt we continue to work with entrepreneurs in the tech and telecoms sector. The ICT channel deserves huge praise for its dynamism and flexibility in keeping the UK open for business.”

**Special Report – page 16**

# Leeds reseller drives growth



Jonathan Marsden

LEEDS-based communications provider The Technology Group has added 4,000 new users in the last quarter, a 27% growth for its core platform during the Covid-19 restriction period.

The deals made in the last four months take the usership of its 3CX managed services unified communications platform to in excess of 20,000 users globally, expanding its client footprint into Switzerland and The Philippines.

CEO Jonathan Marsden commented: “The early stages of lockdown saw us taking some difficult decisions to pro-

tect the business at the height of the storm. The new contracts are an encouraging sign of business confidence recovery.

“With remote working looking set to be the new norm for many businesses either full time or partially, companies need to make sure that their telecoms and video conferencing platforms are fit for purpose.

“That includes integrated and reliable video conferencing as well as giving all users the ability to make and transfer calls from the office phone numbers from wherever they are, on whatever device.”

# Strategic partners Transatel

A NEW module added to Strategic Imperatives’ SaaS billing platform (Elevate) enables providers to monetise connectivity and digital services and streamline their processes.

The launch follows a link up with Transatel (NTT Group) to provide integrated billing for the fast growing MVNO and IoT market.

By integrating with Transatel’s cellular connectivity platform for MVNOs and IoT providers, Strategic Imperatives’ new MVNOconnect module offers service providers a real-time and cloud native billing and provisioning solution.

Transatel has 170 MVNO launches across Europe and offers UK providers an ‘MVNO in a box’, providing real-time control on the EE network, global cellular connectivity services, authentication and network management.

Strategic Imperatives Chief Operating Officer Tim Sayer commented: “MVNOconnect is available as an optional module to users of Elevate and requires no upfront infrastructure or development investment.”

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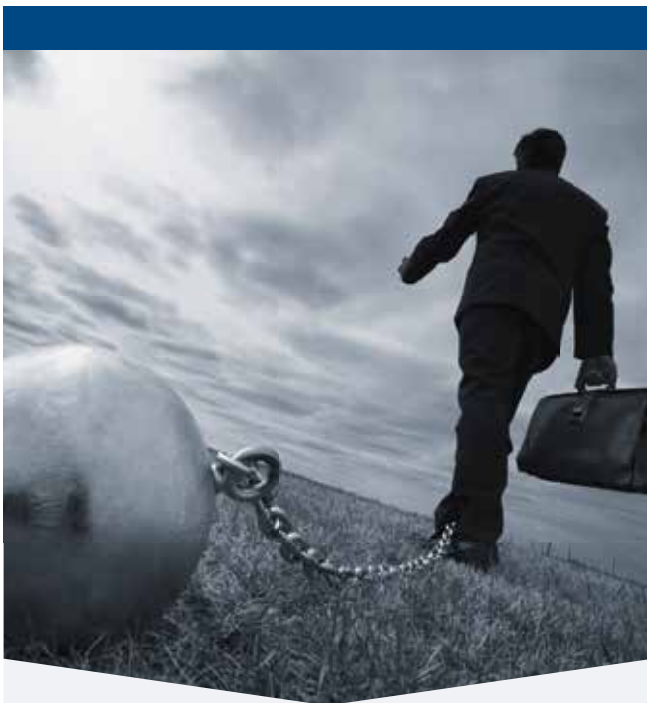
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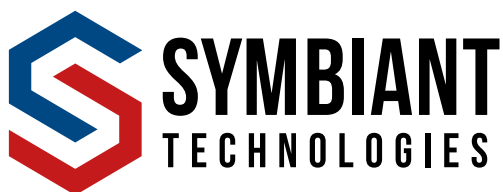
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**WE GIVE OUR CLIENTS MORE**

# Mark Hickey: A tribute by Daisy Group Chairman Matthew Riley

**M**ark Hickey, one of the original members of the Daisy team which laid the foundations for the business it is today, died on October 28th following a long battle with prostate cancer. Daisy Group Chairman Matthew Riley penned these words in tribute to a colleague and friend, which we are pleased to publish in full...



**Mark Hickey**

"I write this with great sadness over the loss of a close friend and one of the original members of the Daisy team. Mark fought a brave and strong battle for 12 years, but the cancer would not allow him to get better. He took each day in his stride, never really complaining, always hoping that the treatments would prolong his life so he could continue to enjoy watching his family and friends for a bit longer. This was my hope too, and I would have given anything to take this terrible disease away from him.

"Mark was the strongest man I have ever known, both inside and out, he was a loyal and wonderful friend to me and many others, not just inside the Daisy Group but outside as well, supporting me for over 18 years with his unbridled work rate and sales charm. He really was a force of nature.

One of his beliefs in life was the importance of being authentic with people, saying what needs to be said and never trying to be something he wasn't. He always kept his sense of humour and even in the last few days when I last spoke to him, he was laughing and joking about football which was one of his many passions in life.

"My friend was loving and real. He was a loving husband and father to his three children and laid a strong foundation for them. The many people who know Karen, his wife, and his children will watch over them, as Mark is, and make sure that they have a great life, full of his values and wishes. Lastly, his magnetic charm will be missed by all who knew him.

"During Mark's illness, I know that there were two things

that kept him going, his children and hope. Otherwise to face another day would have been tough and I know how many days he must have had like that. Now my hope is that he rests in peace knowing he did all that he could and that his wife Karen and children will be fine.

"I know Mark made many friends across the UK telecoms market, no doubt sharing many good times and lots of laughter. I know you will all join me in sending our deepest condolences to Mark's family."

Daisy Group has set up a Justgiving page to raise funds for research into prostate cancer. If anyone would like to make a donation and send a note to the family the link to the page is: <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/in-memory-of-markhickey>

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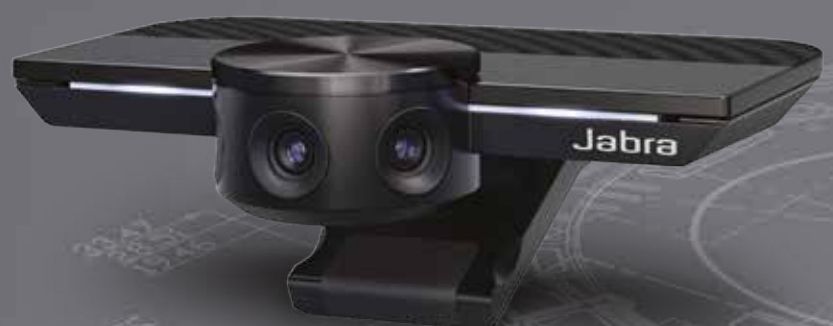
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# Why adapting to full fibre

Enabling the Covid-19 home working shift in remarkable timescales could justifiably be seen as the making of the UK's comms sector. But the challenge of driving full fibre adoption may be the ultimate test as the 2025 PSTN switch off and all-IP comes into clear view. During an online Insight Session hosted by Comms Dealer in association with BT Wholesale last month, our panel of experts untangled the new product adoption challenges and provided a strategic view of where the channel really needs to be.

All the industry knows it has to break loose from the PSTN and traditional models soon, so resellers should not deny themselves time to consider the one certain engine of future growth – full fibre. “2025 is not far away when you think about what is going to transform in the marketplace over that period,” said Paul Beacham, Senior Manager, Data Networking, BT Wholesale.

“So it's about getting ahead of the curve and educating the market on the multiple challenges that the industry is going through. That also presents an opportunity to support channel partners through to the end

customers, helping them to navigate that journey. Focusing on solutions that enhance continuity and help resilience will be critical, and full fibre clearly has a key role to play.”

Arguments in favour of resellers adopting full fibre sooner rather than later are unassailable. Nothing should dissuade any ICT reseller from the fact that only a FTTP strategy stands between them and the eventual evaporation of their business, believes Sara Sheikh, Product Lead for Data at Gamma. “It's an existential issue,” she stated. “If you're not thinking about full fibre you could be out of the game. It's important for resellers to be aware of this



Sara Sheikh

FTTP will help to build value and keep resellers in the game because you can't use a copper service to provide the applications that most businesses need these days.



Paul Beacham

## We are fundamentally going to transform the business, the services we offer and how we offer them to the channel

and we have been careful and considered about our messaging so far. There will be challenges, but it's also a great opportunity to move away from selling products to selling services and getting closer to the customer, and to really change how we interact with users. Our message to resellers is not to panic but embrace this.”

Going all-IP is about new products and services and driving adoption, which is a complex and developmental process that will crucially

require a coherent channel framework. But certain availability and process capabilities need to be quickly fulfilled before resellers can adopt full fibre at a time when deferring the decision until later is becoming less of an option. “The current coverage of FTTP across the UK is not enough for us to form a new strategy on how we do business,” said Vicki Rishbeth, Technical Director, Focus Group. “And the current FTTP product does not have what I would consider to be a

SLA. I'm looking forward to Openreach coming to the fore with something that is more befitting to the business community.

“One of the biggest challenges I have is washing my base on a regular basis to see whether a FTTP has popped up. I would like to see Openreach give us that data. On another point, we will be migrating a lot of customers from either FTTC or SOGEA onto FTTP. I'd also like to see a smooth migration process using the same IP addressing to make it as seamless as possible for the customer.”

In developing a FTTP adoption strategy we must of course reduce adoption friction as much as possible. When adopting something new it helps to lower the barriers and for fibre there is much work yet to be done as it is a very different beast. “For a large percentage of FTTP circuits ordered its actually a manual process, and Ethernet is a higher margin product,” observed Sheikh. “FTTP is a much lower margin product and the process doesn't justify it. What happens when the FTTP footprint and order volumes increase? If we



# re is a strategic priority

don't have that automation in place we will struggle."

Resellers may also find themselves weighing the incremental benefits of adopting FTTP against the implications, including costs, of change. "Some partners are slow to adopt new technology," commented Jamie Gunnell, Connectivity Product Manager, Node4. "I remember trying to sell IP over traditional analogue lines and ISDN when partners were making quite large margins on those products. There may be more features and greater alignment to where things are moving in the future, but it was worth less to them in terms of margins. It's different with full fibre. Removing copper from anyone's network has got to be positive, and it is important to get partners understanding what is happening in the market."

We must consider the forces that will determine the FTTP adoption process, and how the channel can better drive uptake. This boils down to how FTTP is communicated and the overall delivery process, including education.

"The move to full fibre is key, but education is absolutely critical to make this work," added Barry Ward, Director Disruptive Technology, Wavenet. "The education has to flow from the ISPs and network carriers through to the reseller channel and down to the end user. That is absolutely critical. We could have a lot of people buying these services but not getting the performance they expected. Education is key."

### Vital services

Comms resellers have always mattered to UK businesses, but perhaps never more so than at this time as we acclimatise to the Covid-19 pandemic and head towards the 2025 PSTN switch off and an all-IP world. Yet the scale of the challenge may

## Comms resellers have always mattered to UK businesses, but never more so than now

not be fully appreciated, believes David Palmer, Head of Product Network Design, Claranet. "I don't think the realisation is quite there about how much work is

needed to get to a full IP infrastructure," he said. "On the question of where we are now and where we need to be in five years time, there is a massive disparity between the knowledge and understanding resellers have and what is actually happening in the market."

"Many channel resellers will have to change their fundamental business models. We have partners who sell PSTN and connectivity aiming at the volume market. Going forward there is a great opportunity to develop a service wrap and offer bespoke services. How you differentiate is a hard game to play, but there is an opportunity for providers and resellers to change the model

of how they work. In moving to a FTTP strategy automation is key. But the systems are not there yet. Automation has to improve. How we check for FTTP availability is very different from FTTC and quite a challenge."

It is actual FTTP diffusion that will ultimately determine the pace of adoption. But until many more premises are served and resellers can operate smoothly in the FTTP world it may contribute little towards driving digital transformation. Yet the case for FTTP considerations strengthens by the day, despite the channel being somewhat adrift on how to deliver on the promise. "The industry is in a transition phase of moving to new products but hasn't resolved



Jamie Gunnell

**Removing copper from anyone's network has got to be positive, and it is important to get partners understanding what is happening in the market.**

the quality of delivery," pointed out Steve Barclay, Managing Director, Networks, 9 Group. "There is too much manual input and much work to do be done to make things more efficient."

"As a society we expect things to be much easier to access, and have information available at our finger tips, know our options and take more control. Pushing as much as possible out to the edge in terms of the service delivery and the end user is key. You can still maintain that relationship: Ultimately it is about a service that is easier to

understand for all elements of the channel so partners can manage that process on the customers' behalf."

Among the big determinants of new technology adoption are the benefits offered to resellers and users. A strong and receptive customer base is an important factor, and, in the main, the upsides derived from FTTP are flow benefits received during the life of the customer relationship. This reflects an important reality: that RoI for resellers happens over time rather than 'in the hand'. "The key is how full fibre creates the foundations

**Continued on page 14**



Vicki Rishbeth

**The current FTTP product does not have a SLA. I'm looking forward to Openreach coming to the fore with something that is more befitting to the business community.**



Barry Ward

**You can't sell connectivity, particularly full fibre, as a stand alone product. It has to be part of a deeper delivery mechanism to make sure the solution works end-to-end.**

**Continued from page 13**

to offer over the top services," added Beacham. "For a wholesaler like BT Wholesale it's about how we expose those capabilities to customers in a way that makes it easier to consume. Simplifying the process is a key aspect we are looking at from a portfolio perspective and how services are brought together."

In becoming agents of change and nailing their colours to the mast of FTTP and OTT services, resellers' strategic foresight will be rewarded, noted Palmer. "Resellers need to look at the additional overlay services they can offer, almost turning their business model on its head and evaluating the value adds and services," he said. "We are doing that ourselves. People expect more than just the network. Now it's about getting more embedded in the customer, so we need to understand them better to move forward and evolve that service."

The same approach applies to resellers needing to gain a clearer view of their own future business model, believes Barclay. "We are moving into an era where we have communication as a service rather than hardware," he said. "Service delivery is critical to building long-term relationships with customers. That's where the return on investment will

come from – the continued relationship and partnership. Resellers will be effective in winning business and maintaining customers with a good level of service."

According to Sheikh, this is about more than securing RoI. How resellers add value could ultimately determine the survivability prospects of their businesses in an uncertain world. "For the channel there is a massive threat from the tech industry being able to reach out to customers directly, leveraging the ease of service they offer and the low touch access they provide," she stated. "They have a lot of money and funding behind them.

"Operational excellence is where the channel can add value on the support side. The channel knows its customers and has relationships, and can separate itself by providing a personalised experience. If communication between the value chain can be streamlined and automated then the channel is better able to support customers and deliver the value add that would protect them from that external threat."

The magnetism of connectivity, particularly full fibre, determines that it should not be sold as a stand alone product, especially if it is to fend off looming threats to the channel, emphasised

Ward. "It has to be part of a deeper delivery mechanism to make sure the solution works end-to-end," he stated. "As an aggregator we work with many of the major ISPs and we have to make sure that operational excellence is instilled into our processes upstream and downstream. How you fit those together and streamline that process is an important challenge in achieving operational excellence, especially if you are overlaying multiple services."

David Aldritt, Technology & Innovation Director, Highnet, commented: "There is a challenge for us all to understand how we build those systems to optimal advantage. Today it is easy



**Steve Barclay**

**The industry is in a transition phase but hasn't resolved the quality of delivery. There is too much manual input and work needs to be done to make things more efficient.**

The 2025 switch off should therefore become the lodestar of all future channel business strategies – which must include a FTTP component, but not

portfolio of connectivity solutions. With FTTP one of the challenges we all have is the geographic roll out and our understanding of this will continue to evolve. Working closely with Openreach we will get a clearer view of FTTP Professional and the commercials which will be specifically targeting the business market. Ultimately, the road to full fibre isn't a single initiative managed in isolation – there are many other market programmes over the next five years that will form part of the channel strategy.

"At BT Wholesale I firmly believe this is not just about evolving – it's about transforming. I've been at BT for 20 years and this is the most exciting time I've experienced as we are fundamentally going to transform the business, the services we offer and how we offer them to the channel." ■

## The 2025 switch off should become the lodestar of all channel business strategies

to go to full automation and lose touch with what is at the other end – a live customer running a live business. During that search for improving our bottom line we need to get clever about how we also capture customer data, understand the customer and understand channel partners."

The good news is that the 2025 cliff edge deadline works in the channel's favour, as older competing technologies will no longer be a barrier to the shift to newer access technologies such as FTTP. "The pace of change is encouraging," added Aldritt. "The roll out has been accelerating and it will continue to do so. The clear goal is the same for everyone – that the PSTN switch off is going to happen, we will get rid of copper eventually, and that 'eventually' is getting closer and closer. Having those discussions and considerations internally and externally has to be on the agenda right now."

be wholly dictated by full fibre, observed Beacham. "In the context of 2025 much of the talk is around full fibre and all-IP, with a big focus on the PSTN switch off," he commented. "It's not just about PSTN, there are a number of legacy services and access technologies that will be retired. All private circuits for example, and legacy copper-based EFM access.

"FTTP is clearly going to grow in importance, but it should be seen as part of the overall



**David Palmer**

**It's about getting more embedded in the customer, so we need to understand them better to evolve services.**



**David Aldritt**

**The clear goal is the same for everyone – that the PSTN switch off is going to happen. We will get rid of copper eventually, and that 'eventually' is getting closer and closer.**



## More Session Insights...

Many organisations do not expect to go back to full office working, so business grade connectivity is required within homes. This is a tremendous opportunity for the channel. Full fibre has to be a key part of this.

David Aldritt, Technology & Innovation Director, Highnet

The biggest shift we have seen is to collaboration and this has implications on connectivity. As well as a dispersed workforce driving more bandwidth requirements you've got expandable and flexible security and measurement tools such as productivity – all underpinned by the connectivity layer.

Barry Ward, Director Disruptive Technology, Wavenet

We've seen massive uptake of Teams as our customers take a more unified approach. People are reviewing why they are in an office. We've looked at how we are working and made some permanent decisions.

Vicki Rishbeth, Technical Director, Focus Group

Full fibre at the end of the day is plumbing. But that plumbing is absolutely critical and the quintessential part of any solution that a partner rolls out. FTTP will definitely help to build value and keep resellers in the game because you can't use a copper service to provide the applications that most businesses need these days.

Sara Sheikh, Product Lead for Data, Gamma

Educating resellers on full fibre is part of our responsibility, and guidance is a key part of our strategy. We can't let partners stumble through this. To build a strong channel you need to guide them.

Steve Barclay, Managing Director, Networks, 9 Group

There are more questions asked about FTTP and people are excited. But clients don't really understand until we do the education piece, which is key to how we productise and position FTTP with the customer.

Jamie Gunnell, Connectivity Product Manager, Node4

The way businesses are evolving and using these new technologies is a great opportunity for channel businesses if they move quickly and have a full fibre strategy built into their thinking. They are then equipped to give the best advice and be the trusted advisor.

Steve Barclay, Managing Director, Networks, 9 Group

The main challenges I see ahead of 2025 lie with other services running over the PSTN which are getting overlooked. If we migrate a service that has Redcare, a lift line or EPOS service for example, it's not technology we supply or are trained for, but it will be our number customers call when things stops working.

Vicki Rishbeth, Technical Director, Focus Group

Full fibre, all-IP and channel partnerships will be critical to the future, and there needs to be flexibility up and down the channel to support new business models.

Carla Barrow, Senior Sales Manager, BT Wholesale



Carla Barrow

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Last month's Comms Dealer online ICT Investment Forum event (15th October) sponsored by Knight Corporate Finance and hosted by ICT entrepreneur and commentator Adrian Barnard put the spotlight on current M&A and investment priorities via an insightful agenda and a line up of industry experts. We hope that the special report that follows (pages 16-25) will help to give you a strategic advantage when planning ahead for your future.

# Redefining your value

There are various ways of assessing your business, but perhaps the most important criteria are in terms of value and the 'perception' of worth, according to Knight Corporate Finance founder Adam Zoldan.

There is little doubt that the M&A fraternity have collectively brought a sharply honed interest and vitality to the idea of multiples. But a seller's focus should be far more broad, says Zoldan, who pointed to six recent deals completed by Knight ranging from six to nine x EBITDA. "As advisors we reinterpret EBITDA and look at revenue, non-recurring and extraordinary costs," he added. "We look at run rate, how the performance is today versus how it was over the last year. We consider work in progress, what's coming down the pipe and how that will add to a business. Multiples are important, but don't always believe what you read – they can be misleading."

"From an investor and buyer perspective, among the key attributes that will have an impact on the value of a business are of course customers. The profile of a customer base will in large part determine the interest from certain buyers. There is no right or wrong. Also key is the product portfolio and the expertise within a business."

He noted that owners must know their elevator pitch and be able to articulate clearly the types of products

and services they offer, which is reflected in the financial performance of the company. Another key question to ask is – how do the products and customers affect performance and vice versa? The key to making this all work is the people and the management team, especially if you are looking for inward investment.

If a business owner gets all this right the perception of the business will be positive. That perception can be subjective, but importantly it can have an impact on the multiple. "If you can generate a great perception of your business you will also generate much competition in the process, whether an exit, investment or fund raising – that is worth money," stated Zoldan.

"Other factors that will move a reseller's multiple include size. Typically, for a reseller falling between £0.5 million and £1 million EBITDA we're seeing a multiple of circa six times. Once you get beyond £2 million PE as a platform investment gets interesting. There is much competition among PE investors for companies of a reasonable size. That's when we start to see double digit valuations."

Multiples are too often the talk of the town, but



Adam Zoldan

## Multiples are important, but don't always believe what you read – they can be misleading

this preoccupation reflects another important reality that is often overlooked – that of perception. Selling a business is a serious matter, and the role of perception in achieving success cannot be overstated, noted Zoldan. He argues that the perception of growth that a business owner could generate in the future may positively differ from growth already achieved, which is a pivotal and valuable distinction to emphasise.

To emphatically prove the point he cited certain value

in terms of adding to its share price or market cap. This increases to \$20,000 for Toyota. But buying a Tesla for \$50,000 increases its share price potentially by £1 million, based on perceptions of its ability to deliver growth in the future."

Returning to deal activity in the communications sector, it's business as usual for Knight. Significantly, the ICT sector is not focused on proprietary technologies, it is all about open and easily accessible technology. And software is IPR – all big attractions for investors. Against this backdrop there are two reasons for acquisitions, scale and expanding product sets and expertise.

"But the real story of the sector is PE which accounts for approximately 90 per cent of deals," commented Zoldan. "We are aware of six currently underway and another six that are likely to drop over the next six months. Most range between 10 and 15 x EBITDA. When you are planning your own route ahead, don't look over your shoulder or concern yourself with the activities of others. Take time to consider your aspirations. Whatever they are there will be options that enable you to mould your strategy." ■

dynamics at work in the car market. Tesla is small compared to Toyota, for example, but worth almost double. "There has been a change of perception about Tesla's ability to deliver on its growth plans, which are aggressive and reflected in its share price," said Zoldan. "It's also reflected in different types of multiple."

### Perception matters

"Instead of EBITDA, look at the value per car multiple. Each car General Motors put on the road over the last year was worth circa \$6,000



# WE'RE EMPLOYEE OWNED

Just over a year ago, Blizzard Telecom became Employee Owned. Trading since 2008, Blizzard has built up a strong partner base distributing a range of products and services including voice, data, mobile, IT and energy. With group turnover having reached £8 million, the business began to attract a number of competitors with a view to purchase.

Founders Mark Jones and Martin Turner had been considering long-term options for the business. Both with over 30 years' experience in the channel, they had seen many transactions often result in disappointing outcomes for owners, employees and partners. They did not want this to be the case with Blizzard, so began to explore better alternatives.

Employee Ownership (not to be confused with management buyout) to date is not a common exit option, less than 500 companies have taken this approach so far. In July 2019, the founders placed 75% of the business into Employee Ownership, which is run through a trust whereby all members share benefits equally.

Mark Jones said "Over the past year, we have promoted a number of employees to senior positions in the business as part of the

Mark Jones  
Managing Director

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- A commitment to the longer term
- A fully engaged and committed workforce
- A clear shared purpose and collaborative way of working
- The preservation of the business and its values following ownership succession

succession plan. In most cases, these employees have been with us since we first started and have helped Blizzard get to where it is today. As owners, Martin and I are now increasingly stepping back from day-to-day duties, but remain present to guide our successors in the ongoing growth of the company, delivering the confidence in the future that our staff and channel partners deserve."



Emma Teden  
Employee Ownership Representative

Employee Ownership representative Emma Teden says, "since becoming Employee Owned, all staff have taken on board that we truly are the owners of the business. We are fully invested in the business goals and incentivised more than ever. As a collective, we know, and are proud of the fact that every win is a joint victory, where everyone is rewarded. Going forward, we are confident that the Employee Ownership model, with its collaborative approach, will support the ongoing success of Blizzard and our partners."



## Blizzard

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# Sector resilience pays

The experience of past recessions is that the comms sector is largely resilient and in demand. Not even Covid-19 has knocked the channel off its tracks. In fact, says Megabyte Chief Analyst Philip Carse, it's full steam ahead.

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed further the comms sector's flexibility and resilience, evidenced by a resumption in M&A activity during the past three months, with new and resurgent buyers making their mark. "The new buyers may have decided to embark on M&A and taken external funding, such as Windsor Telecom and Prompt Communications," stated Carse. "PE backed businesses are getting into the M&A game and major buyers are now returning to the M&A fold. Matthew Riley, a strong buyer, is back in the market with his Aurora business acquiring Union Street and Shaftesbury Systems."

Carse noted that most existing buyers are PE backed businesses, well proven in telecoms, such as Arrow, Southern, Babble, Sabio and Wavenet. "We expect companies like these to be more busy in the coming months," he added. "One to watch is Radius Payment Solutions which is building out its telecoms activities and is an interesting buyer in the market."

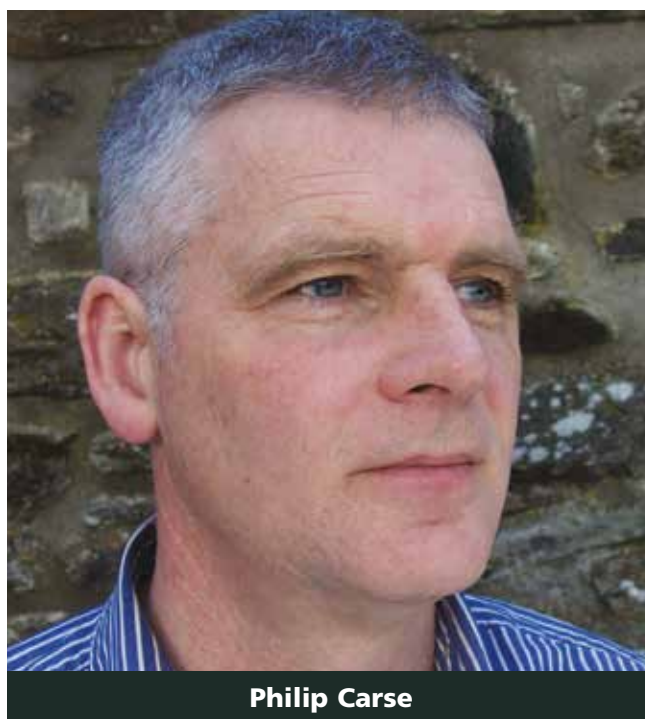
PE interest is now on a scale perhaps greater than anything experienced before in the sector, and there is no shortage of fire power. "Private equity has so much dry powder," added Carse. "We estimate circa £2 trillion globally sat in PE

waiting to be spent. The reality is that if you're a PE fund you can't generate fees unless deploying money. So there is lot of money in PE looking for a place to go."

Owners thinking about selling or expanding their business can go down the PE route or look for a market listing. But the advantages of a listing are becoming weaker, believes Carse. "New rules and regulations like MiFID reduce the amount of research on companies. On the whole, a listing is not the most obvious route to follow; and the comms sector has not had the best relationship with public markets, aside from Gamma."

Public companies can't lever up too much debt – two to three time EBITDA is the usual limit. So for companies wanting to invest big, as with infrastructure players, public markets are not the best place to be. For example, CityFibre went private, as did Kcom, which was limited as a public company in how much money it could raise to exploit the fibre opportunity in areas adjacent to Hull.

"PE is by far the preferred solution for any owner manager at the moment," emphasised Carse. "The PE model in this space is well proven, it's all about buying at five times, getting that down to three times with immediate cost synergies and building up scale, then selling



Philip Carse

the PSTN switch off – all seen as opportunities to take market share and be more crucial to customers. "Covid-19 is accelerating this digital transformation," he stated. "Therefore CEOs are optimistic but conscious of the need to be sensible and look after the cash. Most companies are also thinking about how to adopt remote working on a more permanent basis."

Carse reaffirmed that one of the most interesting developments is the resumption of M&A activity from June onwards when buyers and sellers realised their world wasn't collapsing. "A reseller recently completed a deal according to the agreed terms established pre-Covid," he added. "Valuations have held up, and there are new investors looking at the telecoms sector. One CEO of a PE-backed business said he'd been approached by three funds that had never invested in the comms industry before."

"They suddenly recognised the resilience of the sector. Everyone wants recurring and mission critical revenues, so valuations are strong. If I was an owner manager reflecting on how my business got through lockdown, and was always planning an exit, now is as good a time as any to think about it. Especially with changes to Capital Gains Tax coming down the line." ■

## Valuations have held up and there are new investors looking at the sector

at ten times. PE will be drawn to the sector even more."

### Strong position

The sector's resilience has become a stand out factor, he added. "Where we are now is far better than anyone hoped for back in the dark days of March," noted Carse. "A 'business as usual' holding pattern was established in mid-July. Companies found they had more cash sat in the bank than expected, partly because of bank deferrals and drawn down debts, and a sharper focus on cash collection. On the whole,

cash positions were holding up without any real bad debt and customer bankruptcies. From a financial point of view, most companies are probably not far off their pre-Covid profitability plans and new orders are getting to back to pre-Covid levels. CEOs are generally positive about the long-term future while remaining cautious about economic issues. It's very much business as usual."

Before Covid-9, observed Carse, the industry was facing developments like fibre roll out, 5G, IoT and



# THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

## 3CX's managed hosting simplifies deployments and keeps you in the driving seat.

3CX's footprint in the channel is getting bigger. With a string of firsts under their belt (3CX was the first to launch a software-based IP PBX in the UK, which was swiftly followed by 3CX WebMeeting, the first WebRTC based conferencing solution), the UC vendor is now the market leader in open standards communication technology. Now with over 1000 IT and Telecoms partners nationwide, 3CX is turning its attention to the cloud.

"With the ISDN switch off looming and the fallout of COVID-19 encouraging more businesses to switch to remote-friendly cloud solutions, our partners are receiving more enquiries than ever," 3CX's CEO Stefan Walther explains. "We want to help them service as many of these customers as possible and we're doing that by providing a range of quick, low maintenance setup options for hosted systems."

### A Champion of Choice

For 3CX resellers, having options when it comes to their product portfolio has always been a major draw. Walther knows this, and as a result, he's consciously expanding the choices available to his partners, giving them multiple ways to differentiate their business.

Resellers tailor their 3CX solutions to suit their business and their customers. There's no vendor lock-in, so partners choose their own SIP Trunks, deployment method and integrations. When it comes to phones, plug & play devices are available from a range of leading manufacturers, such as Snom, Fanvil, and Yealink, plus there's the 3CX Web Client for those looking for hands-free options. 3CX has made sure that there are products to suit all needs and budgets. It's a business model that sets them apart from competitors, who typically bundle phones, call plans, licensing



Stefan Walther, CEO

and hosting together into a single monthly fee, with no room for negotiation.

### You're in the Driving Seat

"One thing that consistently emerges when we speak to partners

is how much they value our flexible approach," Walther tells us. "If an experienced reseller joins us with a preferred trunk provider or handsets that they love, we're not going to make them ditch long-standing vendor partnerships to use a proprietary product, as many competitors do. On the other hand, we know that some of our partners prefer 3CX to provide support for their solution so that they can spend more time focusing on sales. To make their business model simpler, we have a range of supported trunks, hosting providers and hardware available that our technicians can troubleshoot on their behalf. Ultimately, we let the partner dictate the nature of their solution."

All this choice means there's little 3CX cannot handle. With customers ranging from healthcare providers and government ministries to universities and multinational corporations, partners benefit from having one solution that can be adapted with ease.

### New for 2020: Hosted by 3CX

If this wasn't already enough, 2020 marks the start of a new era for 3CX. Until now partners could deploy 3CX on-premise or self-host in a public or private cloud. With the launch of 3CX's new, managed hosting offer, Hosted by 3CX, that's

changed. 3CX can now install, configure and maintain client systems on a reseller's behalf.

Hosted by 3CX enables administrators to leave the hassle of hosting behind, making PBX management easier than ever. Partners benefit from a reliable, zero maintenance, cost-effective solution that 3CX supports end-to-end. Customers have peace of mind knowing their solution is monitored by the vendor, whilst retaining a local relationship with their partner.

### Channel Commitment

Whether using Hosted by 3CX, deploying on-premises or self-hosting, 3CX partners retain full control of their clients and their systems. "We're first and foremost a channel company," says Walther. "We recognise the value that experienced partners bring to the solution. Rather than trying to compete for direct sales, our channel teams are committed to supporting partners through the entire sales cycle."

### Try Hosted by 3CX for Free

3CX's Standard Edition including Hosted by 3CX is completely free for one year, providing a low-cost scalable solution that will support any business long term. Create your free trial license and discover what 3CX could do for your portfolio, firsthand.

# Cook opens up on inside

**From the moment former Union Street Technologies Chief Executive Tony Cook decided on the timing of his exit strategy he was wholly committed to delivering on the plan for himself and for staff.**

**S**erial tech entrepreneur Matthew Riley recently struck a stand out deal to acquire Union Street Technologies from Cook and his wife Sarah and merge it with his Aurora business. The enlarged group was officially launched on September 7th and soon after it bagged Shaftesbury Systems. As we shall see, the process from Cook's stand point was far from being a hasty one, and it demanded strong leadership and to some extent powers of persuasion.

"On reflection we started the process in 2016," he explained. "I had turned 50 and was thinking about what to do with the business – it had been full-on for 20 years. Union Street was set up in 1999, we had won some great customers, now totalling over 500. We knew we had a good business and that the market has been kind to us. I also knew I didn't want to hang around forever.

"I thought that, if I want at some point to extract myself I need to find a way of making myself redundant. We have a great team of senior managers so I hatched a plan and it was key to be transparent and explain what I had in mind. I presented a powerpoint on where we could go and tied that into a share option scheme for the senior team. That brought



Tony Cook

**In early May I got a call out of the blue. I was surprised, it was Matthew Riley and he expressed an interest**

them into the idea of getting us to a position where at some point we could sell."

Having locked minds together behind his strategy Cook

set about getting his ducks in a row. "We had grown over a period of time and bolted all sorts of things on, accumulating some 'technical debt' along the

way," he explained. "This all had to be fixed to get things working really well. We also transitioned from a desktop environment to the cloud. I then decided to be less hands

on and encouraged the team to prove to me that they can take the business forward. Our Managing Director Vincent Disneur is well known and front of house, so I decided to step away from trade shows and the front line. The more I stepped away the better we seemed to do."

Union Street's EBITDA in 2016 was circa £1.3 million but Cook wanted to get the figure nearer the £2 million level. "We set about that plan and started fixing things and that process brought us through to 2019 when I saw we were getting there," he commented. "The product was in good shape, most customers were moving to the cloud platform, EBITDA was where we needed it to be – and I decided that I needed to do something to make it all a reality for these guys. If I set a new goal at this point I would effectively have been placing them in golden handcuffs. I was keen to exercise the plan."

To be responsible for making decisions on the future of your business does not imply the capacity to succeed single handedly during the process and the 'grand inquisition', also known as due diligence. "Early in 2019 we got in touch with Knight Corporate Finance," noted Cook. "We had shopped around for advisors but in June signed up to work with Knight which conducted a trial due diligence test that



# the story of sale

turned up all sorts of issues. This helped us to understand the information we would need to get together.

## Weighing the options

"Knight helped us put together a comprehensive document containing lots of facts and figures. We talked about potential buyers and thought PE was a good option. We had an ambitious team, and Vince was chomping at the bit to take the business forward. We did the rounds with

negotiations we received an interesting proposition."

As Riley had operated in the sector for many years Cook assumed that the due diligence would be less intense. "I was wrong," he said. "The amount of data required was incredible. They had a whole team of people quizzing us. You have your day job to do, and suddenly you are in an overwhelming world with vast amounts of data to get together. But with Knight it was like having

up your sleeve that contrasts that, like some extra profit tucked away, you can fend off those issues."

To say that vendors are hugely challenged by due diligence inquirers would be to greatly understate the nature of the process, which is also likely to put pressure on expectations around value. "When you get an indicative offer at the start, remember it is just indicative because the buyer makes many assumptions, and due diligence is about testing those assumptions all the way through," advised Cook.

## As the deal progressed it became even more intense and during the last week we worked virtually through the night

approximately 10 PE houses and received some good offers. We chose one we liked and were moving through that process – then Covid-19 hit. Everything ground to a halt and I assumed nothing would happen for a year, so parked the plan ready to try again.

"In early May I got a call out of the blue. I was surprised, it was Matthew Riley and he expressed an interest. Matthew had a vision and he tracked us, noting our good technology, our IP, strong customer base and good people. He had complementary skills in Aurora and thought that the combination of Aurora and Union Street would make an interesting proposition.

"This was different for our management team as we had set our sights on PE. I had to consider Vince and how this would look for him. After

two or three employees working with us. We shared data in a data room, Knight helped to slice and dice the numbers and supported us through the process every step of the way."

Acquirers perhaps lead the field in enforcing stringent transaction processes, so ferocious is their attention to detail. "In hindsight there are a few things we could have done before we even went into the process," commented Cook. "This would have prevented any last minute scrabbles to iron out issues. So make sure your books are up to date and all filed perfectly. This can all be done upfront.

"Once in the process, keep some gas in the tank. Don't overstate everything. You will probably be chipped along the way with a potential cost unearthed, for example. But if you have something

"It becomes a series of mini negotiations. You concede on some things, win on others and find common ground. As the deal progressed it became even more intense and during the last week we worked virtually through the night. When we finally completed the deal at 4am Knight provided champagne, but we were exhausted and went to bed.

"The whole process was done remotely over Zoom. I had always expected to have a party for staff to say thank you, but in lockdown conditions we couldn't do anything. That is still to come, we'll celebrate it one day, but at the time it was something of a damp squib."

As part of the deal Cook is helping with the transition, working three days a week. "They are flying now and I see that diminishing over time," he stated. "I have a few irons in the fire, different software projects, but I'm just seeing what happens at the moment. Once this year blows over I'll take stock and enjoy what we have achieved with my wife Sarah." ■

## Navigating through a transaction; what's the ETA?

Despite the current economic conditions, the channel has demonstrated genuine resilience and the level of transaction activity remains strong. At Knight we have been closing deals throughout lockdown, but analysis on our latest deals does show that the time taken to complete a process has been affected.



Paul Billingham

Transactions typically involve a large amount of work up-front, both for us and the company involved, therefore it only makes sense to start a process if we are confident of completing it. We can spend up to four months preparing a business for sale however, we can actually move far more quickly than this but often recommend a dry-run due diligence which will check the business is sufficiently ready to make it through the intensity of a transaction. Knight Vendor Assist flags potential deal issues up-front to ensure that these can be mitigated ahead of time and significantly reduces the due diligence timetable later on. Alongside this, we prepare the sales or investor documentation that will enable interested parties to make a well-informed formal offer to invest in or acquire a business.

When we start the marketing process, we agree the parties to approach with our clients. We do not work for buyers, but we know their acquisition criteria and the level of funding they are able to draw down and this enables us to qualify the right target buyers for each business. Typically we can extract written offers within six weeks but have found this is extended where international buyers are involved. Private Equity deals will add a further month as they will want to meet management and understand

the potential of the team and the business moving forward.

The execution of a deal involves due diligence and legal documentation. This part will take no less than 10 weeks but lately we have seen that deals take an average of four months to complete. We believe that the impact of COVID has not dampened the enthusiasm of investors or acquirers, but they do want to ensure they are mitigating their risks. As a result, we are seeing more time in diligence which is also becoming more extensive.

On average, our last 10 deals each took 7.5 months to complete and we estimate this has been extended by around a month compared to deals a few years ago. Our workload shows that the process is split by; 22% preparation, 26% in marketing and 52% executing the agreed deal.

Ultimately, preparation will have the greatest impact on the time taken to complete a deal. We expect that the minimum time to complete a deal with a full marketing process is six months but recommend that you plan for nine months. A well-prepared business will ensure your deal runs smoothly and reduces the time and effort spent in diligence. It is never too early to start planning and at Knight we are here to assist when you need us.

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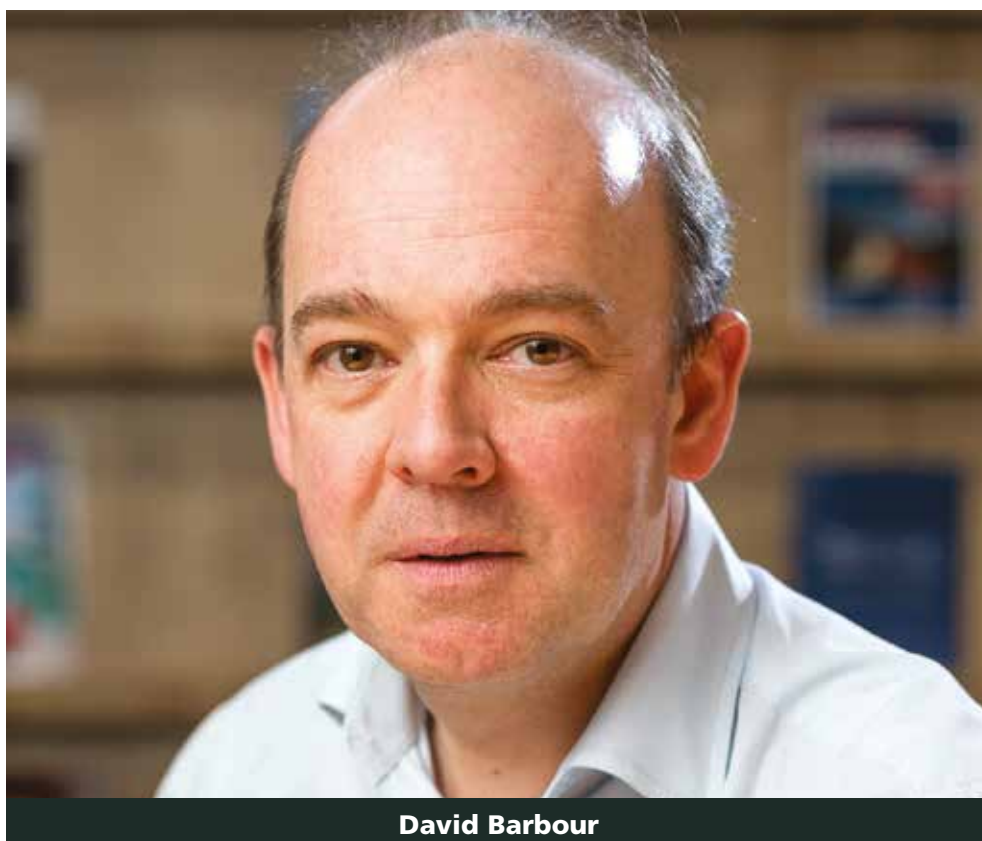
# Cozying up to the 'forgot

One of the best indicators of how business owners should shape up their organisation for any future planning is the criteria on which PE houses pin their bets, according to FPE Capital Managing Partner David Barbour.

All signs point in one direction: This sector is a great space, a safe haven, and new investors are flooding in. "It's obvious why PE loves this space," stated Barbour. "It offers sensible recurring revenues, not high organic growth, but a cookie-cutter acquisition world where you can bolt organisations together, customers are fairly sticky, the products are quite similar, and you can aggregate and take out some central cost."

FPE Capital is most active at the smaller end of the market and usually the first investor alongside an entrepreneur business owner who wants to push growth organically and/or through a bolt-on. "We'll buy into a business that's £1 million EBITDA or upwards as a new platform investment to create scale," added Barbour. "Therefore the multiples are slightly lower than 10x generally."

He signposted two 'break points': Firstly the £2 million EBITDA mark which means bank debt can be taken on in a meaningful way, or debt funds increased. The second kick point is £5 million EBITDA. These are not fixed markers, but general PE signposts for where funds may go. "We look to boost our businesses with capital, bring in some extra management, and maybe a few acquisitions to get the company up to the £5 million



David Barbour

## We need to get that entrepreneurial spirit back into these businesses. We love that

level," added Barbour. "Our funds generally don't have enough fire power to get to the £10 million milestone. So we'll pass the company on. There is a great ecosystem of consolidators above us."

There is no doubt that resellers in the comms sector have moved up the PE agenda. Ten years ago reselling was a near dirty word in PE. Now it's grown up and sits at the middle of the economy as the lifeblood of a business – and you need

expertise to deliver services. The difference between BT (4x) and Gamma (20x) is stark. "Resellers have been the forgotten niece, but they are becoming a vibrant and exciting part of the economy with lots of growth, and growth is the key to everything," said Barbour. "We all need to get this segment really driving."

He has a clear view that fresh talent will provide resellers with a step up the ladder, believing that an

injection of better people will boost overall leadership and business success.

### Talent matters

"You need good management and good people, and the big challenge for the IT services industry is around bringing in more talent," he commented. "Why? Because the software and cloud elements are crucial to success in the next five to ten years. It's a segment that may be a little pedestrian in some

ways, so we need to suck in more smart people.

"We are entering an exciting time and will see good people come out of big companies in the telco space. The era of remote working means we are not tied to hiring expertise within a commutable distance. This is a chance to upgrade people into this segment. We've seen founders build a layer of management beneath them. We need to get that entrepreneurial spirit back into these businesses. We love that."

FPE Capital generally invests in companies with 50 to 100 employees. The change up to 150-200 can be 'painful', noted Barbour. The firm also works with IT services companies and understands how the bigger software vendors work and how to deal with Microsoft. "We are slightly nervous as a house about what might happen at the very small end of the corporate market – the 20 to 100 seat organisations," he added. "So far they seem relatively robust, but I don't think we've seen the worst of the pinch."

Six months into Covid-19, PE is digging into clients, asking whether they will be here in a year's time, will they be spending the same – a lot of this is sector specific. "Even if they halve their spend they will probably build it back up over the next



# ttten niece'

12 to 18 months as they rebuild their IT and regain confidence," commented Barbour. "This disruption will be choppy for some. It's not a one way bet in this sector and we are seeing the next iteration of the Covid-19 pandemic. Businesses will slim down their offices, maybe move or deploy to shared work spaces. There is potentially a huge amount of churn here, so it's better for resellers to be facilitating these shifts now because those loyal customers are

We are seeing people play catch up on cyber and cloud implementations. That is where the wave of work is going to be. Hardware and fibre connectivity will become consolidated, commoditised and low margin."

Organic growth in the market currently sits at around 10 per cent. To go faster requires acquisitions, so Barbour wants to be invested in nimble small service-led organisations. "Let's say the business is

## Resellers have been the forgotten niece, but they are becoming a vibrant and exciting part of the economy with lots of growth

going to be very important on the other side."

Resellers will pay dearly for a half-hearted response to Pandemic Britain, especially when strong engagement with the market and tech developments provides scope to ensure long-term sustainability. "We are going to see change: Voice will decline, mobile will be flat to declining, but the cloud, cyber, IoT, telematics, the smart home etc is all going to converge," observed Barbour. "Many of the IoT services businesses are natural platforms for people who want to bring in some of these more exciting areas.

"Cyber is also key following the rise off more vulnerable at-home networks. Corporates mainly had no work from home policy around cyber, but on March 19th were forced to shift to a home working environment.

doing £2 million EBIDTA and the founder wants to release some capital," he said. "We want founders to be aligned with us in pushing harder, and this works much better if they have more security in their family life. The general rule of thumb in PE is 50-50 – 50 out and 50 in. If the founder believes the story, they should make a lot more money in the second round.

"In many cases we see one maverick entrepreneur who has brought a business up. But what they need is bench strength, three or four people around them with more systemisation of sales and marketing. There are some real nuggets to get out of a business with a bit more sector expertise. But ultimately it is about the top two or three people, their energy, expertise and how well they drive it. It is up to us to get people in to help the founders."

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# Integration and the perf

The chief determining factors during the exit and acquisition process are in business, law and finance matters, not least due diligence. But far more potential will be released on deal day if integration issues are also addressed early in proceedings, according to Elitetele.com COO Alex Cliffe.

**A**n acquisition can be perceived as a dividing line in more ways than new ownership and there should be no inhibition in breaking down barriers between owners and employees during the sale process. Nor should there be a fast uncoupling of the business owner following deal day which could jeopardise the future unity of the enlarged organisation. "It is useful to put yourself in the shoes of the vendor and its employees, plan early and involve the seller in the integration plan," stated Cliffe. "We start planning the integration half way through due diligence once we are confident that nothing will come out of the woodwork."

During the surge of due diligence the ins and outs of a business are thrust into the spotlight so there is also much to be said for getting your ducks in a row early. The process is bristling with formal checks and the relationship between buyer and seller should never be too distant. "Clean well run businesses will always sell irrespective of market conditions, and sell at maximum value," added Cliffe. "So make sure you have the MI to hand that tells that story. Do a mini due diligence on yourself so you know how to clearly articulate the narrative."



Alex Cliffe

## Clean well run businesses will always sell irrespective of market conditions, and sell at maximum value

The acquisition process is best driven by collective responsibility, believes Cliffe, saying the interview process works both ways. "We are in it together," she said. "Over the first 12 months the acquired business will not stand alone under its own brand and not be touched, so it is crucial to know what the integration will look like. It is key for

the business owner to build a relationship early, break down barriers and work closely with us to establish how the future is going to look and feel. This makes employees feel secure, with the seller on board standing shoulder to shoulder, helping us to gain that trust.

"Having found a home for their business sellers want

to make sure it's a success, so we plan early and build a picture of what year one will look like. This can be communicated succinctly to employees, and if you articulate that well the buy-in starts. It is also important to make sure that employees know why you've acquired the business, why it's valuable to you, and why they are valuable too. You've got to

earn trust, and the clock starts ticking on day one.

"Acquired staff might think the buyer will dictate everything, but you may be buying that business as it has better people, better systems and better ways of working. In the last few years we have acquired for skill sets and experience. The integration plan and communication



# fect mix

with employees needs to focus on a merger of skills and experience, and pick the best from both companies, then put that forward together as a plan. You get buy-in, but that doesn't happen overnight."

## Acquisition targets

Elite targets £1 million to £20 million firms. The deal structure is not one size fits all and the company approaches each opportunity with a clean sheet of paper. It has completed 17 acquisitions across IT, tech, UC, traditional telco, and in the early days acquired very much for growth, looking for similar customer bases, suppliers and product sets. But in recent years it has acquired more strategic targets based on skills and products, and the last acquisition was an IT business.

"This reflects our move to become a technology company," said Cliffe. "From June onwards we took the opportunity to restructure the business, bringing the IT and UC division together. We have more IT and engineering staff than any other role. A big plus point is that this will make it much easier to integrate in the future. We have the foundation in place for future acquisitions, and we involved as many people as possible during the restructure, building a management layer involving people from all sites and elements of the business.

"Another turning point was the establishment of a product and commercial team that looks at product strategy, consisting of people from the acquisitions we've made across the different

product sets. This field of experts is looking ahead as we transition from traditional services to future product sets. We have also strengthened our account management team and have Relationship Managers rather than new business sales."

Cliffe characterises Elite as a souped up buy and build £50 million business hard on the acquisition trail, and its founder Matt Newing has aspirations to double the size of the company as part of a three year plan. "We are ready to get going we have a good platform, a more consultative sales team, a tech division, and it's all about the cross sell now," added Cliffe. "I will acquire customer bases that make the cross sell strategy more successful. Board members are focused on this, it's the next game changer for us."

In identifying potential acquisitions Cliffe noted that a high proportion of contracted recurring revenue is attractive, and urged resellers to ensure customers are 'locked in', whether via a robust long-term contract or sticky customers with more than one line of business, and who have been with the company for a long time. "A strong senior management team is also key, as are employees with skill sets and experience, along with the longevity of staff, a high performance sales team and year-on-year organic growth," she added. "I'm describing the perfect business, but a big factor that is often overlooked is culture. This is key. Culture is born out of years of work and you don't change it overnight. So we look for businesses that fit culturally." ■

# Get a grip on your number and what life it will give you

**N**ot until business owners set out a long-term personal financial plan would it be at all sensible to consider business strategy, advises Xentum Managing Director Adam Carolan.

It is noticeable that many company owners are obsessive about executing their business strategy yet lack a personal finance plan – and it makes no sense for owners not to review their own family positions in line with organisational goals, believes Carolan. "Few people address risk before they look at opportunity," he commented. "People protect risk in their business but don't necessarily protect risk in their personal life. So get your ducks in a row and have an idea of what life looks like after you've sold your business. It's great to get the money, but what's your purpose? Most people are driven by purpose rather than money."

Carolan says Covid has focused a lot of minds and more people are switching onto the question, 'what do I want to get out of this?'. "Helping people make the right decisions and get the right number is what drives me," he said. "Understanding your number is key in the exit process. If you don't know it, and what it will get you, you will likely experience a lot of fear and worry. People need to understand what kind of life that number will give them on the other side."



Adam Carolan

## Few people address risk before they look at opportunity

Carolan is set to publish a book based on what he calls the Two Circles principles. Called 'Two Circles of financial planning – how business owners should run their personal finances', the book explores the idea of a big circle which attracts all of the focus, time and energy of a business owner. "What they neglect (for good reasons) is the personal circle," explained Carolan. "I'm trying to get business owners to develop the same mindset for running their business but with their personal finances too."

## Family matters

"What is your balance sheet? What is your five year cashflow? What if the worst case scenario happens? Business owners have these discussions in board meetings about their organisation, but they don't have meetings about their family finances. The reason people get into business is to give themselves financial

freedom, but the business starts to gain control. You may be putting fires out all the time, deal with issues day to day, take body punches – it all saps your energy. So take off your business hat and consider what you are trying to achieve personally. Once we know that, it should go into your business plan."

Carolan's primary focus is on the comms, tech and software sector. He works on a fixed fee basis and takes clients through a consultation process, perhaps spending between six and ten hours with a family, assessing their vision prior to creating a plan which is managed month to month by Xentum. "Given how difficult it has been during the last six months I don't think people are giving business owners the respect they deserve," he added.

"Consider Entrepreneurs Relief: No one was expecting that to be cut so severely, and looking forwards there are questions about CGT. I've spoken to a number of accountants and we are all expecting CGT to go up. The chancellor has made a B-line for businesses and while I expect CGT to be reformed it doesn't mean there won't be opportunities at the other side of it. There are always opportunities around planning. My advice would be for anyone going through the exit process to have that March/April deadline in mind. For those not going through the process, I'd be sceptical about rushing things for tax purposes." ■

# PacketFront: A driver for

**Under new ownership Nordic software house PacketFront Software aims to orchestrate and automate the UK's 'manual' networks and processes into the 21st Century, according to VP of Sales Timo Kuusela.**

**N**etwork orchestration firm PacketFront was snapped up by Virtual1 in July this year. The Swedish-based software house provides network automation solutions for telecom operators, city carriers and enterprises in more than 20 countries. PacketFront will operate as a stand-alone organisation and maintain its own brand, customer base and senior leadership team. "Having helped FTTP providers get to market quickly and operate efficiently across the Nordics, we see an exciting opportunity with the new wave of FTTP suppliers emerging in the UK," said Kuusela.

PacketFront Software was established in 2011 as a spin-off from PacketFront Solutions which sold both hardware and software products. The idea was to create two independent companies to give the software side a better opportunity as a multi-vendor solution. "We found that having our own hardware made it difficult to cooperate with other hardware vendors so forced the separation to focus on the core business – software," said Kuusela. "The objective was, and is, to offer network orchestration and CRM solutions to altnets."

The first major task was to build an independent software business within



**Timo Kuusela**

## **A key discussion now is around Software Defined Networking which has really driven this network orchestration piece**

the altnet market space and prove that it could work with other hardware, while maintaining its existing customer base. "The second milestone was broadening our portfolio to support carriers," noted Kuusela. "Services in the residential altnet market are quite straightforward – you're selling Internet. In the carrier space services are much more complex. One of our early adopters was Virtual1 which has achieved fantastic results. The third milestone was attracting Tier1 and Tier2 carriers as customers. Good examples include Tele2

in Sweden, GlobalConnect in Norway and recently Gamma here in the UK. Many of the bigger carriers still do a lot of manual work. So we show how they can avoid tasks like CLI typing and instead focus on system architecture to give better services."

### **End-to-end solutions**

For altnet customers, PacketFront Software provides more complete solutions including self-service portals for end customers, CRM systems and network orchestration. Those components create an end-to-end solution

that delivers automated workflows for customer and service management. "When it comes to carriers we mainly focus on network orchestration," commented Kuusela. "Our BECS solution provides auto provisioning from customer devices all the way to their core network. By integrating BECS with CRM systems like Salesforce, operators can create workflows that, for example, allow for zero-touch network build out and automated service provisioning."

PacketFront Software's annual average turnover growth

rate is circa ten per cent. It's main focus is Europe with the Nordics its primary market. "Now the UK and Germany are great markets for us to expand into," stated Kuusela. "We have a market presence in both but there's a lot of potential as they are large markets behind the Nordics in their FTTP roll out. The UK is predicted to be the fastest growing FTTP market in Western Europe in the coming years. We have had customers in the UK for years, but have stepped up our efforts by opening a local office.

"In the UK we also see a trend towards open access. Altnets are interested in opening up their networks to other service providers. This has been the dominant model in the Nordics, and PacketFront has been the pioneer supporting that business model from the very start, which we now want to utilise in UK markets."

The main challenge Kuusela faces is the slowness of transformation. "We hear so many customers say 'we need automation' but never actually get started with it," he said. "In the past, when we researched altnet and carrier markets and asked if they need automation and network orchestration there was resistance on both fronts. While both were interested on a theoretical level, operators were hesitant to change their existing



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# r automation

working methods. But network orchestration has become mainstream in the last few years which means we now don't have to drive those motivations. It has become more a matter of technology choices. A key discussion now is around Software Defined Networking which has really driven this network orchestration piece."

## Scaling up

Another challenge faced by the company has been how fast it can scale while accounting for the diversity of how operators build their networks, and the number of software and hardware vendors it needs to integrate. "Every new customer has meant creating a unique environment," added Kuusela. "However, we have proven over and over again that we get our solution to work in any environment. Now, when technology is well proven the main opportunity for us is to scale the business more aggressively, especially to address new geographical areas."

Kuusela's primary growth strategy is to work with more system integrators and technology partners that complement PacketFront Software's portfolio. He is also looking for new technology partners to expand the firm's ecosystem.

"This will help customers and system integrators as we can show how systems work together and the combined benefits," he added. "One of our key technology partners in the UK is KeyPro which provides a GIS solution. This co-operation enables us to show the benefits of including passive network management into a business equation.

"Customers need flexibility – from a commercial and technology point of view – to select the best of breed software and hardware and we provide that. We have workshops with our customers to identify their pain points and low hanging fruit, where we can provide the fastest benefits. Then we help with implementation. All our customers' networks are different, even if they use the same hardware and provide the same services, they all have different workflows and supporting systems. We adapt our solutions to work in the existing network environment which is also where we support operators when they need us."

All in the industry know that technology moves quickly. Even so, Kuusela sees too many organisations sitting on their hands, even when they can see the business case. "This slow adaptation usually stems from businesses making things unnecessarily complicated," he said. "When an organisation finally comes to action they typically try to solve all of their problems at once, which is usually a recipe for disaster. The key is to slice problems into sections and work one by one. Usually, just getting systems up and running can be done in a month or two which brings immediate benefits.

"Everybody is looking at investing in network automation in some way or other because they can see the benefits it brings. For those dragging their heels, my advice would be to ride the wave soon or expect tougher times moving forward, because you won't be as competitive in a couple of years." ■

## Just a minute with Timo Kuusela...

**Role model:** Barack Obama: There aren't many politicians that are as genuine with such high moral foundations. He is also an inspiring thinker and orator. While he didn't succeed in everything he set out to achieve as President, he had a clear vision and the will to pursue that vision.

**Tell us about one fear you have managed to overcome:** Speaking in front of a crowd. But to succeed I needed to overcome that fear by repeatedly challenging myself in that situation. After a while public speaking became much easier.

**The biggest risk you have taken?** Starting my own company with five former colleagues. We produced our own CPEs including hardware and software and in three years expanded the company from zero to £5.5 million.

**Best piece of advice you have been given?** My former manager at Ericsson asked, 'why don't you go into sales?'. That question determined my career path ever since.

**If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing?** I'd be a mathematics teacher.

**What was your first job and when?** My career began with a summer job at Ericsson Finland in 1992. This is where I got into the IT field and where I progressed to become a Software Developer and Tester before going on to specialise in telecommunications in my MSC.

**Top tip for resellers:** Think about how you reward your sales organisation. If you only reward short-term or fast deals, that's what you'll always get. If you want long-term customer relationships you need to have OTE programmes that take this into account.

## No excuses this time

The first wave of lockdowns saw the best of the channel. It also saw the best of its customers too.

More often than not, partners could rely on at least a little patience and understanding from customers, as they dealt with unprecedented restrictions and demands.

This time, lessons have been learned and expectations are higher. I'm not convinced customers are going to forgive anything less than the best possible service.

### Don't get stuck in a rut

Look at it another way: whenever you reach a point of needing to count on customers to give you a break, it's already too late. You're on a slippery slope to higher churn and constantly chasing your tail.

The best policy is to avoid giving customers reasons to be dissatisfied in the first place.

I realise that's a tough ask for channel players with enough of their own problems to contend with. Unfortunately, that doesn't change things.

### Stand out on service

Remember, your customers are under pressure from their own customers. In the first lockdown, people generally had lower expectations for being able to have their queries answered or communicate seamlessly. This time, they'll expect better, and comms providers will be on the hook to deliver.

I'm not just talking about in-life service, but the whole package from initial discovery and setup to porting, provisioning and go-live.

These added demands spell opportunity for comms partners with the right service approach. It's fast becoming one of the strongest ways to differentiate from competitors.

To deliver great service you've got to do the basics well and, in the midst of a viral pandemic, that means making everything you do safety-first, compliant, convenient and fast.

### No delay with assisted plug and play

We at Support to Win had a head start on the trend for 'contactless' service and zero-touch provisioning, which are



Tamsin Deutrom-Yue

now widely accepted as critical in the fight against Covid.

That's because these were services we started providing in 2018, and this experience really helped our comms partner customers when onsite installs and training sessions had to stop.

It meant that major implementations and migrations could go ahead, irrespective of local or national lockdown restrictions. It enabled partners to sell with 100% confidence their projects would be delivered.

And with the new ability to conduct virtual PBX discovery audits, there is no aspect of the customer delivery lifecycle we can't deliver or support remotely.

I have every faith that the comms channel will continue its heroic efforts in keeping Britain communicating during the challenging times ahead.

Partners may end up receiving less thanks for the contribution they make, but at least they have the tools at their disposal to really make a difference to their customers' service experience – and to stand out from the competition in a way customers will remember long after this is over.

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# NICE to meet you

**Comms Dealer finds out more about how NICE solutions are helping resellers stay relevant during these challenging times.**



**W**hile the pandemic has affected many aspects of our lives, customer experience remains more important than ever. Even while businesses aim to survive the financial implications of the pandemic and their employees have been forced to work from home, the experiences organisations deliver still influence customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. The NICE portfolio empowers organisations to deliver exceptional multichannel experiences that engage customers and employees. NICE offers partners a very relevant and powerful set of solutions to help their clients address today's challenges and unlock its opportunities.

**But who are NICE?**

Founded in 1986 and currently employing 6,500 people across the world, NICE is a leading provider of cloud and software solutions. NICE has a truly global footprint serving 25,000 organisations in more than 150 countries, including 85 of the Fortune 100 companies. More than 350 staff members in the UK are dedicated to improving customer experience and staff engagement

for organisations across the country. The UK headquarters are in London, although most members of staff are working from home right now.

Nicky Butler, Vice-President of EMEA Partners at NICE, said: "Our mission is to help companies win through customer experience. The world's best-loved brands trust our extensive portfolio of products to deliver omnichannel customer service and employee engagement. In short, we turn customer service into customer loyalty and empower your employees to be brand heroes."

**Providing extraordinary customer experience**

"We know digital transformation is at the heart of the changing customer experience. Customers want to engage with businesses in a way that suits them. The days of a 9-5 customer service call centres have been overtaken by a multimedia environment. Customers want to communicate in the most convenient way possible, whether that be by phone, email, instant message, live chat, social media and so on using the device they have to hand

and whenever they want." Butler said.

The NICE team was quick to realise the implications this would have for contact centres. All these methods of communications will require management to not only ensure the customer gets the experience they are looking for, but to also measure and record these interactions while remaining compliant.

**Looking after a remote working workforce**

There are implications for the workforce too. While historically this process may have been handled by an office-based contact centre, the growth of the gig economy and the home working requirements of coronavirus have had a knock-on effect on employee engagement.

Butler continued: "Customers are not going to expect a different experience just because more people are working from home. In fact, in these stressful and challenging times, they may expect better service as their choices of engagement are being limited by Covid-19. They may not be able to visit a bank or shop as they did



"Our mission is to help companies win through customer experience. The world's best-loved brands trust our extensive portfolio of products to deliver omnichannel customer service and employee engagement."

*Nicky Butler, Vice-President of EMEA Partners at NICE*





“The challenging times we are living through gives partners a reason to re-engage with existing customers. By taking on the NICE portfolio, they will have something new to offer them that is so relevant for their clients’ contact centres as they continue to work through the pandemic.

*John Byron  
UK&I Channel Manager at NICE*

before and will be reliant on other communications methods to connect with their service providers. Customers may also be more emotional and that puts further pressure on contact centre agents.”

“Meanwhile, businesses run the risk of their employees becoming dissatisfied or disengaged as they are no longer part of a traditional team environment. Contact centres have potentially changed forever. A supervisor walking the floor will be a rarity not probability, but they will still need to stay in touch with their agents to check on their welfare and performance.

“Our experience shows that measuring interactions between customers and employees, to find areas for improvement and success, results in increased satisfaction for both parties.”

**Largest contact centre application suite in the industry**

NICE uses artificial intelligence (AI) to score interactions to find these improvements, eliminating the costly and time-consuming human processes of random sampling, quality

programmes, customer surveys and manual listening. All powered by strong AI platform - NICE ENLIGHTEN, that has analysed billions of interactions from many of the world’s largest organisations for the most critical use cases and business outcomes.

This is just the tip of the iceberg though. With the largest contact centre application suite in the industry, the NICE portfolio offers omnichannel recording, workforce management, quality management, agent desktop automation, analytics, biometrics, compliance tools and feedback management, all from a single vendor rather than purchasing these applications from multiple vendors and managing multiple relationships. These solutions work in contact centres across industries and can be used by both SMB and large corporations.

John Byron, UK&I Channel Manager at NICE, believes the company’s contact centre portfolio of solutions opens up new opportunities for partners.

He said: “The challenging times we are living through gives partners a reason to re-engage with existing customers. By taking on the NICE portfolio, they will have something new to offer them that is so relevant for their clients’ contact centres as they continue to work through the pandemic. It will allow partners to proactively engage their audience with a real purpose backed by a powerful suite of solutions that will improve the clients’ businesses.

“Resellers can now step forward and become consultants to their contact centre clients with technology that offers real solutions to help them cope with the impact of Covid-19 and prepare for any future challenges.”

**Business partner programme**

NICE has launched a business partner programme to give contact centre and UC resellers access to the entire product portfolio, expert help from product specialists, wholesale or referral commercials, and marketing support. ■

To enquire about becoming a NICE partner, please contact John Byron at [John.Byron@NICE.com](mailto:John.Byron@NICE.com).

# Block chief sharpens his

**Block CEO Marc Chang was always likely to set up and run his own business, but it was the Melissa Worm that proved a critical turning point on his pathway to success in the tech sector.**

**F**rom the health service to retail, Block has become a marker in the deployment of advanced tech solutions. But Chang did not originally intend to follow a career path in tech, having studied economics before kicking off a career in finance. "That didn't excite me," he said. "However, I was interested in the technology used by the bank and enjoyed figuring out how it worked and building improved ways of working. In the mid-90s it struck me that technology was going to revolutionise companies, the wider economy and society. So I decided to jack in my job and study Analysis Design and Management of Information Systems.

"For me, examining the relationship between people and technology-based systems was fascinating. I quickly gained an appreciation for the complexity of it all at a time when the IT profession was in its infancy and there was a catalogue of large project failures. Against this backdrop I learned in theory how to design for success."

Nearly broke and with substantial loans to pay off Chang applied for positions at the big consultancies and took a temporary job at COLT Telecom for one day, working on the service desk. The move proved to be a significant catalyst:



Marc Chang

## I wanted to work in the networking team as that was where all the action was

His impressive response to an immense challenge translated into clear signs of personal potential that did not go unnoticed.

"It was carnage," explained Chang. "Due to sickness and annual leave there was two of us supporting several thousand users and the Melissa Worm had infected the entire PC estate throughout Europe. I was invited back the next day, then for two weeks, and eventually offered a permanent role with a

promise to fast-track me through the IT department. I accepted. I wanted to work in the networking team as that was where all the action was. This was at the time of the dotcom bubble which eventually burst. I decided to take what I had learned and apply it to the NHS where I could do something positive and make a difference."

### Strong pedigree

Chang founded Block in 2006 with Jonathan Pickering, a former colleague at COLT. "Our first client was

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust where we were engaged to deliver the design and installation of the new Evelina Childrens Hospital network, along with the new Picture Archiving and Communication System (PACS) infrastructure," he added. "The project was a success, but it was not without its challenges.

"It became clear that our approach, experience and expertise combined could make a difference within the NHS at a time

when Blair's Government was beginning to make significant technology investments through the NPfIT programme. As a result of the project's success we were then asked by the Trust to provide the strategic consultancy required for a site-wide network integration and transformation project."

Although Block began as a consultancy Chang felt that after a couple of years he could be more effective and impactful for clients by having access to vendor roadmaps, particularly Cisco. Block became a Cisco Gold partner and continued to focus and invest on its healthcare specialism, while extending its capabilities into other technologies such as UC, data centre and end user compute.

"As a techie at heart, innovation has always been a fundamental part of our make-up," noted Chang. "Over the years, we seem to have made Cisco's Solution Innovation Award our own, also winning at a global level. This is something I'm proud of."

Block's innovative approach also dovetails with Big Retail (shopping centres and large concession-based department stores). "Blending our vertical focus with our horizontal technology expertise has enabled us to successfully maintain success in these core industries over the last

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# focus on key verticals

few years," he commented. In 2017 Chang became CEO, following the departure of Pickering. "I wanted to take the business forward with a focus on growth and profitability, and this became a significant turning point for both me and Block," commented Chang. "Since becoming CEO I've tried to make Block a great place for our people to work, live and grow, while also creating a solid operational platform for growth."

During the past three years Block has moved from a

goal has been to do our bit to support the NHS along with the high street. Both have significant challenges while also providing critical services to our communities. We have developed a portfolio and partner model that aligns with these challenges and tried to be ahead of the market in terms of technology transitions."

#### At the vanguard

Chang cited his move into Software Defined Networks as a good example of this strategy. Block has designed, installed and managed

Chang also took a lead following the Covid-19 outbreak, playing a key role in deploying the infrastructure at London's 4,000 bed Nightingale Hospital in just seven days. "We were involved in several national programmes to help the NHS, from helping GPs to perform consultations from home with full clinical application stacks to the higher profile Nightingale hospitals," he said. "All of the entire Block team were involved in making that happen."

As part of his crisis response strategy Chang introduced initiatives to re-platform some of Block's solutions and services, such as adapting the healthcare collaboration solution to integrate with Microsoft Teams. "We also re-platformed our VDI solution into the cloud to enable quicker and more cost-effective deployment," he commented. "We can now deliver a single full stack clinical desktop within one hour from start and you can pay for just one month. This drastically changed how organisations were able to respond during the Covid-19 lockdown and will drive ongoing change moving forward."

As a business leader, Chang says the pandemic has prompted him to become more transparent and open in his approach. "There is a tendency to try and be overly positive and keep potential negative news away from your team," he said. "For us, it's been honesty that's made the difference. We've made decisions together as a team, and allowed our people to make their own decisions when it comes to their personal and home lives." ■

## Our goal has been to do our bit to save the NHS along with the high street. Both have significant challenges while also providing critical services to our communities

turnover of £23 million to £38 million and increased EBITDA from circa £600k to £4.3 million. The group now employs around 150 people. As part of his strategy Chang acquired and integrated Innov8 in 2018 and Connect-IP in 2019. This enabled the company to enhance its ability to serve the health and care market and increase its capacity to deliver at a much larger scale. More recently Chang founded Socura, a cybersecurity partner which provides advisory and advanced detection and response cyber services.

"Our group strategy focuses on forming capability and capacity through organic growth and acquisition," added Chang. "I have always believed in a vertically focused approach and our

hundreds of wired and wireless networks since inception, and with the advent of the IoT and the high number of unmanaged devices within healthcare and retail, the company has invested heavily in Cisco's SDA solution and, says Chang, become the country's specialists in delivering it across healthcare."

Chang is also looking into AI and intelligent automation as well as the IoT. "We are considering how they add features or better services to our clients," he added. "For instance, assessing how we can provide contextual-based intelligent automation within an office or hospital floor to keep the lights, HVAC and IT off if no one has entered, even if the lights come on at 8am automatically."

### Just a minute with Marc Chang...

**Role models:** Kenny Dalglish. Beyond football, I watched him lead not just our club but our entire city through Hillsborough, attending every single funeral and supporting each family. Kenny fought for justice, stuck by those families every step of the way and transcended football. That's what makes him a role model to me. I also look up to those who fought against discrimination, injustice and racial prejudice – Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi. And my father. He fought with the north west Chinese community to have the British Government formally apologise for the forced repatriation of their fathers (my grandfather) after they had served during the second world war in the merchant navy, leaving their families behind. There is a plaque of apology near Liverpool Pier Head.

**What do you fear most?** Failure. That's always been the biggest motivation in my life and driven me to always improve and never stop.

**What possession could you not live without?** Right now my Theragun. I am training for a 5k race which means I am exercising every day and without its healing and massaging I don't think I would be able to walk at the moment!

**Best piece of advice you have been given?** Perception trumps reality. It doesn't matter if you know you are right, if someone believes you are wrong, it wins every time. Life is often not black and white but a question of viewpoint. Part of working with clients or employees is to listen and to educate, to show a more complete picture or different ways of viewing the world. That approach helps when building team diversity and cohesion.

**Who do you admire most in the channel?** Martin Hellawell. To see Softcat grow organically and profitably over the years to over £1 billion and listed on the FTSE is incredible. The number of tech careers Softcat has created and the charitable work it does is also admirable. Martin has always been humble and generous with his time and advice.

**If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing?** I would certainly be running my own business as I enjoy bringing my ideas to life and am not sure I could work for someone else after 15 years. It would likely be food related. I love my food and also fresh produce.

**Name three ideal dinner guests:** John Lennon: I grew up next to where he did near strawberry fields and went to school on Penny Lane. Oprah Winfrey for so many reasons; and Steve Jobs, the obvious tech idol.

**Your main strength and what could you work on?** I am good at spotting a new opportunity and working out how we can make a great product to address it. But I can be impatient and sometimes I could do with listening a little more.

**Top tip for resellers:** Be yourself and keep it simple. Find what you are good at that differentiates your proposition and be true to that.

**Tell us something about yourself we don't know:** I used to DJ when I was younger and played several well known nightclubs. During lockdown I reignited the passion and played on Twitch with other Block DJs as part of a Block Rockin' Beats digital festival.

**How do you relax?** I like to play football with my children, walk the dog, create DJ mixes and I recently built a 7,000-plus piece Lego Millennium Falcon.

# Nunn on his move to dis

**In speaking up for smaller resellers 'left to fend for themselves', Viegli owner Robert Nunn could not be clearer on his intent to transition traditional players to the hosted world.**

**T**he formation of Viegli as a comms channel distributor in April this year has sparked a triggering of demand for its Unify OpenScape Business S platform proposition, which Nunn says he has made easy for resellers to sell and support, together with Call2Teams, which allows users to connect any IP capable PBX to MS Teams, creating a rounded hosted proposition. "We're delivering great results and our immediate target is to get to 1,000 net new endpoints a month," stated Nunn.

"We also continue to see growth in Call2Teams and these two products will remain our focus for the foreseeable future. At the moment we're one of the best kept secrets in comms. I'm pretty sure that's about to change. I hope that innovative vendors will see Viegli's channel as a good home for their products."

Viegli was formed as an idea in 2008 and became the vehicle for Nunn and his former business partner to work together from January 2012. Nunn took full ownership in January 2019. "One of our larger clients going into liquidation in December 2018 was the catalyst for the change in ownership and direction," he explained. "We spent all of 2019 reorganising and have now moved into a great space in 2020."



**Robert Nunn**

## **We're one of the best kept secrets in comms. I'm pretty sure that's about to change**

Until this year growth had been relatively modest with turnover around the £1.1 million mark. "Bearing in mind we only moved into the channel space in April we are forecasting much faster growth and I expect turnover in 2020/21 to be in the £2.5 million region," added Nunn.

"Since April we have onboarded approximately 65 resellers and we're forecasting that to be in the hundreds by Christmas this year. So far we're being

well received and I see this trend continuing."

### **Focus area**

Nunn's immediate focus is on onboarding and supporting resellers. "The work we do in the first three to six months of the relationship should make them self-sufficient thereafter," he added. "As the portfolio grows we will bring experts into the business that can support the reseller. The main challenge is to maintain the level of service we

provide with the increased volumes of business. We've addressed this in the main with technology, speeding up the delivery process. We can now hand over a system to a reseller in as little as 15 minutes. Our core is on solid state servers and equates to VMware. The service we provide is bespoke for every client instance, there is no shared resource."

Nunn first clicked with the comms industry in 1996 when working for Olympus,

which is known for cameras rather than phones. But its business comms division had a range of phones and it developed a 'smart phone' which automatically prefixed calls with an LCR code. "I've been in and around comms ever since, fully involved in the single line dialler revolution in the early noughties, selling eight million of them across Europe and the UK," stated Nunn. "I've always wanted to get back to being a channel facing business rather than end user, and the Covid-19 pandemic and Call2Teams gave me that opportunity to change the business direction and move into the distributor space.

"We've invested heavily in all the areas that I felt let down by with our own supply chain. My team includes a marketing resource for instance, helping resellers to create their own branded flyers and materials; and our billing team will white label bills for our resellers. We just want to build relationships and not simply box shift. I'm seeing a large chunk of the channel left alone to fend for themselves. We are bringing expertise into these smaller resellers and investing in relationship building."

Growth to date has been organic and Nunn indicated that Viegli's portfolio will expand. He's already investigating 5G opportunities and seeking

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to help smaller resellers with Ethernet-based circuits. "While my team is relatively small we have expertise in everything we do," he added. "As we grow we'll need to add commodity items like headsets into our portfolio. That would just make things easier for our resellers by having a single point of purchase."

## Remote working

He also noted that Covid-19 has changed the way we all work, and while web meetings have been around for a long time, it's only in the past six months that we've seen the common adoption of remote working. "Our industry needs to accept that flexibility and agility need to be at the forefront of everything we do," said Nunn. "The ability for us to support the reseller in these areas will steer us naturally into the space we want to fill. I see on a daily basis the legacy telecoms resellers wondering how to transition from traditional on-premise models to hosted. That transition has been accelerated significantly because of Covid-19 but these resellers especially are going through a huge learning curve."

"I also think the industry needs to take a long look at itself. Things like self-renewing contracts and seven year leasing will (and should) become a thing of the past. Everything we do is on 30 day rolling terms and is handset inclusive. My model is entirely scalable so I would hope that in five years time we have around 100,000 endpoints out there with a base of 300-plus resellers. I'm not driven by financial numbers, but the business will be significant."

## Just a minute with Robert Nunn...

**Role models:** Simon Sinek and my dad! Simon because I love his enthusiasm and zest for life; my dad because he taught me that nothing is more rewarding than working hard.

**What do you fear most?** Snakes.

**The biggest risk you have taken?** Moving into the channel because I genuinely believe we can make a difference.

**What possession could you not live without?** My kettle. I go into shock if I don't have two cups of tea an hour.

**Best piece of advice you have been given?** Don't take yourself too seriously. It genuinely isn't about you!

**Who do you admire most in the channel:** Virtual1 CEO Tom O'Hagan. A seriously good guy building an impressive business.

**If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing?** A groundsman at a cricket club.

**One example of something you have overcome:** I broke my foot in half which stopped my football career. That was unpleasant.

**Name three ideal dinner guests:** Simon Sinek, George Best and Ben Stokes. Enthusiasm, genius, genius. What a dinner that would be.

**Industry bugbear:** Self-renewing contracts and spurious charging to clients should be banned.

**Tell us something about yourself we don't know:** I'm a decent cricket umpire.

**Your biggest achievement?** Surviving a 200k hit in December 2018 and still being here.

**Your main strength and what could you work on?** I am good at solving problems. But I need to update our CRM from time to time.

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Energising Our Partners

## Southgate is back in business with new green energy mission

DURING his three decades at the helm of Frontier Voice and Data and Pink Telecommunications, Peter Southgate earned an enviable reputation for providing high quality, flexible communications solutions – including Frontier's App2Chat hosted telephony solution – to an established client base across the UK.

In 2017, he teamed up with Fidelity Energy and successfully created a new hub for utility needs and services, specialising in business energy, before exiting the industry in a deal with Chess ICT.

Now he's back with renewed energy and has incorporated a brand-new business, Verda Energy focussed on providing businesses with greener energy solutions.

"Having worked in the comms arena for many years, the launch of Verda Energy is a welcome departure from our core business," explained Southgate.

"We decided on the name Verda, as it is the literal translation of green in Spanish. Our objective is to help change the way that businesses

procure their energy. Our main emphasis is on green and sustainable energy generation and providing our clients with a route to market that enables them to report a reduction in their carbon footprint and support the global challenge to slow down climate change."

Knowing that many businesses would be under increasing pressure in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, Fidelity Energy has ramped up its partner support processes by personalising the marketing support for each partner. This has helped Verda to reach out to both new and existing customers.

"The pandemic has certainly brought about challenging trading conditions which have proven tough. However, Fidelity Energy have helped us to buck the trend and we have a full marketing strategy in place, with our new website now live and plans in place to mail out to our clients and a wider network through local Business Network International chapters," said Southgate.

"Without the support of Fidelity, we would not have been in the position we're now

in, offering an end-to-end energy solution to our many clients and where we are already considering expansion options to reach out to more of the UK's businesses. Interestingly, we have seen a positive impact from COVID in our core business and are busier than ever before and continue to perform and support our clients with their business solutions.

"Having operated in the telecommunications and IT sector for 35 years, I had no doubt that continuing my partnership with Fidelity Energy would be the best thing for my clients. I knew that it would enable me to grow my business and to offer impartial expert energy advice with comprehensive proposals and choices to my clients.

"Many of our customers are SME companies that are under ever-increasing pressure to control their costs and protect their bottom line. Our partnership allows us to assist with budget certainty and provide insurance against the market rising in the future, whilst achieving our objective of offering Green energy to UK businesses," added Southgate.



"Without the support of Fidelity, we would not have been in the position we're now in, offering an end-to-end energy solution to our many clients."

Peter Southgate

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# Kaye's winning blend

**After seven months of enabling sectors and workers to circumvent coronavirus and keep Britain working, it is now more clear than ever that channel partner success boils down to a blend of portfolio breadth and value, according to TelcoSwitch Managing Director Barry Kaye.**

**K**aye has always harboured a passion for technology. His earliest childhood memories include the Commodore PET, Acorn BBC Model B and SEGA Mega Drive. Not surprisingly, he spent a significant part of his early career in and around the Internet and FinTech. "I missed out on the early mobile boom, so was determined to ensure I harnessed a second big opportunity in comms – VolP," he stated.

TelcoSwitch was formed in 2015 by CEO Russell Lux. He saw a growth opportunity for hosted voice and UC and now has a growing base of partners across telecoms and IT managed services. So much so that the company appeared in the Sunday Times Tech Track 100 this year. "The expansion of the business has surprised us and we've exceeded our projections on seats growth," said Kaye. "We're on target to double turnover this year and have over 60,000 people using the CallSwitch platform for voice and collaboration."

According to Kaye, it's impossible to have a conversation about UC and not acknowledge Microsoft Teams. "Microsoft is everywhere and enjoying monthly billing relationships with customers through everything from operating

system licencing to Office 365," noted Kaye. "That's a huge opportunity for us because voice with Microsoft is convoluted and expensive. We can drive that cost down, add features and improve resilience. That's a great driver for our partners to take to market. We're seeing solid growth in the area of our voice integration with Teams, and expect this to continue."

Kaye has also witnessed 'exceptional growth' as resellers look for more cost-effective UC options without the upfront forecasting and contractual commitments. "As well as high demand for our voice offering for Microsoft Teams, our compliant call recording and analytics platform is making significant inroads in financial services and contact centre environments," he added.

"The platform continues to grow in features. As a technology-led business we're always innovating, improving and trying out new ideas. Some of that comes from us, but it also comes from working closely with partners, taking their feedback and seeing where we can deliver value back to them. We have some interesting products pushing through the development roadmap."

A key moment of development at company level was TelcoSwitch's



Barry Kaye

## Resellers who don't have a wide enough product portfolio could easily find themselves challenged with margin erosion

migration to its V5 and V6 platforms, each offered a raft of new features and functionality. TelcoSwitch's acquisition strategy (for example, the Ziron transaction in January) also intends to advance its product portfolio.

### Must haves

"Ultimately it's about two things – breadth of portfolio and value," added Kaye. "Resellers who don't have a wide enough product portfolio could easily find themselves challenged with margin erosion, and an obvious example is mobile voice. Resellers whose

businesses leaned heavily on mobile have had a tough year. With reduced travel all those roaming revenues have gone, and even things like out-of-bundle UK data charges went with everyone working from their home broadband. Resellers need to be selling multiple services, not just to improve customer stickiness, but to top up that revenue in multiple areas. Related to this is of course the service aspect. Having the right products is one thing, but looking after your customers is everything."

One of Kaye's top priorities is supporting partners at a

time that's been challenging for everyone. "We have a wide partner base – many have thrived with enhanced pipelines as their customers transitioned to different working practices and needed a tech stack to support them," he explained. "Others have found the market more challenging. But we've ensured that our lines of communication with partners have been stronger than ever this year. That's something that will continue as we move forward."

To that end TelcoSwitch has expanded its channel team and bolstered its marketing capabilities so partners can engage with new customers through a white label programme. Sales and technical training is delivered via an Academy. "We've added roles in almost every discipline," said Kaye. "We currently have a team of over 70 employees across the group. The geographical footprint of our partners is diverse so we have a regional business development team to enable that nationwide level of support."

"The advent of Covid-19 and subsequent move to remote working is another major factor driving our current growth, proving that the TelcoSwitch technology and platform, as well as our operational teams and processes, work effectively." ■

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# Tang's ultimate mission

All business leaders should not hesitate to campaign in favour of, and subscribe to, the organisational values advanced by B Corporations (B Corps), urges Zen Internet founder and Chairman Richard Tang.

In September Zen Internet secured certification as a B Corp, joining a growing group of companies reinventing business by pursuing purpose as well as profit. Since founding Zen in 1995 Tang has been keen to ensure that the company balances financial success with social responsibility. Over the years he discovered that rather than this being a trade-off, the two reinforce each other over the long-term, as doing the right things for staff, customers and suppliers leads to greater loyalty and long-term financial success, he argues. Here's what becoming a B Corp means to Tang, Zen and the wider community, and how the accreditation was achieved...

**What prompted you to sharpen Zen's focus on your key objectives?**

During a visit to Bhutan in 2008 I learned of the King's 'gross national happiness' philosophy and it inspired me. That is when I introduced what are now Zen's three most fundamental long-term objectives of Happy Staff, Happy Customers and Happy Suppliers. These objectives reflect my own personal deeply held values, my belief that people should come first, and money second. I believe the world would be a better place if more organisations operated in this way. So when I learned about the B Corp movement last year I instantly knew that it was a good fit for Zen.

**What is a B Corp?**

Certified B Corps are a new kind of business that balances purpose and profit. Being a B Corp, for example, gives me and my fellow directors a legal responsibility to make a positive difference to society and the environment. We are legally required to consider the impact of our decisions on our workers, customers, suppliers, community and the environment. B Corp is a community of leaders, driving a global movement of people using business as a force for good.

**What was involved during the B Corp accreditation process?**

The certification process is comprehensive and organisations are required to implement and maintain processes which enhance social and environmental contributions. These processes are then reviewed during the verification stage to ensure they meet the required standards.

To become B Corp accredited a company's entire social and environmental performance is measured across the five key areas of Governance, Workers, Community, Environment and Customers. It involves a comprehensive certification process which took us eight months or so to complete. Examples of areas looked at include energy supplies, waste and water use, worker compensation, diversity and corporate transparency.



Richard Tang

**There's too much short-term thinking in the pursuit of short-term profits in our sector (and many other sectors), often at the expense of channel partners and, ultimately, their customers**

As part of the process we were able to showcase initiatives such as how we offset our carbon emissions as part of our Carbon Neutral Plus status. We also have an environmental steering group in place that does a lot of great work to ensure environmental objectives are set, and met, each year. This steering group also

runs a series of programmes and awareness campaigns throughout the year that encourage everyone to take small steps in their own lives to reduce their carbon footprint. Another key part of the accreditation is about commitment to employees. We provide excellent employee benefits and maintain an ongoing

programme of health and wellbeing initiatives.

**How will you keep Zen on the B Corp track?**

Zen's independence is important to me and that is why I will never sell. There's too much short-term thinking in the pursuit of short-term profits in our sector (and many other sectors), often at the expense of channel partners and, ultimately, their customers. As Zen's sole ordinary shareholder, I can ensure that we always stay true to our values. I am proud of our B Corp accreditation which backs up the years of hard work we have all put in to make it happen. It is also supporting the worthwhile global B Corp movement that, in my view, the world desperately needs. For too long companies, particularly large organisations, have focused on short-term profits to the detriment of all else. Zen wants to show its customers, partners and the industry that we can be a successful and profitable company, without compromising our values.

**What ultimately drives you?**

I have made it my mission in life to do what I can to evolve our capitalist system into one that better looks after the wellbeing of society and the sustainability of the environment. I describe my mission in a five minute video on my YouTube channel – and becoming a B Corp was a very worthwhile step on this journey. ■

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# Finding a focus for, and d

Ultimately, any resistance to establishing a policy of organisation-wide disruptive thinking could pose a risk to the long-term sustainability of a business. And with a disruptive thinking vacuum at the top of many channel organisations it's time to take control, according to this month's panel of industry experts...

**H**ow can business leaders seize the opportunity to establish disruptive thinking as a marker in their company's path to differentiation, competitiveness and ultimate longevity? We asked this month's line up of experts – Tony Van Den Berge, Director EMEA Partner Organisation, Amazon Web Services; ANS CEO Paul Shannon; Cloudreach Head of Application Development Jason Sutherland; and Emma King, Marketing Director for Europe, Ensono.

**Why do channel companies need to build disruptive thinking into their leadership team?**

**Tony Van Den Berge:** To survive, resellers need to undo some of the things they've been doing, which requires that they build disruptive thinking into their business at all levels. At Amazon, this is encompassed in what we call our 'Day 1' philosophy, which is founded on the belief that great companies never abandon a start-up mentality. To remain relevant, organisations need to move fast and be able to quickly embrace new trends. Those that get caught up in process, which stifles creative thinking, get pushed into 'Day 2' companies and risk irrelevance and decline. Disruptive thinking and

embedding a 'Day 1' mind set into the culture of the organisation is fundamental to its long-term survival.

This is especially true for MSPs whose business model has been disrupted in recent years through the adoption of cloud and the shift from traditional on-premises data centres to hyper-scale cloud solutions. Today, building a successful cloud managed services practice begins with a company's ability to foster and develop a cloud-first and Day 1 culture focused on automation and innovation. To do this, you need to start with the commitment and dedication of the leadership team who need to be at the centre of innovation. Without the guidance, funding and sponsorship of senior leadership, transformation plans can, and often do, fail, stall or fall far short of their full potential.

Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos has always said, 'If you're going to take bold bets, they're going to be experiments and if they're experiments, you don't know ahead of time if they're going to work. Experiments are, by their very nature, prone to failure. But a few big successes compensate for dozens and dozens of things that didn't work'. This is one of the foundational principals of Amazon and something



Tony Van Den Berge

**Ensure you're promoting a mindset of experimentation, and advise employees to try different things and learn from their mistakes**

we teach customers about when moving to the cloud.

**Paul Shannon:** Disruptive thinking should be ingrained in every leadership team. Leaders should recognise that just because they're doing something a certain way doesn't mean they should do it that way forever. Once you've got a truly disruptive leadership team you can begin to filter this throughout the whole organisation, so

your employees have the freedom to suggest changes and new approaches that mean your customers and organisation benefit.

**Jason Sutherland:** Building disruptive thinking into your leadership team is necessary if you are going to find the next edge of innovation. But it's not just about the leadership team, it's important to promote innovation throughout the organisation. Leaders

should set an example and promote the idea of free thinking and make sure that everyone spots opportunities to differentiate. One of the most important traits of a successful organisation is to encourage disruptive, innovative thinking through a culture of openness. If you can provide the forums to promote those ideas you'll overcome the majority of the challenges that you have.

**Emma King:** MSPs are relied upon in the industry for their vision to innovate and transform how clients optimise and modernise their IT operations. Leaders need to exemplify this approach, encouraging teams to think differently. This is best supported by a working environment that empowers employees to disrupt the status quo.

**How best should resellers overcome inside the box thinking, and how important is it for them to think outside the box?**

**Tony Van Den Berge:** When it comes to innovation and development, very few people know what is going to work straight away, so it's important to try things. This is where the culture of continuous innovation, fail fast methodology, and agile come into play. Ensure you're being scientific and promoting a mindset of

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# Driving disruptive thinking

experimentation, and advise employees to try different things and learn from their mistakes. Once you've got this you will be promoting psychological safety within your organisation. At this point, you know you're becoming more successful.

While this advice has been around for years, very few companies sit down and promote this mindset and the tools that go along with it. Everyone has a good idea, but you have to give people the tools to try those ideas, innovate and fail fast. It's not just about encouraging surface level disruptive thinking. Ensure you have the mechanisms to promote outside of the box thinking and a Day 1 mentality.

**Paul Shannon:** A big problem that is often overlooked is ego. Lots of businesses are run by people that believe success is down to them and their thinking. This is hugely detrimental when cultivating disruptive thinking. It can hamstring any business and a board when they go through various stages of growth. The best way to encourage the board and the leadership

team to think differently is by inviting other people into the room. Our senior leadership team meetings are attended by three people that aren't directors. We've compared the difference in the meetings when these three people attend and when they don't attend, and found the quality of the meeting and level of innovation has always been greatly enhanced when they are in the room. This is one of the most important changes you can make to help you think outside the box.

**Jason Sutherland:** Two things are important here. First, leaders must lean on their organisations to execute their ideas. They need to be good at framing what it is they're looking for, and they need to make sure they guide the thinking, while not explicitly saying what they're looking for. Second, it is vital to unlock autonomy. If you don't break outside the box you run the risk of being singular in terms of how you think of yourself in the market.

**Emma King:** Inside the box thinking is best overcome

by a willingness to embrace change. So many leaders are held back by a fear of failure, unwilling to threaten the status quo that may be delivering good results for a company. Instead, business leaders need to reorient their mindset and think creatively about the problems facing their industry and what solutions they can offer.

**The success of disruptive thinking and executing on sound strategies hinges on decision making. What tips can you offer to help the decision making process?**

**Tony Van Den Berge:** Many companies make high quality decisions, but they make them slowly. To keep the energy and dynamism of a Day 1 company you have to make high quality, high velocity decisions. This is easy for start-ups and very challenging for larger organisations, but speed matters in business. So don't just settle for quality decisions, be mindful of decision velocity too.

**Paul Shannon:** Failing to make any decision is a lot worse than making the wrong one. Making tough, far reaching decisions is certainly one of the most difficult aspects of my job. If you happen to make the wrong call, you just need to take responsibility and have the guts to get back out there and make another decision. At the end of the day, you bear that responsibility as a leader, no matter how heavily it may weigh on you.

**Jason Sutherland:** Number one is to actually have a decision making process, a kind of 'meta model' around how we think we're making our decisions. This comes back to a lot of organisations



Jason Sutherland

**One of the most important traits of a successful business is to encourage disruptive, innovative thinking through a culture of openness**

not actually understanding where their value leaders are, meaning they're not sure what they're trying to take to the market or what they're trying to do. The Google OKR is a great model of framing your thinking: What are the objectives? What are the key results? Most importantly, how are you going to quantify and measure?

**Emma King:** Successful decision making relies on a clear strategy set from the top. As part of this, leaders need to set a culture where employees feel safe and empowered to innovate. Blame behaviours have to be clamped down upon and replaced with accountability.

**Which areas of the market should resellers be most mindful of when aligning their disruption strategies?**

**Tony Van Den Berge:** The successful next generation MSPs that

are able to effectively deploy their disruption strategies have followed a path of specialisation and differentiation. Next generation MSPs must decide which areas, solutions, industries, verticals and use cases they want to build specific expertise in. Normally, those areas tend to be where they have a proven track record with solid customer success stories. At AWS we help next generation MSPs build a differentiation plan that incorporates every facet of the business, making sure that the plan is aligned with their overarching business strategy.

**Paul Shannon:** You need to know your vertical inside out before you start worrying about which disruptive strategies you're going to apply. If you choose a disruptive strategy that doesn't align with the

**Continued on page 40**



Paul Shannon

**Making tough, far reaching decisions is one of the most difficult aspects of my job**



Emma King

## Innovation is frequently impeded by the lack of flexibility in a business's IT infrastructure

**Continued from page 39** verticals where you've spent years building a reputation and credibility, then there's no point operating with that disruptive strategy in the first place. My advice is to focus on what you do really well in a particular vertical and just go for it with a well researched and applicable disruptive strategy.

**Jason Sutherland:** Resellers should lean on their partner relationships and really understand what the roadmaps look like for those vendors. If you're providing

value on top of someone else's portfolio, which we all are, then actually understanding what the portfolio is going to look like over three, six or 12 months is very important. Also, be mindful of what partnerships are happening within the wider industry.

**Emma King:** Innovation is frequently impeded by the lack of flexibility in a business's IT infrastructure. But cloud computing provides a perfect platform to support disruptive thinking and business model innovation. ■

# Top tips from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos on how to make key decisions

- Never use a one-size-fits-all decision making process. Many decisions are reversible.
- Most decisions should probably be made with somewhere around 70 per cent of the information you wish you had. If you wait for 90 per cent, in most cases, you're probably being slow. Either way, you need to be good at quickly recognising and correcting bad decisions. If you're good at course correcting, being wrong may be less costly than you think, whereas being slow is going to be expensive.
- Use the phrase 'disagree and commit'. This phrase will save a lot of time. If you have conviction on a particular direction even

**If you're good at course correcting, being wrong may be less costly than you think, whereas being slow is going to be expensive**

though there's no consensus, it's helpful to say, 'Look, I

know we disagree on this but will you gamble with me on it? Disagree and commit?'. By the time you're at this point, no one can know the answer for sure, and you'll probably get a quick yes.

- Identify true misalignment issues early and escalate them immediately. Sometimes teams have different objectives and fundamentally different views. They are not aligned. No amount of discussion, no number of meetings will resolve that deep misalignment. Without escalation, the default dispute resolution mechanism for this scenario is exhaustion. Whoever has more stamina carries the decision. ■

**Tony Van Den Berge, Director EMEA Partner Organisation, Amazon Web Services, on his 'cloud value vision':** For most enterprises, around two thirds of their IT budget is still spent 'keeping the lights on', running back office systems. In an on-premises structure the majority of costs and resources are below the value line, unseen and undifferentiated. This budget allocation challenge leaves IT leadership in the back office with aging technology, and this challenge is a significant contributing factor to what is holding many of these companies back from true transformation and innovation. With cloud you can reduce costs of infrastructure management and other undifferentiated work, and, more importantly, pull more resource investments into more strategic and business value contributing efforts.

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# Fresh thinking as a route to future business success

There are strong arguments in favour of underpinning key elements of a long-term business plan with disruptive approaches, according to Alan Mackie, Chief Marketing and Products Officer, Gamma. He says that the 'business as usual' status quo will remain in perpetuity – despite market uncertainty and a superfast moving industry – unless channel leaders pursue strategies characterised by fresh thinking – an imperative that has been catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic. "For many organisations disruptive thinking is a matter of survival," stated Mackie. "In the past year, competition has been fiercer than ever: Every business has changed the way it works, and the quick shift to digital has been highly disruptive in itself.

"It is vital for businesses to avoid getting stuck in their pre-pandemic direction and ways of working. Now, more than ever, organisations will need to innovate and, in some cases, step outside of their comfort zone. Business leaders should encourage employees and colleagues to go past the idea of doing something 'the usual way', and move towards doing it 'the outstanding way', even if this is outside of the organisation's normal way of working."

Mackie believes that business leaders should adopt a measured approach to driving and managing disruptive thinking, with an all-inclusive



Alan Mackie

## Outside-the-box thinking should be encouraged throughout the company, not just at leadership level

strategy involving all people within the organisation.

"When we talk about outside-the-box thinking, too often we assume this means completely revolutionising the status quo," he added. "This assumption makes the whole concept sound way more challenging and time consuming than it needs to be. Ultimately, when a leader truly thinks outside the box, the box goes away – and so does the pressure of having to deliver something new. Business leaders who are hoping to overcome inside-the-box thinking should be willing to take a new perspective on their day-to-day work and activities, while also having the flexibility necessary to incorporate new ideas into their routine."

Outside-the-box thinking is only possible when collaboration and

communication are at the core of a business strategy, believes Mackie. "Especially at a time when we're all working from home and employee engagement is more important than ever," he added.

Leadership is crucial in bringing discipline to disruptive strategies and key to success is execution, which ultimately hinges on decision making. "Decision making should be a trial and error process," noted Mackie. "Some decisions might lead to failure, but it's critical for reseller leaders to persist and adjust throughout this process. We are living in uncertain times, and although scary, organisations will need to continue to innovate and take action if they want to succeed."

According to Mackie, disruption strategies should start with the customer and take account of the problems they are trying to solve or the improvements they want to make to their business. "Once we have established the nature of the value we are looking to bring to the customer, this can be the guiding principle in determining the go-to-market plan for the business, and the different markets to explore," he stated. "Rather than jumping on the latest technology or market opportunity bandwagon, resellers should set out their business purpose and look to develop new ways of working and new partnerships to support their plan."

# Realising the right balance

The term 'disruptive' can be applied to simply questioning the norm or being radically innovative in your approach. Either way, it's essential to constantly challenge current practices and assumptions, to be flexible and adaptable, and to embrace new business practices, working environments and emerging technologies. "But being disruptive does not mean that you always have to be radical," stated Andy Wilson, Head of Wholesale, CityFibre. "Many customers value stability and consistency. You should not be disruptive for its own sake."

For resellers seeking to be disruptive and take a leadership position, their business model and culture will need to change. "You also need stability and consistency," added Wilson. "It is also key to get the balance right between data collection, analysis and accuracy, and the delegation of responsibility within the business. The better the information and interpretation, the more accurate your decisions will be."

Resellers are also advised to be disciplined and make time to think because thinking is vitally important to decision making. "Block out physical time for tactical and strategic thought, otherwise you will always be consumed by the here and now and won't have the opportunity to plan and strive towards future goals," noted Wilson. "To be truly disruptive, you also need to be agile and able to make decisions and act on them immediately, at every level."



Andy Wilson

"It's also necessary to have a culture which allows people to make mistakes. Whether they are senior or middle managers, or junior employees, people should never be scared to try something, and they should never be punished for making a mistake. You should include everyone in the business in your disruption strategy and have a feedback loop that will allow their voices to be heard."

## Key threat

For many channel businesses today, the biggest threat will be new, more dynamic and disruptive entrants, believes Wilson. "These new businesses will be quick thinking, agile and responsive," he said. "They have no legacy constraints and are able to react and adapt to changes in the market quickly. Established businesses need to think how they can respond to that challenge and turn it into an opportunity. While customers value stability and dependability, resellers will nevertheless need to match the new entrants in terms of their innovation and their capacity to embrace new ideas and technologies."

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THE Comms National Awards is a unifying force so in the absence of a physical event this year Comms Dealer laid on the next best thing – an event streamed live from London with everyone linked via video and social media. The response was staggering and summed up how people in our industry are doing amazing things during the pandemic crisis.

On the day, over 600 channel people tuned in from home, in 'bubbles of six' in their offices, or in a local pub to be part of the spectacle and with almost 25,000 views on Twitter, hundreds of LinkedIn posts and 2,000 video views, the event truly united the industry in a surge of goodwill, with finalists and winners celebrated from every part of the UK.

The broadcast quality interactive awards 'show' was hosted by radio and television presenter Colin Murray (pictured) who engaged with hundreds of 'viewers' face-to-face on screen and via social media (#CNAwards2020) throughout the proceedings.

Viewers saw Elite Group CEO Matt Newing acknowledge his Entrepreneur of the Year award from his office in the Isle of Man then witnessed winning celebrations across the land including Highnet in North Scotland, Uplands in Wales and SaltDNA in Northern Ireland.

Union Street, Gamma, Jola and Digital



Wholesale Solutions were double winners while EveryCloud Security snapped up a trio of gongs including Enterprise Reseller of the Year. Uplands collected the SME Reseller of the Year award.

"There were some fantastic triumphs and heart-warming stories to tell, but on the day the real winner was the entire channel which demonstrated its ability to adapt and deal with unprecedented situations created by the pandemic rapidly and intelligently," enthused Comms Dealer Editorial Director

and awards co-ordinator Nigel Sergent.

"I am extremely grateful to our judging panel who gave up their time to judge the awards, and a final word of thanks must go to our headline sponsor DWS and all our award and hospitality sponsors for their invaluable support.>

Newing added: "I'm grateful and I'm amazed to have received the Entrepreneur of the Year award. It's recognition for what we are achieving out there."

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# ROLL OF HONOUR

## 2020 COMMS DEALER AWARDS WINNERS...

### ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR – Matt Newing, CEO of Elite Group

Matt Newing is an ambassador for the Prince's Trust and a dedicated supporter of the progression of young people. He believes in giving back and supporting local communities and ensured that charity forms an integral part of his Group's culture.

### BEST CALL MANAGEMENT SOLUTION – Akixi Limited

Akixi delivers management reporting, real-time analytics, and trend analysis. A reseller customer said their solution blows competitors out of the water. Revenues at the company have risen by 28% this year.

### BEST BILLING SOLUTION – Union Street Technologies

Union Street's ABILLity platform manages the billing activities of over 600 comms providers. A reseller customer said Union Street has a real understanding of its processes and the vital nature of billing to its business.

### BEST ICT DISTRIBUTOR – Jola Cloud Solutions

Over the last 12 months mobile broadband and sim card distributor Jola has grown billed revenues by 26.5% to over £5m. In a survey, 95% of Jola partners said they would recommend them to friends or colleagues

### BEST END POINT OR DEVICE – Jabra

Engineered to be the world's first intelligent 180-degree Panaromic-4K plug-and-play video solution, Jabra PanaCast has provided channel partners with a new and unique way to acquire new business.

### BEST HOSTED TELEPHONY PLATFORM – Digital Wholesale Solutions

DWS hosted seats on its HV.Select platform have expanded during the pandemic to over 110,000. One reseller said: "DWS has offered incredible resources to help in the lead up to the PSTN switch off, helping us to explain the need to transition to IP to our customers."

### BEST SME TELEPHONY SYSTEM – Wildix

Wildix delivers a full collaboration, software free PBX feature thanks to its market-leading use of WebRTC. One reseller said "when our engineers set up the first system, they could not believe how simple it was. One click on an email and they were live."

### BEST FIXED LINE NETWORK – Virtual1

Virtual1's advanced network continues to go from strength to strength offering cutting edge propositions combined with empowering partners to self-serve. One reseller said: "Virtual1's network, portal and technical service support is second to none."

### BEST WHOLESALE SERVICE PROVIDER FOR COMPANIES (up to £10m t/o) – VanillaIP

Vanilla sees its key role to be predicting what resellers and their customers will need in the future. This cannot be more clearly demonstrated than by the 100 strong development team behind its Uboss cloud management platform.

### BEST WHOLESALE SERVICE PROVIDER FOR COMPANIES (over £10m t/o) – Digital Wholesale Solutions

The DWS connectivity portfolio continues to grow with over 90,000 new broadband connections, 2,300 new ethernet lines and over 213,000 new mobile connections. The judges agreed DWS is a highly dynamic business clearly focused on developing partner businesses.

### BEST SME UC SOLUTION – HighNet Telecoms

Based on the Xelion hosted telephony platform, HighNet's 'well thought out and alternative' solution provided Highland Fuels with a state-of-the-art unified communications system with 80 Xelion user licenses.





COMMS NATIONAL AWARDS

# ROLL OF HONOUR (CONT'D)



*"What a fantastic event – well done to the Comms Dealer Team. We love sponsoring awards events because we love working in this sector, working as part of the best channel in the world. Sharing, recognising and celebrating success is always important, but right now more important than ever – we have lots to stay positive about. I'm sure everyone enjoyed seeing lots of familiar faces and seeing people being recognised for great work. Well done to everyone especially the winners. Onwards and upwards into 2021 – wishing everyone well."*

TERRY O'BRIEN, CEO  
DIGITAL WHOLESALE SOLUTIONS

### BEST ENTERPRISE UC SOLUTION – Incom-CNS Group

Incom-CNS delivered a Mitel MiVoice Business UC solution and migration to SIP trunks across six UK sites for global wire systems manufacturer, Grippe. Phase 2 will see the solution rolled out globally.

### BEST SME MOBILE OR IoT SOLUTION – Uplands

Upland supplied SIMS and Data Connectivity into devices that manage and control machines at Cornish Labour Services to improve efficiency and productivity, as well as reducing costs. ROI for the customer was a key factor in securing this award.

### BEST ENTERPRISE MOBILE OR IoT SOLUTION – SaltDNA

SaltDNA offers 'Peace of Mind' for organisations who value their privacy, by giving them complete control and secure communications to protect their trusted relationships and stay safe. The judges thought this highly differentiated solution made SaltDNA a winner.

their privacy, by giving them complete control and secure communications to protect their trusted relationships and stay safe. The judges thought this highly differentiated solution made SaltDNA a winner.

### BEST SME CLOUD SOLUTION – Charterhouse Voice and Data

Charterhouse's cloud comms solution for law practice The Chambers at 9 Bedford Row in London, seamlessly integrates with the legacy IT infrastructure, saving barristers, clerks and support staff time and delivers an agile working environment.

### BEST ENTERPRISE CLOUD SOLUTION – EveryCloud Security

EveryCloud - in partnership with 8x8 – provided Manchester law firm Slater and Gordon with an easy-to-deploy cloud contact centre solution which has transformed their customer experience and delivered a 'work anywhere' technology platform.

### BEST SME VERTICAL MARKET SOLUTION – Windsor Telecom

Windsor Telecom developed Next Call - a bespoke skills-based routing, scheduling, and reporting solution for its pressured healthcare customers. This has increased productivity by up to 25% and has revolutionised the way customers manage communications.

### BEST ENTERPRISE VERTICAL MARKET SOLUTION – EveryCloud Security

Harnessing best-of-breed security technology, EveryCloud's solution protects clients ranging from Premier League and Women's Super League football clubs to top-flight international sporting and events venues.

### BEST CHANNEL SUPPORT SERVICE – CityFibre

CityFibre works collaboratively with its partners to help them identify profitable target markets, develop and execute exciting and innovative sales and marketing campaigns and support this with expert advice and financial support.

### BEST CHANNEL PORTAL – Gamma

The Gamma Portal provides its partners a home for everything they need to provide outstanding customer service and seamless business operations.



*"In this year's awards there were some incredible examples of how good our industry can be. Everyone jumped through hoops to do things in days that would normally have taken weeks or months. Some companies did extraordinarily innovative things, that are outside of what we would normally do as an industry. In a world that, at the moment, can feel at times a little depressing, reading these entries has reminded me how good people can be."*

IAN FISHWICK, CN AWARDS JUDGE AND ADEPT CHAIRMAN,

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**BEST RESELLER INNOVATION AWARD** – Capito

In collaboration with HP, Capito re-purposed unused hardware from their customer bases by collecting, securely data wiping, and provisioning IT equipment which was no longer required and re-deploy the devices to frontline services.

**BEST SUPPLIER INNOVATION AWARD** – Union Street

Union Street's NxTier SaaS solution means resellers can connect their customer's phone system to NxTier then route call traffic through their preferred carriers, accessing many of the benefits of owning a soft switch but with a far lower cost of ownership.

**DIVERSITY AWARD** – Jola

At Jola, meetings have either subtitles and chat boxes or an interpreter to ensure all staff can fully engage and all employees take a sign language course. More than a third of employees are female and occupy 50% of middle management positions. This a great example to the industry.

**CSR AWARD** – Cirrus

At Cirrus, Employees take Social Action Days and Cirrus technology is optimised for use by charities including the Community Coronavirus Care Group, enabling them to benefit from the latest cloud-based voice solutions.

**RESELLER KEEPING BRITIAN WORKING AWARD** – BDR Group

BDR has been an essential partner for Southern NHS Trusts through the COVID-19 crisis, supporting over 15,000 NHS staff with essential services. The judges said the work BDR carried out for Kent & Medway NHS was phenomenal, especially delivering PPE for free.

**SUPPLIER KEEPING BRITAIN WORKING AWARD** – Gamma

Gamma's partner Support and Recovery Packages have dealt with all areas including hibernation, expansion and new business. These measures have already generated over £1 million in credits to Gamma partners.

**SME RESELLER OF THE YEAR** – Uplands

Uplands has developed into a fully blown Managed Service Provider offering a 'one point of contact' process that incorporates a Strategic Contact Strategy enabling customers to be continually engaged with Uplands offerings and technological improvements.

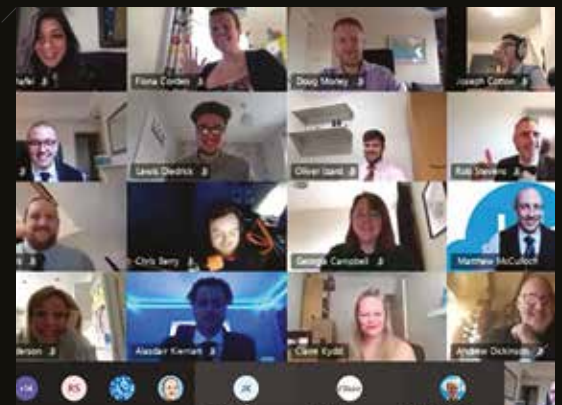
**ENTERPRISE RESELLER OF THE YEAR** – EveryCloud Security

EveryCloud's niche service uniquely protects businesses through best-of-breed cloud security, phishing remediation and identity and access management solutions. Judges described the work they have carried out for international sports venues as 'utterly compelling'.



*"We've massively missed our adventures with Comms Dealer this year and when something's not there you feel a whole part of you is missing. Tonight, you've reminded us what a great channel and industry we have with so many new faces and businesses out there being successful. Thanks for going above and beyond, overcoming many adversities, and bringing people in the industry together. It's what makes us strong and keeps us alive. With hope and resolve we will be stronger and fitter all round."*

CHRIS MORRISEY, MANAGING DIRECTOR  
LILY COMMS



# Service teams rise to the c

**N**ew research from managed services company Maintel has found that more than a third of people (38.6%) in total, admit to losing their temper with customer service agents and 26% of Brits aged 18-24 and 25-34 admit to swearing at them.

Meanwhile, 44.4 per cent of customers have hung up in frustration and 53.9% have asked to speak to a manager. The research was conducted during lockdown and explored the experiences of 200 people with customer services teams and contact centres, They were asked how they would prefer to get in touch, whether their experience has been good and where their frustrations lie.

In a bigger study, global workplace performance firm Leesman surveyed 700,000 workers worldwide to find that 52% have little or no experience working from home. The research also concludes that the UK is one of the world's 'least prepared countries to weather a mass home-working strategy', with 55% of its workers having little/no experience.

With the coronavirus pandemic forcing large numbers of staff to work remotely, customer service leaders must ensure that their teams remain engaged, healthy, effective, and productive in their new working environment, despite having to manage them remotely. So what skills are required, and what best practices need to be followed?

The theme of last month's Customer Service Week reflected the importance of teamwork in providing outstanding service to all customers. This all led to some key questions for our service leader contributors this month: During the Covid-19 pandemic, how have members of your customer service team embraced your new work arrangements, how are they striving for excellence, how are they adapting to change and what, if any, challenges have they overcome?



VICKI COWPERTHWAIT  
9 GROUP

"We've been keen to respond to our partners' changing priorities, as most businesses have had to adjust the way they work. We observed a reduction in inbound calls and an increase in cases raised through our support portals. We responded by working closely with our development team to facilitate portal enhancements. We've strengthened our processes, equipping individuals to provide a consistently excellent service against a changing backdrop. Collaboration and cross departmental working have increased, and our teams are equipped to respond to the changing needs of our partners. A new operational support group has also been established, enabling staff to easily communicate with a wide group outside their own team, regardless of where they are working from. We also hold open conversations with partners, so that we can clearly understand their current priorities. We're currently running a questionnaire which aims to identify how their needs have changed since the pandemic began."



MALEK RAHIMI  
BDR

"BDR invested a significant amount of resource creating a seamless operation for homeworking ensuring the latest technology is available for support staff in whatever environment, by offering a blend of voice and video communication maximising efficiency when assisting customers. We utilise Power BI for live statistics on performance behaviours such as calls, emails, tickets and jobs handled by each agent so we could divert additional help to the right areas, reducing stress where possible. We also provide tutorial videos for repetitive tasks, saving time. We implemented shift patterns in three of our support divisions to accommodate customers new work patterns. Most of our staff have adapted well due to the fast-paced nature of our group, whilst a few require additional help with the transition and increased workloads. Overall, we are feeling positive going forward with relative harmony."



PATRICIA FARRELL  
GAMMA

"At Gamma, our key focus has always been to deliver our objectives and strategy as planned, regardless of the current crisis. Prior to the first national lockdown, we decided to shift to home working to protect our people's health and wellbeing, and to continue delivering our services as seamlessly as possible. This early decision was only made possible by the technology we already had in place well before 2020. Over six-months into the pandemic, we are continuing to support our customer service team by listening to their needs and reacting accordingly. Striking a work-life balance has been especially difficult for some of our colleagues, but we've overcome this challenge by encouraging alternative working hours to accommodate family and childcare needs where necessary. Ultimately, our collaborative culture and flexible approach have made it possible for our customer service team to continue delivering the best possible service to our partners and customers."



DAN MILES  
FIDELITY GROUP

"Pre the COVID Pandemic "Home Working" was for the lucky few. However, working from home and being isolated can be a lonely experience. A good customer service team thrives in a fast paced, collaborative environment. I am used to questions flying here and there, shouted across the office. Frustration, usually at carriers, boiling over and the support the togetherness brings. The intoxicating team spirit! To overcome this, we have twice daily video conference calls to review sticky issues and listen to each other's stories. Originally these were just audio conference calls but we soon found that the visual element provided a turbo charger to the calls. Facial expressions and eye to eye contact adds a huge amount of personal interaction to distance communication, which cannot be underestimated. Oddly, I also miss the unwinding on the journey home, a quite interlude between work life and home life."



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# challenge of home working



KATRINA MACLEOD  
HIGHNET

"The move to fully home working, and then a blended approach when we were able to offer some office-based working, has been very well received by our teams. People have embraced the opportunities and flexibility available to them. However, WFH is easier for some than it is for others, and our middle management have had to learn how best to support the health and wellbeing of their team. We've put a lot of effort into raising awareness, educating and empowering our people to provide this support to the very best of their ability. We also have to manage productivity and the customer experience, and this isn't easy when people are dispersed. We've been very attentive to our Customer Satisfaction surveys, and we're monitoring our Net Promoter Score results very closely. It's been great to see higher scores and great customer comments since March – home and blended working works!"



DUNCAN WARD  
NETWORK TELECOM

"At Network Telecom we worked quickly to get customers set up for remote working, many for the first time. Our customer service team acted with urgency from their own homes, providing businesses with equipment like additional mobiles and dongles, as well as upgrading them to the cloud. Our aim was to empower our customers to work from home at short notice and ensure business continuity. We moved to remote installations and remote training, ensuring customers had everything they needed to work remotely. Internally, our teams pulled together with members of other teams joining the customer service team to add additional support. Thanks to our WiFi-enabled desk phones, NT Multimedia, we were able to stay in constant contact. We utilised our video conferencing platform, Enreach Meetings, to keep up team morale throughout. As a result, we were able to uphold top-class customer service despite working completely remotely for the first time."



ROB STEVENS  
JOLA

"Due to the services we offer and the equipment we provide for staff, we were quickly able to move to remote working across the business which enabled staff to work safely and adapt to lockdown. With the closure of schools in particular, staff were able to manage their workloads around childcare whilst still exceeding company KPI's and supporting customers. With a small reduction on inbound work in the early months of lockdown, staff were able to take time to review current processes and make changes and improvements to better support customers whilst increasing their knowledge of the products and services they are supporting. More time at home – staying safe – also allowed staff to spend more time with their families and offer support during what has been a challenging time for everyone and help them adapt."



ANNE SHANNON  
CITYFIBRE

"After a series of lockdown simulations, all of CityFibre's office-based employees, including our customer service team, were working from home prior to the national lockdown announcement, ensuring they all had full access to the systems and resources needed to efficiently work remotely. We pre-empted the need for collaborative and emotional support during these unprecedented times and established a programme of regular internal communications and utilised our existing team of internal Mental Health First Aiders to support staff. Ensuring the well-being of our colleagues is a top priority and one of our noted challenges since working from home."



CHRIS MORRISEY  
LILY COMMS

"I couldn't be prouder of how our customer services team has stepped up during this pandemic. The volume of calls we received initially were unprecedented, all at a time where our team were adjusting to remote working, something they previously had no experience in. The team straight away adopted a can-do attitude and demonstrated great empathy for our clients, providing support when it was really needed. We helped our teams to adapt by delivering specific 'Working from Home' training, which really helped our people to understand how they could deliver their role from home and what our expectations were as a business. All through making these adjustments, our call volumes were higher than ever as our customers equally needed our support in adapting to work from home, so we made it our mission to contact all of our clients to discuss how we could help to minimise disruption."



DAVID SAMPSON  
VIRTUAL1

"Whilst you can't replace face-to-face interactions for building relationships, using the latest technology and the bonds already created, the transition to remote working within Virtual1 has been seamless. Our customer services team has done a phenomenal job supporting each other both through video conferencing and chat to stay ultra-connected. Our real-time NPS system has also been a great asset in helping us respond to customer concerns immediately. We monitor progress until satisfaction is restored and, during the pandemic, our Net Promoter Score has actually increased by 20 points. The main challenge we've had is the local lockdowns as our people need their support networks. Knowing this, we have made extra effort to stay close to our teams, ensuring daily contact and making them aware of the mental health support we have available. We also continue to host virtual socials to facilitate the relationship building that we believe is so critical."



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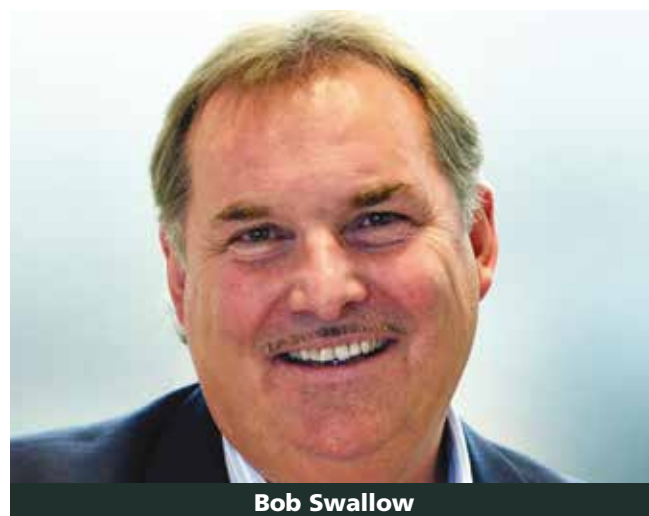
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# Why leaders must prioritise mental wellbeing of staff

**B**ob Swallow has been in the ICT industry for more than 40 years, in the past 20 years holding board level roles including national and international sales leadership, general management and CEO positions for the likes of Siemens and BT. As a Trustee of Mental Health Associates, the new charity set up as a first response resource for anyone suffering from anxiety, depression or 'fear of failure' in our industry, we asked him what ICT leaders should be aware of as pressures increase on sales teams during the pandemic...



Bob Swallow

## How can you identify an employee struggling, possibly with a mental health issue?

As in all walks of life it is sometimes very difficult to recognise when someone is struggling with mental health. People who don't want others to know will develop an ability to appear fine. Sales people are particularly good at this, but very few survive putting a brave face on. My experience is that talking things through is much more productive. So it's important for leaders to develop observational skills and spot people with potential issues.

## Do you have any personal experience of people that have 'gone over the edge'?

Sadly, over the years I have seen many sales people suffer from extreme pressure. Often it is created by the individual themselves from

fear of failure, or even from peer or partner pressure. With the constant drive for growth or greater profitability from various types of ownership, the scrutiny on performance builds pressure.

## What is the impact of unrealistic targets on sales people?

Unrealistic target setting is poor sales leadership. Sales people are well rewarded if they are successful and some believe that because of this, any amount of pressure is OK. If the quality of leadership is good, then they will identify quickly where someone isn't coping.

It is so important for the welfare of the individual, as well as the ethical reputation of the business, that leaders are more aware of peoples' mental health. This has never been more important than now when our people are working remotely, with little physical interaction and potential feelings of total isolation. These things

add to any feelings of foreboding that already exist.

## How important is a 'talking post' for people who might be struggling?

It is the first and most important step to getting them the help and care they need. Sales people tend to be confident, bordering on arrogant, and therefore not in any need of support. We know that this isn't the case, and they often struggle to discuss their issues.

## How can people in our industry help?

We need funds to create and man a dedicated helpline and provide training and awareness courses for organisations to get the message out there that there are people you can talk to, who have real empathy and who are trained to help people with problems.

You can donate at [gofundme/mentalhealthassociates](https://gofundme.com/mentalhealthassociates) or call MHA founder Peter Orr on 07766 088775

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

# Tuscon joins Sabio



**Matt Tuscon**

MATT Tuscon, formally SVP and EMEA MD of Conga, has joined Sabio Group as Chief Commercial Officer to help drive its global growth strategy. He brings 25 years CX sales experience and during his time at digital document firm Conga led the business to quadruple bookings.

His previous experience includes stints at Iris Software as Chief Revenue Officer and NewVoiceMedia where he was EVP Worldwide Sales. He was also EMEA Vice President for RightNow Technologies before its acquisition by Oracle in 2011.

Sabio Group CEO Jonathan Gale said: "We've set ambitious goals for the next five years, so it's important that the company invests in proven leaders like Matt to ensure we deliver on our growth objectives."

Tuscon added: "With more and more brands recognising the need to transform their CX operations through digital processes, automation and improved business insight, Sabio is well placed to support them in this transition."

## Also on the move...

FORMER Rackspace VP Global Solutions and Services for EMEA Simon Crawley-Trice has joined Six Degrees as Practice Group MD with a remit to manage the complete portfolio and drive cloud services solutions in particular.



**Simon Crawley-Trice**

CEO David Howson said: "2020 has been a turbulent year but we remain focused on supporting clients and accelerating their growth by acting as a strategic, secure cloud partner. Simon brings a wealth of knowledge and experience in driving the innovation that best enables this." Crawley-Trice added: "Six Degrees has the potential to be the biggest name in the UK secure cloud services market. I will build on this by enhancing the mission critical integrated solutions we deliver to clients."

BRIGHTCLOUD'S presence in the European contact centre marketplace is set to strengthen following the appointment of Matt Delargy as Head of Sales. He brings 25 years ICT industry experience and kicked off his comms career in Kansas



**Matt Delargy**

City for Global Crossing in 1995, returning to London in 2001. His prior roles include stints at Energis, TalkTalk Business, EE and Hardware Solutions. CEO Alex Morrison stated: "Matt's appointment will be felt immediately as he leads BrightCloud's team to continue to engage our key target markets across the UK and Europe." Delargy added: "With the uncertain environment we are currently working in, BrightCloud Group is positioned to enable our partners to evolve seamlessly."

COMMS Dealer is delighted to introduce Greg Denholm, our new junior research analyst/journalist. He is a NCTJ qualified journalist with experience across both print and digital media. His previous experience includes a stint at The Maidenhead

Advertiser and he is a regular contributor of videos and articles for The Toffee Blues Everton Football



Club fan site. "I am thrilled to have joined the Comms Dealer team and to have started contributing to the magazine," commented Greg.

FORMER Poly Regional Vice President of Western Europe Jeremy Keefe has been appointed CEO of Nuvias UC. He takes over from Steve Harris who becomes Executive Chairman after 11 years at the helm. Harris commented: "Jeremy is an exceptional leader and familiar with our business from his time at Polycom."

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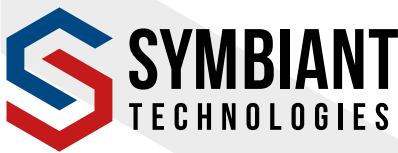
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