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Openreach CEO on
2021 priorities p18**

**How Gamma
champions diversity
and inclusion p24**



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Comms People

This month's movers and shakers



Channel set for fibre land grab

THE comms channel is poised for an intense period of FTTP roll out that could ultimately redefine the nature and longevity of customer relationships based on a first mover advantage.

SPECIAL REPORT

There will be stark differentiation between resellers that provide FTTP as soon as they are able to and those that don't, warned Zen Partner MD Steve Warburton. "We're all going to be in a race to upgrade customers to FTTP," he stated. "It's an opportunity and a threat."

He noted that the lower fault rates coupled with an improved performance will increase customer stickiness, which should

be a red flag to resellers too slow to enter the FTTP race.

"We have offered FTTP for circa 10 years and seen that a typical customer stays with us for over six years," he added. "Once the service is installed there's little reason for customers to move. It will be difficult to transition a circuit between providers, so it's important to upgrade these customers quickly once the service is available."

Zen is investing heavily in its network ahead of what

Warburton believes will be a bumper period of demand for FTTP at a time when organisations will be more reliant than ever on their network performance and ICT provider relationships following the shift to agile working practices.

"We're taking our footprint from 450 exchanges up to 700 exchanges," he said. "That will give us 80% coverage of FTTP premises. We're also upgrading the capacity from the exchange back to the network." **See p18**

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

AS A TURBULENT 2020 recedes in the rear view mirror, the journey ahead will be towards regaining control of strategic plans for the future, being more creative and stimulating innovation in business. How the channel performs in the coming years

could essentially boil down to these priorities, and the good news is that, to a large extent, guesswork on the direction of the market is now a thing of the past, enabling us to move forward with certainty, with time to think and time to formulate approaches to those long-term objectives.

Mind-time spent on predicting where the comms sector is heading, and mind-wrangling over which technologies to back, have been swept aside by the industry defining impact of Covid-19. And as we move into an era of greater clarity it is surely time to be more visionary and innovative, confident in the future pathway before us, directed by clear sign posts to the cloud, SaaS and agile working practices as dead cert bets.

This certainty gives us more time to align purpose with profit, for example (see page 32), and develop an industry transformation mindset that will help to create a tech savvy SME sector (see page 12). This period of relative certainty also enables us to make smarter decisions, develop the workforce's creativity, double down on marketing (see page 15), harness innovation and aim to take a lead in the now full-on race to the cloud.

Much like 2020, life in the comms sector will be far from ordinary in 2021. But it will be extraordinary, we hope, not for its lockdowns, but for the watershed unlocking of opportunities linked to innovation and creativity in customer engagement, solution delivery and outcomes.

Comms Dealer wishes its readers a happy, prosperous and strategic 2021.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

• 2021 CHANNEL PREDICTIONS: Buoyant comms industry will thrive in rocky waters ahead – see page 38.

Air IT snares acquisitions

AUGUST Equity-backed Air IT has acquired Oxford-based MSP Riverbank IT Management and Coventry-located Nexus GS for undisclosed sums.

The double deal follows Air IT's acquisitions of Netstar and Microtrading in October.

The latest additions expand Air IT's market influence, most notably in the Thames Valley and West Midlands.

The transactions also boost its overall headcount to 175 and the customer base to more than 1,000 clients.

Air IT CEO John Whitty said: "Both businesses bring significant value to the table and will be integral in helping us realise our plans to grow. Both are highly accredited and mature MSPs and will be a great fit for the Air IT Group with similar values and culture."

Founder and MD of Riverbank IT Management Marc Juffkins added: "Being part of the Air IT Group gives us access to a broader range of services such as managed cybersecurity and Business Intelligence (BI) as a service."

Founder and MD of Nexus GS Justin Huckfield commented: "Air IT's investment in support systems and expertise will



John Whitty

enable Nexus GS to better serve and meet the changing needs of our clients."

Mehul Patel, Partner at August Equity, put a spotlight on Air IT's long-term ambition: "We will continue to use the knowledge and network we have built over time to assist the management in developing the UK's largest SME cloud service provider," he said.

August Equity invested in Air IT in January 2020 and appointed industry veteran Ian Brown as Chairman and John Whitty as CEO.

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ACS buy a key move for Timico

HORIZON Capital-backed Timico's acquisition of Cambridge-based AWS consulting firm Arcus Cloud Services (ACS) significantly bolsters its public sector influence following its appointment to the G-Cloud 12 Framework.

ACS will continue to operate under its own brand and focus on cloud migrations, cloud contact centres and desktop-as-a-service offerings. It will also enable Timico's cloud services across the AWS platform.

Timico CEO Neil Muller stated: "ACS is an established AWS partner and we are adding its capability to our Hyperscale Hosting Practice."

Simon Hitchcock, Managing Partner at Horizon Capital, added: "The ACS acquisition is an important step and the third acquisition we have made with Timico since our investment."



Neil Muller

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NEWS ROUNDUP

NETWORK operator Vaioni Wholesale has launched a new version of its portal to give partners more quoting and self-service functionality. Partners can now access a combination of real-time information when looking for Ethernet services, with the ability to select multiple options in a single quote across a number of postcodes. "myVaioni also enables bulk quoting and offers category type information so that decisions on where to place orders can be made on more than price alone, and gives accurate total order costs including estimated ECCs," stated Vaioni Wholesale MD Sachin Vaish. "The process is entirely self-serve, cutting time and reducing inconvenience for partners even further."

COMMSWORLD has won a £5.8m contract with Glasgow City Council to provide a full fibre network to support CCTV and traffic control services leveraging IoT and 5G. CEO Ricky Nicol said: "As a Scottish company we want to help tackle the growing digital divide between rich and poor and bring true equity to cities like Glasgow. This is especially the case during this period of jobs instability cause by the Covid-19 pandemic."

Distributor in Pragma iPECS deal

DISTRIBUTOR Nimans has struck a deal with Pragma to provide resellers with the Ericsson-LG iPECS telephone system on a wholesale basis.

Manchester-based Nimans will host its own iPECS Cloud platform from early 2021 which will be available to a controlled list of resellers.

According to Nimans Sales Director Richard Carter and Pragma MD Tim Brooks the collaboration has been 'a long time coming'.

Carter said: "With the move to remote working during the pandemic we have seen the need for versatility and flexibility in our systems. The Ericsson-LG iPECS platform allows us to give our resellers more choice."

"Training will be available via webinars on the new system and stock ready to go from the start of the year."

Brooks added: "Through this partnership with Nimans our teams will work together to support resellers and extend the reach of the Ericsson-LG iPECS Cloud platform in the UK."

Ericsson-LG is a joint venture between Swedish giant Ericsson and Korean vendor LG, with 75% of the ownership with Ericsson.

Panasonic kiboshes biz comms division

FORMER SME market leader Panasonic is to pull out of the business telecoms market and plans to discontinue its PBXs, SIP telephone systems and scanner categories, including parts, within two years.

The company says it is responding to a sharp decline in the market and rapid shift to cloud-based solutions.

Panasonic also identified a technological mismatch between factory and future market needs and trends, and conceded that it is lagging behind rivals' R&D activities and has suffered an ongoing financial deficit.

It said in a statement, 'the shift to new types of demand (hosted phones systems) significantly accelerated by Covid-19 makes the future of the Panasonic business untenable'.

Trust Distribution MD Vince Leahy said: "Many of our channel partners entered the telecoms industry selling Panasonic PBXs, building successful businesses."

"Panasonic was the UK's leading vendor in the SMB space for many years and as a result there is a massive installed base of customers that need ongoing support today and into the future."

"Trust will be working closely with Panasonic and our partners



Vince Leahy

to ensure they get as much support as possible over the transitional period to help minimise any disruption.

"We feel sad for the Panasonic staff, many whom we have worked with for a long time."

Matthew Worboys, who is the Director for Channel Business Development at Gamma, commented: "Panasonic was at the centre of the SME market but never a trailblazer on features, yet it had a robust offering."

"It's a constant challenge for vendors to innovate and remain relevant. Gamma's investment in its own software development house shows just that."

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Lynn lines up Agilitas MBO



Shaun Lynn

CHANNEL services provider Agilitas IT Solutions has completed a management buyout led by CEO Shaun Lynn alongside investment from PE firm Perwyn which has acquired a majority stake in the business.

Perwyn will support the firm's growth ambitions including international expansion, service acceleration and potential M&A. The only leadership change is the appointment of Bill Wilson as Chairman.

Lynn stated: "To achieve our ambitions it was critical to

select an investor that not only shared our growth ambitions but also aligned with our values and corporate culture."

Andrew Wynn and Mark Blower, Partners at Perwyn, commented: "The team at Agilitas has delivered significant organic growth. We are supporting their clear vision for the business over the coming years; and the investment aligns with Perwyn's core thesis of backing high growth businesses pursuing international expansion and M&A."

Focus on chatbots

A COVID-19 induced dip in customer service levels coincides with dim consumer views on the efficacy of chatbots.

A survey by the Call Centre Management Association and 8x8 found that more than half (57%) of respondents have experienced difficulties in receiving customer service since the pandemic started; and 64% of consumers had abandoned a query because the chatbot did not understand them.

Just one in three (34%) say their trust in chatbots is increasing. The survey also found that personalisation is key to the future of chatbots and understanding consumer preferences will be crucial.

Chris Marron, Director of Market Intelligence at 8x8, said: "The human connection remains critically important. The most effective implementations recognise that AI augments human advisors, it does not replace them.

"Organisations should aim to meet customers on their terms and use the channels of their choice. Personalisation of interactions and channels will be crucial moving forward."

Invosys beefs up technical play via Atrium acquisition

CLOUD comms provider Invosys has acquired Atrium Telecom, which provides installation and maintenance services to UK partners. Its MD Barry Tuffs joins Invosys as Sales and Marketing Director.

Manchester-based Invosys is best known in the channel for its cloud comms platform and call logic software.

The deal broadens its tech support capabilities and product proposition, and boosts the availability and extent of its 24/7 offering. "The acquisition has allowed us to tap into enhanced levels of tech-



Barry Tuffs (left) and Peter Crooks

nical support," stated Invosys co-founder Rob Booth. "We share an ethos and an approach

which means the team will slot in with our ideas and plans for the future."



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MSP seals SaaS deal with 8x8

CLOUD services firm Six Degrees has bolstered its Agile Workspace solution category following a partnership with SaaS provider 8x8.

The link-up enables Six Degrees to expand its cloud-based comms, collaboration and contact centre capabilities. The deal also opens up opportunities for 8x8 through Six Degrees' expansion in key sectors.

Six Degrees Product Manager for UC and Voice Tim Smee said: "Six Degrees is working to expand its Agile Workspace Practice Group by deploying solutions to the new virtual working environment."

8x8 RVP for Channel Sales EMEA, Keith Jackson, said: "We are focused on developing our partner programme across Europe and the partnership with Six Degrees is a key milestone to bring voice, video, chat and contact centre to organisations across the region."



Keith Jackson

Cisco swoops on IMI mobile



Jeetu Patel

CISCO'S ambitions in the CXaaS space are set to advance significantly following its acquisition of London-based software and services provider IMI mobile for \$730m.

Cisco says the deal will enable it to provide an end-to-end customer interaction management solution through the customer's choice of channel.

This is possible because IMI mobile's software and services help businesses connect to customers through 'enhanced' interactive channels including social, messaging and voice.

"A great customer relationship is built on consistently enjoyable interactions where

every touchpoint on every channel is an opportunity for businesses to deliver rich, engaging and intuitive experiences," said Jeetu Patel, SVP and GM of Cisco's Security and Applications business.

Jay Patel, IMI mobile CEO, added: "We believe there will be a world of dynamic, always-on connections between global businesses and their customers, and the combination of our respective technologies will enable us to make every interaction matter more for clients."

LSE listed IMI mobile has over 1,100 employees and offices across the UK, USA, Canada, India, South Africa and UAE.

Ingram to be traded for \$7.2bn

GLOBAL investment firm Platinum Equity is to acquire Ingram Micro for \$7.2bn from HNA Group. The sale is expected to be completed by the first half of 2021.

Ingram Micro generated annual sales of circa \$47bn in its fiscal year 2019.

"Ingram Micro is one of the largest companies in the world and will be a cornerstone investment in our portfolio," said Platinum Equity Chairman and CEO Tom Gores. "We have the resources and the experience to help the company pursue an aggressive agenda of growth and transformation."

Platinum Equity Partner Jacob Kotzubei added: "We have been impressed by Ingram Micro's ability to thrive while navigating these fluid and challenging times. We will work closely with the leadership team to sustain that momentum."

Alain Monié will continue to lead Ingram Micro as CEO, and the company will continue to be headquartered in Irvine, California. "We will maintain a strong balance sheet and gain additional flexibility and resources to execute on our long-term strategic objectives," said Monié.

Zen adds stop-sell mentions

ZEN Internet is starting to add stop-sell flags to its network availability checkers so that reseller partners can warn customers affected by Openreach's cessation of WLR.

"We're building that capability as more and more Openreach exchanges become impacted by stop-sell and won't pick up FTTC in the future and will go directly to FTTP," said Zen's Head of Portfolio David Barber.

Zen is also helping partner adopters transition customers to FTTP by refining order journeys. "We'll be looking to bring into our portal and API the ability to move from a non-FTTP access technology onto FTTP to simplify the adoption process," added Barber.

"We have also been responding to Openreach consultations on the features we would like on its FTTP Professional product to help us achieve something that differentiates and provides tools to drive adoption of FTTP.

"What we've seen so far is promising. So, we're expecting symmetrical gigabit speeds from FTTP Professional, plus additional support for complex installations, which we know is important in B2B and install locations," he added.

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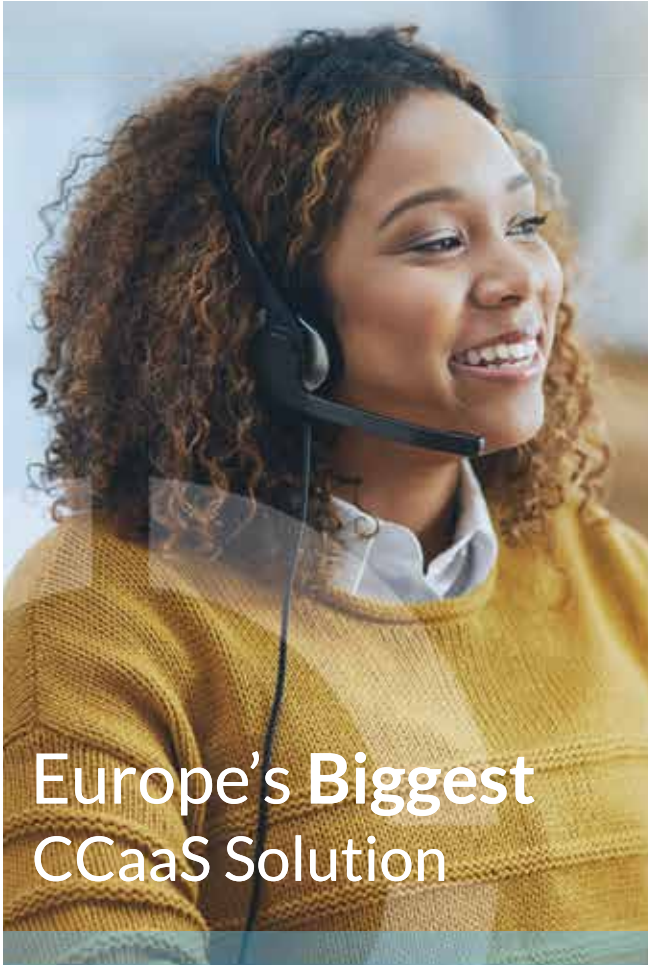


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Pangea pushes 5G plan to next stage

A PARTNERSHIP between Pangea and NHS Croydon is set to boost the comms firm's 5G Project as it nears trial stages.

Pangea's System Architect Dr Arslan Usman is working with NHS Croydon's Director of Research Enterprise and Innovation, Dr John Chang, to finalise the technology before it's trialled in ambulances early this year.

The project uses 5G's ultra-reliability and low latencies to keep ambulances connected while on the move. The solution includes 5G video streaming technology developed by Kingston University which doctors can use to triage patients in real-time before they arrive at hospital.

Chang stated: "Triage is a process where every second counts, even minor delays can be the difference between life and death. With reliable 5G connectivity and video that's accurate to the millisecond, we'll be able to diagnose patients in transit, advise ambulance crews on how best to treat patients, and prepare crucial on-site treatments ahead of time."

Usman added: "Croydon Health Services' knowledge and resources will be vital, especial-



Dr Arslan Usman

ly as we begin trialling the technology. The platform will come out of development early this year, as soon as that happens trials will begin. Pangea will pro-

vide a handful of ambulances with access to the solution and 5G routers, monitor their progress and work with feedback to fine-tune the technology."



LILY Comms smashed all records at this year's Comms Dealer Sales Awards, picking up five trophies which team players proudly displayed outside their Leeds headquarters before the latest lockdown. Lily won Small Reseller Team of the Year, Best Social Media/PR Campaign, Best Apprenticeship Scheme, Best Company to Work For and capped off a memorable night by picking up the Comms Dealer Team of the Year Award. Managing Director Chris Morrissey said: "We are absolutely bowled over. And the fact that the awards were split across various elements of the business made it even more important. This industry is a fantastic place to be. It's where dreams are made!" For the full line up of winners see www.comms-dealer.com

AWS adds new services

THE addition of professional services to AWS Marketplace enables consulting partners, ISVs and MSPs to offer services such as assessments, implementations, managed services, support and training as part of a single order including the software element.

Previously customers needed to subscribe to Marketplace for its catalogue of ISV software solutions and separately source professional services.

By combining everything in one place, AWS says customers

can customise pricing, payment schedules and contract terms on one bill.

"This means a corporation or a Government entity can contract both for software and for the services associated with the implementation of that software, and both can be done through AWS Marketplace," commented Dave McCann, VP, AWS Migration, Marketplace and Control Services.

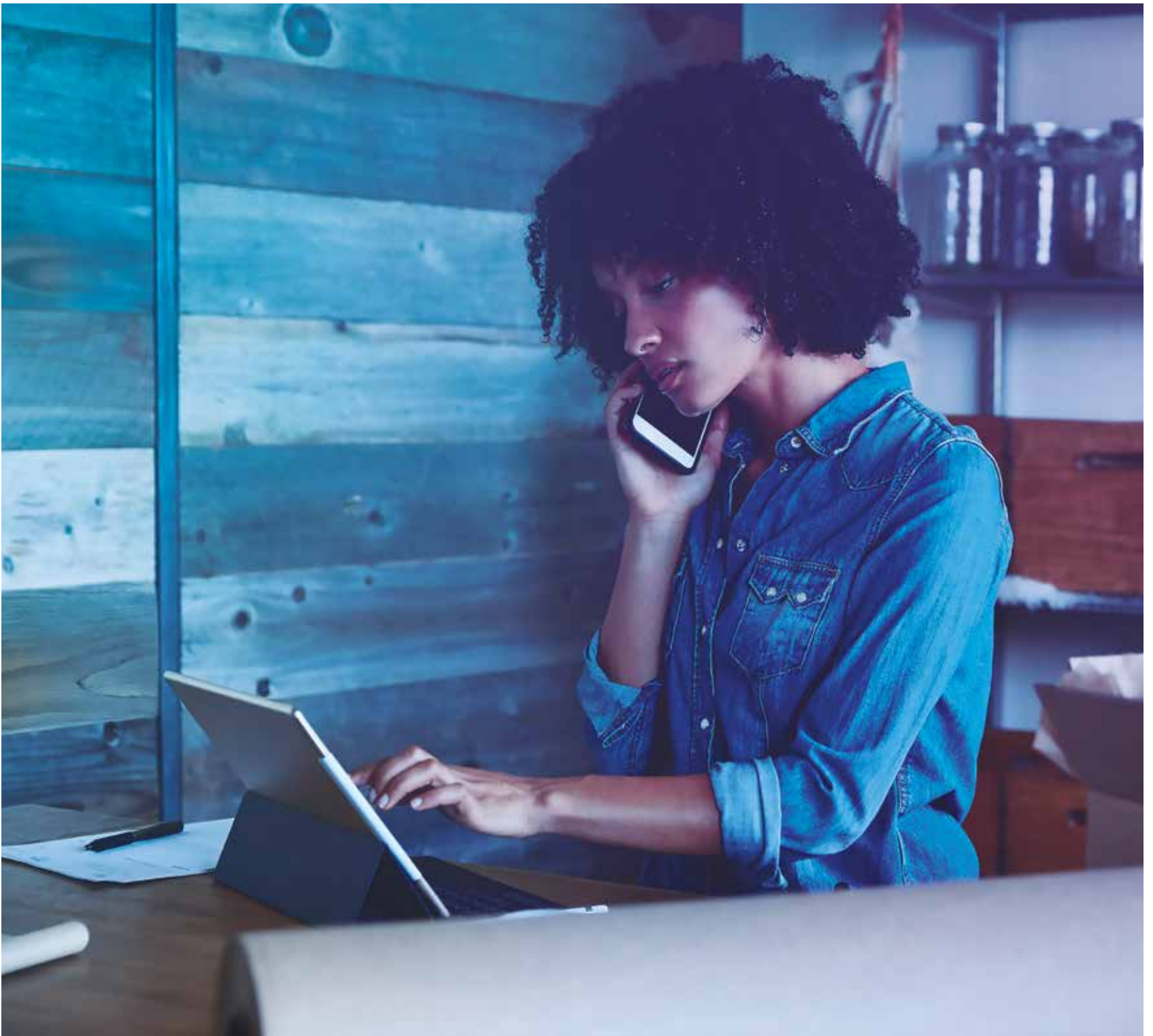
McCann also noted that AWS has more than 100 providers of professional services

signed up worldwide, including top software consulting partners and resellers such as Computacenter.

"This capability to quote, provision and bill software, along with professional services, takes some of the friction out of customer consumption, makes it easy for customers to innovate faster and in a consistent way," he said.

The update was one of several new partner programmes and competencies unveiled at AWS re:Invent 2020 in December.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

LIVERPOOL-based network operator Broadway Broadband has linked up with PacketFront, the Swedish-based software provider acquired by Virtual1. The rural broadband provider will leverage PacketFront's Business Support System (BSS) and network orchestration tool called BECS to offer third party services. Broadway Broadband's CTO Barry Weaver said: "The partnership will enable a faster network build-out and enhanced service delivery speeds, while keeping our operational costs to a minimum."

NUVOLA Distribution has sealed a partnership deal with NICE to deliver its solutions based on Robotic Automation Processes, Artificial Intelligence and Workforce Engagement Management (WEM). "Businesses are recognising the need to utilise intelligent automation and AI to improve the WEM for employees and their customers, especially as many workers engage in their business from home," said Michael Lloyd, MD, Nuvola Distribution. John Byron, UK&I Channel Manager, NICE, added: "We predict massive growth in this sub-sector of the CX revolution, and partnering with Nuvola puts us closer to the channel."

Channel role undervalued

CHANNEL partners lack the technological skills and solutions to effectively upgrade legacy IT networks in the wake of Covid-19, according to a section of the business community.

Research by Virgin Media Business Wholesale concludes that a third (33%) of senior IT managers view their channel partner relationships as transactional only; while 31% of organisations feel their channel supplier doesn't have the expertise to guide them through the current challenges.

Their lack of faith in ICT resellers highlights a communication and education gap between resellers and end users that is brought into a sharper focus following Covid-19.

The gap is also an opportunity for the channel to get closer to customers and shine a light on their capabilities.

More than three-quarters of businesses have struggled to adapt to the outbreak due to legacy IT networks, yet only 23% see network upgrades as a top priority, with cost the main reason companies have failed to take action.

"These findings show that legacy networks are holding UK plc back," said Dale Parkinson,



Dale Parkinson

Sales Director, Virgin Media Business Wholesale.

"Inadequate infrastructure is preventing businesses from meeting challenges around remote working and omnichannel customer demand, and holding them back from embracing more innovative technologies.

"The IT channel can play a critical role in ensuring organisations benefit from the fast speeds, flexibility and agility provided by solutions like national high capacity services."

The research comes as Virgin Media Business Wholesale is making a multi-million pound investment in its core network capabilities and widening access to its 10Gbps portfolio across the UK.

Calligo to make first UK move

JERSEY-based MSP Calligo has acquired Network Integrity Systems, giving it a presence in key locations – Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester and Hemel Hempstead.

The deal is Calligo's ninth acquisition in three years, its first in the UK, its fourth in 2020, closely following November's acquisition of Cinnte Technologies in Ireland, Calligo's third in the region.

Julian Box, founder and CEO, Calligo, stated: "We were seeking an MSP who shared our philosophy that MSPs ought to offer more than simply caretaking customers' technology, and who knew the value of supporting customers in the fullest and safest use of their data."

Mustaq Chandia, Director at Network Integrity Services, added: "Having grown through acquisition ourselves, we know the importance of clear and well understood alignment between the companies. It was important to us from the beginning that any acquirer appreciated the value of the role we have earned with our clients in supporting their operations and ambitions."

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IoT giant picks up Arkessa



Oliver Tucker

MONTAGU-backed Wireless Logic has acquired IoT business Arkessa from ECI Partners.

The deal expands Wireless Logic's market presence and capabilities and follows its acquisitions of European companies Datamobile and New Line Mobile.

"Bringing a customer base of over one million subscriptions, complementary services and alternative routes to market, the acquisition of Arkessa will drive incremental business growth," said Wireless Logic CEO Oliver Tucker. "The Arkessa team also brings eUICC solutions that complement Wireless Logic's current capabilities."

Arkessa CEO Andrew Orr-ock added: "The partnership is a natural fit and supports the ever expanding IoT market."

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Bellcom scoops Zen Circle of Excellence award after top NPS survey placement

HATS off to Surrey-based Bellcom, winner of Zen Internet's new Circle of Excellence rewards programme.

The scheme aims to recognise Zen partners that deliver service excellence as rated by their customers. It was executed in collaboration with the Institute of Customer Service which collated the results of an independent NPS survey to Zen's partner customers.



Steve Bellamy

Bellcom MD Steve Bellamy commented: "We support a

wide range of customers with a commitment to meeting their needs through the most appropriate technology available and pride ourselves on offering a personal service."

The four other companies named in the Circle of Excellence process were Koala IT, Logic Business Systems, MySon and Transpeed.

Paul Stobart, CEO at Zen, said: "We work in an industry

that, rightly or wrongly, has developed a reputation for poor customer service, but it is my firm belief that it shouldn't be that way.

"We introduced the Circle of Excellence rewards programme so we could recognise those that really do go above and beyond to deliver service excellence and to encourage and support all of our partners as they strive to do the same." See page 30

NEWS ROUNDUP

OPENREACH has pledged to create 5,300 new UK-based engineering jobs this year, including more than 2,500 full-time jobs in its service and network build divisions, as well as an estimated 2,800 positions in its UK supply chain through partners such as Kelly Group, Kier, MJ Quinn and Telent. Openreach's full fibre build aims to reach 20 million homes and businesses by the mid-to-late 2020s. It also pledged to upgrade its 27,000 commercial fleet to electric by 2030.



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Releasing SME potential

A new white paper underlines the urgent need for a shift in mindset and strategy among tech buyers. The study also emphatically reaffirms the key role to be played by the channel in driving new technology adoption among SMEs at this time of unprecedented business transformation.

Many SMEs fail to see emerging technology as a powerful force for good despite the potential of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) to tackle their primary challenges. BT's report, with research conducted by YouGov, also found that many SMEs are immersing themselves in a structure of strategic priorities that may not be aligned with their best interests.

The main priority for SMEs in the next 12 months is to increase revenue (60%). Their secondary objectives are to cut operational costs, boost productivity, optimise the customer experience and enable flexible working. But in prioritising revenue growth over the customer experience SMEs could be misdirecting the core of their strategic focus, which if more aligned to the secondary objectives would naturally lead to the realisation of the primary goal to boost revenues.

Few would contend that increased sales is the inevitable by-product of a sublime customer experience, which also nurtures customer loyalty and therefore long-term sustainability. Yet many businesses are giving a cold shoulder to the emerging technologies they should be leaning into to realise their planned priorities. The white paper indicates

that a successful growth plan will fuse technology and revenue growth into a single strategy with the customer experience front and centre, all underpinned by enabling technology.

But according to the survey just 20 per cent of small and 31 per cent of medium sized companies have planned their tech spending for the next five years. And 53 per cent of small businesses see cost, rather than technology enabled gains, as the main consideration when acquiring new tech solutions. The study therefore spotlights an opportunity for the channel to help SMEs cast a wider lens over their capacity to realise growth and efficiency through collaboration tools, next generation connectivity, analytics and other technologies.

Investment challenges

The report also noted that smaller businesses in the main lack the resources that are available to their larger counterparts and may not have the time and know-how to research new technologies like 5G and AI and how they can help their business increase competitiveness. For example, 5G is expected to drive IoT and VR/AR, provide a boost to productivity and catalyse new business models.

But giving SMEs the confidence to invest could



Fotis Karonis

A successful growth plan will fuse technology and revenue growth into a single strategy with the customer experience front and centre

hinge on resellers having the power of 'explainability' as a prerequisite to overcoming barriers to adoption and unlocking SME potential. According to a report by Capital Economics and Sage (cited in the white paper) this growth potential is highly significant. Their research indicates that if SMEs were able to overcome financial issues and invest in technology it would deliver £325 billion in revenue and support 2.7 million jobs. So building a tech savvy SME sector and unlocking that investment potential must be a priority for the channel.

The business case for adopting new technology

could not be stronger nor more clear to see, but the report highlights that SMEs need help connecting the dots to see how innovative tech can contribute to their plans and help them address key challenges. This suggests that SMEs must challenge themselves – and it is the role of resellers to ask what they do, how they do it and why, and show how it could be done better.

The opportunity for the channel to join the dots for larger organisations is just as significant: While the white paper highlights that just 28 per cent of smaller firms regularly evaluate new technologies, only 39 per

cent of large businesses conduct a planned review, meaning that over 60 per cent of this market segment do not have a strategy to make the most of new technology.

The study suggests that industry talk of market disruption is perhaps over amplified as user adoption is the only measure of disruption. Another clear deduction from the study is that to make technology transformation real for organisations it takes advice and leadership to bring emerging technology into a revenue growth and long-term sustainability context for all businesses.

"The opportunities in each sector are different, but similarly transformative, whether it is the role of cryptocurrencies and the blockchain offering financial firms new models for building trust in digital transactions, or AI-powered predictive maintenance changing how the transportation sector performs safety checks," said Fotis Karonis – CTIO of BT Enterprise. "But what is consistent is that in every sector there are enormous opportunities for businesses if they embrace digital transformation."

Download the full SME technology adoption report at <https://business.bt.com/insights/the-future-in-2020/sme-trends/>



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Security gap plugged

StayPrivate CEO Andrew Brogden and Commercial Director Adrian Barnard are bringing a proven enterprise security solution to the channel that promises to unlock significant recurring revenues.

Former Modern Communications MD Barnard has known Brogden for some time and is a key shareholder in the security business which counts among its enterprise customers Blackberry and Sequoia. "We have changed the commercial direction of the company," stated Barnard. "StayPrivate has now developed a proven enterprise solution for the channel which represents a significant recurring revenue opportunity for partners."

StayPrivate provides a global service which delivers enterprise military grade encryption and storage at a low cost for users. It has over 1,000 businesses globally using its platform across all sectors, but with a strong UK bias. "We have taken the enterprise product, commercialised it for the channel and built out enterprise level services and security for a consumer app," added Barnard. "We had a product that was already recognised as easy to use in the market, and have now made it genuinely mass market and channel-ready."

According to Barnard, the opportunity to develop products that scale and deliver a positive societal impact was too big to ignore. "The huge global awareness of privacy and the use of personal data by big tech at the expense of consumers presents a big opportunity

to deliver real change and a socially useful product," he said. "Building both the channel and consumer propositions while investing in product development was the key challenge. Now, customers are requesting a secure or white list/invitation only email service which is at the scoping stage."

Brogden noted that Britain's secure email and document storage requirements have in the past been bereft of adequate solutions, and that StayPrivate's core proposal for protecting emails emerged during his time working in the finance sector where he developed an ambition to boost security levels.

"The City of London is a global powerhouse but its growth has been at the expense of developing the specific expertise that has been available to companies in Silicon Valley," stated Brogden. "There is a significant unfilled need for private email and we have an opportunity to be one of the primary players in this emerging space, having refocused our efforts to create a mass market product that works seamlessly for everybody."

StayPrivate began its commercial life selling direct to businesses, but its growth strategy took a new direction that reflected the improvements in its product, enabling it to bring new



Andrew Brogden



Adrian Barnard

Our aim is to provide everyone with their own private space where they can store, send, receive and share communications in private

solutions to the channel. "We strongly believe that StayPrivate is best delivered as an addition to, or part of an existing partner offer," added Brogden.

Strong pedigree

He worked in financial services for many years, primarily as a derivatives trader. Working in this fast moving environment relies on heavy mathematical modelling which meant he was a heavy user of IT and comms. "I had invested in several early stage IT businesses, including most notably Snapchat, but only moved into the sector itself in 2014 when, along with Rob Reid, a long-

term colleague of mine, we saw the opportunity to create StayPrivate to fill the need for financial services companies to have a secure way of communicating with clients," explained Brogden.

"We were working on a project for a large life insurance company. They needed a way to communicate efficiently and securely with potential clients, but email was not secure and private messaging did not provide a proper audit trail. Rob and I realised that we could combine our enterprise offering with our ideas for a consumer app to create a single platform that would work for both

businesses and consumers. The need for secure email is well established, but solution providers have tended to focus on enterprises and the technology has lacked the simplicity and scalability required to work in the SME and consumer space. Our aim is to provide everyone with their own private space where they can store, send, receive and share communications in private."

The company has been growing at over 100 per cent year-on-year, and as well as managing the effects of Covid-19 it has made preparations for another big impact. "Ahead of Brexit our EU clients wanted to have the assurance that their data would remain in the EU, so we needed to reconfigure our secure environment to work over multiple geographic locations," commented Brogden. "We are now in a position to offer companies a range of choices for data storage – UK, EU or US."

StayPrivate's formula is welcome in a segment of the security market that is up for grabs. "The competition between pure IT MSPs and comms providers who've broadened their offer to include IT products such as private email is where it's going to get interesting," added Barnard. "We aim to open doors for resellers seeking to secure additional much valued recurring revenue opportunities." ■

Top tips on how to get more strategic in 2021 marketing

Brands and marketers are under more pressure to adapt than at any other time. Here, 9 Group's Head of Customer Marketing Louise Abbey provides some tips to help partners evolve their approach to marketing this year.

Planning is critical

The beginning of a new year is the perfect time to define your marketing strategy and to hatch a plan for a successful year ahead. What are you trying to accomplish from your marketing today? Have you got an eye on customer retention? Are you migrating your customers to replacement services ahead of 2025? Or are you positioning yourself to come out on top in a post-pandemic economy? Being clear and realistic about what you're trying to achieve focuses you to deliver real results.

Get creative and be brave

Quick thinking, creativity and a fresh approach are critical as we come to terms with the fact that there is no return to the old world. Marketers need to understand and respond to changes in customer behaviour in order to stay relevant and to maximise results. We've all experienced major changes in our lives, so it stands to reason that the way we consume information has switched up too. User downloads for TikTok increased significantly in 2020. While we're not suggesting that you jump on the latest TikTok dance trend,



Louise Abbey

ambitious brands will be incorporating video into their marketing strategy in 2021. Consumption of content is much more palatable through video, as opposed to heavy emails and lengthy product documentation. It's not an easy nut to crack, but anyone with a phone has the ability to create video content these days and the usage is only going in one direction.

Don't allow Covid-19 to dominate your messaging

It's important that you don't anchor every customer communication in the pandemic. The changes we've all endured are here to stay; and the home working solutions you were pitching in March will become the mainstay for some customers. It is important to remain sensitive to the current climate and your messaging should reflect this. We should also begin to make way for some of the opportunities in the channel over the coming years.

Innovate and look to the future

We've witnessed a period of real innovation in the tech

space with leading brands racing to respond to new user requirements. Alongside this extraordinary period of innovation, the channel is preparing for one of the most significant periods of change in its history, through the switch-off of the copper network. But many resellers are still sitting tight.

The deadline looms and Openreach is now underway with its phased approach to introduce WLR stop-sell at specific exchanges. Those who stand still risk being left behind – and scare tactics rarely work. A supportive, reassuring approach which aims to inform and educate will be received well.

Focus on relationships

By providing real value when your customers need you most you can build and nurture lasting relationships that will stand the test of time. Be supportive and lend a listening ear to understand their needs rather than push a sales agenda, and help existing customers get the most out of the services they have today.

Lean on your service provider

Service provider partners should offer marketing support and advice through specifically targeted programmes. These may include a library of communications which aim to address some of the current customer pain points, and new media to fit with how people consume information today. ■

The Channel's 2021 Opportunities Start Here



Julie Mills, CEO of Support to Win

I won't waste your time telling you what you already know about 2020. Covid. Uncertainty. Lockdown. Disruption. Suffering. Fear.

But is negativity the whole story? I hesitate to ask in case of upsetting anyone, but it's a very valid question: "Has this year been ALL bad?"

Well, in terms of our industry as a whole, no it hasn't. Together we have been sorely tested. But together this comms community has found deep reserves of resilience it never knew it had.

And in the year we mourned the passing of Dame Barbara Windsor, it is as if we've collectively made a feature-length big screen tribute of our own: Carry On Communicating!

That's what we've all been doing for the UK economy – ensuring the heartbeat of business is pumped with the lifeblood of communications.

This is critical because, once growth returns in spring and summer, there will be huge opportunities to ramp up sales and help customers accelerate their digital transformation.

Just 12 months ago, market understanding of cloud-based UC technology was light years behind what it is now. Since then, business customers have been adopting it in droves.

But comms resellers haven't been having it all their own way. There is increased competition from IT-centric partners (e.g. with Microsoft background) for whom telephony is the missing piece of their puzzle.

My top prediction for 2021 is that the chief beneficiaries of all this growth will be providers and partners with the flexibility to innovate their businesses at pace and scale.

Here's how Support to Win believes you can achieve it in the coming year

An ambitious, sustainable sales strategy

Sales teams need a clear, compelling offer for potential customers, and rich new services to upsell the existing base. They need confidence that the orders they book are rapidly and efficiently converted through greater use of automated and remote/virtual processes in data discovery, onboarding and provisioning.

More technical expertise where it counts

Digital transformation is top of the business agenda, so being able to speak the language of technology in the context of business objectives is critical. The output is invariably a need for integration expertise and a strong capability in project managing complex implementations and migrations – particularly as it relates to the Microsoft universe. Challenging technical requirements should be embraced as a great opportunity, not an obstacle to collecting revenue.

Relentless customer-centricity

Customers are looking for a high quality service experience that begins the moment they sign up. Churn is a constant threat, so service levels, training and in-life support should be thought of as profit centres rather than cost centres.

Baker's on the rise

With one acquisition under her belt Chalvington Group Managing Director Claire Baker has ramped up her strategic growth plans with a major focus on controlled buy-and-build expansion.

Baker joined the family business after gaining a BA Hons in Business Studies at university. "Who knew back then that it would become my life," she stated. "My only experience was working in the mobiles department at Racal Telecom in Reading for one year during a university placement."

Chalvington Group began life 35 years ago when Baker's father set up MB Computer Services. He established a telecoms arm 15 years later, called Chalvington Communications, and Baker joined the business two months after the two independent companies were merged in 2012, operating under the Chalvington Group banner. "Joining the companies together was a major milestone," stated Baker. "It allowed us to promote a fully converged experience and took us to the next level of solution provision."

Former Abtec Managing Director Anthony Beard joined the business in 2017 and within two years became a Director in recognition of his significant sales, technical and processing expertise. "I had kissed plenty of frogs in my quest for suitable Directors to help me grow the business following my father's semi-retirement," stated Baker. "Anthony understands categorically what it means to run a small business and the intricacies

that go with it. His career started as an engineer moving on to a support desk manager role and then owning his business, which he successfully ran and sold as a going concern. When he re-entered the industry three years ago to join us and help take the company forward, I had finally found my prince, not my frog!"

Hailsham-based Chalvington Group employs 32 staff, with the majority having a ten-plus year tenure. The company generated £3.8 million turnover in its last financial year (its most profitable year to date) and has 1,500 customers across the south east ranging from two to 150 users. Chalvington's key technology partners include Wildix, Ericsson-LG, Sophos, HikVision, and the company is a Microsoft Silver Partner.

Cloud growth

"We are seeing massive growth in private cloud solutions and struggling to keep up with the installations," said Baker. "All of the prospects we were contacting about the ISDN turn-off and working from home remotely, and who wanted to hold off making the jump to cloud technology, are now contacting us. They are desperate for the flexibility our solutions can provide."

Chalvington's strategy to bring in new business received a boost with its acquisition of Chipping



Claire Baker

We will look for our next acquisition imminently now that we have cut our teeth on the Tendit base

Onga located comms provider Tendit Services in November last year. The deal strengthened Chalvington's regional influence in Essex and north London and expands its customer base. The new office location also enables a more seamless service delivery across the south. "The possibilities for our increased customer base and our financial projections for the coming year look promising, with further company developments planned for the not-too distant future," commented Baker.

"We always stayed clear of acquisitions as we didn't

want to get so big we lost the personal touch. But the acquisition of Tendit changed this attitude – we decided to grow this way but in small controlled steps. We will look for our next acquisition imminently now that we have cut our teeth on the Tendit base.

"Another priority is bringing our in-house systems inline to make us more efficient. We are working with an outsourced development team to help us with this project. Lockdown gave us time to spend on this and it was a great opportunity to get our ducks in line for future growth."

Just a minute with Claire Baker...

Role models: My parents. They came from extremely humble backgrounds and their drive and determination to succeed has shaped my life. I know what hard work looks like and I'm not afraid of it.

What do you fear most? Losing my parents.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I was a county swimming champion.

Best piece of advice you have been given? Always remember that yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery and today is a gift.

Who do you admire most in the channel: Zen Chairman Richard Tang.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing? Event organising.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady; Donald Trump so that Margaret could put him firmly in his place; and Madonna just to make it a bit more controversial.

Industry bugbear: Stamp out ADSL and ensure we have the correct infrastructure in place to provide robust connectivity.

Your biggest achievement? My father handing me the reins of his much loved company for the trusted day-to-day running.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My strength is empathy, but my weaknesses are FOMO and I'm a bit of a control freak. I need to step back.

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Straight-talking Selley on

The somewhat fractious relationship Openreach has with the ICT channel brings to mind the Monty Python sketch in *The Life of Brian*, when disaffected Palestinians ask the question 'what have the Romans ever done for us?'

CEO Clive Selley rarely speaks at channel events, but his admiration for Zen Internet, and the partnership he has with the North West-based ISP, led to a keynote slot at the company's Life Reconnected partner event streamed live to over 200 partners across the UK last month. The Python analogy was illustrated perfectly by a candid assessment of his company's fibre roll out plan which will be music to the ears of comms provider's seeking to give customers some light at the end of the dark economic tunnel caused by coronavirus, Brexit and an increasingly divided Britain.

With 35,000 employees under his wing, Selley says Openreach's ambition is to deliver full fibre connectivity to every home and business in the UK and believes the resulting societal changes will be 'life changing' and as big as when the railways first came to Britain. He hopes he will get the financial support he needs from Government – alongside the critical regulatory enablers such as the expectation of a fair return on investment over a reasonable time - to fulfil his and Boris Johnson's toned down aims to fully fibre the UK by 2025 and accelerate the current FTTP roll out to three million homes a year, a million increase on current figures.

And Selley clearly believes more Government investment



Clive Selley

We will be at four and a half million premises by March, but there are 32 million homes in the UK so there's loads more ahead of us than behind us

in fibre will deliver a faster and more timely impact on the UK's worrying economic outlook than long-term infrastructure projects such as HS2. Here are the highlights of his keynote...

Is the FTTP roll out on track?

"We plan to deliver full fibre infrastructure, past 20 million homes and business premises in the UK, somewhere between the mid and late 2020s. I'd like to do that by 2025, but that will come down to a number of things. One is

our ability to scale our build machine and the other is my ability to access capital. It'll be four million by Christmas. I have promised myself and explained that promise to my team. And adoption of the platform is now progressing at pace as well. We're approaching three quarters of a million live customers on our FTTP platform.

"We will be at four and a half million premises by March, but there are 32 million homes in the UK so there's loads more ahead of us than behind us. We have

encouraged many service providers like Zen, who are early adopters, to take up our fibre to the premise service. And there's a huge schedule of additional exchanges that will take us to two million of the population of the UK being fibre only exchange areas by December 2021. There will be a few exceptions and we will work on those with partner companies like Zen.

Will fibre go to the countryside?

"The cheap and quick way to deliver full fibre is to build it

only in the metropolitan areas of the UK. It is just cheaper per premise past to do that. My aim is to do it in a fairer way, and to balance the bills. I made a formal and public commitment to Ofcom to kick off a rural programme to build 3.2 million homes past - that's 10 per cent of the homes in the UK - by 2025 in a commercial programme, so no Government subsidy. We're building roughly a third of our footprint in the hard to reach places."

Is there an FTTP selection criteria?

"We have specific policies on how we choose footprint. If you're getting 80 meg on VDSL, it's not such an imperative as it would be if you're in a lot slower speed area. So, the kind of selection criteria are – is it a 'not spot' for Openreach meaning an area that we don't have reasonable VDSL coverage or reasonable VDSL speeds? They go to the top of the list. And there are a bunch of other ones. We want to cover all the big cities, so they'll always be in the list, it's just a question of what sequence we do the exchanges. We have a bunch of algorithms for figuring out likely rates of adoption. I want a national build that doesn't just do all the cities first. In rural, I'm building more expensively than in cities, but I'm doing that consciously."

Channel relationships

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engineers and technicians and they are accountable to you. They build the infrastructure that you use, they provision services on your instruction, and they repair when something goes wrong. The communications providers we serve are extensive now with 660 partners in all, ranging from enormous ones like BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Vodafone, through to medium sized ones and a very long tail of small ones. I value the Zen partnership, I learned from them and from their partners. Partnership for me means you are helping me get better so that what I do for you is better for your customers. That's my aspiration."

Update on provisioning issues

"We have a long way to go in terms of cracking the basic engineering processes for slick, efficient and timely provisioning. We are very focused on improving. Help us figure out what's wrong; help us figure out what would make it better and do that in partnership with us. Zen has been doing that. Partners can help because often an FTTP service delivers a gig or half a gig at the modem, but around the premise customers may not experience that speed. So, I'd ask the partners to help educate the end customer. You need to use Wi-Fi extenders to get a signal round the premises.

"My challenge with partners is to quickly refine the processes because they involve going into customer homes. That process has been made a lot tougher with Covid. We've a lot of work to do there. But we are committed to doing it and getting it right."

HS2 or full fibre?

"I think railway infrastructure is important. I just happen to think HS2 is really expensive. With a railway you put your billions in for years and years and nothing happens, there's no railway. The great thing about fibre is if you spend a hundred million pounds on building infrastructure this month, tens of thousands of homes get fibre that didn't have it at the beginning of the month. It's hugely good value for money for the nation. When I speak to digital minister Matt Warman, I will not be criticising HS2, I will be merely pointing out that the country gets a much better return if it bets on fibre."

The discontinuation of copper

"We're in a transition from copper to fibre. We've invested £14 billion over 10 years. That's an average of £1.4 billion a year. This year, I will invest more than £2 billion. When we cover 75 per cent of an exchange area, and there are 5,500 thousand exchanges in the UK, we are declaring, with a bit of notice, a stop-sell on copper services. We've just done the first one in Salisbury and we'll do Mildenhall in May next year, and there's a huge schedule of additional exchanges that will take us to two million people in the UK being in these fibre-only exchange areas by December 2021. There will be some exceptions, but I want them to be small."

The impact of full fibre

"The Centre for Economic and Business Research predicts that if we were to fibre the UK in five years the impact on GDP would be £59 billion. Never has the UK needed that kind

of boost more than today. This is the equivalent of railways from the 19th century, or airports from the 20th century. What the country needs now is a world class, world beating digital infrastructure. We know how to build it, we have to just crack on with doing it and we have to accelerate. It will generate a big boost to the economy and has other important societal benefits. For example, carers who find it not possible to go out to work can do some work from home. It also has a levelling up effect. No longer is it necessary to migrate to the cities to pursue careers and get the best jobs. In a fibre enabled UK, you will be able to do that from the villages and hamlets halfway up a mountain. Rural communities on the wrong side of the digital divide will benefit and it will also have a positive effect on those who live in cities because they will become less crowded."

5G or full fibre?

"The future is fibre. I remain convinced of that. I'm an engineer by background, I study mobile technology. I think fibre will win in terms of pace of roll out and long-term capability and reliability."

Is G.Fast going?

"No, G.Fast will be there for the long haul because it can offer ultra-fast speeds. I think its target area might evolve over time. I would not be surprised if we used it on even shorter copper loop areas such as inside multi-dwelling units and blocks of flats, particularly where the landlord doesn't give us permission to fibre up the risers and across the ceilings, which they don't all do." ■

Zen CEO on creating magic – p30

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ITS accelerates full fibre

One year ago wholesale network operator ITS Technology Group set about fast tracking its full fibre roll out programme boosted by a £45 million Aviva Investors deal. Now, with a strengthened leadership team in place and an expanding channel presence the company is poised to emphatically exert its influence as a primary market player in 2021 and beyond, according to CEO Daren Baythorpe.

The acceleration of ITS's fibre roll out strategy is based on the efficient reuse of public and private infrastructure and collaboration with its partner network to identify areas of greatest demand. "This approach allows us to connect more customers to full fibre far quicker than the industry norm," stated Baythorpe. "With BT's public switched telephone and copper network switch-off plans now in progress, the race to build alternative futureproof full fibre IP-based networks is on to ensure coverage and choice for end users."

Having recently launched a full fibre network along the Fylde Coast in Lancashire, ITS currently operates networks across areas including Bristol, East Midlands, Greater Manchester, North Wales, the North East and South East including London. "I took leadership of ITS in early 2018 and focused on reshaping the business," added Baythorpe. "This has created a strong foundation for this next phase of our growth. Working with Aviva gives us considerable financial backing to further flex our reuse muscles and continue to take advantage of the opportunities ahead."



Daren Baythorpe

While 2033 might be the new target for Ofcom and Openreach, we aren't taking our foot off the pedal

In October last year the alternative network operator strengthened its senior management team and delivery capabilities to fulfil a growing pipeline of full fibre projects across the UK. Mike Goodwin joined ITS from CityFibre's FibreNation to take on a newly created position as Head of Network Architecture and Operations. ITS also recruited telecoms heavyweight Darren Shenkin as Director of Strategy & Innovation. His prior roles

include stints at Hyperoptic, Community Fibre, Plusnet and BT. As part of its recruitment drive ITS increased its partner development and technical teams including fibre designers and planners. Baythorpe said: "Time is of the essence in the race to a gigabit capable UK and having the right people driving this is vital."

A week before the UK was placed into nationwide lockdown in March 2020,

Baythorpe addressed 100 businesses in the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester. His message to partners was one of innovating and tearing up the rule book. And in this context he launched ITS's Faster Britain full fibre network. "Despite the Covid-19 pandemic 2020 was ITS's most formative year of growth," stated Baythorpe. "ITS's channel community has grown to over 150 partners and encompasses a

traditional reseller and newly launched wholesale channel."

Partners have access to all of the company's networks as layer 1 (dark fibre), layer 2 (wholesale) or as a fully managed layer 3 (active) connection. And ITS's full fibre is available across many UK regions including, West London, Greenwich, Blackpool, Nottingham, Hereford, Bristol, Tameside as well as its more recent Faster Britain network builds in Preston and Scunthorpe. "Securing the £45 million deal with Aviva Investors enabled us to accelerate plans to build our Faster Britain full fibre networks across the UK, as well as position ITS as a key player for helping the Government meet its full fibre promise following the copper switch-off," added Baythorpe. "The business built its strong position from its approach to reuse and PIA.

"My aim is to strengthen all aspects and create a strong foundation for our next phase of growth. This includes a commitment to contributing to the Government's full fibre to every premise agenda, and through our reuse approach we're looking forward to the year ahead and connecting more of our partners'

roll out

customers to full fibre far quicker than the current industry norm. We know the importance of alternative network providers in helping the Government reach its full fibre target, and we know the role we can play. Through our use of code powers, PIA and strong relationships, we are still working to our own five year build objectives. While 2033 might be the new target for Ofcom and Openreach, we aren't taking our foot off the pedal."

Key programme

To speed things along ITS launched its Vantage programme last year, a partner-led scheme for installing fibre where partners have an existing customer base on legacy copper or expensive fibre products, looking for better more affordable full fibre solutions. It's an approach that has set the business up well for 2021, believes Baythorpe.

"Our approach to working with partners is proactive," he added. "It is about listening to partners and helping address their challenges, rather than them responding to us. By understanding a partner's strategy we then develop at pace and help them win in the marketplace.

"Partners want to know where they can sell our Faster Britain network, and we want to talk to them about how we can develop network solutions for them. It's that synergy that helps them to drive efficiencies in their base. It also helps us to determine where we build, manage and operate our network. Whether it's a reseller or an MNO looking for backhaul, we are open to those conversations."

Baythorpe is no stranger to the full fibre market. He was previously Managing Director of Openreach's Business and Corporate Delivery division, working at a time when altnet entrants such as Hyperoptic and CityFibre were new to the scene, and he's well aware of what's required to be successful, especially attuned to the importance of a strong leadership team. In addition to recruiting Shenkin and Goodwin, Baythorpe pulled in ex-Partner Channel Director at NTT Kevin McNulty as Strategic Relationship Director; and Dave Ferry as Business Development Director, who joined from Virgin Media Business where he was Head of SME.

The launch of ITS Wholesale, the appointment of channel stalwart Philip Lee, and a new API and portal were also key milestones last year, according to Baythorpe, who reiterated the importance of relationships in building Digital Britain. "Strategic relationships with companies like Daisy Communications have seen multiple Faster Britain campaigns and a burgeoning partnership targeting the business community," he added.

"For example, our recently signed partnership with connectivity provider 4th Utility enables it to take ultrafast connectivity to more than 500,000 premises over the next three years. Partnerships like this, 70 per cent growth in employee numbers during the last year and an ongoing recruitment drive to service our growing network and partner community are statements of intent that firmly plant ITS as a key player in the UK reseller and wholesale market." ■



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A purposeful advantage

Reimagining business performance beyond profit for a strategic and moral advantage is key to future success, according to Adam Cathcart, Managing Director of 9's Partner division.

Channel organisations that adopt a non-conventional people-first approach to performance metrics will thrive on the foundations of their greater purpose, believes Cathcart. He observes a trend to reinvent business by pursuing purpose as well as profit, and says that the full impact of decisions on staff, customers, suppliers, the community and the environment should be positively assessed.

"Profit over purpose is the conventional approach that has driven most businesses for decades," stated Cathcart. "Business schools historically led with lessons on how to achieve profit maximisation, and success is often determined by the bottom line alone. As an entrepreneurial business, 9 has always had the freedom and the drive to combine profit and purpose. We are a people-first organisation and one of our greatest strengths is that we recognise the power of inclusion.

"Our teams have a voice and we support them to back meaningful causes and to affect real change within our organisation, the channel and society. This includes regular charitable initiatives, shaping more inclusive and progressive internal policies and initiating societal change on a larger scale."

In dissecting the moral influence of their businesses

Cathcart urges all leaders to fully consider their organisation's purposefulness and diversity status. "By raising awareness of the lack of inclusivity and diversity in the channel we've made a tangible impact and inspired others to join the discussion," added Cathcart. "The time and effort we placed on this initiative was not driven by profit, but through a genuine desire to do the right thing and to make a positive change."

Factors relating to the running of a business, its environmental footprint and approach to diversity are all indicators of long-term sustainability, says Cathcart. "We've woven these approaches into our processes and measures for success for many years," he added. "Topics around social responsibility form part of our leadership discussions each and every month as well as our regular communications to staff.

"This year, more than ever, a human approach has been critical to the success of UK businesses. Covid-19 is widespread and has impacted us all in ways we could never have predicted. We've adapted our policies to fit with the ever-changing background of the pandemic and taken a careful approach to communication with our teams and partners, with an eye on mental health and wellbeing. During lockdown we needed to dial up our



Adam Cathcart

Topics around social responsibility form part of our leadership discussions each and every month

communications to ensure that teams and partners felt included and supported."

Community matters

9 Group urges colleagues to 'do their bit' and support local communities and has launched a charity initiative with Age UK. All staff are encouraged to give their time to speak with an elderly person in their area who may be lonely. "This allowed us to give something back to society and to create an environment where open discussion about mental health is encouraged, so nobody suffers in silence," added Cathcart.

"As well as ensuring that our own policies focus on 9's social responsibility, we

hold regular consultations with partners. The topic of recruitment comes up repeatedly. Many struggle to recruit and they seek help with advertising to potential candidates. During these conversations we are keen to highlight the benefit of purpose over profit, sharing our positive experiences around diversity and how making small changes can attract a broader and richer collection of candidates.

"By shaping your values around a genuine aspiration to make a positive contribution to the world, you'll naturally attract good people who share your vision. These people will inspire your teams and can affect real change

within your organisation and more widely."

It is true that profit is binary and therefore straightforward to measure, whereas purpose is more ambiguous, making it a challenge to incorporate into KPIs. "This shouldn't be a barrier," said Cathcart. "While it can be tough to report on these factors, by taking small steps to become a more socially conscious company the benefits quickly become evident."

But none of these efforts will count for anything if they just sit in the category of a token effort. "Box ticking doesn't work when culture and ethics are in play," added Cathcart. "Give your teams freedom to support causes that matter. Enable your leadership team to introduce changes that reflect today's world. Even small changes can make a difference and should be celebrated. Have an open mind and accept that things rarely stand still and all people from all backgrounds can provide a welcome perspective on what matters.

"Our inclusive culture is one of our greatest strengths. While we're confident in our approach, we're conscious that the world around us is changing all the time. An agile approach and a communicative nature allows us to stay close to what matters and to identify ways in which we can really help and support our colleagues and our partners." ■

Optimistic outlooks

Seeing both their sales and marketing teams being recognised at the Comms Dealer Sales & Marketing Awards last month gave Pragma's co-founders Tim Brooks and Will Morey a festive boost after a challenging year. We asked them how they overcame these challenges and why they believe their new Candio digital services business will give partners big margins in 2021.

So guys, 2020 – a year to forget?

Tim: It's been the most challenging year, but the Pragma team and our partners together have been delivering great solutions that have helped businesses across Britain keep communicating and operating.

Will: Our portfolio really came into its own this year. Ericsson-LG provided a seamless upgrade path from our on-premise solutions to cloud and our Web Listings services helped over 35,000 businesses update and manage their online presence and embrace online business models.

What was most painful for partners?

Tim: The first lockdown when most sales and installation services had to stop. But partners quickly adapted to meet the challenges and undoubted opportunities in the market.

Will: Keeping their teams happy and healthy and able to continue to deliver first-class services when working from home. The resellers who did this best were the ones who used their own experiences and shared these with the customer.

What help from you went down best?

Will: We delivered a video-based remote

installation services and free monthly licencing which went down really well, as you can imagine.

Tim: We also provided a range of digital tools to make lead generation, quoting and service delivery easier than ever.

Has Pragma's growth been affected?

Tim: Not surprisingly our growth this year has been flat but on the flip side our recurring revenues have leapt with the growth in iPECS Cloud and the launch of Candio, our white label digital services business.

Has the pandemic made things a lot cloudier?

Tim: Definitely. The shift to cloud was significant last year, and we are seeing more iPECS customers choosing cloud than ever before.

Will: With iPECS, our partners were well positioned for all the challenges the pandemic threw at them and were able to easily turn on applications to support home working and collaboration.

Does that mean hasta la vista to your on-premise solutions?

Tim: Absolutely not. Our on-premise PBX business remains strong, and a clear product roadmap combined with integration into our cloud platform means that



Tim Brooks and Will Morey

many customers still opt for an iPECS UCP delivered as an appliance-based solution or virtualised.

Will: Customers clearly want more than just basic telephony, and UC and collaboration sits at the heart of our platforms.

Was Panasonic's withdrawal a surprise?

Will: Hardly. Having an on-premise only PBX proposition was a limited strategy, however I don't think that means there is no future for the PBX.

Tim: There are still many reasons why businesses would prefer an on-premise PBX platform, but they need the reassurance of investment protection and the ability to move to cloud when it suits them.

Isn't Web Listings a bit left of field for the channel?

Tim: You could say that, but it's been an enormous

success for our partners. Resellers saw some decline in recurring revenue as they moved from traditional ISDN services to SIP and were looking for ways to increase profitable recurring revenue.

Will: Web Listings puts customers in control of their online information and makes sure that regardless of which platform a customer chooses to engage with them on, they have a consistent and simple experience.

Is this quite revolutionary for the channel?

Tim: It absolutely is and there's more. We've now launched a new business called Candio which is all about bringing white label subscription-based services to the channel positioned at a low price point. This approach enables resellers to deliver services at low cost through their monthly billing and secure strong recurring revenues at 50 per cent margin.

Will: Our latest Candio service, Website Optimiser, enables a business to completely understand, manage and optimise website performance for less than £10 per month. It makes sure a website is operating at peak performance combining search engine optimisation, security, competitor benchmarking and uptime monitoring into a single simple interface.

Why should partners embrace Candio?

Will: Because it brings highly profitable recurring revenues and a differentiated product that adds value to customers.

Tim: This combination makes for a killer proposition and explains the phenomenal growth that we have seen in the last 12 months.

Predictions for 2021?

Tim: Partners will continue to see significant growth in 2021 as businesses develop their infrastructure and business models to be digital-first and flexible. The last 12 months have shown us the importance that technology plays in our lives and our workplaces.

Will: Businesses like Arcadia that fail to adapt to the new world pay a significant price. Resellers are positioned to help organisations of all sizes to meet challenges and embrace opportunities. ■

How Gamma champions

Lip service and mere cultural mood music will do nothing to advance the spread of greater diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the channel. What we need are real world examples of inspirational D&I champions. Enter Gamma's Chief People Officer Suzie Woodhams, who has D&I at the top of her agenda.

Comms Dealer always seeks to champion shining examples that reveal the real human and business benefits of greater equality, diversity and inclusion in business and beyond. Why? Because industry research and discussion alone will not solve the channel's diversity and inclusion deficit. It needs a real-world leadership and cultural stimulus, and Gamma has ingrained this prerequisite into its very identity...

How is Gamma's diversity and inclusion culture reflected in strategy?

Having a diverse and inclusive culture not only fits with who we are and want to be as a company, but also matches our set of values which encourage employees to aim high, consider others, think differently and be stronger together. These are key components of our 2020-2023 People Plan, and we are working hard on our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I)

strategy. We have also been working for some time on reducing gender disparity as part of our work on the gender pay gap. Early last year we established our new Learning & Organisational Development Team and we are currently hiring a Learning & Organisational Development Manager who will bring new insights and skills specifically on this topic.

How does Gamma's leadership structure drive diversity and inclusion in the business?

Our Board has taken huge steps to promote D&I within the leadership structure. Over the years we have moved from having an all male Board to having two women Non-Executive Directors. Moreover, we recognise the importance of having a more diverse and inclusive leadership team in order to lead by example from the top down, and we are working on this as part of our ED&I plan.



Suzie Woodhams

Enabling people of all genders, ethnicities and disabilities to access the same opportunities for personal and professional growth is fundamental to show that success is not only achievable by one category of individuals, but by all

Why must success models in the channel change and how are you redefining the long-established male orientated success role model in the ICT sector?

A more diverse and inclusive success model in the channel would surely benefit the whole industry. The channel

has traditionally been regarded as something of a boys club, and while we see more examples of women breaking through in this environment there is still a long way to go. Diversity is a strength, and as such, it should be encouraged and supported in all

businesses. Enabling people of all genders, ethnicities and disabilities to access the same opportunities for personal and professional growth is fundamental to show that success is not only achievable by one category of individuals, but by all. The first step is to get women

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diversity and inclusion

interested in this sector and to show that this is an industry they can thrive in just as much as men. Our female employees often have the chance to speak at our roadshows and events, and they have done an amazing job at that. It's something we are keen to continue promoting and supporting as part of our strategy.

How does Gamma encourage young people from all backgrounds to consider technology as a career?

Gamma has been working with the Education Business Partnership for over a year as part of our Hi-Tech Horizons initiative. The programme helps to raise awareness of the hi-tech sector and the opportunities within it in a way that is understandable to young people, influences their career choices and helps them develop important, relevant work-related skills. As part of the initiative we have visited schools in the Reading area and met up with Year 8 students to help inspire them to think about working in a high-tech organisation like Gamma.

We break the students into smaller groups and run an exercise aimed at challenging their ability to put a basic process together, while working in a group of peers that they may not be familiar with. Some of the key challenges were around communication and team working skills. The students were able to identify that the team with the best results worked more collaboratively and were stronger together. It also helped to demonstrate the technical and non-technical skills that are required to work in most organisations.

What were the main challenges you encountered while working with students?

This wasn't only challenging for the students, it also posed some challenges for the volunteers from Gamma as every group was different. We had to find creative ways to ensure everyone was included. Some were vocal, at times distracting, and we had to find ways of keeping the group focused. For other groups, we needed to motivate them more to get involved and to think differently about their approach and set higher goals. The feedback from students showed how we opened their eyes to the power of inclusion, leadership potential and teamwork. Our key challenge this year is being able to run this session remotely, which will (if all goes well) allow us to reach more students over a shorter timeframe. We are also going to run sessions with Year 10s.

How have your recruitment policies changed and in what ways are you recruiting for a more diverse workforce?

Our job descriptions and adverts contain gender-neutral language and we promote balanced shortlists and diverse interview panels where possible. We have also had the opportunity to host professor Professor Haifa Takruri-Rizk from the University of Salford to speak with recruiters in our Manchester office about her 20-plus years research. She provided our teams with valuable tips and guidance on recruitment which they were able to implement in their day-to-day job.

How do you leverage technology to drive greater diversity and inclusion in your business?

Our own technology and solutions, such as Collaborate, can help us drive greater D&I by allowing

employees to work from any location that suits them best. Having remote working tools widens our talent pool while also opening the door for people with disabilities that might not be able to work from an office. Remote working solutions also facilitate a greater work-life balance for all those women who might need it to look after their children or loved one. Of course, technology is only one part of the equation. But collaboration and communication solutions are at the core of what we do and we've been leveraging those for some time to provide a positive, as well as a diverse, working environment.

What first moves enabled you to stride out on your diversity and inclusion journey?

The most important aspect of driving diversity and inclusion in a business is a commitment from the

top. We have a supportive leadership team who understand the importance of D&I and supports our initiatives to enhance it.

Over the years we have also adopted more creative and different approaches to diversity and inclusion. Women are obviously less represented in the technology sector, particularly in leadership roles. We wanted to think about and address this issue differently, so we trialled a novel forum theatre style of coaching in our Leadership Presence for Women programme. This involved the use of actors as well as group coaching.

As a result of this approach we have seen a real difference to participant's personal growth, with some going on to achieve senior roles, including a director position. This can be a great way for businesses to start their D&I journey. ■

What diversity and inclusion means to me...

Sara Sheikh, Product Manager, Gamma

I have been in many meetings where I was the only person of colour and female. It is a symptom of decades of social behaviour, yet this has never intimidated me or held me back. I wish I could put it down to my strength, but the truth is I have never had to.

I work in an environment where my different perspective is considered a strength. It has never crossed my mind that my opinion would be less valued than another. The fact is, we are not all the same – we are in large part a product of our backgrounds – and my



Sara Sheikh

priorities are very different to the people around me. That is also true of our customer base. And in an age where

the customer's voice is stronger than ever, a failure to represent that diversity in your teams is at the

very least business suicide. Things are changing in the communications industry, but it will take time. ■

Challenger measures up

It is a measure of Challenger Mobile Communications' great agility that it could evolve from pagers to full-blown ICT solution delivery. Therein lies its strength and potential, believes Managing Director Jeff Eamens.

Any business in a fast moving marketplace can swiftly become out of date if it does not keep pace and target growth, not simply through sales of the current product portfolio, but also by introducing additional products to complement the offering. For example, in November Challenger added Trakm8's telematics and vehicle camera portfolio to its fleet management solutions ahead of the introduction of London's Direct Vision Standard (DVS). The new standard will require the majority of HGVs driving through central London to add additional sources of indirect vision to avoid fines.

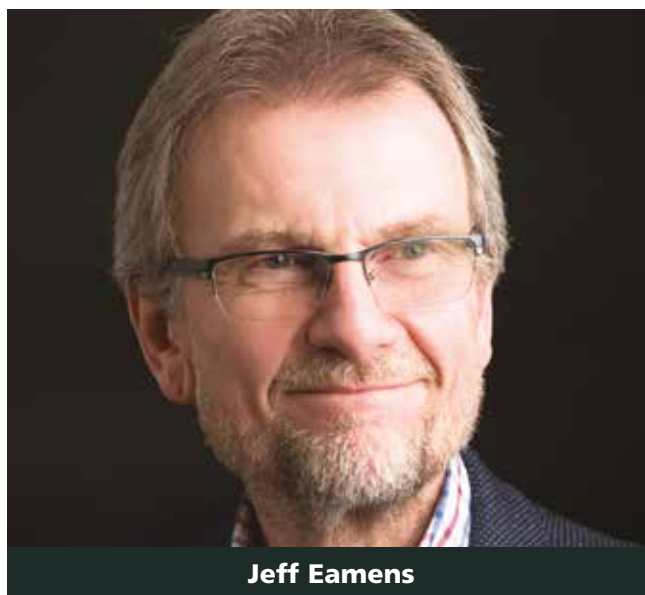
"Similar regulations are expected to come into force in other cities and regions in the future, increasing the importance of fleets having a robust set of telematics solutions," said Eamens. "Challenger has offered tracking services for many years but this has always been one of the smaller parts of our business. Now we see great potential for growth in this sector, given the efficiency, safety and reliability gains such systems can offer. I always keep my eye on the latest tech and ideas in the industry. The trick is finding the add that the customer wants."

Eamens was a mechanical engineer for 11 years before grasping an opportunity to sell radio pagers and then

setting up Challenger, along with Wayne Skellon, in 1991 in response to the explosion in demand for high quality business communications. Since then, the company has gone from strength to strength and is now one of the largest independent B2B telecoms specialists in the UK and one of O2's top five partners nationally. In 1991 it was clear that mobiles would be the logical evolution and next big thing, so Eamens co-founded Challenger to supply the market with what it demanded. In April 2019 he led a management buyout and Challenger became a truly independent business with a refreshed set of goals. "The MBO enabled us to move in the right direction with nothing to hold us back," he stated.

But the biggest change for Challenger came in 2009 when it went into revenue share with O2. "This was a game changer for the industry and we have never looked back," explained Eamens. "More recently we have taken part in some exciting projects including our involvement with ITS and its Faster Britain fibre roll out. We are able to offer our neighbours on the Deeside Industrial Park a fast and reliable full fibre broadband product, where before the options were scarce and expensive.

"Furthermore, to see so many businesses embrace flexible working successfully



Jeff Eamens

To see so many businesses embrace flexible working successfully has been the silver lining to a difficult 2020

in March has been the silver lining to a difficult 2020. We must embrace technology, and the Covid-19 lockdown has forced many companies into this sooner than they would have done otherwise. Finding efficiencies using social media and AI are a must if we are to compete, but never underestimate the value of conversation."

Key partners

Challenger offers a range of telecoms solutions. As mentioned it is a key O2 partner and works closely with EE and Vodafone. The company also provides VoIP systems, tracking solutions, landlines and broadband

along with digital products such as Office 365 and MaaS360. Its customers range from sole trader individual accounts to multi-national companies.

"Starting Challenger is by far my greatest achievement to date because I was always a bit of a rebel, and found it awkward working for other people in sales who put making money above everything else," added Eamens. "Being in business is about getting the best from people and bringing out the best in them, we are all capable of greatness in some field, we just need to find which one it is." ■

Just a minute with Jeff Eamens..

Role models: Richard Branson, who started from nothing, was dyslexic and had no real qualifications, yet managed to build one of the most vibrant and exciting British businesses.

What do you fear most?

Nothing at all. I live for each day and have never worried about anything.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know:

I am reclusive when not in work and socially awkward, which is strange as I chose a career that involves meeting lots of people.

Your main strength and what could you work on?

Getting the best out of people is a strong point. But I can be a little soft and sometimes people take advantage.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing?

I would be working with my hands as I am very practical and can turn my hand to most tasks.

Name three ideal dinner guests:

The economist Steve Keen: I admire his work on how the economy functions; Elon Musk: Tesla is the best company in the world; and Albert Einstein: Probably the greatest mind that ever lived.

Best piece of advice you have been given?

My dad taught me to lead by example. Often this means being first in, last out and being engaged in whatever task you're undertaking. Get up early, clean your overalls, polish your shoes, do each task quickly and, when done, ask for more.

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NEVA - Agent Automation Made Easy

If you are a reseller looking after businesses with contact centre agents who perform repetitive tasks then, no matter what their size, they will benefit from using NEVA.

NEVA stands for NICE Employee Virtual Attendant, but your customers can choose a new name for it if they want. It is the technology and the results created by this leading example of attended Robotic Process Automation (RPA) that counts.

Just as we rely on virtual assistants at home to wake us up, play our favourite music, check the weather and give us the news headlines, NEVA works with contact centre agents to alleviate mundane tasks while keeping a close eye on business goals.

Too many businesses are finding themselves bogged down by repetitive, mundane but entirely necessary and often compliant tasks. Their tedious nature can lead to stressful backlogs and human error, which can cause further issues, such as failure to meet SLAs, reach KPIs or a rise in complaints. Not only is this demotivating for the employee but it is precious time away from looking after the customer. What's the answer? First, you need

to understand what RPA is.

What is RPA?

RPA is software that can be easily programmed to carry out basic, repetitive tasks across multiple applications. It sounds like a nirvana and it is, plus it's a growing trend that businesses are happy to buy into. Forrester predicts the RPA market will have reached \$2.9 billion as we enter 2021, up

from \$250 million five years ago, and is due to almost double by 2025. RPA processes can be provided at an 'unattended' or back-office level where there is no human intervention required. This helps with high volume and low value processes that need to be carried out accurately and at speed.

'Attended' or front-office RPA is where NEVA comes in and it's

not just for enterprise organisations. Companies with 50 or more agents can benefit from this technology.

How does NEVA work?

NEVA is all about supporting the agent, in real-time, whether it be automating a task on behalf of the agent or guiding the agents towards the next best action, during a live customer interaction. When it comes to automating tasks on behalf of the agent, NEVA can copy and paste, create call summary notes, do calculations, verification checks, and so much more!

NEVA keeps an eye on the employee's desktop actions and is ready to assist with tasks where human judgement is not required, as and when the agent needs support. These tasks are automated and are therefore completed faster and more accurately than even the best member of staff could manage.

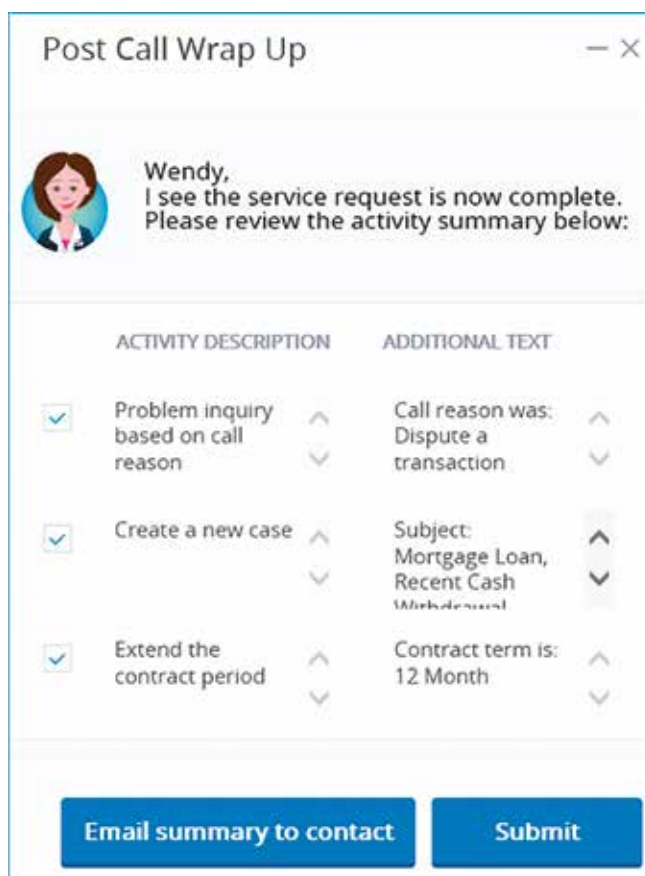
NICE Enterprise's UK&I Channel Manager John Byron said: "We have

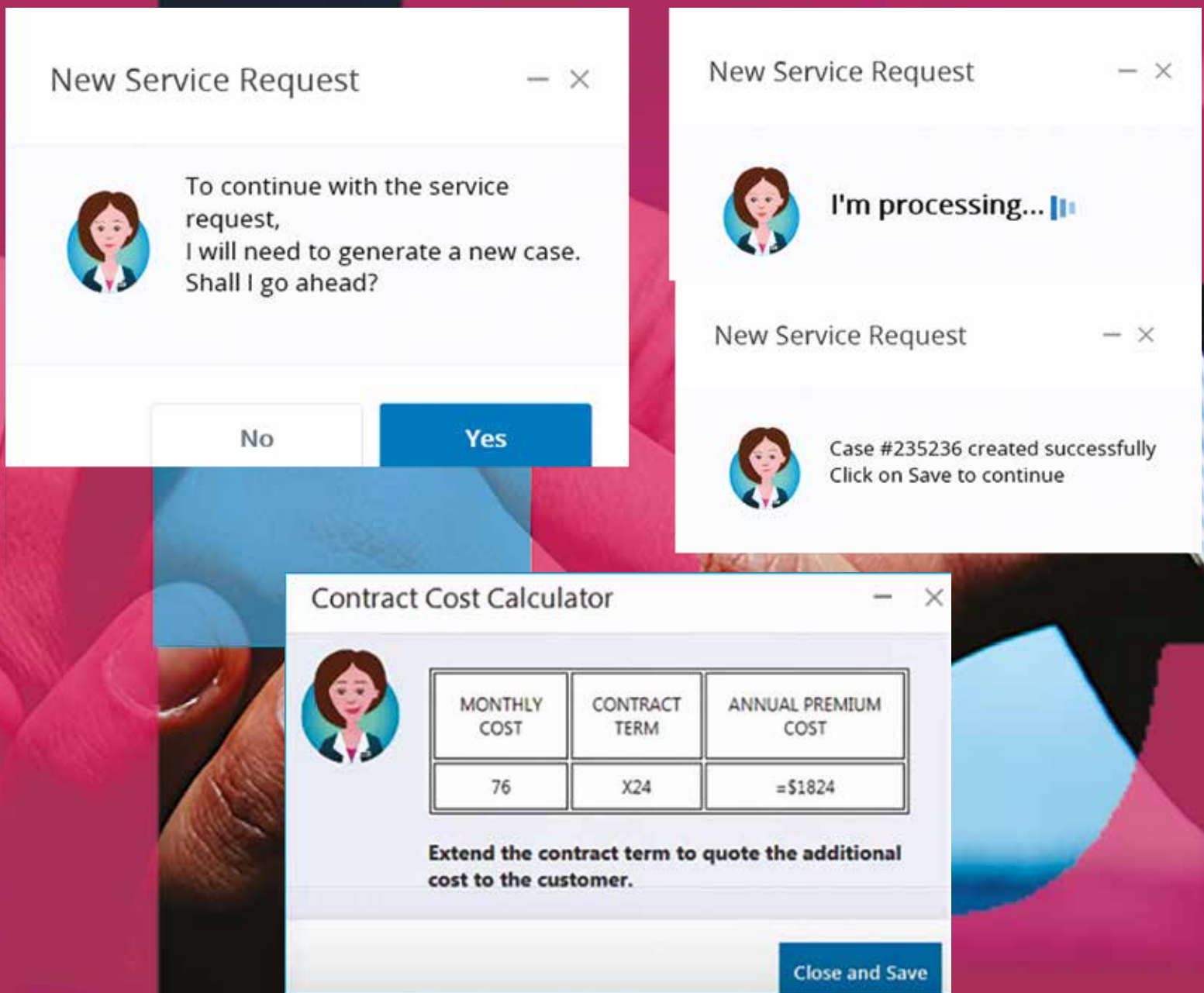
created a bot which sits on an agent's desktop and acts as a guide to internal databases, CRM systems and other tools. I love NEVA because it is unique in the market. No-one else does this type of RPA like NICE. NEVA even has her own character."

NICE has indeed made NEVA feel very human with her own avatar. You will quickly find yourself referring to it as 'her' and 'she' and being grateful for her contribution to your business!

NEVA is also the team member with all the up-to-date answers. As a bot, she does not miss or forget any updates from management or business goals. Automated pop-up windows will give agents real-time, step-by-step guidance when they need it and next-best action recommendations. Agents can also trigger assistance manually or via a web chat facility.

Help can include telephone scripts, messages on changes to company guidelines and policies, reminders to ask for missing contact details or prompts to





upsell or cross-sell other products. At just the right moment during a customer call NEVA will automatically open the tools agents need to facilitate a call, such as multiple databases, CRMs and diaries, but will only present the relevant records on one screen.

Benefits of NEVA

It is not hard to see where the benefits lie. With NEVA, agents can maintain a consistency across all their interactions to improve customer service.

Businesses will be more efficient, more compliant and less prone to error, so complaints

should be reduced.

Time is inevitably saved as NEVA does so many of the tedious tasks, therefore productivity is improved while agents enjoy enhanced job satisfaction as they are free to concentrate on the higher-value tasks. Profitability should increase too with NEVA working as a digital salesperson with scripts that prompt agents with relevant sales promotions or offers based on a customer’s unique history, including purchases and interactions.

Lastly, NEVA is perfect for the world of remote working we now find

ourselves in. The bot is a convenient go-to expert when team members are working independently of each other and the supervisor is unavailable. She also helps onboard new agents by quickly bringing them up to speed with new workflows, systems and tasks.

But where do businesses start?

NEVA is an easy sell when it comes to the benefits, but businesses may be put off by not

knowing where to start to implement it. NICE has the answer in its Automation Finder which seeks out and analyses agents’ repetitive processes to ascertain what can be automated.

Byron added: “NEVA does not care what contact centre solution your customers have got, or CRM or database; this cutting-edge solution suits all. The resellers I have spoken to are getting really excited about NEVA as this

isn’t in any of their portfolios.”

Business partner programme

Named as an RPA Leader in Everest Group’s 2020 PEAK Matrix® Assessment, NICE Enterprise can pass on this expertise to contact centre resellers via their business partner programme. The programme provides expert help from product specialists, wholesale or referral commercials, and marketing support.

■ ■ ■
 To enquire about becoming a NICE Enterprise partner, please contact John Byron at John.Byron@NICE.com.


Building magic moments

Zen CEO Paul Stobart believes that if businesses in the telco industry were given marks for customer experience many would get a three word assessment – must do better. Here, he explains how the quest to create ‘magic moments’ can work wonders in raising the customer experience bar.

Stobart has developed something of a reputation as a speaker who talks from the hip and the messages he delivered to the partner community that tuned into his CX focused talk during his company’s ‘Life Reconnected’ online event last month were, as ever, uncomplicated. He contends there are three simple pillars to customer experience which must be adopted by any comms providers wishing to survive and thrive in these challenging times.

The first, he maintains, is to deliver the basics. “It sounds easy to deliver the basics, but it’s really not because it means doing what you promised to do,” he said. “It means being responsive, keeping within Service Level Agreements, being reliable, staying professional, being pleasant in the way you handle customers, admitting to and fixing mistakes, being honest and building trust.

“I include complaints management in the basics category. We all get complaints. And what sets the CX winners apart from the losers is how they handle complaints. Every complaint you receive is a result of someone who feels impassioned enough to approach you directly. If you can take the passion they have to complain about you and convert it into

passion about the way you fix things for them, then you can convert a complainant into an evangelist. And if you miss that opportunity you risk creating an enemy for your organisation for a long, long time. People don’t forget poor experiences.”

Relationships

Stobart’s second pillar on which to build a solid CX platform is understanding customers and their businesses. “Fundamentally this means being proactive and building relationships,” he added. “Silly things like remembering birthdays and anniversaries can make a real difference. It means you ensure your organisation goes beyond delivering the transactional side of customer experience and leaps ahead to create profoundly meaningful relationships. And if you can’t do that yourself, because you’re the principal and you’re too busy, then inspire your people to take on that mantle and do it on your behalf.

“Understanding your customer’s business is critical. We should not make every call a sales call. Instead, we should show an interest in the customer’s business. Ask questions, listen intently, be present, appreciate what they’re doing. Recognise their achievements and don’t just sound off about your organisation. All customers love talking about their business. Why should we



Paul Stobart

around fast and ask some questions about them.”

This habit, asserts Stobart, will create the third area of CX development: Creating moments of magic and memories. “These don’t come around very often,” he said. “But they will happen, and if you’ve already got your people fired up and infused and delivering the basics and proactively building great relationships with customers, then these opportunities will be spotted much more readily.

“You will know you’ve got CX ingrained in your business when it all happens without you having to worry about it. Issues and technology developments are anticipated because your account managers, your people in the field, your people on the phones, take responsibility and make it happen first. When customers are in difficulty, your people go the extra mile. They are empathetic, they sense when they need to provide extra assistance, they encourage, they share, they support, they work as a team, they work as partners.

“Few suppliers do any of that. And if you do, you will be different and you will create memories. You’ll create feelings, and feelings are things that human beings don’t forget. Quite possibly you’ll create moments of magic.” ■

We should not make every call a sales call. Instead, we should show an interest in the customer’s business

do anything other than feed that desire and do it authentically. It’s interesting hearing about somebody else’s business and you’ll be amazed how many additional business opportunities will

come your way as a result. So when customers or prospects ask you politely about your business next time, have a little trigger in your mind which says, actually, what I need to do is to turn this

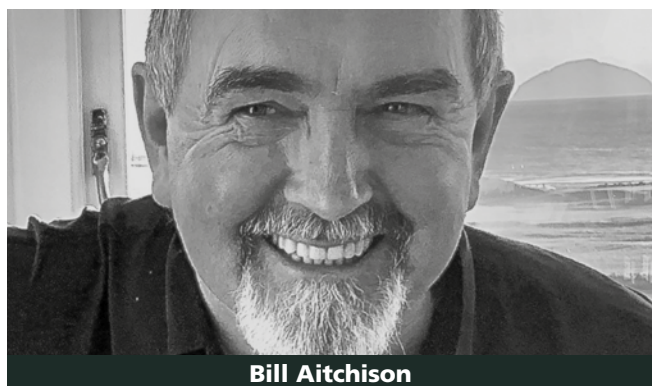
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Encouraging your people to talk is now so important

Over four decades Bill Aitchison has successfully held sales, general management and director positions at GEC, Plessey, Siemens and BT, but his latest position is set to be his most challenging and rewarding. Aitchison, who has also run a charity golf day for 20 years that has raised just shy of £2 million for children's charities, is now a Trustee and Associate at Mental Health Associates, the new charity established by his friend and former colleague Peter Orr to help anyone in the industry suffering from mental health issues. Here, he explains why it is so important to talk...



Bill Aitchison

How can leaders develop a mental health radar?

The pandemic has increased awareness of mental health in society and in the workplace. Ongoing success will become even more dependent on the health of a business's most crucial resource, its people. We need to be even more vigilant than ever to identify colleagues who may be struggling. It is not always obvious – you may spot a change in behaviour, performance or demeanour.

This can be particularly difficult with salespeople. We instinctively hide weakness and any lack of confidence. Leadership is all about instinct, laser sharp perception, observational and relationship skills. Do not be shy to use those same skills to encourage people to talk.

Have you seen people struggling yourself?

I have seen the devastating impact of anxiety and depression in others and I am not ashamed to say I have had the odd blip in confidence myself. The weight of expectation in work and at home can be overwhelming. The additional anxiety of surviving and succeeding through Covid-19 means ICT leaders need to be more perceptive, communicative and supportive than ever.

What's your view on setting high targets?

Raising the expectation bar too high is at best counterproductive and at worst devastating for a business and its people. Business leaders owe it to shareholders, stakeholders, colleagues and customers to understand the business objectives and resource them while setting realistic goals, targets and recognition accordingly.

What would be helpful as a first step?

Now, more than ever, any emotionally challenged

ICT colleagues need to be supported and valued. They need to be repeatedly told they are part of a team that cares together and wins together. We all need to be proactive in our awareness to spot changes where possible and take the time to talk face-to-face wherever possible and safe. It is a conventional method in a digital world but delivers a remarkable impact. The best salespeople have great listening skills, people skills and great empathy.

How can the industry help people?

Consider the huge investment you have made in your people. As an MHA trustee I am inspired to be part of something that can and will make such a difference on a human level and I would urge other people to get involved. MHA was founded to support our colleagues in our industry and like any charity is dependent on funding. Help us to help anyone in need. You can donate at [gofundme/mentalhealthassociates](https://gofundme.com/mentalhealthassociates) or call MHA founder Peter Orr on 0330 1244338

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Reimagining key measur

There is great virtue in the concept of reimagining business performance beyond profit. How? By zoning in on human and environmental matters that are bigger than business, according to our panel of experts who live and breathe these more purposeful values.

There is virtue too in putting a great focus and much energy into being purposeful as a business, and at the same time ensuring a strategic advantage, noted Martin Taylor, Deputy CEO and co-founder, Content Guru. "It is essential that an organisation understands its vision and mission and promotes these through both external and internal communications," he said. "When staff are aligned to these you reduce friction between departments and promote productivity, as everyone is working towards a common goal."

Content Guru incorporates environmental protection in all of its strategic decisions and aims to balance environmental and economic needs. The company actively maintains an ISO 140001 Environmental Certification, said to be the highest internationally recognised accreditation for environmental standards. "We employ environmental best practices across our international network of data centres and offices," added Taylor.

Content Guru has implemented an Environmental Management System (EMS) that contains policies and processes to ensure the business maintains compliance to the latest environmental standards at all times. "We set annual

objectives with targets to make the business more efficient," said Taylor. "These initiatives include reducing waste and improving recycling activities. We also aim to use local suppliers where possible. A written Code of Conduct is sent to suppliers as part of the on-boarding process, which requests that they consider and regularly review their environmental impact."

Content Guru also donates hundreds of thousands of pounds to charitable causes, including Berkshire Community Foundation (BCF), which supports vulnerable groups throughout the county by distributing grants and promoting local charities. Content Guru's Parent company, Redwood Technologies Group, is a founder member of BCF's Business Philanthropy Club which brings together businesses to provide targeted funding to grassroots organisations in local communities. Content Guru's Global CEO, Sean Taylor, is Deputy Lieutenant for the Royal County of Berkshire and a Trustee of BCF.

"We have facilitated many campaigns through BCF, including providing a night shelter for the homeless, life education and counselling sessions," added Taylor. "We support armed forces and services leaders charities and have sponsored the Soldiering



Martin Taylor

On Awards for four years, having recently achieved the Silver Award in the Armed Forces Covenant Employers' Recognition Scheme."

Support matters

Other organisations supported by Content Guru include the Red Cross, Lions, Pride of Bracknell Forest Awards, Barnardo's, Save the Children, Charity Staff Foundation, Macmillan Cancer Support and more. But it can be a challenge for a business to maintain its supportive culture through economic turbulence, and this is made particularly hard by enforced home working due to the pandemic. "To survive in times like this it is absolutely key not to lose sight of what makes your company different and to maintain a sense of purpose or you risk disinterest from colleagues," stated Taylor.

"Don't underestimate how much investing time and

money into your social and environmental goals means to your employees and your local community. In the age of the millennial and Gen-Z, and with most of our own employees in their 20s, we've seen first-hand how young people value a company which exists for reasons outside profit more and more. However, business growth is equally important, and finding a suitable balance between the two is an important part of keeping your company viable during a time of massive commercial pressure."

John Murphy, Group Operations Director at Gamma, reaffirmed that to become a successful, yet purposeful company, organisations need to understand how their business objectives can align with social and environmental responsibilities. "Defining priorities and setting goals is key to making sure a

company is achieving business growth and meeting purposeful objectives," stated Murphy. "More often than not, businesses may be able to leverage some existing projects and objectives to improve their social and environmental efforts. Prioritising efforts that align with the business strategy is a good way to ensure that both are achieved."

Companies that recognise the importance of understanding changing social and environmental conditions can be better positioned to meet commercial challenges and to adapt to market transformation, believes Murphy. "We see our values and wider purpose as a strength and an opportunity to achieve strategic objectives," he added.

Murphy noted that Gamma has been a Certified Carbon Neutral Company since 2006. It has worked every year since to reduce its environmental footprint using carbon offset programmes and other initiatives. "In the UK we work with an independent assessor to measure our total quantity of greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, and we have established a facility management team to gather the necessary data," he added. "The team monitors our seven sites in the UK and enables management to better monitor GHG emissions resulting from activities such as employee

res of success

travel, on-site waste usage and energy used for our network and data centres.

"Moreover, over the years we have been engaged in a number of carbon offset programmes ranging from environmentally friendly power generation projects in the developing world to forest conservation. At the moment these include the conservation of the Amazon rainforest and reforestation in Kenya."

Gamma also improves energy efficiency and reduces emissions by promoting the recycling of waste, cycle-to-work schemes, encouraging car sharing and the use of conference calls instead of travelling to business meetings. The company ensures compliance with data protection, modern slavery and fair selling procedures. "We also strive to improve our workforce diversity and are addressing the shortage of technically skilled females who choose to pursue a career in telecommunications and technology by supporting female education in STEM subjects through different projects," added Murphy.

The trend to reinvent business by pursuing purpose as well as profit reflects the staunch beliefs



John Murphy

and values held by Richard Tang, founder and Chairman of Zen Internet. "People should come first and money second," he stated. "The world would be a better place if more organisations operated in this way."

It is no surprise therefore that Zen has become a B Corporation. "We have been certified by B Lab, the not-for-profit behind the B Corp movement, as having met rigorous social and environmental standards which represent our commitment to goals outside of shareholder profit," added Tang. "We are now legally required to consider the impact of our decisions on our workers, customers, suppliers, community and the environment."

"At the start of last year we achieved Carbon Neutral Plus status, demonstrating our commitment to sustainability, the reduction of carbon emissions and the support of environmental projects. We've offset a total of 12,743 units of tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (tCO2e) which is 4.5 times more carbon than we used between October 2018 and September 2019 by supporting a number of projects in India and Africa."

"We have an environmental steering group in place to identify opportunities, activities and changes that we can pursue or make to ensure we run our business in the most ecologically and environmentally friendly way. Last year, as one example of the initiatives, we succeeded in eliminating single use plastics from site."

As Zen has evolved, one thing has remained rock



Richard Tang

solid – its commitment to the long-term objectives of 'Happy staff', 'Happy customers' and 'Happy suppliers'. "It is our focus around people that has been the biggest key to our success," added Tang. "I've spoken to a number of people who think that doing the right thing and having a wider purpose is at the expense of financial success, but this is a short-term view and couldn't be further from the truth."

"In the long-term, doing the right thing and having a wider purpose fuels staff, customer and supplier loyalty. These are all key requirements for long-term financial success. Zen is proof that the formula works. We have grown from a start-up 25 years ago to a business that is now approaching £100 million turnover, and we have done this completely based on organic and self-funded growth. As Zen's sole ordinary shareholder I don't bow to commercial pressures. I can ensure that we always stay true to our people-centric values. Money becomes a means to meet these people-centric and environmental goals rather than an end in itself."

New year, new you?



Paul Billingham

How was 2020 for you? The ICT sector has been one of the few areas to experience increased demand for its services as resellers were moving mountains to ensure that UK businesses could continue to operate in one of the most challenging business environments we have ever experienced. We have been incredibly busy at Knight reflecting continued interest in the sector from an investment perspective. Whilst our businesses may have had a relatively positive experience, on a personal level, I am sure most will agree it has been a frustrating time.

In business, decision making is relatively objective, focussed on value and we invest significant time and resources to ensure that it runs as smoothly as possible. Interestingly when it comes to our personal life, most of us don't do this and the reality is that decisions can be far more complex.

The key area of personal/business cross-over for entrepreneurs is how you make your business work for you - again we find this is one area that is not prioritised often enough. Your starting point is to be able to articulate your ambitions, this may be in terms of a financial goal, a set of values or how long you want to continue in your current role. It's easy to start at your current position and extrapolate forward but to make your business work for you, it's a case of stating your ambitions and developing your strategy to in order to achieve this.

In business, we are often too busy to devote the time to this task and our experience is that the longer you leave it, the more complicated it becomes.

The new year is a great time to get your house in order - it will have a significant impact on your outlook and your ability to run your business. If your plan includes raising money or entertaining a business sale, the impact this preparation will have on the deal cannot be underestimated. It will enhance the perception of your business, save time in the process and importantly reduce the levels of anxiety involved in a transaction. Planning aside, you never know when the perfect buyer could come knocking!

At Knight we have completed over 120 transactions across the Comms and IT sector. Our most successful outcomes have been working for businesses that are prepared for a transaction with shareholders that have clear and aligned objectives that enable their business to work for them – not the other way around.

As we start 2021, the market remains strong, M&A will continue. We are lucky enough to work in a market that will continue to bring opportunity and with a range of strategic options that we can draw upon. However what 2020 taught us is how much we miss family and friends, to be able to celebrate together, and support each other in and out of work.

Wishing everyone a happy and healthy new year, we can't wait to see you!

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Plan to become trusted

Despite positive news about potential vaccines, there can be no doubt that some of the changes to work environments brought by the pandemic may be permanent.

Nobody can predict exactly what will happen as lockdowns are gradually lifted and whilst we all hope for a degree of normality soon, businesses will continue in a state of flux for some time. There is every likelihood that further waves of infection will force new lockdowns well into the new year and, tellingly, Chancellor Rishi Sunak has extended the Government's furlough scheme until April.

Every area of industry has been affected by the coronavirus and the ICT channel is no exception. However, there are ways in which the vendor community and channel partners can support organisations to ensure that they not only survive this pandemic but go on to enjoy continued growth and success.

According to Koorosh Khashayar, VP Global Channels at global cloud service provider Iland, the recalibration of organisations as they adjust to the 'new normal' will present a significant opportunity for the reseller channel.

"Partners are in the privileged position to help their customers transform the very nature of what they do; pivoting entire business models, supply chains, and operations to help their customers," he said.

"The stakes have never been higher. Businesses must now apply strategic thinking in short-term decision-making. This could involve transitioning the immediate business continuity measures into a robust digital foundation that enables organisations to modernise application environments and fully commit to cloud-based flexibility.

"The right partners therefore can play a vital role at this stage as trusted advisors, so long as they have the right vertical market and technical expertise. They need to know, for example, the particulars around certain cloud infrastructure systems, their precise purposes, and which scenarios they would be best suited to.

"Partners should know the nuances of their customers' businesses and be objective enough to drive new coordination and ways of thinking between different departments within companies," he concluded.

We asked vendors how they will be equipping partners to survive and thrive and the year ahead and the consensus is the support is there - you just have to ask for it.



ADAM CATHCART
9 GROUP

"The pandemic fast tracked the world's approach to remote working and many organisations have introduced operational changes which will have a lasting effect, long after the vaccine has been distributed. Remote working solutions, demand for improved connectivity and the convergence of IT and telecoms present our sector with the unique opportunity to serve businesses to achieve their goals in 2021 and beyond. We've identified key needs by sector and are equipped to support our partners to help their customers mitigate the effect of the coronavirus crisis. Productivity and mobility are key themes, along with digital collaboration and business continuity. Investing in IT and technology will help to revive growth in the economy and will naturally accelerate the transition to digital. Our role is to provide partners with value propositions that meet the demands of their customers today, along with sales and marketing support which helps them stand out from the competition."



ANDY WILSON
CITYFIBRE

"We hope the commencement of the vaccination programme will see businesses start to return to their offices and get back to some sort of normality in terms of working practices. With that in mind we expect businesses will be looking to upgrade and review their current services, to ensure they are accessing the best connectivity available. Couple this with the need for organisations to work efficiently from any environment, the need for cloud-based collaboration tools will increase. The final dimension that will no doubt become further opportunity, is to ensure that when employees are working from flexible locations, the organisations IT security is not compromised. In readiness for the year ahead we have held workshops around planned unpredictability, to give our team opportunity to learn new skills. We will continue to serve the channel in every capacity and work alongside our partners to offer the right propositions."



ALEX MAWSON
DWS

"The past year has brought to the forefront the benefits enhanced communication services deliver to allow flexible and transparent working. Technology is a key driver, with reliable connectivity required to underpin any agile working solution, such as IP Voice and UC apps. One huge opportunity which has emerged in every business sector, that partners cannot ignore, is the growing dominance of Microsoft Teams and the ability to enable external voice services by deploying Direct Routing or Calling Plans. We are also seeing an increased focus on the PSTN withdrawal and the growing fibre footprint, resulting in the accelerated migration to Single Order or FTTP connectivity and the rapid adoption of 5G-based mobile solutions, all of which will enable businesses to effectively work from anywhere. As the Channel's largest aggregator, the extensive DWS portfolio offers our partners the opportunity to build future-proof solutions to support their customers' communications."



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DANIEL ALVAREZ
GLIDE

"Covid-19 has changed many things in the way we think about how we can and should work. The old school mentality of needing to be in a set location is the first thing that springs to mind. For years our industry has tried to express the need for all businesses to move to the Cloud with a wide variety of services and products, with varying levels of success. Covid-19 has given us a real-life case study for what is needed to "keep calm and carry on". Yes, fibre is the backbone that will allow it all to work, but 5G will also play a massive part in connecting users to the network. As we know this is still a long way away from being a reality for EVERYBODY today, but we should do our absolute utmost to make sure every single customer we all have will never suffer like they have during this pandemic."



PAUL STOBART
ZEN INTERNET

"Our reliance on the internet for work, entertainment, communication and much more besides has increased out of all recognition during Covid, and so has our frustration when things don't work. A reliable, and fast connection not only helps to stimulate consumer satisfaction, it also drives business and economic growth. It is therefore incumbent on all of us as service providers to deliver a reliable, fast, responsive service. Doing this in a post-lockdown world is not easy, but that is no excuse. Our job is simple: deliver a great service and empower our customers to flourish in the post-Covid world."



SHAUN BODSWORTH
INFORM BILLING

"This year we have all had to quickly become experts using video conferencing platforms and the trend for seamless 'work-from-anywhere' collaboration solutions will undoubtedly continue over the year ahead. The key to the increasingly popular 'hybrid' work environment is the capability to move locations and to set up for work easily and quickly – relying on portable kit and compatible softphone apps that hand-off calls properly between devices. Those that have also been slow to adopt digital transformation in the past will have been won over by the events of the year, accelerating 'Infrastructure as a Service' and the significant take-up of cloud-based telephony and services such as back-ups and server hosting. With a flexible online billing platform that caters for subscription and event-based charges alongside traditional call rating, ICT resellers will be well placed to take advantage of these opportunities and easily bill for them, wherever they want to work."



VINCENT DISNEUR
UNION STREET

"It's very difficult to predict with any certainty quite what will happen when the risk to public health begins to normalise. It certainly seems as though the genie is out of the bottle when it comes to flexible and remote working, and solutions that facilitate this will probably be in high demand as businesses begin to scale up their operations. If this is the case, then it stands to reason that channel businesses which specialise in selling UC solutions will be well positioned to capitalise on this trend. Knowledge is power, and channel businesses would be wise to pay close attention to revenue streams and customer feedback so as to identify trends early on and optimise their strategy/ service accordingly. Our teams are standing by to assist our partners in this objective."



IAIN SINNOTT
VANILLA IP

"I don't think COVID-19 actually changed the world but it accelerated what we already saw as a natural progression, swept a vast number of businesses into an enforced trail of new technology and new ways of working, and has yet to set us free to find our new 'starting point'. I have for a long-time stressed the lack of knowledge, within SME decision makers, of alternative communications tools as a reason for the strangely slow progress of 'Smart Working Tools'. That knowledge gap has been removed, so armed with the experiences of 2020, buyers will be able to discuss the right changes. Do not give up on desktop phones yet but don't bet your mortgage on them either. One element I still feel needs to be better explained is the use of Teams and Spaces/Channels in Webex and MS Teams. These tools are more than just virtual meeting rooms."



MATT WORBOYS
GAMMA

"In 2020, the pandemic completely transformed every business environment – remote working has become the norm, and this is not likely to change in the year ahead. However, this permanent change can bring great opportunities for those businesses that reevaluate their long-term strategy and employ the right technology. With a vaccine in sight, UCaaS will play a vital role to support and facilitate the likely shift to hybrid and remote-first working environments. At Gamma, we have been listening to our teams and partners to create a business environment that will benefit both. Our COVID-19 planning has stabilised and normalised the way we work, and despite the pandemic, we've made the decision to continue our investment in our UCaaS strategy. In the new year, this will enable us to deliver additional capabilities to help our partners succeed and will ensure the successful delivery of our strategic objectives."



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Boyle activates growth

If one thing screams from the market disruption we are all witnessing it is that standing still is not an option, and any break in the link between evolving customer demands and a reseller's product and service proposition will cause lasting harm, according to Active Business Communications Managing Director Mark Boyle, who has made it his life's work to stay aligned in real-time in all aspects.

Active was founded in 1997 by Ed Liston and operated as a family business trading from a small office in Hyde, Greater Manchester, with just a telephone, a card table and a garden chair. The fledgling company focused on selling business mobile phone contracts and consistently gained customers during its first seven years. Boyle joined Active in 2004, an appointment that moved the company away from being a family-only business. "This change in structure kick-started a period of rapid growth driven by the increasing adoption of smartphones and a successful partnership with O2," stated Boyle. "At the start of 2011 it became clear that growth within the business mobile marketplace had started to plateau. We shifted our business model and evolved to become a business telecoms provider adding fixed line services and telephone systems to our product portfolio."

Active currently has 37 employees working across its headquarters in Stockport and technical operations in Bromborough. The company is on track to achieve turnover of £5 million this financial year having grown by 25 per cent over the past three years. Boyle, who led

a buyout of Active in 2011 without external funding, is aiming to double the size of the business over the coming three years through organic growth and acquisitions. The plan builds on the acquisitions of a number of smaller IT service providers in 2016 which added scale and capability to Active's IT business.

Evolution

Active's evolution as a managed service provider with the ability to deliver integrated IT and telecoms began in 2013 with the rise of IP and increased adoption of cloud services by businesses. Six years later another market shift prompted swift action from Boyle. "We recognised in the middle of 2019 that we needed to strengthen our UC proposition to meet the needs of our customers so we added additional experience and capability to aggressively grow this part of our business," he explained. "Another key focus area has been to anticipate the wider market trends and position the business to ensure it continues to add value for customers.

"Our growth strategy has been led through a combination of organic growth and strategic acquisitions to build



Mark Boyle

We will be looking to gain scale and capability through acquisitions to support the next phase in our growth

capability. Over the next 12 to 24 months we will be looking to gain additional scale and capability through acquisitions to support the next phase in our growth. Our strength has always been our ability to rapidly adapt to the changing needs of the marketplace and our ability to evolve our proposition to deliver value to customers. I would say our biggest achievement is to have constantly evolved the business successfully over the last 16 years and to remain as

valued to our customers now as we were 20 years ago."

Active works with a number of tech partners including O2, Microsoft, Cisco Meraki, Sophos, Zen, Gamma, StorageCraft, HP, NEC, Openreach and InvoSys. "Our ambition is to become the technology partner of choice, empowering business to achieve more, effortlessly," stated Boyle. "We use our expertise to help ambitious businesses select, integrate and manage technology

solutions, empowering people to work however, wherever, and whenever they want. Our customers work with us because we make their life easier, make business sense and, ultimately, we give them the confidence and knowledge to make the right decision for their business."

Boyle has seen a growing desire for change among his customer base as people continue to realise the efficiency gains from working flexibility. "Our customers are more ready to embrace new technologies and ways of working," he said. "For example, we're helping customers to use Teams and Power apps to drive process change. We are also looking at how we unlock the power of data analytics for our customers and how we can create products and solutions that enable them to become more data rational.

"The trend that we're seeing is a desire to drive business efficiency using technology. Customers don't want to go back to how they have been working pre-Covid. They want to drive real change. Our priority is managing our resource and capability to ensure that we can sustain our customer experience with the current level of demand we are seeing." ■

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It's what we do.

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

Ambitious FluidOne CEO set for next expansion phase p30

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Wash Hands Cover Face Make Space

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TALKING MATTERS

MENTAL HEALTH: IT'S TIME TO TALK

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

CAMPAGN

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

MIA is urgently training a team of experienced and 'industry aware' associates who will act as a friendly ear for the men and women who need to talk through their pressing issues.

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

Full report see pages 24-25

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A flexible approach is now vital in the supply of UCaaS solutions

Speaker line up:

Will Gaszide ICT Administrator

Daryl Pile Managing Director - Channel, Genesys

Andy Smethurst Head of Channel, Genesys

Matthew Worboys Director - Business Development, Channel, Genesys

Paul Taylor Sales & Marketing Director, Genesys

Ian Rowan Senior Channel Manager, Wildix

Rob Loakes Senior Channel Manager, Wildix

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Buoyant industry in rocky waters

Without question 2020 has been the most traumatic and challenging year in the ICT channel's history, but hundreds of resellers can take enormous credit for the way they have responded to unprecedented demand from organisations providing crucial services and, more widely, tools and connectivity to power remote working.

It will take more than a few months for the vaccines to be rolled out and pundits unsurprisingly predict a rocky first two quarters of 2021, with enterprise failures likely to escalate as the impact of the pandemic and Brexit take chunks out of the economy.

That said, all is not lost. The ICT industry is better placed than most to weather the storms coming. According to technology analyst Analysys Mason, whilst the effects of the COVID pandemic will continue, the telecoms sector has proved its resilience in relation to the overall economy in 2020 and will return to growth in 2021.

"Fixed broadband has helped to offset declines in mobile revenue for many operators and will support growth in 2021," said Research Director Stephen Sale.

"While revenue from mobile roaming has been particularly badly hit, operators will begin to report growth again from the second quarter of 2021 with total revenue up 1% on 2020 (USD13 billion)," he added.

"We expect that the telecoms industry will return to growth in 2021. This follows a difficult year – industry revenue will fall by 2.7% (USD43 billion) in 2020. However, global telecoms revenue will not exceed 2019 levels again until 2023.

"Trends accelerated or disrupted by the pandemic will provide new opportunities for operators at the intersection of cloud and connectivity, for example in healthcare, education and business cloud services."

We asked a collection of reseller principals to get out their crystal balls and predict growth prospects for 2021. All were bullish about their company's ability to maximise on new opportunities in cloud, decentralised working, security and FTTP.

**PAUL RICHARDS,
CO-FOUNDER EVERYCLOUD**

"The blended working environment is here to stay; cloud adoption will continue to accelerate. We'll be helping businesses unleash the full potential of enterprise communication by voice-enabling Microsoft Teams. We'll continue delivering complete cloud contact centre solutions to our clients – giving them one system of engagement, one system of intelligence and advanced analytics – making it easy to connect and collaborate with colleagues and customers, wherever they are. Securely enabling a 'Work from Anywhere' strategy in 2021 will also be a key requirement for businesses as traditional network perimeters are largely rendered ineffective. Businesses will need to adopt new ways of securing data in a cloud first world and to protect them from increasingly sophisticated phishing, ransomware and other cyber threats."



**RICHARD
PENNINGTON
CEO, FOUNEY**

"2020 was a catalyst for new technologies we've long predicted which will have a lasting impact on the way we all work – from the office and home. It sped transition to cloud-based work as our latest whitepaper suggests (<https://www.founey.co.uk/about-us/resources/>), this will see a 'hybrid workplace' – part office-based, part remote. We see a growth in collaboration tools and room solutions which offer collaboration no matter where you are working. A big growth in virtual contact centre shift to cloud means greater flexibility for sharing – be it technology, premises or personnel."

**DAVID HUGHES,
CEO, INCOM-CNS GR**

"While businesses might once have been reluctant to adopt home-working, 2020 has proven that, given the right communication and collaboration tools, enabling your workforce to work remotely can actually increase productivity. As we adapt to our new world of work, those that haven't already embraced mobile working will have implemented a temporary fix this year, which will become a permanent remote working solution. Having a great majority of our customers to migrate to a new way of working, the biggest pain point is domestic connectivity and security being suitable for business use. Going forward, we expect the deployment of robust infrastructure, security and business grade connectivity to support remote working solutions."

**JONATHAN
SHARP
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
BRITANNIC TECHNOLOGIES**

"Businesses should enter the new year evaluating its customer propositions and studying the processes that have been affected or could be more efficient. By re-engineering your business processes and workplace you can be prepared for any change that may occur. Many of us will still be working at home during 2021 and companies will have to provide the right technology and support for remote employees. Solutions such as Mitel MiTeam Meetings, Avaya Spaces, MS Teams and 8x8 Work enable teams to work together, communicate and connect. Automation will also be a big trend for 2021 with businesses re-evaluating their processes and propositions and trying to cut costs and do less with more. We welcome in 2021 as an opportunity to reset, learn and evolve."



**JOE BOYLE
CEO & FOUNDER,
SALTDNA**

"The pandemic has been deeply impactful for many businesses and has caused organisations to think differently about how they approach their cybersecurity strategies. SaltDNA feel as confident as ever in our business and the technology we have developed moving into the new world of work in 2021. Since lockdown there has been a huge move towards conferencing technologies. Our prediction for the business climate is that, in the future, organisations will be more willing to use location independent technology to provide flexibility to workers, reduce travel costs and speed up decision making and information sharing. Many of these conversations are very sensitive with mainstream systems do not secure enough for organisations. We will help organisations overcome these challenges and remain secure."



Businesses will thrive in the years ahead



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**MATHEW
EVANS
SALES DIRECTOR,
GLAMORGAN TELECOM**

"2020 has taken our acceptance of traditional business workspaces and blown it apart. In 2021, I see businesses recovering and continuing to leverage the financial, environmental and lifestyle benefits of decentralised working. Social mobility may have been temporarily locked down, but our solutions have opened up new ways for companies to offer flexible working from anywhere in the country. GT will continue to promote products that facilitate this, like upgraded fibre connections, hosted communications and telephony integration with Microsoft Teams. We're also keeping an eye on 5G, which could be the game changer in 2021. With greater coverage across the UK, we could see more businesses make the migration to 'pure mobile & SaaS', leaving the old physical hardware behind."



**DUNCAN WARD
CEO, NETWORK
TELECOM**

"It's no secret that the trends that have appeared in 2020 are likely to continue into 2021, with flexible working cemented as the 'new normal'. In 2021 we believe that end-users will make remote working work for them, with more people choosing to switch between home and office working on a weekly basis. We are continuously adapting our product and service offering in line with the changing needs of our customers. For example, we launched our latest fully hosted, cloud telephony solution, NT Cloud PRO during the first national lockdown, helping our customers to stay connected from any device. Next year we will be growing our mobile, IT and connectivity offerings, allowing our customers to flip seamlessly between devices, working anytime and anywhere they choose."

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**SHAHRAM
BAGHERZADEH
MANAGING DIRECTOR
LOOP VOICE & DATA**

"Digital Transformation has accelerated faster in the past seven months than ever before due to the pandemic. Cloud IT and telephony has been the saviour of a lot of businesses by managing the sudden shift to remote working. I think revenue will increase in 2021 as businesses move to cloud products. As we have seen during COVID, no businesses could afford to be disconnected or down and many managed to work from home quickly by deploying data SIM/IoT. Many companies, by quickly adapting to the environment, managed to stabilise their business and in some cases increased their revenue. Based on our experience and client demand, we will be focusing on 5G, solid data connectivity, Cloud IT, telephony and data security."



**MICHAEL
O'DONNELL
CHIEF COMMERCIAL OFFICER,
OPUS TECHNOLOGY**

"We are fortunate to work in an industry that has been less affected by the pandemic than many and we have made every effort to support businesses this year, with technologies and services needed to survive and where possible thrive. A recent survey of business leaders reported that only 26% thought they would be able to conduct business as usual any time before September 2021 and 38% thought it would be 2022, later or never. Therefore, the priorities for many will continue to be managing their remote or hybrid workforce, security, and business continuity. Beyond that, many businesses will be focusing on improving customer service over multiple channels to meet the change in customer expectations and succeed in 2021 and beyond."

**PAUL HOOPER
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
UPLANDS**



"I would say 2020 will go down as a year that showed businesses the absolute essentialness of mobility. Prior to the pandemic uphauling the lives of 68 million of us across the UK, mobility was assumed and somewhat taken for a given. Never has it been so valued as it is now. Whilst we believe many businesses will opt to work as 'normal' as possible - returning to their offices, working alongside their teams, valuing human contact - never again will mobility be taken for granted. We will continue to focus on unifying our business communications and IT solutions, ensuring our customers can work wherever, whenever, with zero disruption. And we will never allow our service levels to detract, no matter what."

**DAVID
ALLDRITT
TECHNOLOGY AND
INNOVATION DIRECTOR, HIGHNET**

"There's definitely going to be a period of adjustment as we emerge into a post-pandemic and post-Brexit world next year. We can see opportunities for growth and clear ways in which we can help our customers to improve their productivity. First is the adoption of full fibre, not just for business premises but for home workers too. Everyone can benefit from the rapid acceleration in the roll-out of new fibre bringing greater bandwidth and reliability. We are also seeing excellent results with the early adoption of Teams Direct Routing and where it is an appropriate solution it delivers tremendous value. Another area ready for a step-change is mid-market adoption of hosted voice and 2021 promises to be the tipping point for this technology."



Mackie steps down



Alan Mackie



Chris Wade

ALAN Mackie has stepped down from his full-time role as Chief Marketing and Product Officer at Gamma. Mackie joined Gamma in 2006 as SIP Trunking Product Manager and was instrumental in launching a range of next generation products including SIP Trunking, Horizon, Collaborate and

Inbound Call Routing. "Gamma has grown considerably over the past few years but has kept customer and partner success at the heart of its ethos and as a result our partners have a great opportunity to grow their businesses and provide innovative services to their customers," said Mackie. "The next few years will be exciting for the industry."

Stepping into Mackie's shoes is new Chief Marketing and Product Officer Chris Wade who joins from Aptitude Software where he was Chief Product Officer. Prior to this he held leadership roles in strategy, product management and marketing at The Sage Group, one of the leading providers of business management solutions to SMEs globally. "Gamma is an innovative company with a clear vision for growth," he added. "I have worked closely with Alan to ensure a smooth transition and I am looking forward to continuing to drive Gamma's strategy and priorities in the coming years."

Also on the move...

FORMER RingCentral COO David Sipes is to lead 8x8 as CEO, taking over from Vik Verma who has retired. Sipes led RingCentral's go-to-market, product and engineering and is credited with being instrumental in its 12 year growth trajectory from a



David Sipes

\$10m revenue business to over \$1bn. In another top exec change Jaswinder Pal Singh becomes Chairman of the Board, replacing Bryan Martin. "8x8 is participating in one of the biggest SaaS markets today, cloud communications," stated Singh. "We believe Dave, with his operational expertise, strong industry background and go-to-market leadership is the right leader at the right time to fully realise our potential." Sipes added: "The cloud and work-from-home are transforming business communications for every employee and customer touchpoint."

MITEL'S UK&I Head of Sales Nick Riggott has been promoted as Sales Director for the region. He joined Mitel in 2015 with a remit to boost the vendor's presence in the private and public sector. Richard Roberts, Vice President, Northern Europe, Mitel, said: "Nick's focus, drive and leadership contribution has been instrumental."



Nick Riggott

Having worked in the communications industry for 15 years Nick has a valuable practical knowledge of how enterprise communication, collaboration and customer experience technologies can drive change and add value to any business, as well as understanding the value of partnerships and supporting the customer experience."

IT SOLUTIONS provider Comtec Enterprises has kicked off its next expansion phase with 30 new junior hires to its operations and sales teams.

The new positions have been created on the back of growth opportunities in Comtec's data centre, infrastructure and communications divisions. "2020 has been a challenging year for many of our customers, but by working hard and offering creative and flexible IT services we have been fortunate enough to grow during this period and see great potential in supporting the post-Covid recovery," commented CEO Nick Claxson. "I believe IT is a great career path to start out, develop skills and be successful. That's why we want to fuel future growth by training up our own people, all under the age of 24, in partnership with the Government Kickstart Scheme."



Nick Claxson

Zest4 brings in top level execs

ZEST4'S strategic focus has sharpened following the appointment of two high profile execs. The Wilmslow-based wholesale UC provider has pulled in Ben Marnham as Chairman and Eddie Buxton as Non-Executive Director.



Ben Marnham

Marnham began his career as part of the start-up team at Alternative Networks in 1994 where he was COO and helped to drive revenues to £115m in 2012 when he left. Alternative Networks was acquired by Daisy Group in December 2016. Marnham has since held a number of Non-Executive Director roles including Luminet, Solar and Timico.

Buxton has over 20 years industry experience and recently left Maintel where he was CEO for ten years. He has particular expertise in business development, M&A and strategy execution.

Zest4 MD Mandy Fazelynia said: "Ben and Eddie will support us with our ambitious growth strategy. Both are highly regarded in the industry and bring a broader range of experience, including M&A."

Milligan poised to take Scottish lead

OPENREACH'S MD for Customer, Commercial and Propositions Katie Milligan is poised to also lead the firm's Scottish Board when current Chair Brendan Dick retires next March.



Katie Milligan

Milligan is a graduate of the Business School at the University of Strathclyde and has held a number of senior positions at BT Group.

She joined Openreach in 2009 and was previously its Commercial Director, leading teams through projects including the design and delivery of superfast fibre products and high bandwidth propositions for businesses and large organisations. "This is a crucial time for the development of Scottish digital infrastructure as we pave the way to the analogue switch-off in 2025," said Milligan.

Openreach CEO Clive Selley added: "Katie's strategic leadership and commercial acumen will be vital as we accelerate our ultrafast broadband build across the nation and deliver the Scottish Government's challenging R100 build alongside our significant private investment."

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