



Dan Ilett: A man with community on his mind p18

Agilitas CEO sets sights on three-year £50m target p32



VOL 25 ISSUE 9 FEBRUARY 2021 www.comms-dealer.com



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This month's movers and shakers



Charterhouse in acquisition trio

AUGUST Equity-backed Charterhouse Group is ramping up as a major MSP in the channel following a trio of influential acquisitions that put the firm closer to its £100m revenue target.

SPECIAL REPORT

The deals strengthen Charterhouse's influence in key geographies and deepen its Microsoft and security expertise.

The acquisitions of Reading-based Symity, Digital Exchange Products (DXP) in Leigh and cyber security consultancy Pentesecc in Peterborough (a Check Point Elite Partner) also boost group revenues to £60m.

These transactions are the latest in Charterhouse's buy-

and-build campaign which kicked off with the acquisition of public sector targeted NETConnection Systems in December 2019 and St Helen's-based Lloyds IP in early 2020.

Charterhouse Group CEO Mark Brooks-Wadham (pictured) stated: "Through these transactions Charterhouse will become a significant provider of managed IT and business communications in the UK.

"Symity brings expertise in Microsoft technologies includ-

ing Teams. DXP provides further exposure to the north west region and is complementary to Lloyds IP's presence. And the skillset Pentesecc brings strengthens our cyber security presence and enables us to provide an end-to-end Managed Security Platform.

"The combination of this transaction with previous acquisitions will create an organisation of increased breadth and scale, underpinning future business performance and growth."

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The CityFibre logo is positioned in the bottom right corner of the page. It features the word "CityFibre" in a white, serif font. A white diagonal line starts from the bottom left and extends towards the top right, passing behind the logo. The background of the entire page is a dark green with a radial pattern of lighter green lines emanating from the bottom right corner, creating a sunburst effect.

EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

LAST year was a time for radical thinking and that jolt in mindset continues to drive a more strategic role for ICT resellers. As the impact of Covid-19 remains keenly felt across the nation it is true that organisations require, more than ever, forward

looking IT and comms partners who have themselves grasped the chance to reform and act with greater purpose on issues such as a revised strategic outlook that focuses on remote working, wellbeing, the wider community, diversity and environmental sustainability.

All of these vital issues will continue to be reflected and explored in Comms Dealer magazine every month as we delve into the major issues impacting the channel this year and beyond through a people-first lens. We do this not by pontificating or preaching, but through the thoughts, observations and insights, experiences and strategies of inspirational leaders in our industry who truly make a difference. This month's magazine is no exception.

Building on last month's issue in which we shared insights into how channel trailblazers are 'pursuing a higher purpose', this month we feature the achievements of Intercity Technology which is also charging ahead with a purposeful agenda (page 26). On matters concerning the environment and the key role of the channel in driving e-waste management, we get the inside track from Agilitas CEO Shaun Lynn on how sustainability priorities are emerging as ever more important considerations for resellers and end users, and how outsourcing key functions can alleviate the challenge and free up resellers to focus more on their greater purpose, core activities and long-term success (page 32).

Whatever new challenges and changes we face in 2021 compared to last year, the constant priority that is certain to recur annually for the foreseeable future is the theme of sustainability and acting with purpose, and how that fits with your organisation's strategy. Watch this space...

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

DWS valued at £1 billion

DIGITAL Wholesale Solutions (DWS) is to demerge from Daisy Group following a partnership with Inflexion which sees the private equity firm make a significant minority investment in the business.

The demerger, which values DWS at £1bn, is the final step in separating DWS from the Daisy Group. As part of the transaction, which was signposted on January 5th, the majority of the shareholders of Daisy Group are reinvesting directly into DWS.

DWS provides IT, communications and cloud products and services on a wholesale basis to over 6,000 UK partners, from vendors including Vodafone, O2, BT/EE, Microsoft, TTB and Virgin Media Business.

Its services are targeted at resellers serving SMEs in the 10-250 employee range.

DWS CEO Terry O'Brien, who remains in post, said: "It was clear that Inflexion shared our excitement about the UK channel community and the potential for growth as SMEs increase their investment in digital technology."

Daisy Group founder Matthew Riley continues as DWS Chairman. He said: "In a fast moving and highly com-



Terry O'Brien

petitive market, with customers demanding more from their partners, we made a strategic decision to separate our direct and indirect businesses to provide a better focus and agility."

The transaction follows DWS's acquisition of cloud services provider Giacom in November giving it a strong foothold in the IT reseller and SaaS space.

In its last financial year ended July 2020 channel-only Giacom generated almost £49m revenues, £6m EBITDA and is on track to hit circa £62m revenue this year.

Giacom's Cloud Market platform provides SaaS solutions including Microsoft 365 and Azure, security and back-up to over 70,000 end user SMEs through its partner network.

Jagusz in top chair at Vaioni

INDUSTRY veteran Chris Jagusz has taken the Chairman seat at Vaioni Wholesale as the firm strengthens its plan to treble in size by the end of 2024.

The Manchester-based network and cloud provider's strategy includes a push towards total automation and potential mergers and acquisition activity.

Jagusz is well known in the industry for his roles in high growth firms including Azzurri, Redcentric, Daisy and SSE Enterprise Telecoms.

Vaioni Wholesale founder and MD Sachin Vaish stated: "Chris is a great fit at exactly the right time in our development. He is not only a great sounding board, we can also lean on his experience in business growth and M&A."

Jagusz added: "The business has a well-funded five-year plan and straight away I knew it was something I wanted to be part of. I bring a fresh perspective to the firm's strategic thinking, and I can dive into the detail when Sachin and the team think that will be useful."

"As a priority I'll help to make sure we're not just working on innovative new products and services but that we're getting them out to the market."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

GAMMA has sold its fibre network (The Loop) in Manchester to infrastructure services firm euNetworks. "As well as adding routes to our Manchester metro network, The Loop provides a more local presence, the flexibility to connect more data centres and buildings and the opportunity for expansion," said euNetworks CEO Brady Rafuse. Gamma CEO Andrew Taylor added: "The Loop is now ready for its next phase."

THREE companies have been selected to roll out full fibre broadband networks on behalf of the Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) programme, backed by Government funding. Airband, Truespeed and Wessex Internet will be installing full fibre broadband across Devon and Somerset to more than 56,000 rural homes and businesses over the next four years.

GIGACLEAR'S fibre roll out has received a boost following the opening of new office and warehousing facilities in Swindon. The rural broadband provider aims to reach 500,000 properties by 2023 and the Swindon base will function as a central distribution hub. The company is also hiring 120 new recruits.

Lux set to accelerate expansion

TELCOSWITCH has kicked off 2021 with a £4m growth capital funding deal that signals the hosted comms provider's intent to drive expansion via M&A and organic channel growth.

The deal is TelcoSwitch's first external funding round which raised £2.5m through BOOST&Co. The remaining £1.5m has been raised via existing long-term investors.

"The investment advances our planned M&A activities, with three acquisitions underway in exclusivity, to broaden the technology portfolio and increase the customer base," stated Russell Lux, TelcoSwitch founder and CEO.

"We've worked hard to get to this point and now have a supportive partner in BOOST&Co to help us drive the business forward, continue acquiring other relevant businesses and accelerate the growth of our base."

Kim Martin, Principal at BOOST&Co, added: "TelcoSwitch is focused on investing in growth which will also lead to the creation of new jobs at a time when unemployment is on the rise."

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Nicol makes way for CEO

COMMSWORLD'S Non-Exec Steve Langmead has taken over the CEO role from Ricky Nicol who now operates under the title Founder and Vice-Chairman.

Nicol will remain on the Board of the Edinburgh-based company he set up in 1994.

Langmead has been a Director of Commsworld since 2018 and his new appointment initiates an ambitious new expansion plan across the UK, stated the firm.

His former roles include Senior Vice President of Atos in Scotland and Capita's Chief Executive for Scotland.

Langmead said: "Both Ricky and Commsworld are a huge success story and I look forward to continuing to work with Ricky. His entrepreneurial drive will still be at Commsworld in his new role."

Nicol added: "When I first started we were the new kids on the block and had to prove our worth against some formidable and much larger competitors. Together with my team we achieved this."

"It is no secret that, as well as working hard to establish a successful business, I have faced and won my own battle with ill health. Not only that,



Steve Langmead

but last year – the year of Covid – I became a grandfather. The time is right for a new leader to drive Commsworld forward, and Steve is a business leader with a track record of success."

NEWS ROUNDUP

A REPORT by the Public Accounts Committee which raises concerns over whether the Government's gigabit broadband targets are achievable has prompted Zen Internet CEO Paul Stobart to call for a more joined up approach. "To ensure targets are met and that those without sufficient connectivity, particularly in rural areas, have the speed and reliability they require, we need greater collaboration between Government and the broadband industry to include the infrastructure players, the carriers and the service providers. Each of these has a role to play in making this once in a generation infrastructure programme a success."

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Circulation 01635 588 869

ISSN 1366-5243

bpl. A BPL Business Publication

BPL Limited
 Highbridge House, 93-96 Oxford Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 1LU, United Kingdom
 T: 01895 454542 F: 01895 454413

Subscriptions
 Subscription rates for 12 issues:
 UK, £65; Overseas: £80 (incl p&p)
 Back issues can be obtained:
 UK £6 (incl p&p), Overseas £10 each (incl p&p)
 For subscriptions please call 01635 588 869

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Member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations ABC total average circulation 15,300 (Jan-Dec 2019, 12,380 print, 2,920 digital)



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August Equity invests in BSL

PE FIRM August Equity has acquired a controlling stake in Wandsworth-based Business Systems (BSL).

The investment is expected to catalyse BSL's expansion plans in new markets in the UK and internationally.

Adam Kantor, previously Chief Commercial Officer, steps into the role of Chief Executive Officer and Geoff Love, former CEO of business messaging firm Commify joins as Executive Chairman.

Kantor said: "Our legacy of providing compliance and monitoring solutions to the world's largest financial institutions has been the foundation from which we have built our Workforce Engagement Management and cloud contact centre offerings.

"This investment allows us to serve our customers better and provides access to additional expert resources."

BSL is August Equity's fourth investment in adjacent managed services businesses following investments in cyber (SecureData), unified commu-



Adam Kantor

nications (Charterhouse Voice & Data) and cloud managed services (Air IT).

Mehul Patel, Partner at August Equity, commented: "This platform has an opportunity to expand its customer base globally while investing more in higher growth segments such as CCaaS and its internally developed voice compliance software management tool."

BSL was founded by Richard Mill and Stephen Thurston in 1987 as a call recording provider in the financial sector.

NEWS ROUNDUP

CANDIO has added a Website Optimiser solution to its digital marketing proposition. "It caters to the strong reseller demand for adding additional forms of recurring revenue while providing an opportunity for end users to optimise their web presence and win in a digital-first world," said MD Will Morey. Pragma launched Candio in October 2020 as a dedicated resource for channel-ready digital services.

A FINANCING deal with infrastructure investment fund Basalt Infrastructure Partners enables wholesale-only fibre operator Full Fibre to scale its build capacity and expand its gigabit fibre optic network to the first 100,000 premises in 2021 and at least 500,000 by 2025. The deal means Basalt takes a majority interest in Full Fibre and will provide capital investment and additional management expertise. Full Fibre will focus its FTTP products on market towns with between 5,000 and 40,000 premises, initially in the West Midlands, Central and South West, that might otherwise be left behind by the national FTTP roll out.

Cirrus secures multi-million boost in new growth phase

FAST-growing contact centre specialist Cirrus has secured a multi-million pound investment from BGF along with financing from NatWest Growth Capital.

The Epsom-based firm has seen ongoing growth across the UK and North America and according to CEO Jason Roos this funding round will ramp up growth and innovation.

"We are in a position to capitalise on megatrends in business communication, driven by consumer and technological changes which have been supercharged by Covid-19," he commented. "We've witnessed



Jason Roos

rapid growth and as a result of this funding we're looking to accelerate our sales trajectory

and bring more clients onto the Cirrus platform."

Rahul Satsangi, investor at BGF, added: "Cirrus represents an exciting opportunity to scale a fast growth software business.

"With a large untapped market, a strong product offering and channel partnerships, we see huge growth potential."

Kit Maclaren, Director at NatWest Growth Capital, noted: "Cirrus' technology product puts it in a great position to capitalise on growth prospects."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

BELFAST-based Barclay Communications has scooped a £3m deal with the University of Cambridge, the biggest in its 24 year history. The company will deliver over 5,000 mobile connections that will be accessed by all colleges and departments, and will support users across multiple countries as well as remote learning set ups. MD Britt Megahey said: "We competed against well known industry names to win this partnership and that reflects how Barclay Communications is at the top of its game."

PORTAONE has pulled in Enzo Viscito as MD of its UCaaS division with a remit to build the softswitch and billing vendor's channel presence. Viscito noted that PortaOne's engineering focus has made it a household name in the technical and engineering communities, and that the time is right for him to turn up the volume on the company's billing and service provisioning solutions. "I grasped the opportunity to fully introduce PortaOne to the UK channel," he said. "This is a young, agile company that has been flying under the radar in this region." Viscito's previous roles include leadership stints at Inclarity Communications and Nice Systems.

Call to boost connectivity



Dominic Norton

SPITFIRE Network Services Sales Director Dominic Norton has called on SMEs to allay the risk of potential reputational damage and staff productivity shortfalls by urgently addressing the poor quality of broadband connectivity used by many home workers.

According to a survey by the company more than a quarter of home working SME employees face regular connectivity issues and just 4% have a dedicated Internet connection for work related purposes.

The Internet and telecoms provider surveyed over 1,000

UK SMEs and the research identified an opportunity for channel partners to provide solutions that could prevent dropouts and lagging for the 57% of employees with more than three devices connected to their home broadband.

"We were unsurprised to discover that more than one in four employees are facing connectivity challenges whilst they work from home," commented Norton. "My message to businesses would be to act now and consider the damage that may be being caused to both productivity and reputation."

Restore in recycling firm buy

RESTORE Technology has followed up its November 2020 acquisition of E-Recycling with the addition of Runcorn-based Computer Disposals (CDL), a provider of IT recycling and data sanitation services.

The move is the latest in a string of scale-up acquisitions as the firm seeks to become a primary IT recycling and asset disposition business with a particular focus on the UK'S IT reseller channel.

Charles Bligh, Chief Executive Officer of parent company Restore plc, commented: "With the addition of a new site in the north west we have increased our scale and created an opportunity to grow organically and with additional acquisitions in the future."

CDL will be integrated into Restore Technologies during 2021 with key management and over 80 members of staff remaining in the business.

The services provided by the merged businesses include secure data destruction, IT recycling, on-site IT destruction, server and data centre relocation and IT asset management.

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Babble ticks off shop list



Matt Parker

BABBLE'S acquisition of Ultracomms doubles its contact centre business (called Babble Contact) and precedes a string of additional acquisitions to be done by mid-summer, according to CEO Matt Parker.

"We will continue to acquire businesses that are making an impact in the market," he said. "We have another five acquisitions in the pipeline in the next six months, and we're on track to double our EBITDA run rate to £20m by November 2021."

The deal is the first since Graphite Capital invested in Babble at the end of 2020, valuing the business at £90m.

Ultracomms CEO Derwyn Jones commented: "A progressive and ambitious business such as Babble has the capabilities to provide our customers with the technology and expertise they require."



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Medway set for full fibre Taurus hailed as top Wildix partner in UK

ICT resellers operating in the Medway towns of Gillingham, Rochester, Rainham, Strood and Chatham will be able to offer customers FTTP within two years following a £40m investment from CityFibre.

The project, set to be finished by 2023, will bring super-fast broadband speeds to the area, which CityFibre claims will boost business productivity and deliver millions in economic benefit for the region.

This will be welcome news for businesses in the area hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis.

A report prepared by the Kent & Medway Economic Partnership states that over the course of 2020, Medway's economy shrank by 11-14% with unemployment rising rapidly to around 36,000.

Michael Holland, MD of 5G Communications, which acquired Medway-based Diamond Communications last September, told Comms Dealer. "The investment CityFibre is making in the Medway region is good news for local people and good news for our business.

"Full fibre will create more demand for joined up communications. In two years time this pandemic will be behind us and



Michael Holland

business will no doubt boom in Medway and beyond on the back of the FTTP roll out."

Aideen Sadler, CityFibre's City Manager for Medway, added: "With our construction partners at Lanes Infrastructure, we will do everything possible to minimise disruption as we begin to roll out this technology, which will future-proof Medway and lay the foundations for its digital transformation, while enabling vital economic recovery."

Transforming Medway is part of CityFibre's Gigabit City Investment Programme which aims to convert eight million premises to full fibre.

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EXETER-based Taurus Clearer Communication has been named the UK's most successful Wildix partner and the sixth best in the world just two years after signing up with the web-based PBX supplier, which now has resellers in 135 countries across the planet.

The announcement was made at Wildix's 2021 virtual UC&C Summit which, according to the international company, was viewed by 1,500 channel players.

Wildix bills itself as a market disrupter and Taurus Technical Director Richard Whybra and MD Jonathan Sawyer admit it took some time to decide to sign up as a partner.

"We first saw the product in 2017 but were reticent because the solution is so different to anything we have marketed and sold before," said Whybra.

"We now sell Wildix as a fully managed cloud platform inclusive of lines, calls and support for a fixed monthly fee. We have had a lot of traction with multisite solutions in the 200 to 800 user space."

Wildix CEO Steve Osler commented: "UCaaS is growing 30% year over year, just in terms of software. And no one



Richard Whybra

who buys into UCaaS will want to use sub-par headsets, cameras or microphones. People understand that the tools they

use are fundamental to the success of UCaaS. It's about the value you deliver."

UK Senior Channel Manager Ian Rowan added: "The UK is now Wildix's fastest growing territory in Europe. We now have 100 partners and recruited 40 in the last year.

"The UK channel is understanding the flexibility and functionality of a WebRTC telephony platform and the sales solutions that can be added into the Wildix ecosystem."

PURE Cloud CEO Darren Lake and MD Jamie Lake have set their sights on the Matterhorn summit and are in training to reach the 14,692ft peak in September in aid of Help Us Help Others (HUHO), a community-based charity that provides help and support to those in need. The father and son team aim to raise £30,000. Darren Lake, who set up HUHO five years ago, said: "I've always wanted to climb the Matterhorn but life always got in the way. I've now hit my early 50s and it's now or never. This won't be easy, but then nothing worth doing ever is!" Jamie added: "This is an opportunity to raise a significant amount of money to help those most in need." Family friend Neil Hammerton will join the duo on the climb. If you would like to donate please visit the team's Just Giving page. (See page 38)



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Study shows areas of channel growth

THREE primary areas of business opportunity have been pinpointed by a survey of senior decision makers in 100 channel organisations – their focus resting on helping businesses to become more agile, boosting the customer experience and driving efficiencies.

The study, conducted by BT and Cisco, also found that over 96% of channel partners have witnessed customers taking a more strategic and longer term approach to their digital investments following the impact of Covid-19 on working patterns.

Almost as many respondents believe that businesses are prioritising digital transformation plans for the foreseeable future.

Over two-thirds of those questioned noted increased demand for network bandwidth from customers, while more than 60% saw greater demand for collaboration tools.

Gavin Jones, Channel Sales Director, BT's Wholesale Unit, said: "We're seeing a shift in the way channel partners and their customers are considering a long-term strategic approach to digital investments, including permanent changes in working practices for distributed teams of people.

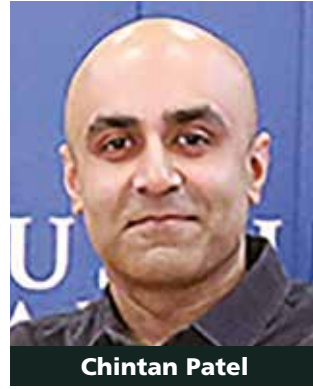


Gavin Jones

"The research indicates a desire and need to handle complex technology via third parties which presents a huge opportunity for channel growth and, more broadly, bodes well for the technology sector in Britain."

Cisco UK CTO Chintan Patel commented: "As the pandemic persists it's clear that channel partners and their customers are looking to transform their emergency digital responses for the long-term.

"CPs highlighted cost savings through automation, enhanced agility, flexibility and increased security as key strategic benefits. As a result, the benefits and returns on these technology investments can be viewed as a dividend, giving UK businesses a return over the years to follow."



Chintan Patel

The survey pointed to the benefits of remote working experienced by channel companies, with 90% reporting that their productivity is the same or higher than in the office. Nearly half believe that a new hybrid working model will prevail, while 15% predict a predominantly virtual working model.

"A blend of old world and new world is where we'd like to get to, taking the best of both situations into the future," observed Justin Coombes, Marketing Director, Gamma.

"New benefits such as expanded talent pools and more flexible working conditions leading to higher productivity are just some of the advantages, so all businesses need to engage with the positive outcomes of hybrid working."

IT Centric targeted by Fraser

SOCONNECT'S acquisition of Edinburgh-based IT Centric boosts staff numbers to 38 and adds 80 small businesses to its customer base (now totalling 500) as it targets £5m revenues by March 2022. The company is supported by a nationwide network of over 200 engineers.

The self-funded deal builds on SoConnect's 2019 bolt-on acquisition of Netopa and according to CEO Campbell Fraser future transactions could be on the cards.

"We are in a position of financial strength with around 80% of our contracted revenue being recurring," he stated.

"This acquisition strengthens our cloud, cyber security and hosted services. And we are better placed to support UK-wide SMEs' remote workforces in the wake of Covid-19."

IT Centric was founded in 2004 by Gordon Sayers who joins the SoConnect board alongside former IT Centric Non-Exec Director David Ellis.



Campbell Fraser

NEWS ROUNDUP

GEOGRAPHIC expansion, new service propositions and greater supply chain automation have combined to boost Agilitas's turnover to more than £14m with EBITDA earnings of £3.829m. The 21.8% year-on-year growth was in part underpinned by the introduction of six new service offerings and expansion of the company's Nottingham-based international logistics hub which now supports over 67 countries. Shaun Lynn, CEO, commented: "Our aim is to ensure this growth remains consistent. To achieve this we need to invest in the right people, technologies, processes and facilities." (see page 32)

DIVERSITY and inclusion initiatives rolled out by Exertis will better enable the company to respond to the experiences and requirements of a broad spectrum of customers, according to Global Chief Digital and Marketing Officer Vishal Chhatralia. "We must continue to build a diverse organisation which matches the diversity of the customers and partners we serve," he said. "Where we have more diversity we have better and more non-linear ideas and innovation driving growth."

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Remodelled tech support



Pete Gilbert

CROWDSOURCING is set to transform the market for in-home and business services carried out by technicians over the next five years, claims Roamlar Tech UK Commercial Director Pete Gilbert.

He advocates a business model that leverages a crowd of on-demand certified independent technicians based across the country. Tasks are allocated via a mobile app following a match with crowd members based on skill sets, certifications, experience and location.

“Professionals can accept tasks according to their availability, perform on-site visits and submit related information and photos for a quality check performed by a team of reviewers,” explained Gilbert.

He aims to replicate the scale and growth of the company’s European crowdsourcing model in the UK and is piloting its gig

economy approach with a number of service providers including TalkTalk.

In the Netherlands, where the model was initially piloted and launched in 2016, the company serves top national brands including KPN.

“Since the start of the pandemic telco companies saw a strong increase in demand for Internet and online services while facing a much lower availability of their own fixed workforce,” added Gilbert.

“Largely driven by Covid-19, sickness and absenteeism rates spiked at 25%, leading to a backlog of on-site visits performed by technicians.

“This crowd-supported approach allows businesses to be fully flexible in responding to the needs of the market, both in terms of footprint and volume, while cutting overheads and fixed costs.”

Apalo set for UCaaS campaign

UCAAS provider Apalo has kicked off a channel recruitment campaign following a six month beta test of its mobile-first platform with certain partners and their business customers.

The platform enables partners to resell services or own-brand the FMC solution. “Our team is now ready to onboard and work alongside 50 to 60 new channel partners,” said CEO Philippe Matos.

“For one monthly service fee partners will be able to offer their customers an all-in-one UC solution accessed via a single management portal.”

The multi-tenanted UCaaS platform combines mobile, telephony, collaboration tools, national and international calls and data packages, with full SBC and management for traffic monitoring and fraud prevention, plus a choice of handsets, pointed out Matos.



Philippe Matos

Stone unveils e-waste app

THE launch of Stone Group’s e-waste recycling app reflects growing demand from organisations for a more sustainable approach to IT hardware purchasing and disposal, according to Director Tim Westbrook.

“This is an area that should not be overlooked and one where fast and widespread change is crucial, as 53.6 million metric tonnes of global e-waste was generated just last year alone,” he said.

Research by Stone indicates a strong appetite for ways to responsibly manage e-waste and technology procurement via ‘green’ methods – nearly 60% of the businesses questioned purchase refurbished hardware and over 30% use an IT asset disposal service.

However, one in five respondents said they still send their old IT to landfill and 31% cite the cost of investment in sustainability plans as a barrier.

Westbrook noted that the Stone 360 e-waste app is designed to make recycling



Tim Westbrook

easier and more cost-effective, enabling businesses to arrange for the collection of their redundant IT equipment, receive rebates and have a tree planted on their behalf.

“All items are then taken to our dedicated IT asset disposal facility where they are securely recycled or refurbished,” he added. “Excessive resources or investment aren’t always needed to make sustainable change.

“The e-waste recycling app is designed to be quick and easy for organisations to use while helping to significantly reduce their carbon footprint.”

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BCN pockets Xicon Cloud

BEECH Tree-backed BCN Group has bolstered its cloud play with the acquisition of Warrington-based Xicon Cloud for an undisclosed sum, its third acquisition in 18 months (following the purchases of Leeds-based Blue Logic in 2019 and Runcorn business Polymorph in February 2020).

The Xicon Cloud deal adds clout to Manchester-based BCN Group’s public sector strategy, bringing particular expertise in the public sector healthcare market, being accredited to con-



Simon Kelf

nect into and use the NHS’s Health and Social Care Network (HSCN).

BCN Group CEO Simon Kelf commented: “The acquisition strengthens our cloud product and service offering.”

Simon Heyes, who is the CEO of Xicon Cloud, added: “This opportunity will allow both organisations and our customers to benefit from the joint capabilities of a larger team and wider product portfolios.”

Openreach to boost job seeker diversity

AT LEAST 20% of new roles at Openreach this year will be filled by female candidates as the company seeks to address a gender imbalance based on a revised approach to recruitment.

The move follows research that found the wording of job adverts could deter women from applying for positions. The study also deduced that job adverts without gender bias increased womens’ interest in engineering jobs by over 200%.

Gendered phraseology, active versus passive construction and skill set descriptors were highlighted as pivotal in the way advertisements are perceived

by women. “Gender inclusive adverts could be vital to bringing more women into a range of sectors,” said Dr Chris Begeny, who is a Research Fellow in Gender and Organisational Psychology based at the University of Exeter.

“All too often the rhetoric of improving women’s experiences in male dominated sectors emphasises the idea that women need to lean in and overcome their own ‘internal barriers’.”

Openreach HR Director Kevin Brady added: “This research is important in helping us to develop ways to redress the balance.”



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Build Your Connected Cloud on FluidOne

Successful businesses depend on connectivity!

Many businesses have had to switch to a remote workforce to overcome the challenges over the last few months, which means they have had to become even more agile to support increased flexibility and remain competitive. With the rapid acceleration of digital transformation, channel partners have had to change and adjust their offering in order to meet the needs of their customers. Many organisations have had to re-evaluate their connectivity and pivot towards multi-cloud and multi-connected infrastructures to support their business both now and in the future. Without connectivity, there is no Cloud, so it was a natural step for leading connectivity aggregator, FluidOne, to support channel partners by providing true Connected Cloud Solutions for them to add to their existing toolset and help them mobilise their customers' workforces to operate more productively and efficiently, no matter where they are.

FluidOne excels at providing high-quality data connectivity services, including Unified Communications, Mobile and IoT to a loyal partner base. As a Connected Cloud Solutions provider, it boasts a range of routes to market with Channel and Strategic Partners delivering services via its award-winning national fibre network, Platform One. Focused on a vision to become the best quality Connected Cloud Solutions provider to UK channel partners, FluidOne's strategy to scale up over the coming years has seen the company undertake a series of strategic acquisitions and investments.

With an expert team and a robust product offering, FluidOne is confident they are able to find a solution for any issue a partner may face. And, if they can't, you can be sure they will work to swiftly bring a solution onboard to support you. Forever innovating and pushing the boundaries, FluidOne has ambitious plans to continue to deliver its top-quality Connected Cloud Solutions to its growing partner base.



RUSSELL HORTON
CEO

Continuing on an upward trajectory, FluidOne has announced an investment in Cyber Security Associates Ltd (CSA) to add dedicated cyber security to further enhance its already attractive Connected Cloud Solutions offering. FluidOne's CEO Russell Horton notes that "combining these services with the connectivity that FluidOne is best known for allows us to work with partners to help them digitally transform their IT and communications offering, enabling their customers to be agile and focus on their core business. We aim to provide partners with the tools they need to create multi-cloud and multi-connected environments for their customers that are secure and simple to use." More investments and acquisitions are on the horizon for FluidOne, as it continues to seek out high-quality businesses with complementary skills to add to the growing group of companies, presenting the opportunity to build and expand alongside them.

On hand for mental help



www.mentalhealthassociates.co.uk

PEOPLE working in the ICT channel community who suffer from poor mental health now have access to a first response 'listening post' website (www.mentalhealthassociates.co.uk) launched by Mental Health Associates (MHA).

The organisation was founded by Peter Orr and comprises a group of trustees dedicated to alleviating the negative effects on mental health of the coronavirus pandemic and other stress points, urging all those affected to not suffer in silence.

"It was important to have the website up and running so we could reach the broad range of individuals and companies that MHA can help," said Orr.

"We can now showcase our vision and the work we are doing. We will also use the site to promote our mental health awareness programme.

"We hope the ICT industry will get behind the charity as launching during the pandemic has been challenging, particularly with fundraising. The development of the website and the support of Comms Dealer has been a great help."

Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent added: "Comms Dealer is delighted to have aided Mental Health Associates in getting the website up and running.

"Sometimes a friendly person to talk to is all that's needed. Someone who can empathise with the issues you are facing, someone who knows our industry well and can talk things through with you calmly and pragmatically and put you on the path to better mental health."

Mental Health Associates is aiming to raise £50,000 to train 50 Associates. (See page 19)

New unit powered by energy

MANCHESTER-based Incom-CNS is set to help customers save on their energy bills following a link up with Fidelity Energy. The comms provider has set up a dedicated energy division that provides audits and managed services with access to 17 energy suppliers.

It has a particular focus on making green energy products available to large and small businesses, minimising their bills and carbon footprint.

"We have been offering a managed service for business comm, streamlining bills and passing on savings to our customers for more than three decades," stated Incom-CNS Group Sales Director Grant Counsell. "We have extended this service to utilities."

Fidelity Energy MD John Haw said: "Our focus will be on creating real value to Incom-CNS' customers and delivering an efficient energy solution to save money and the planet."



Grant Counsell

Time ripe to grab cellular opportunity

THE Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on remote working and undeniably highlighted the gulf between good and bad connectivity, a gulf that is not unbridgeable, emphasised Cloudcell MD Kevin Boyle who says poor connectivity is for channel partners to remedy.

With a significant opportunity for resellers to grasp, it's a chance to modernise archaic and inappropriate connections to homes and offices, believes Boyle, whose upgrade mission is advancing at pace.

"Despite a tough 12 months we've managed to grow our reseller base by over 150% and expand the company by 19% year-on-year," he said.

"We are seeing increased demand for wireless solutions deployed in residential settings as well as for business continuity, due largely to the drastic acceleration of remote working.

"We expect this trend to continue into 2021 as remote working becomes a dominant theme and the need for reliable high-speed, low-latency Internet access becomes permanently essential."

Cloudcell's cellular technology and engineering expertise have combined to provide solutions and tools that help overcome the most challenging connectivity issues presented by Covid-19, pointed out Boyle.

"Wireless broadband solutions have many potential uses and can boost connectivity, providing a more reliable and well rounded end user experience," he stated. "Cellular and SDWAN as a connectivity solution is a viable alternative to standard forms of connectivity.

"Cellular is about much more than simply back-up. It is an entire solution in itself



Kevin Boyle

and offers great opportunities to resellers of all shapes and sizes to secure revenues from new and existing customers."

Boyle said his focus this year will be on consolidating progress made in 2020 and maintaining momentum in developing reseller partnerships in channel with cellular solutions from the company's connectivity platform called Cloudcell EQ.

Boyle reaffirmed that the potential use of 5G could 'dramatically' improve connectivity and to support partners during the pandemic Cloudcell has launched a revised set of commercials for Q1.

As part of its expanding reseller programme the company will also launch a marketing initiative later in the year and hold educational webinars, provide technical training and dedicated sales support to help partners leverage the EQ platform to full advantage.

In other strategic developments Cloudcell will roll out a 5G roadmap that encompasses the assessment of available technology, location testing and commercial models.

"We will help our partners to navigate the applications of 5G and its potential to boost connectivity to devices in many more locations," added Boyle.

Connexin expands network

IOT and Smart City operator Connexin is to expand its IoT network nationwide, providing carrier grade roaming LoRaWAN connectivity and infrastructure to customers across the UK.

Connexin raised £80m in funding in September and currently has regional LoRaWAN networks in place in East and South Yorkshire.

Furqan Alamgir, founder and CEO, said: "Regionally, we have seen our network used by a variety of sectors and indi-



Furqan Alamgir

viduals from entrepreneurs and innovation centres to the utility, private and public sectors.

"These results have demonstrated the effectiveness of low

powered networks across multiple use cases.

"Connexin is committed to changing the status quo in a previously stagnant smart city and IoT market."

Donna Moore, CEO and Chairwoman of the LoRa Alliance, added: "This is a significant achievement for IoT that will open up a tremendous business opportunity and deliver new service offerings."

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Future Proof Your Communications

3CX's latest release cements the company's transition from phone system to full-blown omnichannel communications platform. CTO & founder Nick Galea tells us what's in store for 3CX this year.

2020 was the year no one planned for. Yet, in spite of the disruption, 3CX was able to find its silver lining. "We've always been an agile organization," says CTO Nick Galea, "and this year forced us to practice what we preach. Like thousands of businesses around the world, our team shifted to remote working virtually overnight. But for us, this was an opportunity. The world's biggest remote working experiment highlighted the power of 3CX to connect colleagues and co-workers, no matter what's happening outside. We've seen a glimpse of what the future of communications looks like and by living through it, our team has created the most ambitious roadmap in 3CX's history."

3CX's Vision

If you follow 3CX, you'll know that the product is growing. "Customers are no longer satisfied with calling alone, they need multiple ways to connect," Nick explains. "Our system has evolved to mirror these consumer trends, giving our partners the full suite of communications tools needed to compete in the digital age. Forget having separate systems for each channel, 3CX does it all."

"All" is not an understatement. For one affordable, annual fee, 3CX users unlock live chat, Facebook messaging integration, business SMS, and HD video conferencing. All alongside the award-winning business phone system with which 3CX made its name. There are no hidden fees, no add-ons, and no per-user pricing. Just reliable, tried and tested tools that simplify



“Employee-customer connections are very much at the core of what we do. Our aim is to allow internal teams to work more efficiently and as a result, make customers happier.”

Nick Galea

internal and external communications.

We asked Nick to describe the vision for 3CX going forward: "Where our competitors are still very much focused on connecting co-workers, 3CX goes one step further. Employee-customer connections are very much at the core of what we do. Our aim is to allow internal teams to work more

efficiently and as a result, make customers happier."

Customer Driven

Omnichannel is a word that's often thrown around in the UC world, but few providers have got to grips with the power of synergized communication. Whilst leading vendors do offer multiple communications channels, few have made sure they speak to one



another. As a result, customer experiences remain clunky and frustrating, reminiscent of a game of pass-the-parcel.

"Customers want a single point of contact for their query," says Nick. "They don't want to start a conversation on chat, be told to call a contact centre, and then have to re-explain their issue to a new agent. It's simply a waste of time. For businesses, this is make or break. Solve a customer query in one interaction and only 1% of customers go to a competitor. Solve it in two interactions and this figure shoots up to 15%. When it comes to contact centres, the fewer touchpoints the better."

3CX has designed its omnichannel communications solution with this in mind. With it, users can seamlessly transition from one channel to another, and continue speaking with the same agent. Opened a chat but decided it's easier to talk an issue through on the phone? No problem! Elevate to a call at the press of a button. Started a call but now need to share a document on your screen? Simple, switch to an instant web meeting. Gone are the days of working in silos, with 3CX you connect your way.

What's Next at 3CX?

3CX is known for innovation and V18 promises to be no different. The upcoming release focuses on giving businesses even more ways to

connect with customers. With new live chat features, night modes, and enhanced Webmeeting scheduling included in the lineup, there's a lot to like, but 3CX knows customer service relies on more than just the channels at your fingertips.

To deliver exceptional CX, efficiency is key. Agents need the tools to resolve customer inquiries effectively, whilst simultaneously being free of admin tasks that take away from what matters most—customer interaction. V18 addresses this by introducing a bundled Help Desk solution to support the efficient handling of customer queries.

"Helpdesk solutions for small and medium-sized organizations are expensive, time-consuming, and limited in terms of functionality", Nick explained, "We knew a solution within the product would offer our customers something better. With version 18 users no longer need a separate helpdesk solution, saving them additional training, admin, and cost. What's more, the solution will be 100% supported by 3CX, so they'll have complete peace of mind."

Try 3CX for Free

Why wait for version 18? 3CX's Standard Edition includes live chat, web conferencing, SMS integration, and it's completely free for the first year. Create your free trial license and discover what 3CX could do for your portfolio, firsthand.



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A man with community o

Few can claim to read the comms market as well as former Financial Times journalist and Gigabit Networks CEO Dan Ilett whose back story features a number of notable career posts and achievements – all based on the premise of building a solid community.

This story is of a man wholly in touch with the market in which he operates. Ilett is equally clear on his vision, ambition and strategy as he turns the UK's full fibre roll out to Gigabit's and its customers' advantage, in particular seeking to elevate the Midlands as a digital hub. Every region needs a supportive full fibre provider and community assets such as Leicester-based Gigabit Networks and its partner CityFibre are a godsend to businesses and residents, believes Ilett. "I am from the Midlands," he said. "It's an incredible area for talent and ideas with a significant industrious history. We'd like to see it become one of the best areas for digital innovation in the UK. Our proposition is full fibre for enterprise, SMEs and SoHos. We want to help the Midlands to get faster because it's been massively underserved for too long. We currently work exclusively with CityFibre because it is aligned with what we are trying to achieve.

"If we didn't have legacy infrastructure the UK would be flying right now. Instead, the monoliths are trying to sweat their assets and are scared of cannibalising lucrative revenue streams. We have to face up to the fact that it's time to go fully digital and forget about old commercial models. It's taken



Dan Ilett

I love journalism, writing and the idea that you can create interesting, valuable communities that people can connect to. Gigabit is an extension of that

a long time to get fibre at a decent price compared to some other countries. We'll be looking at next generation capabilities for rich Internet use, networks and work. We're interested to see what the communities we serve can do with these tools."

To advance its mission Gigabit Networks wasted no time in making its first acquisition, snapping up Haverhill-based Skyline Wireless last November to

address a greater swathe of bandwidth-lite areas in the east Midlands region. Skyline delivers last mile wireless Internet connectivity via radio and 4/5G networks. The firm also provides UCaaS, VoIP and security solutions to SMEs. "Most people in the Midlands haven't realised the potential speeds and technology that are available to them," commented Ilett. "Gigabit and Skyline will change that. We can now make central city

businesses faster, along with more rural areas. We have additional big milestones on the roadmap and we'll stage our investment rounds accordingly."

Experience counts

That Ilett's grasp of the marketplace and the tasks in hand is impressive should come as no surprise when you consider his past experience of leading teams in global brand marketing and digital product

delivery. He has advised IBM, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Samsung, Cisco and others on brand positioning, go-to-market strategy and performance. Ilett also led digital banking and insurance product transformation for Virgin Money and Thomas Cook. He is a founding member of Coindesk.com (a Bitcoin and Blockchain website) and Greenbang.com (a cleantech research company). "I went into start-up, worked in digital publishing and consulting and ran digital transformation in a number of FTSEs and left Thomas Cook last year to build new businesses," he explained.

"I built several global communities with audiences of millions of people from nothing – just using words and Wordpress. I love journalism, writing and the idea that you can create interesting, valuable communities that people can connect to. Gigabit is an extension of that because we see the Midlands business arena as a community. It just doesn't identify with itself that much – yet."

Gigabit Networks was formed last year by Ilett and David Yates. Ilett had not long departed from Thomas Cook and Yates' 4 Ocean's Ventures provided some of the initial seed capital to get the business going. "The initial strategy

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On his mind MHA urges people with mental health issues to seek help

was to launch an ultrafast fibre Internet service for prosumers and gamers, but once we spoke with CityFibre about its City Champions programme we realised that targeting businesses in the Midlands would be a better way to grow a solid base," commented Ilett. "We launched the business right at the start of the first Covid-19 lockdown, so our sales and marketing plans basically went out the window overnight and we had to pivot into a more digital marketing strategy.

"We've done well and gained some great clients and a few big logos. We approached NHS trusts and care homes fairly early in the Covid pandemic and that has helped us considerably. We are good at digital marketing and PR but we need to engage more with CIOs, IT directors and general influencers in the Midlands. Part of this is around redefining industry language, it's way too jargony for concepts that aren't always that tough and can easily exclude people. I don't think that's right."

Through a journalistic lens he sees clearly the writing on the wall for VARs wanting to secure their future by building a community. "As with any good company you need to define what makes you stand out and stick by your promises," he added. "To use a marketing phrase, VARs must create a whitespace for their brand so they have a story to tell. Never just chase the money – but work with people you like on something you love. Enable people to do what they want and help them on their path all you can. It all comes around."

Just a minute with Dan Ilett...

Role model: Nelson Mandela for his patience, forgiveness and a heart that showed the world the true meaning of compassion.

What talent do you wish you had? Being a doctor would be an incredible journey.

What do you fear most? Going to the Post Office.

Best piece of advice you have been given? People take you on your own estimation. Don't waste time doubting yourself.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing? Digital media and communications – helping to connect people and ideas.

Your main strength and what could you work on? I can tell a story. I'm creative and like to build fast. I'm a starter, but I really have to focus on finishing things properly with complete perfection.

One example of something you have overcome: My son was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes aged 2.5 years old. That was like being hit by a train. I stopped business travel and promised to be more of a hands-on dad.

What could you not live without? The TV, noise cancelling headphones, Deliveroo and running shoes.

How would you like to be remembered? As living the dream.

Lesson learnt: To trust myself more and ensure I get the right help to grow and get things done.

Name three ideal dinner guests: I have seen very little of my close friends during the past year, so three of them.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I studied Japanese at Sheffield University for four years.

Top tip for resellers: Great message + relationships + service = good feedback.

Mental Health Associates is now fully operational as the only charity working exclusively in the ICT industry to help people in need of mental health support. This month we quizzed founder Peter Orr on how he and the charity's trustees and associates can help anyone that may be struggling with issues of stress, anxiety and self-worth.



Peter Orr

helped individuals by simply talking to them.

Why is MHA so important?

The pandemic has given everyone challenges and some people cope better than others. It must be especially hard for those individuals who are furloughed and are worried about their future.

Are some companies neglecting their staff?

Most companies in our industry have been brilliant at keeping staff engaged and motivated during the pandemic, but others have not been so good. Some people on furlough have told me that no one from their company has contacted them during the latest lockdown. Not once. That is very sad to hear.

What can people do to make sure people don't drift into mental health problems?

It's important that all team members speak to each other. Not always about work - sport, weather, politics, anything. And don't be frightened to simply ask how they are doing.

Have you helped anyone at this stage?

We certainly have. Our first few months have seen the charity support 15 people in our industry. We are also supporting companies with mental health awareness workshops.

How do the workshops help?

The workshops promote mental health awareness in the workforce particularly in the ICT industry. We want to encourage the early detection of poor mental health and to enable people to talk to each other about their worries and anxieties. We also signpost local and national support. You can book a workshop via our website - www.mentalhealthassociates.co.uk.

What does being a 'first response service' actually mean?

We are primarily a listening post, a confidential service outside the work environment. Our signposting and listening service, manned by people with industry knowledge and understanding, has

What if somebody struggling wants help from outside our industry?

We fully understand we are a first response service, and some people may wish to get more specific help. Our website has useful sites and contact numbers to help people that don't want to speak to us.

Does the charity need support?

Yes, we do. In this crisis money is tight and every charity is struggling, but if every ICT company donated just £100 we would be able to do so much more. Any donations would be much valued.

Do you need more helpers?

Our aim is to have 100 Associates trained and ready to help, so that when the Covid restrictions are lifted, local Associates are available to meet face-to-face with individuals and companies.

For more information please visit www.mentalhealthassociates.co.uk. If you need help urgently call 03301 244 338.

To donate please visit <https://uk.gofundme.com/f/mental-health-associates>

The future of voice

BT Enterprise Voice and Collaboration Director Georgina Williams on coronavirus, the channel and the future of communications.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote collaboration tools; and in the midst of another national lockdown the lessons learnt from last year mean businesses are set to look to the future and take a more strategic approach to communications technology – particularly the integration of voice and collaboration tools into the workplace. This is an important step with the shift to all-IP in full swing and the PSTN switch-off just around the corner. Yet the channel has a big role to play in educating businesses so they understand the wider benefits such a move can bring, while making it easier for them to adopt the products and services required.

Coronavirus also dramatically changed the nature of business communications. In the sudden explosion of remote working that occurred during the first lockdown, there was a huge pressure on the IP Exchange to handle the shift from voice calls to video conferencing. Once things began to settle, the focus moved to collaboration solutions with organisations looking to cloud technology to allow employees to work from home.

For a lot of businesses, this digital transformation

wasn't entirely unplanned. The switch-off of the UK's PSTN network in 2025 meant many were already considering a move to all-IP and the benefits of voice and collaboration capabilities – including calling, messaging, and meeting. The fact is, coronavirus forced it to happen much sooner than expected and it's here where channel partners stepped up to the plate to provide streamlined access to connectivity, voice and collaboration solution portfolios, as well as the support required for new users to drive the most value from them.

Staggered approach

The work isn't over yet. As we await the impact of the vaccines some companies who have fixed line communications in place at offices may feel that once we are back, in whatever capacity, they still have a working solution that doesn't yet need to be replaced. Similarly, for larger firms relying on a complex PBX there could be a higher cost to extract and upgrade – which could well be the deciding factor at a time when fiscal responsibility is likely at the top of the agenda.

The key to overcoming such challenges is education. While many businesses will be aware of the switch-



Georgina Williams

off, for instance, they may not be aware that some exchanges will stop receiving support before 2025. CPs need to convince businesses to start thinking about migration sooner rather than later. CPs should also explain that the benefits of hosted collaboration tools go far beyond just voice and video communications alone. Integrating these into an organisation's everyday business operations and applications can unlock new insights and opportunities.

Voice technology is constantly evolving. Now we're seeing the full adoption of VoIP which has powered a revolution in IT-based voice communications and services. Crucially, this allows it to be analysed in new ways.

Businesses can search call recordings for specific words or phrases for example, the automation of which will instantly speed up and improve the delivery of more personalised and effective customer communications; while AI-powered real-time analysis will allow companies to better gauge customer experience through measuring sentiment (not

simply what they're saying, but how they're saying it) – a powerful tool, if sales teams are working in isolation. This capability can be further advantageous by helping organisations to monitor the wellbeing of employees.

Human factor

The lockdown has forced many to work from home which has its benefits, but it also takes away a lot of human contact. That alongside the uniqueness of the situation means employee mental health has been brought more into focus. With some level of remote working likely to become permanent for many, collaborative tools that measure sentiment can help to monitor employee wellbeing.

Apart from the flexibility and productivity gains from having all comms in a single application, other benefits can be derived from the many standard integrations that come out-of-the-box. For example, integration with CRM allows users to offer simple click-to-call integration or view all of the previous interactions with a contact easily in one place. Free

flowing data streamlines the sales process, for instance, automatically setting calendar reminders and entries or locating specific product fact sheets based on what's said during a prospect call. Other examples include more intelligent IVR routing. This could be through NLP or integrating intelligence from other applications into IVR in order to advise the system why a customer might be calling so that they can be more efficiently routed to the most suitable person.

Looking ahead, integration can go much deeper into office environments too. It's already relatively common for meeting rooms to have their own email addresses to simplify their booking process but, when setting up physical meetings, if the number of people attending suddenly exceeds the maximum number of seats, the system could automatically find a bigger room or turn the meeting virtual.

All of the aforementioned benefits speak for themselves, but they may not be self-evident. A greater level of awareness and education from CPs will be required. With most people working remotely since the spring of 2020 the situation has highlighted the importance of a resilient, cloud-based communications platform. It's become increasingly clear that any strategy will need to integrate voice and collaboration solutions, supported by the transition to an all-IP infrastructure. CPs have an essential part to play in helping customers understand what a migration to that environment will mean to their business, and what's required to achieve it. ■

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VanillaIP enhances UC with Cisco Webex

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VanillaIP herald Webex inclusion as Flexibility & Profitability for Resellers

London based UK Cloud Communications leader VanillaIP, known already for a broad portfolio of best-in-class applications, delivered, and managed with in its unique service platform Uboss, proudly launched a suite of fully API integrated Cisco Webex services which the communications giant has just integrated with the Broadsoft voice platform it acquired in 2017.

Speaking about this latest addition to the VanillaIP reseller portfolio, Sales and Marketing Director Iain Sinnott said, 'This is a perfectly timed addition for us as whilst we have an MS Teams direct routing solution, we wanted a true voice, meeting and team collaboration proposition that represented a fairer revenue and profit share opportunity for our resellers. The market transformation that has taken place in the last 11 months will challenge many suppliers but for those of us who have championed workplace flexibility alongside application base productivity optimization, the newly open minds of the Small and Mid-Market buyers is a refreshing advance'.

The Webex products suite itself is a combination of:

- Webex Softphone
- Webex Spaces – Softphone + Team collaboration and chat
- Webex 25 – Webex Spaces with an additional open meeting room
- Webex 1000 – adds meeting room capacity up to 1000 participants and brings in recording, transcription and remote desktop control

Product specialist and senior engineer Ed Thrussell commented, 'this represents the culmination of six-months close work with Cisco as part of their early field-testing panel. It has been a great experience working with their team and using the shared knowledge. We have used the powerful API sets that Uboss, Broadsoft and Cisco Hub offer, meaning the Webex Apps are truly



“ Whilst we have an MS Teams direct routing solution, we wanted a true voice, meeting and team collaboration proposition ”

Iain Sinnott, Sales and Marketing Director

'Real-time, on-demand deployment is part of the new requirement emerging from the 2020 shakeup. The fact that a user can go onto the

and fear of change has slowed the market on its journey to this point, but the leap has been forced onto UK businesses and they have now

delighted with both the service set and the automation of deployment and I think it will be a big product for us in 2021.'

“ Real-time, on-demand deployment is part of the new requirement emerging from the 2020 shakeup ”

Dave Dadds, CEO

"On Demand" which is great for client self-service whether provisioning 1 or 1,000. Once the client downloads the required Device(s) type desktop, mobile or tablet (all three can be used at same time!), Uboss does the rest including adding call credit limits so Resellers can allow services to be created by their customers, whether that's for an existing user or a brand-new user, via the customer portal, without any commercial concerns.

Dave Dadds, CEO and one of the driving forces behind VanillaIP key differentiator Uboss added,

portal at 11pm, deploy the service, bring up the soft clients and start making calls or having meetings is great, the fact that Uboss ensures the reseller achieves a zero-touch billing event is critical. Ten years ago, we started assembling the Uboss development team because we believed this era of multi-vender, multi-product, application-based solution suites would dominate business communications. Apathy

seen the benefits firsthand, which means there is no going back.

Early adopter and education market specialist Richard Clarke of Leverstock, who attended the Virtual Launch on Tuesday 19th Jan 2021, was full of praise. 'As a reseller I need to keep the back office administration costs to a minimum so we can support our schools well and still create profit and value. I am



New Horizons for Wade

Gamma's appointment of Chris Wade as Chief Marketing and Product Officer underlines the company's ambition to extend its portfolio beyond traditional telecoms and its operating boundaries beyond the UK.

Wade's background is in IT software. He was previously Chief Product Officer at financial software developer Aptitude Software and before that spent 15 years at Sage, rising to the post of Vice President of Products. In both roles he was responsible for product evolution and marketing strategy which he believes stands him in good stead to help fulfil Gamma's aspirations in the software arena.

"Gamma has outstanding foundations and expertise in telco, but I am excited to evolve our software and SaaS capability," he said. "I hope to bring more software centricity to the company, especially as this can create more opportunities than hardware alone used to. Our UCaaS proposition is interesting and I'm excited to see how it evolves in the coming years. We have great ambitions to position this offering in the European market to continue helping businesses to be more modern, efficient, and agile – especially at times like these where those aspects are more important than ever."

So, what attracted him to the position at Gamma? He says it was all down to the company's market position, expertise and growth plans. "In today's digital world, connecting people is critical," he added. "Communication is the lifeblood of any

business, just as much as SMEs are the lifeblood of the economy. The way Gamma connects these two elements really interests me and attracted me to this position. Moreover, the company's strong position in the UK market and its ambitious plans in the UK and Europe were key factors in my decision to take on the role."

Wade holds a Masters degree in physics which he gained at Oxford, so one must question why he took the road into software product development rather than science or engineering?

"I always felt that staying in science or engineering might have meant becoming more and more of an expert in something fewer and fewer people seemed to be interested in," he explained. "In software development, and product management in particular, you have to plan for the long-term while, at the same time, executing in the short-term. This appealed to the 'thinking' and 'doing' sides of me."

Past colleagues refer to Wade as an analytical leader who can take strategic commercial intent and translate it into practical action plans, which should resonate with Gamma's loyal reseller community keen to maximise on market demands for 'as a service' solutions. "Gamma has a strong reputation among channel partners and our commitment to them is one of the key differentiating



Chris Wade

Communication is the lifeblood of any business

aspects of our business," stated Wade. "I am looking forward to continuing to support our channel partner programme and to consolidate the relationships with our partners."

Thought leadership

"In the following years we will focus on elevating Gamma's profile in the market. We will continue to position ourselves as thought leaders and to raise awareness of our vision and mission. This will also benefit our channel partners who will be able to show they are backed by a credible expert in UCaaS. Ultimately, UCaaS will play a key role in the market. We are focusing on this transition to a UCaaS-centric strategy in order to have the processes, products and capabilities necessary to meet the requirements of our customers and partners."

Wade is realistic about the challenges ahead presented

by Covid-19, but is confident there will be opportunities too and promised a range of new products and updates. "Remote working will continue impacting our business and the UC market for many years to come," he said. "Although mass vaccination is in sight many businesses will continue working remotely or will adopt a hybrid working environment. This opens a lot of questions and challenges for all industries that will have to adapt. UCaaS will play a key role during this shift. Moreover, with the ISDN switch off in 2025 we will also see a spike in SIP and VoIP adoption."

"2021 will be an exciting year for Gamma and we look forward to sharing more information about our plans, which will see a new contact centre proposition, a WLR replacement, a reinvigorated mobile offering, and updates to Horizon Collaborate." ■

Just a minute with Chris Wade...

Role model: I wouldn't say that I have one role model. I admire many of the people I've worked with and learned from over the years. However, I also admire entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk for their ability to recognise the potential of a market and exploit it.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: For the creation of my Master's thesis I had the opportunity to hold a quarter of a million pounds worth of diamonds.

Your main strength and what could you work on? The two are related: Although I work very well with people, regardless of their background or skills, I can be a little too direct at times.

What's the best piece of advice you have been given? 'Be a ten' rather than beaten. Meaning you should always strive to be the best version of yourself irrespective of the situation you find yourself in.

How do you start your working day? I usually start my day by going for a run.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing? I find ICT truly fascinating. I think it's a privilege to act as 'translator' between technologists and businesses, who sometimes don't seem to understand each other. Nonetheless, if I had to choose another career, I might have enjoyed staying in academia.

How do you relax? I enjoy spending time with my kids, being outside as much as possible and running.

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New Challenges in 2021 for UCaaS Providers

After last year's problems, many people are hoping for a brighter 2021. Enzo Viscito has recently started a new role as Managing Director UCaaS at PortaOne, which he describes as one of the best kept secrets in the industry despite being deployed for over 400 telcos worldwide.

Is this a case of the poacher turning gamekeeper, as he was previously MD of UCaaS provider Inclarity? It certainly puts him in a relatively unique position to comment on the state of the market, and the challenges, new and old, facing the market.

Whilst he believes people should be optimistic about the future, he also says they need to move forward carefully as the market has been transformed.

An increasingly challenging marketplace

The pandemic continues to impact both individuals and companies. It has also triggered significant changes to the telecoms market. It feels like three years' change was crammed into about six months!

Video calls: The use of Teams, Zoom and other products rose massively as people switched to home working. Daily usage of Teams rose almost 400% globally between March and October 2020. In the UK, Zoom daily users went from 160,000 in March to 1.6m in November. The necessity of using these solutions has led to people re-evaluating the communication tools they use in their organisations.

Market exits: Last year brought about the end of Panasonic in the PBX market, where it had been a mainstay for large numbers of small organisations and had provided a good revenue stream for its resellers. Add to this the recent rumours circulating about ScanSource Europe's future and it is clear we are entering unsettled waters.



Enzo Viscito

Changing business models:

Many suppliers are changing their go-to-market models, which is impacting resellers as some suppliers start to go direct.

- Avaya's UCaaS model is to take customers directly and switch resellers to an agency model.
- Cisco has already announced direct calling, after spending time and effort encouraging BroadSoft licence customers to switch to a SaaS model.
- Microsoft completed their acquisition of Metaswitch, which will make people wonder about their future plans.
- Both 8x8 and RingCentral are selling directly, via their websites.
- Salesforce acquired Slack to help it offer an alternative.

Throw in Google Voice and Amazon Connect and it adds up to significant challenges for resellers. So how does a UCaaS reseller

compete with these global giants and their ability to reach straight to the end customer?

A perfect storm?

As someone who has stood in their shoes, Enzo feels that this adds to the challenges owners of resellers have always faced: billing and integrating third-party applications and products to add new features. They are now being faced with the perfect storm of these old problems, plus the potential erosion of their end-customer relationships and changes to their cost models. And then how do they differentiate their offering when many others are using the same platform?

Customer requirements are also expanding: first it was a phone system and then a system with collaboration – now, they want a "productivity tool" that integrates with CRM systems and automates workflows to improve revenue

generation and streamline costs.

What are the options?

In light of this turmoil, what should owners be considering?

- Stay where they are and face potential death by a thousand cuts, as the challenges mount and erosion takes place. This could potentially reduce the value in the business – a risk if they want to sell up in the future.
- Look to build their own solution around open-source platforms such as Asterisk, FreeSwitch or API-centred CPaaS (Communication Platform as a Service) providers such as Twilio – but this takes time and skilled resources. Not just to set it up but also to maintain and continually enhance it.
- Consider seeking out a new provider. But how do they ensure they are not jumping straight from the frying pan into the fire?

Enzo feels that the balance has tilted too much in favour of the suppliers. Originally, in the early days of UCaaS, suppliers took a go-to-market approach that worked for both parties. But as the market is maturing, they are now looking increasingly to grab a larger slice of the pie.

Is there an alternative?

For Enzo feels that PortaOne's alternative is a return to that original approach adopted by suppliers in those early days. Their approach is based on five key pillars:

- 1 Lifetime licences to enable greater long-term margins for their partners.
- 2 Access to API and source code, enabling easy integrations and enabling partners to build their own total solution through bespoke integrations. Especially helpful if they want to target specific verticals.
- 3 A unique integration using mobile phones as full-featured extensions of a hosted PBX environment, enabling resellers to increase their ARPU.
- 4 Fully integrated billing and service provision through a single portal. This eliminates billing and integration issues and avoids the cost of having a separate billing platform.
- 5 Fully managed hosting in PortaOne's datacentres (around the world, including the UK) reduces the investment to get operational as no servers or other infrastructure is required.

Enzo feels that PortaOne ticks all the boxes in terms of the feature set that customers expect, and has created a simple and transparent pricing to give resellers confidence about the costs. "We are 100% committed to the channel," says Enzo. In fact, he is confident enough to issue a challenge: Anyone that has a platform with 1,000 seats or more, then he can save them money and increase their margins.

This is the year when resellers, after the challenges of last year, need to look closely at their business model to evaluate its sustainability and consider if there is an alternative. ■

Contact Enzo Viscito today › sales@portaone.com › +44 207 048 2089

Find your true purpose

Organisations with true vision are investing in the development of a broader purpose beyond boosting the bottom line, including quality of life, culture and communities, according to Charlie Blakemore, Group Managing Director at Intercity Technology.

It is true that the emphasis of many businesses is moving towards people centricity, diversity, sustainability and care for the environment, rather than double down on making a handsome profit at all costs. The chief reason for matters such as sustainability rising up the corporate agenda stems as much from Covid-19 as other purposeful priorities. "The pandemic has put a new perspective into everybody's lives, on a personal and a professional level," stated Blakemore. "It has reset the strategic outlook of many companies by highlighting the importance of their people and the value they bring to an organisation. As a result, we're seeing more and more business leaders pose the question: 'Is what we're trying to achieve still relevant in today's rapidly changing business landscape?'"

"However, it's not always what you do that matters – it's how you do it. The pandemic has reinforced this tenet in what has been an extremely challenging and prolonged period for businesses, where teams and individuals working remotely have had to rely on each other more than ever to get the job done."

Intercity Technology has implemented a number of initiatives and processes over

the years to ensure it remains socially and environmentally responsible, from a local schools programme to its Women in Tech Networking Group. "These are well developed and built to deliver value for our colleagues and our local community," added Blakemore. "But most importantly, our initiatives have allowed us to stay engaged and connected during these challenging and unprecedented times."

Ongoing endeavour

"You can never rest on your laurels and we continually seek to create a better working environment for colleagues. The same outlook applies for our community. We often take time out as a team to help those in need as we appreciate the added value it brings to the wider community and demonstrates our understanding of the local external environment. Caring for our customers, each other and the communities we work in is in our DNA and will always remain one of Intercity's core values."

Intercity Technology's bias in favour of advancing a 'higher purpose' agenda includes working with local schools to raise awareness of careers in ICT among young people. "As part of our longer-term objective to develop a pool of young talent in the tech industry



Charlie Blakemore

It's not always what you do that matters, it's how you do it

we work closely with social enterprise Ahead Partnership to support schools across the Midlands, where our business is headquartered, to educate students on the range of opportunities

available across our industry," explained Blakemore.

"We also established the Women in Tech Networking Group at Intercity in January 2020. The Group discusses

topics like how to celebrate our gender diversity and managing a work-life balance, as well as how to encourage more women into the industry, and importantly, how we can improve our working environment and culture. These themes are all part of Intercity's development strategy."

Blakemore believes that strategic visions such as his must underpin the future of all organisations and key to success is measuring the effectiveness of all initiatives. "You'll fail to understand the true value they bring to your organisation if you don't measure their success," he added. "We often carry out internal surveys to hear what our colleagues think about the company and the areas we could look to improve."

"Our values are more important now than they have ever been. As a family-run business, it's been hugely rewarding to come through this challenging period. But we've done this by doing the right thing. Helping our colleagues, looking after our customers and continuing to invest our time in the community – and not by prioritising short-term gains. That's the key, and I'd encourage other businesses to do the same to ensure a successful and sustainable business model is developed for the longer-term." ■

Intelligent strategies

Comtec Enterprises CEO Nick Claxson has displayed the courage of his convictions as he seeks to steal a march on rivals with the launch of an AI-focused software division.

Claxson's drive to help businesses realise their goals prompted him to establish IT solutions provider Comtec in 1994, when he was a teenager. The business went Limited in 1999 and continued to grow rapidly. "IT was blowing up like never before and I soon found myself with a career in the heart of a blossoming industry," he said. "We built data centres to support our customers, bought lorries to help them move and set up. We went with our gut and what was needed at the time, which served us well. In recent years, thanks to the introduction of the cloud, we've streamlined our focus exclusively on tech, particularly AI, and are currently in the throes of another period of growth."

Becoming an APC Elite Partner in 2002 was the first big turning point for Comtec. This paved the way for more milestones, including the build of its own UK-based network and data centre in 2006, and strategic repositioning to focus on the hybrid cloud marketplace in 2019. "Our focus on the hybrid cloud marketplace has been the biggest change to Comtec in recent years," explained Claxson. "We've seen acceptance in the market that there needs to be a physical/cloud hybrid, we've seen the ecosystem become more rounded, and we've tailored our business to meet those needs."

Comtec is a Deloitte Fast 50/ Fast 500 company and in 2007 it was designated a Growing Business Magazine Young Gun. A year later Claxson was an Entrepreneur of the Year finalist for the Innovation and Growth Forum. In terms of revenue, Comtec is expected to generate between £5million to £10 million this financial year, though Claxson is confident he has the people, proposition and customers in place to see revenues approach £15 million over the short-to mid-term. To help drive growth Comtec has more than doubled its headcount from 25 to 60, with more hires planned. "In three-five years time I would like to see Comtec as a strong contender in the UK tech arena," noted Claxson. "I have no doubt that we will make this happen if we continue to focus on our people and customers."

"Our priorities will always be our people, be they customers or staff. The wellbeing of the Comtec family is at the front of my mind, this year more than ever. We have a Head of Wellbeing on hand to ensure staff are happy, can manage their pressure and aren't feeling isolated while working remotely. People are the building blocks of any successful endeavour, so it's vital to make sure they're happy."

Taking a longer term view of client relationships also



Nick Claxson

AI and the insights it can offer are going to be huge

features heavily in Claxson's thinking, which is shaped by past experiences. "We have, over the years, won some incredible projects that I wish we'd recognised the value of at the time," he said. "The Shard is one such example. We did several successful projects together, but at the time we were very much concentrating on one thing, doing it, and moving on to the next big contract. In hindsight, we should have stopped, considered our next move, and tried to create ongoing partnerships with the clients."

AI potential

Claxson's approach to relationships feeds into his championing of the business potential of AI, which he says is growing from strength

to strength and will be vital in the coming years. "We're so invested in the potential of AI that we've created a separate software division with the sole task of pushing us into this area for the future," he said. "AI and the insights it can offer are going to be huge. Our biggest opportunity is to use AI to offer our customers insights into their tech, how efficiently they're using it, visibility of their data centre – you name it. It may be a new technology but at the end of the day it comes back to simply adding value. Delivering added value means a sharp rise in customer satisfaction, a stronger business offering and an ace up your sleeve that sets you apart from the competition." ■

Just a minute with Nick Claxson...

Role model: Warren Buffett. He has a great outlook on life, has good viewpoints, yet isn't outlandish.

What talent do you wish you had? To time travel. There are so many things I'd like to go back to and experience all over again, and a few things I think I could have done better with hindsight.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I'm an identical twin.

Best piece of advice you have been given? Don't try and reinvent the wheel. Before you start, ask yourself why you're trying to change something so much? If it's round and it rolls, let it roll.

Who do you admire most in the channel: I'm fascinated by Softcat, an inspiring company.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing? I'd work in wellbeing – coaching, things like that.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Two traditional tech heads and one new age social media man.

Your biggest achievement? Being recognised by my peers is always hugely affirming.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My strengths are tenacity and persistence. My weakness is that sometimes I bite off more than I can chew.

How do you relax? Working on my 1979 MG Midget. No tech, purely cogs and oil. It switches my brain off.

Workforce management – offering choice to recruit and retain contact centre agents

Contact centres need to keep hold of good staff by offering flexible working schedules. Resellers can help businesses achieve this with NICE’s market-leading WFM software.

The pandemic changed the way most of us work forever. Just as resellers’ staff will be largely working from home, the same will be true of contact centre agents who have also moved to their kitchen tables and spare rooms. This represents a huge opportunity for contact centre resellers as UK businesses grapple with the new normal that is as far as you can get from buzzing, large offices full of contact centre agents wearing headsets.

Work-life balance

Some businesses were already beginning to address the needs of the personnel coming up in the rails. Millennials and generation Z were the new kids on the block, and they wanted flexibility, even before lockdown became a reality.

Sue Bolt, Director of Workforce Optimisation Solutions for EMEA at NICE Ltd, said: “Contact centre staff still tend to be quite young, usually between 25

and 35 years-old. Along with the growth of the gig economy of flexible freelance and contract-based work, the competition to recruit and retain agents is higher. So even before COVID, contact centres needed to offer flexibility as agents were choosing jobs based on their work-life balance and moving to a new employer if they did not get what they wanted.”

A recent study by Earnest found 40% of employees would trade in a 10% of their salary for more flexibility in their schedules. But how do you manage schedule flexibility and meet a business’s daily needs?

Win-win scenario

WFM is good place to start and NICE continues to lead in this area. They have been named as a leader in the Gartner Workforce Engagement Management (WEM) Magic Quadrant report four years in a row. The artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities of NICE WFM makes it easier to balance the desire for



“Resellers can look at how WFM can benefit their customers and their agents to balance the challenges of home working and home schooling.”
Sue Bolt

employee preference with business demands to create a win-win scenario for all.

When life was a little simpler, NICE’s WFM software enabled agents to select their own days off, their own hours and their own lunch breaks in line with the business needs to enable contact centre supervisors to fill the group-wide schedule, including less popular shifts and public holidays.

Agents were offered the

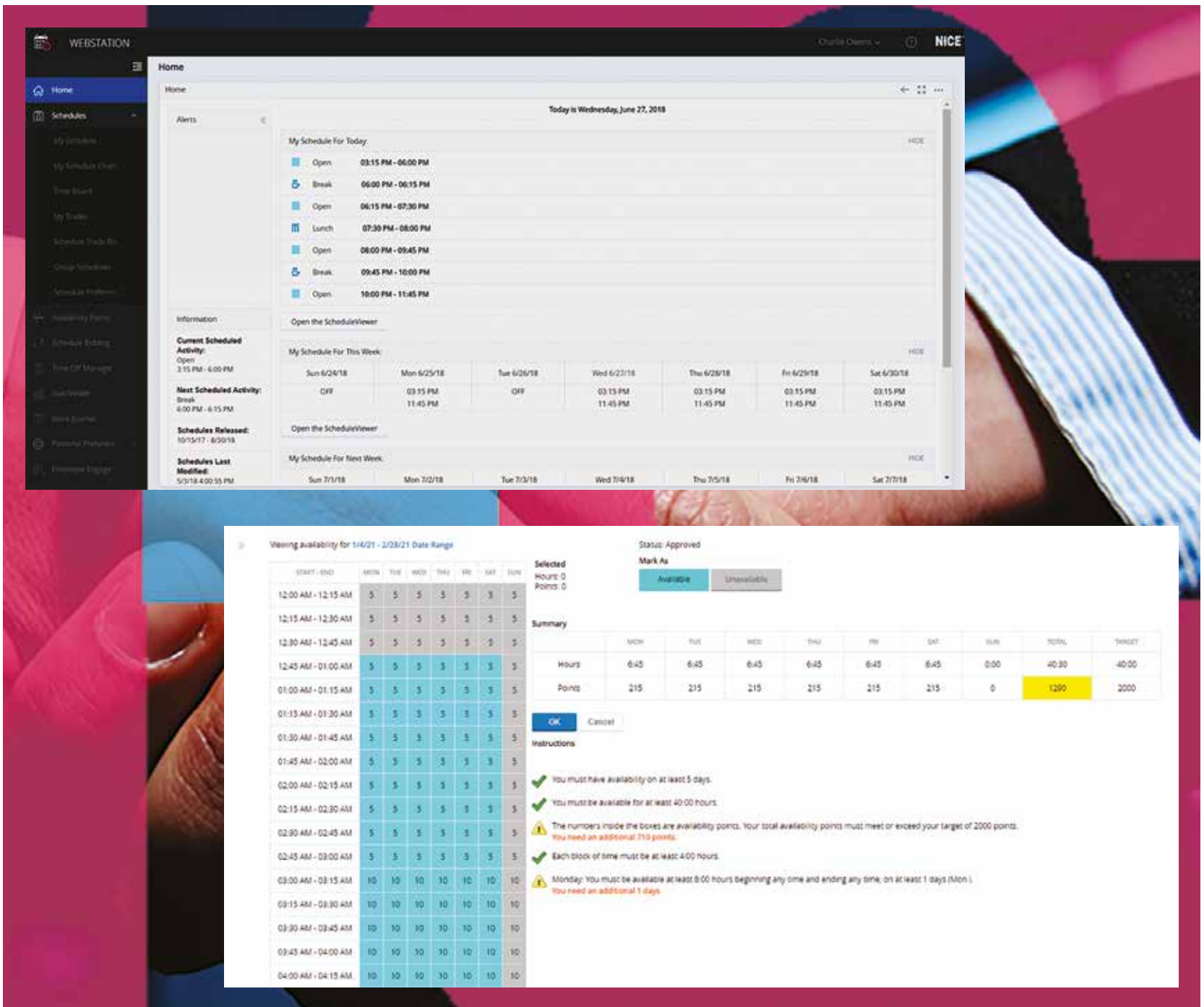
ability to prioritise their preference type, so a long lunch break may be more important to them than having a Saturday night off, or they would be willing to be available for a busier shift so they can attend an online exercise class. If agents can work a schedule that fits as closely as possible to their ideal working hours, then they will be happier members of staff.

NICE WFM takes the complexity out of this

complicated scheduling task. It uses a propriety algorithm to compare an agent’s ranked preferences against a generated schedule. More senior or the most loyal employees can be rewarded with the shifts they want as part of this process. The process is very simple while giving agents a voice in the schedule.

Availability Points

Another way to meet both agent and business needs is to employ the use of NICE



WFM's Availability Points. These gamify scheduling whereby agents make compromises with their availability in exchange for the time they would like off.

Now let us consider working through a pandemic.... Availability of agents may have opened up with less time spent travelling to work whereas working parents may need more flexibility during the day to help home school their children.

Bolt said: "Agents have gone from a busy contact centre environment to being on their own. Resellers can look at how WFM can

benefit their customers and their agents to balance the challenges of home working and home schooling. Fortunately, NICE was ready with the right product before home working began."

Micro-shifts and choice

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, Bolt has also seen a move towards "micro shifts".

She added: "Agents are available for shorter bursts of time; for as little as half an hour to up to three hours. Rather than trying to pack agents into traditional

eight-hour shifts, WFM can accommodate these needs too."

"When the pandemic is finally over, how many agents will head back to the office or stay at home or will they be allowed to choose when they come in? The issue of 'choice' will be huge for the next two years.

Staff recruitment and retention

"This will affect how businesses keep hold of staff too. Whereas everyone was too scared to leave their jobs at the start of the pandemic, people are now moving on. You no longer have live in a

25 to 50-mile radius of your place of work. Supervisors can put out national adverts to draw from a wider pool of talent. If you can offer your agents more choice, it will help with recruitment and retention, so you get the best talent."

NICE Enterprise's UK&I Channel Manager John

Byron said: "Resellers will need to react to market need by helping contact centre customers or prospects move with the times by offering solutions like ours that can be integrated with any contact centre platform. In return, we can give resellers our full support; they do not have to be experts overnight."

■ ■ ■

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

Setting out a resilient st

This month's panel of experts discuss how they are factoring in the lessons learned during the first Covid-19 lockdown, and they share insights and advice that will enable all organisations to navigate 2021 with greater operational resilience and confidence.

We can see an upturn coming as Covid-19 vaccines offer hope of a return to a new version of normal this year, and the role of the comms sector in helping to deliver business and economic recovery cannot be overstated, believes Iain Sinnott, Sales Director, VanillaLP. "There is so much we can do to deliver productivity in the emerging landscape – as an industry we hold the key to the pace of recovery," he stated. "If we work hard, advise well and deliver professionally we will look back from 2025 with pride."

To achieve favourable hindsight resellers need to accept that the old telecoms world has gone, believes Sinnott. "While the features of the telephone system do and will remain part of the service mix there are other drivers and options that customers will focus on," he added. "Currently, it is virtual meetings leading the conversation, but CX,



Iain Sinnott

mobility, flexibility and productivity in the normal working day will return to be major drivers of change within all businesses."

He says that resellers also need to consider their future and which portfolio will deliver it, saying: "Is this a long-term play? In which case you need a portfolio that you, your team and potential investors can truly believe in. Is it a build to sell? In which case it may be prudent to ensure your base is consuming products that a buyer can easily integrate.

"We need to inform them about all the options. If we want to stay relevant, we need to bring options they had not considered. If we see ourselves as trusted advisors, then we must be prepared to advise. If you are not part of the decision making process there may be less need for you to be part of the supply chain. Furthermore, resellers need to remove the concept of 'the end of the sales process'. Our portfolio is evolving daily and as a result the service we deliver to customers should be truly fluid. We are the customers' technology partner, not a shop to be visited when a contract runs out."

The pandemic has driven a huge demand for businesses to adapt quickly and embrace new systems, affirmed Chris Morrisey, Managing



Chris Morrisey

Director, Lily, who has been helping SME clients with mobile to office 365, voice to video and everything in between. "We've had to continue to adopt our digital transformation methodology ourselves, bringing in new solutions to support our clients such as hardware as a service and Microsoft Teams," said Morrisey. "Digital transformation means adopting new technologies and changing with your environment.

"The rise of video conferencing software that bridges the gap between IT and telco leads to a much bigger conversation with prospective customers. However, that doesn't mean you will automatically win both. Resellers still need to continue to differentiate and show how they can add value to their client's business. Collaboration is the new normal and if you haven't embraced it, you really need too. Also, look

at every single way you can build more recurring revenue. A simple way of doing this is everything as a service, this brings security to your business."

But the biggest lesson Morrisey has learnt in recent months is the role and importance of engagement. "Creating an environment that supports communication and wellbeing is essential to how engaged your employees are and was the key to our success when adapting to working from home," he added. "If you apply the same amount of effort to your people and culture as you do when in an office, then you can still have a highly engaged, highly operational team that delivers even better results."

Lockdowns have also emphasised how important it is to be positive, proactive and agile – and to keep looking ahead while being consistent in terms of strategy and direction, believes Andrew Wilson, Head of Wholesale, CityFibre. "The biggest impact of the pandemic for businesses has been to accelerate trends towards home working, mobility and the cloud," he observed. "Having great connectivity has become more important as a consequence of that acceleration. Strategically, connectivity will be critical for resellers to form

strong partnerships with organisations that can deliver both the connectivity services and the support that will enable them to meet the needs of their end user customers."

Wilson also noted that the pandemic has seen many more IT-focused businesses moving in this direction. "More than ever, resellers need a clear and definitive business plan and direction – a clear focus – one that's attuned to the needs of modern and progressive businesses," he advised. "They need to identify clear target markets, prioritise the strategy they develop to build business in these target markets and be willing to invest in measurable activity to achieve their goals."

According to Matt Dykes, COO at Abzorb, the last year has also taught everyone that life can change in an instant. "Never before have we been exposed to such extremities as this," he said. "So it is important to be



Andrew Wilson

strategy for 2021

flexible, accept change, be willing to learn and evolve to improve. During the pandemic everyone has become tech savvy. Resellers now need to sell solutions and not individual products.

"They need to talk to their customers about what challenges and issues they face and how technology can solve them and help deliver their objectives, save money and achieve a return on investment. Many companies will be reducing real estate therefore remote working solutions are a huge opportunity. But there is competition, so resellers need to be one step ahead of the curve."

Adept Technology Group CEO Phil Race says his first priority is to motivate the company's people. "The stop-start nature of lockdowns, the challenges of home schooling and home working from kitchens and bedrooms, and the dark rainy days against a backdrop of energy sapping news will challenge motivation at the best of times," he said. "As an executive team we need to cajole, lead, inspire and enthuse."

During the first lockdown Adept focused on over-communicating with investors, staff, partners and customers. "This is going to be ever more important as we tackle Lockdown 3.0, a pretty rubbish sequel! A lack of information creates a void that can be filled with frustration or fear," added Race.

He also noted that Adept focused on executing flawlessly during Lockdown 1.0, assiduously defining projects, agreeing plans,

reviewing and being proactive. "This stood us in good stead but needs continuous rigorous management," he added. "A lot of projects have been fast and short-term. We need to help our teams deliver for clients a transition from tactical to strategic.

"This leads to a greater need for advice and guidance and consulting. Hence our push towards Adept Consulting. We also need to ensure that we have the right systems to power the business through Project Fusion, our system strategy that allows work to be managed effectively, customers to be understood better and information about our performance to be quickly obtained."

Adept's focus has also swung onto its approach to what Race calls 'mega-themes'. "Technology is so crucial that there is a need to provide highly resilient solutions, with clear managed back up for rapid recovery, in a secure environment, in a frictionless manner supporting an organisation's need for awesome customer engagement," he said. "These mega-themes lead to opportunities for tech such as cloud, security, UCaaS, data connectivity and contact centre.



Matt Dykes



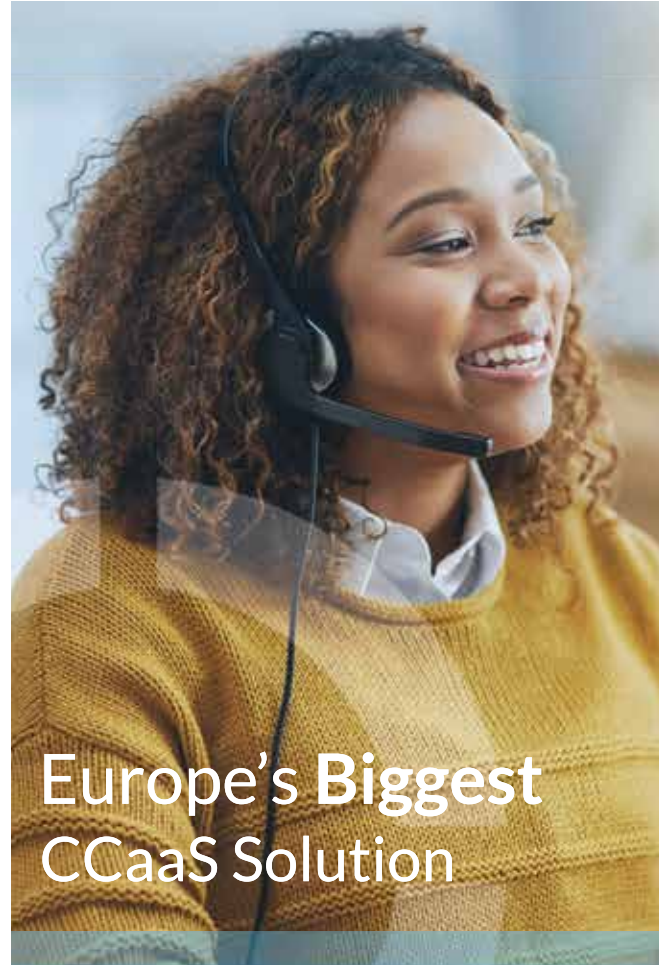
Phil Race

"There's a need to make these mega-themes relevant for your audience as they are all seeing the world in different ways. We deal with lawyers, construction companies, schools and the NHS. Each of their worlds is very different. We may have the same ingredients but they want different meals!"

According to Race, Adept is increasingly becoming a restaurant, not a supermarket. "We have the various ingredients and can sell these at a price such as M&S," he explained. "But the competitive threat of Lidl and Aldi – in our case Microsoft and Amazon – means that selling ingredients is a journey to decreasing margins. We need to be Rick Stein or Gordon Ramsay, creating solutions, blending elements and delivering an impeccable experience.

"In this way we can protect margins and engender loyalty. We must also remember that a bad review travels fast, just like a restaurant review on TripAdvisor. So getting feedback and acting on it fast is the same challenge for resellers as restaurants. In this world we need to keep trying, innovate in a relevant way and execute flawlessly. If this doesn't work then fail fast and try again."

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Agilitas CEO sets sights on

Most UK businesses have had a rough ride over the past 12 months but with a record year under his belt Agilitas IT Solutions CEO Shaun Lynn has put a bright spotlight on the growing requirements for Inventory-as-a-Service propositions and end-to-end outsource solutions.

From top to bottom the UK channel is coming under greater examination as sustainability and Covid-19 determining factors continue to hold sway. This has clearly affected the calibre of many VARs to effectively tackle new demands as revised business models and environmental priorities come to prominence. Yet business leaders like to keep things simple, so no wonder Agilitas notched up a record year in 2020. That's not all: Every component is there to ensure Lynn achieves his three year plan to hit £50 million revenues following a transformational SBO last November.

The secondary buyout was supported by Perwyn which provides firepower to accelerate the outsources that Agilitas can complete for partners, as well as opening up M&A opportunities. "Completing a secondary buyout that provided an 8.5 times money return to our investors during a global pandemic highlights the resilience and relevance of the business," stated Lynn. "All of that needs great people to be able to pull off, but more than that to keep a smile on your face and enjoy going to work."

Originally servicing the IT channel (Cisco is now Agilitas's number one supported estate) Agilitas



Shaun Lynn

Completing a secondary buyout that provided an 8.5 times money return to our investors during a global pandemic highlights the resilience and relevance of the business

has since expanded its proposition to adjacent markets including telco. "We are seeing a huge appetite for our Inventory-as-a-Service proposition with the likes of Maintel, Telent, Daisy and Allvotec leveraging our service," stated Lynn. "Logistics and inventory management is in Agilitas' DNA and for that reason it makes no difference to us if we were managing IT, voice or washing machine parts as the same outcome is required – ensuring the part in question

is consistently delivered to the expected SLA."

Strong pedigree

Agilitas started life in July 1990 as CPI (Computer Parts International) which was largely an IBM midrange broker. Acal invested in the early 2000s with a view to create a services business that would provide parts availability (largely reactive sales) for the IT marketplace based on CPI's experience of distribution and specialist manufacturing. Lynn first became exposed to the IT

sector when he undertook the IBM graduate scheme. So it is fitting that he joined IBM specialist CPI in 2010 following a strategic review aimed at relaunching the business as a channel-only services provider selling annuity support contracts. Fast forward to 2014 and an MBO was completed which allowed the firm to focus on investing for growth rather than being a non-strategic division of a large plc.

Agilitas now supports over 500 customers ranging from

OEMs, system integrators, VARs, distributors, service providers, telco and owner managed businesses. The current headcount stands at 140 with approximately 45 new hires since July 2020. Lynn expects to add 20 more by mid-2021 with job opportunities created via organic growth, building on the £90 million worth of total contract value secured in 2020. Lynn hopes to continue organically growing the business at 25-30 per cent year-on-year.

In its last financial year to March 2020 Agilitas registered £14 million revenue and £4 million EBITDA. For March 2021 Lynn is forecasting over £20 million revenue and £8 million EBITDA – and targeting £30 million-plus revenue for March 2022 based on a contracted order book with between £11 million and 12 million-plus EBITDA. "Our three year plan is to organically grow from £20 million services revenue to £50 million, and to further establish the business internationally with the potential for bolt-on acquisitions to turbo charge our journey," stated Lynn.

Currently, 80 per cent of Agilitas's business originates from the UK market with the remaining 20 per cent apportioned to Europe and the rest of the world. To facilitate its expansion

n three-year £50m target

plans Agilitas is increasing the levels of automation between its systems and those of customers. "This has enabled us to process many more service requests and deliver hyper-scale projects," he added. "Therefore making software-enabled Agilitas much more intrinsic to our customers' business. Furthermore, our vendor agnostic approach enables us to deliver 'as-a-solution' service wraps that are focused purely on a business outcome, whether that is expanding geographic reach, enhancing service performance, reducing operational overhead or increasing the service portfolio."

Agilitas's growth areas include geographical expansion, developing more service offerings and investing in emerging technology areas such as security and IoT. "We are continuously monitoring new technology areas to onboard," added Lynn. "In 2020 we added six new service propositions including Voice, EPOS and Workspace hardware support. In 2021 we have plans to increase this number to provide our channel partners with an end-to-end service. This now includes our latest support proposition around Apple hardware. We are also seeing traction for providing a service bundle of OEM/vendor software support coupled with our hardware support over a multi-year basis. This is essentially Agilitas investing in the upfront outlay and selling back to the partner on a monthly basis via subscription or leasing."

According to Lynn the full effects of Covid-19 on organisations are yet to be

felt, and he says a lack of long-term planning among business and Government leaders will be damaging. "Companies are too reliant on schemes such as furlough," he explained. "Leaders are not looking at key data points and leading KPIs. Once public sector demand diminishes, once the private sector has resized post-furlough and new technology buying behaviours are more established, the bubble of ever increasing new product sales and increased minutes purchased will stop growing. Success will be far more service

I've never been a techie or into technology in any way. I'm a technophobe and proud of it

and solution centric, based on understanding peoples' needs and behaviours.

"If Covid-19 and its aftermath teaches us anything it will be to genuinely put people at the heart of everything you do and why you do it, playing a much longer game, and building far stronger and better quality businesses that will be more attractive to our clients."

Agility is key

It goes without saying that the pandemic has forced businesses to accelerate their digital transformation plans, meaning that channel firms have had to adapt and become more agile to remain relevant. This has had a significant impact on demand for Agilitas's expertise. "Due to our scale and access to inventory we can reduce the overhead to channel partners in the provision of hardware spares

while increasing service performance," said Lynn.

"Clients have realised that supply chains are difficult to manage. If something is not the core skill of a business, meaning a sub-scale performance in those areas both commercially and operationally, why do it? It makes strategic sense to outsource to someone who can improve the service, provide additional options and drive value. We provide full outsource solutions that release channel partners from inventory spares ownership, enabling them to focus on

the customer experience and first line services. Covid has accelerated the drive to outsource and leverage a more flexible service."

This approach contrasts with an industry norm that is too transactional, believes Lynn. "Too many people push a product to make a sale that may or may not be right for the customer," he added. "That is purely about hitting a monthly target at a fairly low margin to benefit a vendor that is totally removed. To survive and thrive many me-too VARs and SIs need to identify what they want to be famous for and become more collaborative with agile partners to deliver a differentiated service."

Becoming famous for championing the green agenda would be a wise option, believes Lynn, as sustainability trends become ever more entrenched. Government pressure is

growing on technology hardware vendors to reduce their carbon footprint by extending the life of hardware refresh programmes, and this needs to be managed by businesses like Agilitas, says Lynn. "Agilitas extends the life of hardware with support options that include the maintenance, repair and training of legacy systems, so people understand how to keep the lights on," he noted. "More importantly, we help channel firms to reduce our industry's carbon footprint."

Lynn's formative years were spent in retail sales ranging from music and DVD, typewriters and palm pilots through to jewellery and watches. "My early experiences taught me that everyone is different and that each customer places a value on something slightly different to the next," he said. "I'm a creative thinker and problem solver by nature and happiest challenging my customers on what's working and what's not working in their businesses, and their plans to do things differently. Building honest and open relationships is the secret to business. No one has all the ideas or answers, that gives us the impetus to make a difference.

"I've never been a techie or into technology in any way. I'm a technophobe and proud of it. It took me a long time to learn that the safest and most fun and engaging place within a business is with the customer. I always urge everyone in our team regardless of their role to spend more time with our customers as it's where we learn the most and make the biggest difference." ■

Just a minute with Shaun Lynn...

Role model: My colleague Ricky Chadwick: He spent three months in hospital on a ventilator last year with Covid and has taken everything in his stride, demonstrating such a positive attitude and returning to normal life, inspiring us all.

What do you fear most? Needles, snakes, spiders – and not being needed.

The biggest risk you have taken? Joining what is now Agilitas to lead the turnaround in late 2010 and then MBO'ing the business.

Who do you admire most in the channel: The best speaker I've seen is Vin Murria. The way she sees the world and puts people at the heart of it is thought provoking.

One example of something you have overcome: I'm currently recovering from a major Achilles reconstruction operation.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Tony Hancock for laughs, Winston Churchill for inspiration, and Simon Sinek who challenges you to see the world differently.

Industry bugbear: To make the sector less product and more people centric.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: My passion is Tony Hancock. I collect everything to do with his radio shows from the early 1950s and listen to them most days.

Your main strength and what could you work on? I learn from my mistakes, share my experiences and surround myself with fantastic people, but I can sometimes be too impatient and take a view that the world should think like I do.

Top tip: Find a balance between product sales and service. The most successful resellers are always one step ahead of the competition.



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It is so important to keep cult

It is extremely challenging to maintain any sort of business culture with staff geographically and socially distanced, but maintaining contact is vital to ensure employees remain motivated and, most importantly, are not demonstrating any mental health issues.

Culture expert Kate Wood helped Chess ICT go from 63rd to 1st in the Sunday Times 'Best Company To Work For' listing and retain their place in the list for 10 years. She now offers Culture as a Service through her Pockets Consultancy. She firmly believes connection, clarity and kindness will get us through Lockdown Three.

"Lockdown Three requires us to re-engage with the individual employee," she says.

"With plans parked, holidays on hold and employees 'zoomed' out, there's risk of burn out. For many there is little to look forward to. Novelty backgrounds, quizzes and online drinks only remind us of 2020, so what now?"

Here is Wood's checklist for directors and managers:

Mental Wellbeing

People may experience guilt about remaining employed when others aren't. Anxiety around health, inability to juggle home-schooling can lead to feelings of failure. Open up about your challenges and your employees will.

Connection

Walk and talk. Non-video phone calls change conversations. Ask what the business could do to make things easier? Listen. If you lack language to discuss Mental Health, ensure employees know how to find information, including financial support, benefits and counselling services.

Clarity

The UK economy in the news causes concern. Deliver clear, regular communication about business change, communicate even if there are no changes and focus on good news. Not forgetting those on maternity or furlough.

Surprises

Small, kind gestures make a big difference such as an early finish or late start. A wellbeing package in the post or a thank you card can make someone feel less lonely and more valued. Encourage staff to take holiday days and not just save them for when the world opens.



LOUISE ABBEY
9 GROUP

"We've taken a very careful and proactive approach to communication with our teams and our partners during lockdown. Equipping staff with the right tools allows them to stay connected while working remotely. We've seen an acceleration in the adoption of cloud-based collaboration tools, not only with our own teams but with partners and the demands they are seeing from their customers. Video and collaboration solutions have minimised disruption during lockdown and the right technology has allowed our teams to develop new skills and to adapt to the changing world. The introduction of a weekly staff newsletter has allowed our teams to share their stories from home. Regular initiatives such as a quarterly presentation from Adam Cathcart, our Managing Director, and celebrations which recognise outstanding contributions are a key part of our culture. We now host these digitally."



GAVIN JONES
BT WHOLESALE

"BT has done more than ever to support colleagues, particularly in a third lockdown. Our online service 'Your Wellbeing' provides 24/7 information for all staff, which makes the difference in a socially distanced world. We have also increased the level of communications on wellbeing through a bespoke series of Wellbeing Webinars and regular Chief Medical Officer updates to keep colleagues informed about Covid-19 and support services available. We also understand how critical it is for teams to take time when they need it, so we've added Mindfulness Calls through the week to help colleagues take a break and carry out self-check outs. We're also encouraging everyone to check in with each other and BT's Peer to Peer network can help people feel more connected. And to kick off the New Year, we have launched 'The Big Stretch' to keep our teams motivated and build healthy habits."



KEITH JACKSON
8X8

"As remote work continues, there is considerable value in organisations promoting cross-collaboration and knowledge sharing within teams. By making sure that everyone is well informed with regular check-ins and touchpoints, businesses can be on the front foot in the face of disruption. In today's remote working environment, transparency is key. For leaders, this means finding a balance between 'water-cooler' chats and business conversations to ensure employees feel involved and connected. In the absence of in-person interactions, having the right technology in place to enable frequent communication is a crucial step towards empowering employees. Culture is driven by employees that feel empowered. Enabling teams to actively share knowledge, collaborate, and by offering opportunities for input, organisations will drive their virtual culture forward."



CAROLINE BAKER
CITY FIBRE

"At CityFibre we place huge importance on ensuring our employees are involved, inspired, supported, and feel like a member of a family. In the last 12 months we launched 'The CityFibre Way' which showcases our inclusive and supportive culture and behaviours. In addition to this, we moved our induction online, set up Diversity & Inclusion networks to drive inclusive behaviours, and trained 32 Mental Health First Aiders so that we could spot and support Mental Health issues. Our recent engagement survey showed the success of our efforts; 88% of our employees felt CityFibre takes a genuine interest in employees wellbeing and 86% confirmed our culture resonates with them. The advice we would offer is open communication. Keep the avenues of support open, encourage employees to look after themselves first, talk about culture, networks and the importance of mental health at every opportunity."



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Culture alive - even at a distance!



MARTIN TAYLOR
CONTENT GURU

"A scheduled video conference with thirty people on it is great in some circumstances, but it isn't the answer to every situation. Likewise, it is easy for company culture to get lost in translation when colleagues are collaborating via email alone. To maintain a collaborative environment, it is key that you provide the tools to engage through a range of channels, including voice calls, instant messages and group chats, emails, Teams and Zoom. Regular internal communications to the whole company, specific teams, and directly from C-level managers all help keep colleagues 'on-message'. Aligning personal objectives to company values ensures colleagues are engaged with the culture while working towards their own specific goals. Encouraging feedback from staff and increasing 1-1 sessions is essential for uncovering any potential mental health issues and providing extra resources and support can minimize the opportunity for these to get out of control."



VINCENT DISNEUR
UNION STREET

"Each month we hold a companywide meeting via Teams to review our objectives and company values. These meetings feature presentations by department heads to share details of recent achievements and goals for the coming month. It's not all business though, during these meetings we place equal importance on sharing people's news such as births and charity initiatives. Our people also regularly interact at the department level to keep everyone engaged, motivated, and to ensure they have the support they need for their work and well-being. Mental health issues are notoriously difficult to recognise in people, let alone remotely, but we try and monitor for signs such as changes in behaviour or being withdrawn. We actively encourage our team members to reach out if they are struggling with mental health or any other issues, and we offer an open line of communication so that there is always someone available to listen."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"We started Jola from scratch in 2014 and focussed on attracting and training self-motivated people, who shared our corporate values and ambition. We have hired and trained an additional seven staff during lockdown. We have kept our team involved and inspired, with regular Teams meetings, to share our departmental and individual successes. Staff perks, such as free coffees, film downloads and vouchers, are well received, but not as motivating as knowing we are directly responsible for helping partners to provide the NHS, retailers and the government with 4G for vital services. The phenomenal growth we have achieved is down to the exceptional team we have at Jola and their physical and mental health is a priority. Each employee has access to private healthcare, a 24/7 employee assistance programme and access to free workouts and discounted healthy eating outlets. Regular communication is key to ensuring your staff are happy, healthy and productive."



AYSHEA ROBERTSON
ZEN INTERNET

"At Zen we are extremely proud of our People First approach. This was never only about the physical office environment – it also covers the importance of a supportive, collaborative, and inclusive culture. When the pandemic emerged, we quickly elevated 'new ways of working' to become a key pillar in our 'People & Culture' strategy while also putting greater emphasis on health and wellbeing and engagement. This is a key step to maintaining your company culture online during these trying times. Where possible provide a suite of communications and collaboration tools as well as guides, links and online training, to help your people stay connected with each other and your business. And be sure to make time to listen to your people – this is critical. Having regular conversations and spending time understanding the different circumstances and needs of your people, will help with mental wellbeing."



PAUL GIBBS
MYPHONES

"For me, one thing that has become more and more evident is the need to ask 'how are you'? I think we are all guilty of presuming everyone is OK. The importance for us as a business is to not only keep staff involved but to encourage a more open forum for conversation. A simple call with no agenda, colleague-to-colleague is more important than ever. The last lockdown in the summer may have masked how people were really feeling. Being winter, which is documented to only increase people feeling down, we need to go even further with what we do in the workplace. Staff involvement is key as we are all missing the conversations in passing, the office gossip and general human interaction. We encourage social catchups with Friday late afternoon beers or libations of choice, companywide quizzes, and regular catch ups to hear what is going on within all departments."



LAUREN MCMANUS
GAMMA

"Throughout the pandemic, the physical and mental health of our teams have been key concerns for our business. We believe it's critical to provide an open and welcoming environment for employees to be able to share their issues and concerns. Managers play a vital role in supporting their teams and regularly checking in with them. We encourage 1-2-1 meetings, as well as virtual social events to bring teams together and promote employee engagement. Moreover, we've introduced many initiatives to support our employees during these difficult times: Our Employee Assistance Programme provides free, professional advice and resources on a variety of personal issues, while our trained team of Mental Health First Aiders can give initial support and signpost to additional resources as necessary. These are all underpinned by our Wellbeing Channel on Microsoft Teams, specifically created as a space where staff can connect."

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Age of analytics dawns

In an increasingly dispersed world of work collaboration analytics delivers value far beyond efficiencies, according Tollring CEO Tony Martino who outlines the full extent of the channel opportunity.

Remote working is now an integral part of most organisations and the signs are that workplace flexibility is here to stay – which raises certain challenges. “We’re seeing a lot of focus on managing the wellbeing and performance of remote employees, and while this is critical, equally important is customer retention and customer experience,” stated Martino. “The key to solving all of these issues, as well as contributing to the bottom line, is collaboration analytics. This is a huge opportunity for the channel. The newly adopted collaboration tools have propelled organisations into new ways of working in a short space of time without the insight and feedback necessary to ensure that they’re on the right track.”

The scale of demand for collaboration analytics is reflected in figures from Gartner which Martino cites as significant. In a recent survey Gartner stated that 82 per cent of business leaders intend to have employees working at home some of the time and 47 per cent permanently. “Collaboration analytics delivers on this vital management need, going beyond just call analytics for

sales and support teams, capturing and presenting information and insights from across a whole organisation,” explained Martino. “It is all about breaking down an organisation’s natural silos to look holistically across every area of business performance, from individuals, to teams, to departments and then relating the information to business objectives.”

Managing employees remotely, whether at individual or department level, requires greater transparency and clear objectives. “This can help to clarify how the very nature of their management has changed and how the new hybrid and remote working environment is performing,” added Martino. “These analytics can also be used to help organisations determine how their collaboration tools are working, identify trends and gain an accurate insight into employee experiences.”

Wellness has also become key to operational performance, observed Martino. A workforce that is balanced and healthy will have a positive impact on the customer experience and analytics can be used to help assist in the areas



Tony Martino

It is all about breaking down silos to look holistically at every area of performance

of company culture, mental health and isolation issues. “By extending analytics into this internal collaboration space we can also gain an insight into the impact that change has on workforces,” added Martino. “For example, the last year has seen many organisations forced to adjust their business model, or reduce headcount, which has a large impact on the day-to-day role of the employees that remain. Analytics gives managers the data they need to manage this change effectively.”

As a key enabler for the shift from UC to collaboration, much of the channel already understands the value of analytics in collaborative environments. “Those familiar with monitoring calls have an advantage and are moving to this new generation of analytics to help their customers to achieve relevant

insights across all areas of their organisations,” said Martino. “Metrics that relate to externally facing activities provide a new perspective that complements traditional measures, and combining internal and external metrics delivers a stronger view of an organisation’s ability to deliver a good customer experience than ever before.

Cloud factor

“It’s a relatively easy approach to position too, because delivering collaboration analytics in the cloud removes technical overheads, making it a straightforward up-sell or bundle opportunity. The only complexity comes from the depth of information that can be delivered, so we’re helping the channel to leverage the opportunities, providing educational resources and demonstrating the business benefits that they can deliver to their customers, with

sensitivity to the compliance and privacy requirements that the increases in transparency of data can bring.”

According to Martino, the channel can expect to see future advances around tools like Microsoft Teams which will be at the heart of these developments. “Collaboration analytics will be extended to include enhanced management capabilities for meeting recordings, through to greater integration with CRM systems and calling platforms for an even more complete view,” he commented. “More communications tools will be integrated into the business ecosystem, such as Teams, with the aim of achieving a more fluid working environment where organisations can become far more effective, whether their workers are in the office, at home or in a café.” ■

Light at the end of the channel: a look into the mood of the industry



Gavin Jones
Channel Director at BT Wholesale

The past 12 months have been a period of unpredictability. A global pandemic rapidly changed how we worked and lived our everyday lives and we've all had to show resilience. Now, as we take stock and look to what may come next, the mood in the UK channel is one of cautious optimism.

That's according to a new report carried out by BT Wholesale and Cisco. With further support provided by Gamma, the whitepaper, entitled 'Light at the end of the channel' looked to uncover the mood in the industry and explore more deeply how the evolving situation is changing behaviours.

A more strategic approach to technology adoption

Businesses are now viewing technology as more important to current and future performance than ever before. Following the initial explosion of reactive demand for more network bandwidth and collaboration tools to support suddenly remote workforces, businesses are now taking a more long-term approach. Almost in total agreement, 96% of respondents said their end-customers are now taking a more strategic approach to their digital needs; they are thinking about how digitalisation can be the key to recovery and future success.

The pandemic introduced many organisations to new ways of working digitally and it's unlikely that they'll turn back. In fact, 91% said their customers were prioritising digital transformation for the foreseeable future, with the biggest benefits of digitisation seen as increasing agility and customer experience. When this is combined with the fact that 82% believe that digitally-equipped organisations have been significantly less vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic, it reveals how technology can both enable new opportunities whilst adding much needed resilience.

This transition in mindset is particularly important when you consider the switch-off of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) on the horizon. Taking place in 2025, companies that are geared up for all-IP through their connectivity and tools, will be futureproofed and have the foundations in place to build on.

The research indicated that 52% of channel organisations are aware of the looming deadline but are yet to act, 40% are preparing their strategies and 8% are completely ready. In other words, there is some way to go and the channel will need to provide continued education and support.

Permanently changing how we work

Another reason for the new long-term digital thinking is rooted in customers' desire to maintain remote working in some capacity. In perhaps what would've been a surprise to some pre-pandemic, many channel partners (CPs) have reported productivity which has been the same or higher than in the office. Following this success, nearly half anticipate a hybrid model incorporating both remote and office working moving forward, while 15% anticipate a prominently virtual working model, with less than 10% of work completed from a centralised office.

Optimistically, it's predicted that the increased remote working will have a positive, lasting impact on the industry, not least in terms of inclusivity. Increased trust, autonomy and the humanising of relationships

between peers, as well as between employees and management, are all aspects that should remain.

Managing the increasing cyber threat

With all the positives that come from remote working, there are potential issues to consider too, including the increasing cyber risk that stems from having employees decentralised. Where once workforces operated on secure corporate networks, they are now accessing sensitive data on potentially unsecure wi-fi networks and personal devices. These newly digital companies are suddenly vulnerable to threats in completely different ways which they are learning to manage.

When asked what actions end-customers can take to better protect themselves, the number one response, by some distance, was that they should engage a Managed Service Provider (MSP) to aid the protection of networks (70%). Respondents were clear that outsourcing cyber security needs to a third-party team of experts enables customers to focus on their business.

The second choice (44%) was to prioritise relationships with suppliers that have a strong cyber security ecosystem, perhaps in order to minimise the potential for third-party and supply chain attacks, while also ensuring there is a deep pool of expert knowledge and support to call on.

The importance of the channel

Throughout the pandemic, the channel has played a vital role. Not

only has it kept end-customers connected and enabled them to evolve to the situation, but CPs have also been critical in keeping each other – and the industry – talking and operational.

In fact, 96% of respondents said their CPs were essential in keeping them operational during the first wave of the coronavirus, with 84% stating that partners had gone above and beyond expectations. The importance of the industry and relationships within it can't be underestimated.

For example, BT Wholesale took steps to simplify access to voice and collaboration portfolios and scalable bandwidth, to enable CPs to cater for quickly changing customer demands. There is an understanding that this level of support can't stop, however. Everyone is now operating with a heightened sense of risk and uncertainty and, as such, CPs need to continue to remain flexible to partners to help mitigate risks and manage pipelines effectively.

Looking ahead

The channel is a resilient industry which is an essential trait given its importance in helping businesses to continuously evolve in response to the situation. The report revealed a level of cautious optimism among CPs, but also a deep understanding and empathy that the environment continues to fluctuate and mitigating its impact will take a joint effort of flexibility and support.

But there are undoubtedly opportunities for CPs. There isn't a

one-size-fits-all approach; adding true value comes from understanding customers, their pain points and then developing solutions to match.

The changing attitude towards tech, with it now seen as a strategic driver, will require CPs to provide education around the 2025 switch-off, as well as expertise and support to ensure businesses are adopting the right all-IP tools and benefiting from them. The increasing concern around cyber threats means MSPs can become an essential cornerstone of cyber security postures. While the move to permanent remote working will require better, more compatible voice and collaboration tools alongside the availability of faster, more reliable connectivity.

There is light at the end of the tunnel and the industry must use its influence to ensure that everything we've learnt over the last year can be used to build back a better, more connected, and more inclusive all-IP tomorrow.

Research was conducted via two methods: a wide-ranging survey of 100 separate channel organisations and one-on-one interviews with experts from the aforementioned three organisations. This provided a blend of quantitative and qualitative data, which was analysed to understand current sentiment, how behaviour of both channel partners and end-customers are changing, and where future opportunities may lie.

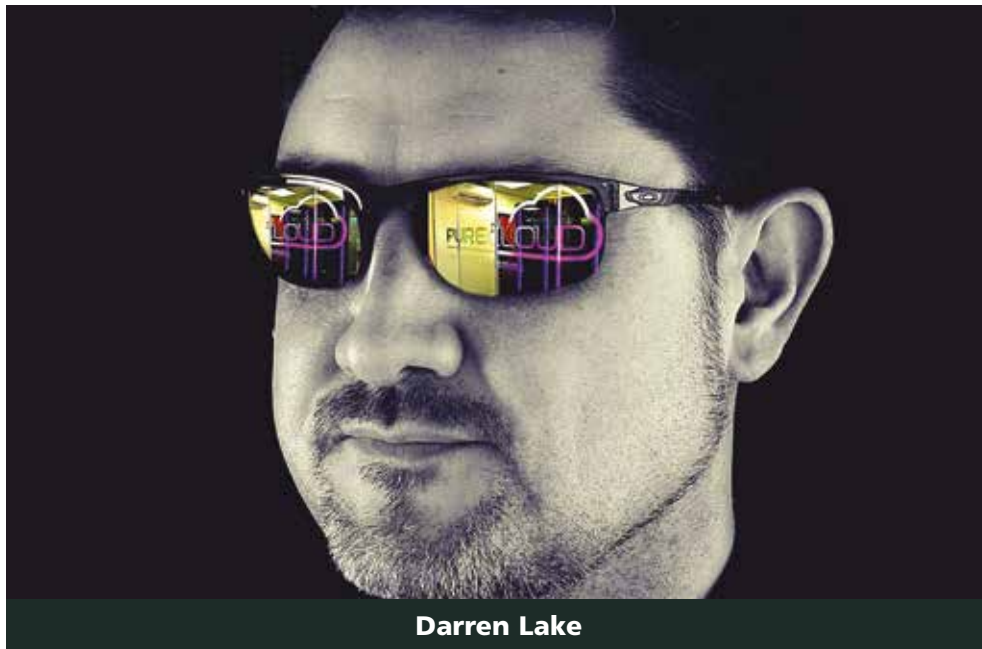
The full whitepaper 'Light at the end of the channel' is available for download.

Lake wades into new gro

Pure Cloud Solutions is plainly benefiting from its all-encompassing business strategy. Here, Group CEO Darren Lake recounts the journey so far and outlines his future organic and M&A growth plans.

Lake's comms sector experience (see panel opposite) qualifies him as an industry veteran, yet his back story is the precursor to something bigger – and we sense that, despite the twists and turns of a varied and lengthy comms career he's barley started and has a long way to go yet. Lake established PCS in 2012 with his brother Martin who owned a small business (CS Communications) focused on installing Toshiba PBXs. "Martin could see that the future of the PBX was limited and he asked me if I was interested in setting something up with him," explained Lake. "He asked at the right time as I was fed up working for other people and not being in control of my own destiny. Initially I sold WLR, connectivity and hosted voice into my brother's client base. PCS was set up as a wholesale business from day one with a view to eventually growing a small channel of partners."

PCS generates significant year-on-year-growth in line with its evolution. "We are now a true managed service provider," added Lake. "We expect all areas to continue to grow significantly. We also expect our channel to gain traction with the introduction of our distributor in South Africa. And we will continue our M&A activities to achieve step growth. Through organic and acquisitive growth our



Darren Lake

I took a break from telecoms and became a fully qualified butcher for 18 months. I enjoyed it, but missed comms so decided to get back into it

plan is to achieve £18 million turnover maintaining 20 per cent EBITDA. Martin and I have stepped back to focus on M&A. We have a board of Directors that run the group businesses. There is a lot of M&A activity in our industry and this will increase as businesses can't keep up with technology changes."

Lake is targeting £5.3 million revenues this financial year (discounting potential acquisitions) with 10 per cent EBITDA. "We have a great pipeline for 2021 and I am excited to see what

happens in South Africa," he added. "Our partnerships and channel continue to grow steadily which is also great for the group. It's all about making different technologies work together now with APIs which requires a specific skill set. If any business doesn't have a cloud strategy then time's running out – PCS hasn't sold a fixed line solution for eight years."

Acquisitions

In 2018 PCS acquired two businesses in the IT space and is currently in discussions to acquire another voice

company in Q1 this year which would take group revenues to £6.5 million with 20 per cent EBITDA. This all builds on the strong foundations put in place by Lake. The company started with eight people and now employs 26. It bought its office outright in 2017, a year after building its own hosted voice platform delivering voice, UC and an FMC capability – called UCA (Unified Communications Anywhere). PCS is also a Cisco Meraki Select Partner, Sophos Silver Partner, and partners with AWS, Microsoft,

Datto, HP, Konica, BT, EE, O2, Vodafone and Enreach.

The overall business is now structured as PCS Group with Pure Cloud Solutions, PCS IT Services and PCS Mobile Solutions forming the combined entity. "This year our mobile business is set to hit 7,500 connections which is an excellent achievement in two years from a standing start," added Lake. "We also offer voice, IT, security, DR and managed print to clients and partners; and we are looking at AI and the continuation of delivering secure flexible working solutions. We have also just released our direct SIP connect into MS Teams, so we're eager to see what new opportunities this opens up."

According to Lake PCS has always been solution led and educates clients, helping them to develop IT and technology strategies that deliver value for their business. Lake sits on the board of two of PCS's largest clients as a Non Exec' to help steer their IT and technology strategies. "The role of any business should always be that of a trusted advisor," commented Lake. "But never think you have all the answers, so keep learning. Two heads are normally better than one. Plan for growth by bringing in people that are better than you in key areas. If you don't have the trust of your client or partner you have nothing." ■

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growth phase

The path that led to Pure Cloud Solutions...

LAKE'S back story in the comms sector is long and varied. He left school to install and maintain London systems as an apprentice for £60 a week. He then moved to Telecom Products where he installed and maintained Panasonic and SDX systems, before being approached by UTL/UTM to become part of its support team for the north of England and Scotland.

UTL was bought by Shipton where he spent 10 years, eventually becoming National Service Manager. Shipton was acquired DeTeWe and Lake was then approached by Astra Communications to join its board of directors as Professional Services Director. He then moved back to DeTeWe as Technical Director. "Next, I set up a small reseller called Quantum Business Concepts with a couple of partners, but this venture only lasted 24 months due to issues about where the focus should be," said Lake. "So I worked for Crane Communications and was later approached by BT to become its Sales Manager in the north west for Global Services. Then I helped to set up Ethos Voice & Data before taking a complete break from telecoms to become a fully qualified butcher for 18 months. I enjoyed this but missed comms so decided to get back into it."

Lake worked for Convergence Group for 12 months and was approached by Wavenet. After two years there he did a short stint at Ctalk setting up a channel – and then established Pure Cloud Solutions with his brother in 2012. "The rest is history!" said Lake. ■

Just a minute with Darren Lake...

Role model: Jacques Cousteau: A lot of what we know about the ocean is down to this fearless guy.

What talent do you wish you had? To speak every language fluently on the planet.

Your biggest achievement: Creating PCS.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I am a total adrenaline junky and love rock climbing, skiing and scuba diving – I am a Master Scuba Diver.

Who do you admire most in comms? Matt Riley: I worked with Matt at DeTeWe for several years and what he has achieved with Daisy is impressive.

What do you fear most? Letting my family down.

Your greatest strength and what could you work on? I'm focused and tenacious but sometimes a little too eager.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Jacques Cousteau, I would love to talk to him about his adventures and how different the oceans are now; and my two grandads to get to know them as a man. One was a tank driver in WWII and the other a boxer and stone mason.

What possession could you not live without? My wine fridge.

Lessons learnt? I have never suffered fools, so with hindsight I should have kept my mouth shut in certain situations.

How would you like to be remembered? For having had passion and showing my kids what hard work, focus and determination can bring you.

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? I'd be a scuba diving instructor somewhere warm.

Top tip for resellers: Take time out to focus on the business, it's worth it.

Agility's new leap of faith pays off with energy deals

LIVERPOOL based telecommunications provider Agility Communications specialises in providing business mobile, VoIP and connectivity to an extensive range of customers and has now added another solutions string to its bow – energy management – alongside Fidelity Energy.

Explaining how the move into energy came about, Managing Director Alan Riddoch said: "Funnily enough, we saw an article in Comms Dealer on Fidelity Energy and arranged a call with Sales Director, Sean Dixon. It soon became evident that Fidelity's key values were aligned with ours, so we knew our customers would be in great hands. The rest is history!"

Adding another utility to the services a business provides



Alan Riddoch

providing figures and analysis to us whenever needed. We also enjoy the monthly reports we receive, which provide great insight to all the team on the energy market and factors effecting contracts and prices. Great partnerships are forged by having great relationships and this is certainly the case with Fidelity!"

Riddoch and his staff are passionate about providing

solution based on their individual requirements.

"Honesty, independence and accountability are the fundamentals of our mission statement to ensure our customers have access to the full range of solutions across the market with a dedicated account team who are always one call away, to provide independent advice.

"As part of our credit checking process, we usually ask for two forms of ID. Most of the time that tends to be a utility bill. As a result, it clicked that we should be offering energy supervision to our customers to add to our service wrap. We have found that many of our existing Agility Comms customers have been happy to switch energy suppliers with us, as it minimizes the admin for them by having a single point of contact for their utilities. They trust that we will only offer them the very best services."

It must be said, our energy management business has made a great contribution to not only our turnover but also to our bottom line

might seem daunting, however Riddoch reports that the integration and process was a breeze thanks to the help of the Fidelity onboarding team.

"With thanks to Jason Fernyhough and the team at Fidelity, it was incredibly simple and straight-forward and our team are now fully trained on energy. Jason is invaluable when it comes to answering questions and our Internal Account Manager Lucy is such a great help in

the best possible service and he says many customers have already handed their energy management over to Agility based on long established trust.

"We always strive for excellence. Our customers benefit from our one-hour response times as well as advice from our consultative business managers who ensure they not only take advantage of the latest technology but also utilise the most effective

Riddoch believes any ICT business not adding energy as a service is missing a trick. "This is a great opportunity for any IT or Telecoms business looking to provide energy management services to their customer base. Be open-minded and think less about the additional revenue for your business and more about how you can enhance your relationship with your existing customers and ensure they will stay with you forever.

"As a business, we saw an exponential growth in last year's trading period, and we are on course to double our turnover this year. It must be said, our energy management business has made a great contribution to not only our turnover but also to our bottom line," added Riddoch.

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Let's salute our Champions

New for 2021, Channel Champions will recognise the full range of teams who contribute to building winning ICT channel organisations.

Great things are achieved when a group of colleagues unite and pull together to achieve a common goal. At Comms Dealer we are fortunate to see this every day in the sector we are proud to be a part of. You are all amazing.

To recognise the impressive achievements across all functions of channel businesses, we are delighted to launch this new awards initiative which will recognise teams and unsung heroes across the whole business spectrum namely:

- Sales & Account Management
- Marketing
- Tech Support and Engineering
- HR, People & Culture
- Billing & Finance
- Executive Leadership

"Entries will be based on work and activities carried out between March 1st 2020 and March 1st 2021 – the most challenging time in the channel's history - when so many teams performed miracles to make sure the UK's crucial organisations could keep working and millions of staff and management across all sectors could relocated to their homes," said Channel Champions Event co-ordinator Nigel Sergent.

"It's been said many times in the last year but the ICT sector has been Britain's fourth emergency service during the pandemic, providing vital communications to millions and we aim to reward these heroes at the Channel Champions event at a glittering luncheon on 6 May 2021 at Marriott Grosvenor Square in London's Mayfair

"Given the year we have been through, I am sure all ICT companies will want to take the opportunity to properly acknowledge their teams by entering," added Sergent.



Terry O'Brien

Terry O'Brien, CEO of Channel Champions headline sponsor DWS, commented: "These awards are very special because they recognise real heroes in teams that don't always get the credit they deserve. The Channel Champions awards are based on activities carried out during the entire Covid-19 crisis and channel teams have done some amazing work during the pandemic which should be recognised.

"Over the years, we've been fortunate to win multiple channel awards, so we have experienced first-hand the positive impact it has on a team. Entering awards can be a huge incentive for your teams as they want to win and celebrate their accomplishments. We're proud to be the headline sponsor of the Comms Dealer Sales and Marketing Awards for the first time and we encourage Channel businesses, both large and small, to enter the awards and celebrate their teams' hard work and successes.

"Winning, or even being shortlisted for these Awards, brings a huge uplift in morale as everyone feels valued and they can see how their hard work is paying off. Channel Champions will be fantastic opportunity to recognise the contribution teams have made not only to their business, but to the wider Channel as well."

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Reseller Technical Support & Engineering Team
Reseller Sales Support Team
Reseller Executive Leadership Team
Reseller Billing & Finance Team
Reseller People and Culture Team

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Vendor Marketing Team
Vendor Technical Support & Engineering Team
Vendor Sales Support Team
Vendor Executive Leadership Team
Vendor People and Culture Team

SERVICE PROVIDER AWARDS

Service Provider Sales & Account Management Team
Service Provider Marketing Team
Service Provider Technical Support & Engineering Team
Service Provider Sales Support Team
Service Provider Executive Leadership Team
Service Provider Billing & Finance Team
Service Provider People and Culture Team

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North pulls in CEO



Glen Williams

FORMER Allvotec CEO Glen Williams has joined North as Group CEO. North was formed from five technology, IoT, networking and safety and security providers brought together via a series of mergers. Williams, who is credited with leading the sale of Damovo in 2018, brings broad experience in global IT and strategic partnerships having held a number of senior management roles at Dell, Computacenter and Lenovo.

He said: "The bringing together of five companies with a strategy to build the UK's leading IoT, networking and connectivity and safety and security provider is an exciting challenge. North is already an established player in the provision of smart technology solutions and is positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that exist today and in the future in areas such as 5G and IoT."

Aliter Founding Partner and North Non-Executive Chairman, Greig Brown, added: "We are targeting significant organic and inorganic growth across several established and emerging markets. With Glen's track record in the industry the business is well placed to achieve its strategic goals."

Also on the move...

JUSTIN Willson has made the switch to cloud specialists Synapse360 following 30 years working with telecom resellers Universal and Charterhouse Voice & Data. Willson will be tasked with



Justin Willson

helping to develop a reseller channel for the Manchester and Isle of Man based business which has developed a range of managed cloud services to help customers build their own hybrid environments. "I'm looking forward to developing new channel and referral partnerships in London and the south," said Willson. "Synapse360 was acquired by Manx Telecom in 2019 and since then has reviewed and revised its portfolio to ensure the company stays relevant, enabling organisations to go through digital transformation seamlessly."

IT MAINTENANCE firm Velez Managed Services aims to boost its brand awareness globally following the appointment of Matthew Barnsley as Head of Marketing. The company



Matthew Barnsley

has added five heads to its marketing team in recent times and Barnsley's instatement brings senior level marketing experience. Dan Orton, VP Sales, commented: "Matt's role will entail

leading the global marketing team across multiple countries, overseeing all marketing projects while continuing to demonstrate our channel focused approach to the industry." Barnsley added: "This is an opportunity to reach out to clients through new, exciting content and help enhance the team's marketing abilities."

THE appointment of CityFibre's Head of Regulation Alex Blowers as Chair of the Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA) is expected to boost the industry body's influence and also marks CityFibre's return to INCA. "INCA members are set to play a major role in achieving the Government's ambitious targets for national coverage of gigabit-capable networks by the end of the decade," said Blowers. "The interests of all altnets are becoming increasingly aligned and I will help to strengthen our collective voice."

A NEW digital-focused tech unit to be launched by BT on April 1st will be headed up by former Bharti Airtel Group CIO Harmeen Mehta who joins BT as Chief Digital and Innovation Officer, reporting to CEO Philip Jansen. The new Digital unit will include accountability for IT, digital innovation, BT-wide business transformation and data and product strategy. Other leadership changes see Howard Watson become Chief Technology Officer.

IPI secures top chief executive

IP INTEGRATION (IPI) has signed up former co-owner of DatapointEurope Sat Sanghera as CEO. He has been working with IPI over the last year in an advisory capacity. "What started out as a two weak advisory engagement unexpectedly turned into an exciting opportunity," stated Sanghera. "IPI has a loyal and skilled team and we want to build on this solid set of foundations."



Sat Sanghera

Chairman Joe Prentis added: "Sat leads from the front and by example, enacting positive change across the organisation. In the short amount of time he has been with our company he has fostered a culture built around championing our people and celebrating our clients."

The company also appointed Andy Scopes as COO. He was most recently VP of Group Operations at Sabio.

Wade appointed as Gamma CMPO

GAMMA has appointed Chris Wade as Chief Marketing and Product Officer (CMPO), taking over from Alan Mackie who stepped down at the end of last year. Prior to Gamma, Wade served as Chief Product Officer at Aptitude Software. He also held a number of leadership roles in strategy, product management and marketing in several different operating businesses within The Sage Group. CEO Andrew Taylor said: "Having worked in a variety of product and marketing roles with a focus on software, Chris brings



Chris Wade

a fresh perspective to our vision and strategy." Wade added: "Our reputation in the market positions us to help businesses embrace digital innovation through the adoption of UCaaS. I will strive to continue building on the company's foundations, while further fulfilling our ambitions in the UK and Europe."



Alan Mackie

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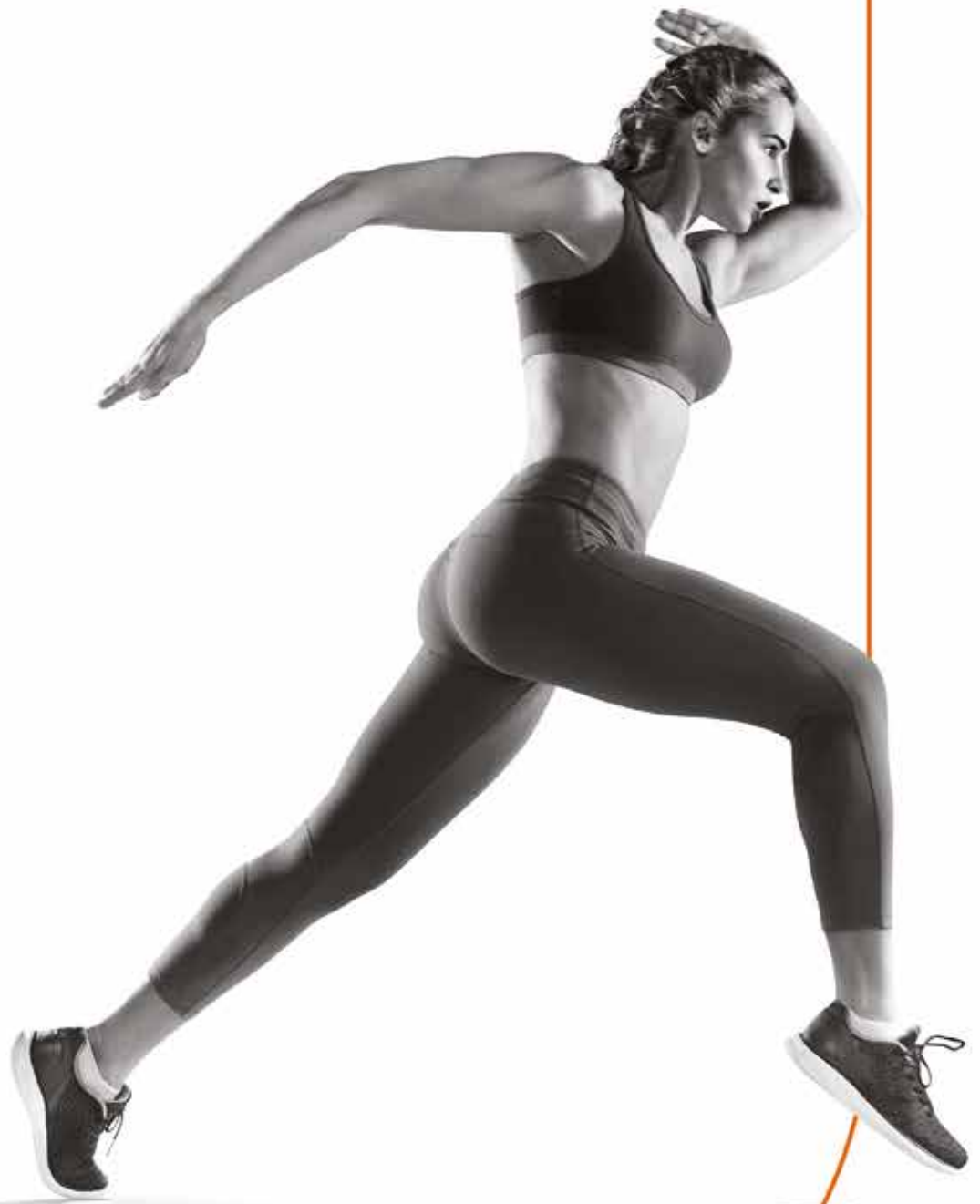
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