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scale-up mode p24

INCA Chair aims to
accelerate full fibre
agenda p30



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Comms People
This month's movers and shakers



Jola boosted by BGF investment

CHANNEL-only mobile data specialist and eSIM MVNO Jola has secured a £10.25m cash injection from growth finance firm BGF ahead of an organic growth push to drive a three-fold return on investment within five years.

SPECIAL REPORT

Jola's founders retain control of the business with BGF taking a 25% stake and all shareholders have created a pool of share options for non-directors.

Ruling out a spending spree on immediate acquisitions CEO Andrew Dickinson (pictured above far right) said: "The plan is not predicated on any acquisitions at this time. There are very few assets in this space that make sense for us to buy and

we have enjoyed the process of organic growth to date."

Set up in 2014 with a £50k investment Jola now employs 40 people and is on track for £7m turnover and a £2m EBITDA run rate this financial year.

Dickinson is confident Jola will continue to onboard 20-30 resellers per month, having added 250 partners during 2020 to take its total to over 900.

"Because our systems are fully automated we can onboard as many resellers per month as

want to become Jola partners," he stated. "With BGF's support we have an opportunity to build on what we have achieved over the last seven years, helping more Jola partners to win large high margin IoT/M2M projects.

"This deal should be a beacon for those resellers that have been thinking about getting into mobile data as it is so scalable, and our partners are winning. One of our MSPs just won a deal worth over £5m."

Continued on page 3

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

IT IS THE season for breaking out – for the sun, daffodils, and a nation of lock-downers. We can look forward now to less time in the house or flat, and more time outdoors. It is also prime time to dwell on strengthening roots in home working. If

we take as read the new workplace preference of many, HQ-based work is already a poor second as hoards of office and knowledge workers seek to adopt the practices of a freelancer working from home. Business leaders in many organisations are driving this trend too.

The reality is that hybrid working will likely be set in stone as corporate policy. Evidence shows that work time at home is more productive, while offices will become primarily a place of congregation for group catch-ups and sociality. These new realisations and trends suggest that organisations may have been firing on two cylinders pre-Covid-19, oblivious to the latent productivity gains that took a pandemic to bring into reality.

This raises a key question: How else can businesses make dramatic advances and run better and leaner? Pre-Covid-19, the benefit of technology as a business driver was accepted but not enthusiastically enough to force great change. Same with the home working scenario as trust issues put the brakes on. Not any more.

The three drivers propelling home working – namely more productive staff benefiting from a better work-life balance; bosses keen to reduce their costly office space and harness a more productive workforce at the same time; and the technology roll outs that underpin digital transformation – create a perfect storm that's blasting in a workplace revolution.

With such winds of change in the air, it is also the season to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by the channel at this time – a subject that was unravelled at last month's Comms Dealer Insight Session (held in association with TalkTalk Business). See page 14.

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

Radius seals Frontier deal



Ray Ferris

RADIUS Payment Solutions' ninth comms sector transaction in two years sees the fast growing business acquire The Frontier Group as it seeks to drive national expansion in telecoms, telematics, insurance and fuel cards.

North Shields-based The Frontier Group was established in 2010 and is best known as a specialist in mobile, connectivity and IT solutions.

It has a strong regional presence across north east England and operates a division supplying comms solutions into the care industry, called Frontier Care Services.

The unit provides mobile devices, tablets and connectivity, IoT and remote working

solutions for more than 16,000 users in the care industry.

Frontier's customers will gain access to a wider range of telecoms and new transport products such as fuel cards, telematics and insurance.

Ray Ferris, MD of Radius Connect, commented: "Frontier is a fast growing business that has established strong partnerships in growing sectors and carved out a niche offering within the care industry. It complements our growth agenda."

Radius Payment Solutions CEO Bill Holmes commented: "The Frontier Group is a thriving regional business and we will innovate further with new products and services over the years ahead."

Continued from page 1

THESE international resellers provide an organic way for Jola to move into foreign markets without the need to acquire incumbents or establish offices, according to Dickinson.

He said: "Following these partners into their geographies allows us to expand our base and we now have a presence in almost every country in Europe.

"For example, we have signed up one MSP with offices in Germany and Italy and we bill them directly.

"They have installed our product in 6,000 gas stations across the continent.

"We also have innovative UK partners that sell all over the world. For them our global roaming products give them instant access to opportunities in 200 countries, offering hundreds of local networks on a single SIM."

Seb Saywood who led the deal for BGF said: "Jola has clearly differentiated product capabilities with a specialism in eSIM provision, a very high growth part of the market.

"The projected growth of the global mobile data market is considerable, with demand for such services expected to accelerate with the anticipated roll out of 5G."



Seb Saywood

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NEWS ROUNDUP

SABIO'S AI and automation portfolio has received a boost following its acquisition of Madrid-based Fonetic which provides cloud-enabled AI voicebots, chatbots and customer behaviour analytics solutions. The company currently manages, processes and monitors over 200 million interactions per year. "Almost every customer interaction will soon be fronted by AI in some shape or form, and AI-enabled capabilities are poised to transform the customer experience," stated Sabio's CEO Jonathan Gale.

ANT Telecom has adapted the alarm management solution Aspect Link to help companies automate their duty of care to homeworkers. The Health and Safety Executive says employers have the same duty of care to remote workers as office-based staff. ANT Telecom MD Klaus Allion said: "Automating the process makes employees feel valued and frees up time for managers and supervisors, preventing stress and frustration. People feel better, more gets done and it gets done with a smile." In practice, homeworkers have access to a SOS button and the service sends 'Are you okay?' messages as well as 'Take a Break' and 'Finish for the Day' notifications.

Air IT gets two more additions

AUGUST Equity-backed Air IT has taken its acquisition total to six in as many months with the additions of Kent-based InfoTech Solutions and Cheshire-located Concise Technologies, both for undisclosed fees.

The latest double swoop expands Air IT's geographical influence into the north west region and bolsters its presence in the south east.

John Whitty, CEO of Air IT, said: "Entering the north west has always been one of our strategic goals along with future growth in the region. We now have the capability to deliver a national offering, serviced locally, which is so important to SMEs."

The acquisitions bring an extra 250 customers and add 50 staff to Air IT's headcount.

The InfoTech deal in particular brings more capabilities in the financial, construction and manufacturing sectors.

In October last year Air IT acquired Netstar and Microtrading, swiftly followed by Riverbank IT Management and Nexus SG in December.

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Bleakley on growth plan

BRAND unification marks the next phase of Firstcom Europe's development as the cloud comms provider brings its UK subsidiaries Telesis and Difference Corporation under the parent company moniker.

According to CEO Christian Bleakley the move is also reflective of a UK restructure, strategic refocus and expansion.

"Our strategy has evolved," he stated. "Our focus was to move slowly away from the existing names so as not to lose their brand recognition and then move toward Firstcom Europe. That time is now over and we are merging our operations and identity to be more integrated."

Bleakley conceded that when the firm started out in Bolton 12 years ago he did not imagine that it would become the centre of operations for a European business

"Many of the original team have stayed with us and their experience has grown with company expansion," he added.

"The high demand for cloud services has seen us strengthen our team by 20%, even in the middle of Covid, to include more technicians, customer support, finance and channel staff. We have streamlined our busi-



Christian Bleakley

ness to make it easier for the channel to work with us."

Firstcom Europe currently operates in the UK, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Poland, and aims to make more acquisitions within this footprint.

See page 32

NEWS ROUNDUP

MANAGED network specialist Systal Technology Solutions has sold a minority stake to private equity firm Inflexion. Owner-managed Glasgow-based Systal was founded in 2008, is a Cisco Gold Partner and delivers services to companies across North America, EMEA and APAC, supporting over 1,300 locations. The company's clients include Coca-Cola European Partners, JLL, Unipart Group, DCC and Scottish Power. John Farrugia, Managing Partner at Cavendish Corporate Finance (which advised Systal on the sale), commented: "Systal has established a strong reputation with a growing roster of high calibre clients across the globe."

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Editor: Stuart Gilroy
sgilroy@bpl-business.com 07712 781 102

Publisher: Nigel Sergent
nsergent@bpl-business.com 07712 781 106

Managing Director: Michael O'Brien
mobrien@bpl-business.com 01895 454 444

Sales Director: Simon Turton
sturton@bpl-business.com 01895 454 603

Production: Frank Voeten
fvoeten@bpl-business.com

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BSL builds in CCaaS space

AUGUST Equity-backed Business Systems (BSL) has upped its play in the high growth CCaaS space with the acquisition of cloud contact centre specialist Acrinax. The financials of the deal were not disclosed.

Acrinax also specialises in Workforce Engagement Management (WEM) solutions and has developed its own software tool, called Acrinax Chat, a real-time chat translation solution that enables agents to communicate in over 100 languages.

Acrinax founders Damian Bowen, David Baughan and Andrew Jacobs join the BSL senior leadership team.

According to BSL CEO Adam Kantor the deal builds scale and is another platform for BSL to create a broad set of services for its mid and large enterprise customer base.

“Joining forces with Acrinax is a logical step and brings additional depth to what we can offer to our customers as they look to transform their contact centres,” said Kantor. “Combined with our existing cloud



Adam Kantor

contact centre and WEM practices, along with our monitoring and compliance services, we will continue to increase the value and innovation we bring to customers.”

Bowen said: “Migrating to the cloud is at the top of customers’ priority list and the partnership will enable us to deliver this strategic transformation.”

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

PE firm August Equity took a controlling stake in Wandsworth-based BSL in January this year.

Babble underpins cyber credentials

GRAPHITE Capital-backed Babble has bolstered its cyber capabilities with the purchase of managed service IT solutions provider 81G Blue. The deal is Babble’s third transaction in three months and its seventh since the start of 2020.

Babble CEO Matt Parker said: “Our buy and build strategy has continued at pace in 2021. We have more acquisitions in the pipeline as we seek high quality, innovative businesses that have the potential for further growth.”

Babble now has operational bases in London, Burton and



Matt Parker

Newcastle, supporting over 3,000 organisations in a range of sectors.

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NEWS ROUNDUP

CARDIFF-based Circle IT’s purchase of Microsoft Gold partner Fabric IT adds £3m revenue and expands its Microsoft Dynamics, Microsoft Cloud and Managed Services business. The deal takes group revenues to £25m. Commenting on the transaction, Roger Harry, founder and owner of Circle IT, said: “Fabric enhances our core Microsoft Cloud portfolio, bringing Microsoft Dynamics (Business Process, CRM, ERP), Power Apps (Data Analytics, Visualisation and Development) and additional Microsoft Modern Workplace capabilities to Circle.”

ARROW’S acquisition of Castle Donnington-based Complete Networks significantly strengthens its presence in the public sector. Complete Networks provides managed WAN and LAN solutions and has a particular focus on the NHS with a number of hospitals and two ambulance services among its customer base. Arrow CEO Richard Burke commented: “The acquisition positions us to maximise opportunities within the public health sector as the transition to digitalisation builds momentum.”

NUVOLA Distribution has extended its regional influence and capabilities with the acquisition of Electromaster, a distributor based in Ireland and the UK. Nuvola Distribution MD Michael Lloyd commented: “We will combine our expertise and vendor portfolios to create mutually beneficial relationships and solutions for reseller and vendor partners. By building on our vendor portfolio we can offer additional on-premise vendor solutions and services to Electromaster reseller partners. As we can see from the recent withdrawal of certain vendors from the marketplace there is a requirement to provide alternative solutions.”



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NEWS ROUNDUP

OFFICE occupancy across Europe in 2025 will be 30% lower than in 2019, according to forecasters at IDC. "We are not going back to the way we worked before," commented Mick Heys, Vice President, Future of Workplace at IDC. "The role of the office will change to more of a collaborative and creative space with employees working from home at least one day per week. This has implications for the technologies used and it will be important to provide digital equivalence for employees irrespective of location to maintain employee experience."

THE number of smart buildings across the Scottish Highlands is set to increase significantly following a £400k agreement between Highland Council and IoT specialist North. Highland Council serves a third of Scotland's total land area and is responsible for many remote buildings which can now be monitored from a centralised point across the IoT network. The project will use smart IoT sensors to collect data and gain insights on council buildings including CO2 levels, temperature and humidity, ventilation, electricity consumption and light levels.

Sabio rising in Salesforce



Jonathan Gale

SABIO'S acquisition of Salesforce consulting partner Makepositive is reflective of the evolving Human Service aspect in the CRM Customer Engagement Centre space, according to Sabio CEO Jonathan Gale.

"With AI and conversational technologies now handling many routine CX enquiries, contact centre advisors handle a greater proportion of complex customer interactions," he said.

"This has introduced more complexity on the advisor desktop, increasing the need for assistive Human Service solutions that offer true real-time digital support for advisors.

"Salesforce is a driving force in this space as traditional contact centre technologies merge with the Customer Engagement Centre market.

"Acquiring Makepositive and bringing its design, implementation and maintenance skills across multiple Salesforce clouds into Sabio Group is an important and timely move."

Makepositive was established in 2003 and has circa 180 employees with offices in London and Manchester and a development centre in India.

The firm has over 120 Salesforce accredited consultants as well as a dedicated managed services capability.

Gradwell links with MSP TTG

CHILTERN Capital has added mid-market 3CX MSP The Technology Group (TTG) to its portfolio. TTG joins fellow 3CX Titanium Partner Gradwell Communications in the group.

The acquisition almost doubles the size of the group and both businesses will retain their brand identities, with TTG continuing to focus on direct mid-market business while Gradwell transitions as a 100% channel business.

Gradwell CEO Simon Curry, who will lead the combined group, said: "TTG is a great strategic fit for Gradwell and gives the group clear capabilities to provision and service larger customers with more sophisticated requirements."

Jonathan Marsden, founder and CEO of TTG, will retain an investment in the combined group and continue to head up the Leeds-based business.

Chairman Mark Howling commented: "With the two businesses working together the group will be able to address a larger part of the UCaaS market, servicing small, medium and large customers."

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Fast track moves to the cloud



Gary Forrest

AUTOMATING the audit of business telephony environments provides a fast track to cloud migration, according to Pure IP CEO Gary Forrest.

The company has launched an automated service – called ReVeal and designed for multi-site organisations – that collates and processes the technical details of current telephony estates and presents insights in a report as a first step in cloud migration projects.

"Whereas producing a detailed analysis manually could take days or weeks, especially in situations where mixed environments and a range of platforms are present, ReVeal can automatically provide an accurate audit of an organisation's existing PBX estate within hours," stated Forrest.

"ReVeal will reduce time and effort and provide insights upon which an informed system design and migration plan can be built."



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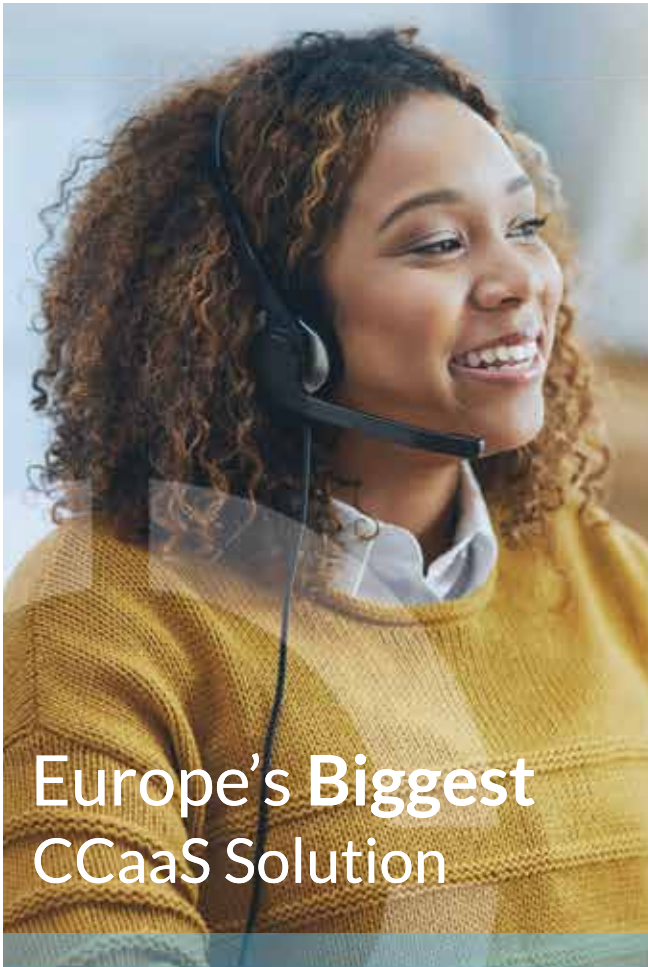
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Energy now a door opener into comms

FIDELITY Energy boss John Haw is urging resellers to fight back against competitors using energy provision as a door opener for new telecoms business.

He believes channel players not selling energy could miss out by not becoming 'one-point' utility service providers.

"Using energy as a door opener, especially during the lockdown when companies are looking to save not spend, is perfectly legitimate," said Haw.

He maintains that technology resellers can now rapidly become energy management specialists and, by utilising their 'trusted' status, can provide a 'compelling wrap' of utility services to customers.

"A lot of big and well-established resellers are now successfully winning telecoms business by earning the trust of a customer by offering energy provision," added Haw.

"With their reputation achieved, it's then a simple matter to add telecoms to the services they offer.



John Haw

"Resellers solve problems for their customers using technology. Energy is a just another problem and our portal can be white labelled so that resellers have an out-of-the-box technology platform to manage their client's energy needs.

"Reseller leaders may think it's a diversion away from their core telecoms offerings but at this time, when companies are looking to make savings, it makes perfect sense."

Fidelity Energy provides back office functions via the portal and sales support, marketing and supplier interaction. Haw claims that partners can be on-boarded in less than a week.

London-based Teknov8 Distribution added energy procurement to its channel portfolio earlier this year. The company's new Electrov8 energy division has already landed deals and according to founder Paul Donnelly cross-selling is now a simple sales tactic to employ.

"Moving into the energy sector complements our portfolio of managed services," he said. "When we think about the ICT world, everything we sell is a utility, just a different utility."

Haw commented: "Customers used to ask telecoms companies why they are selling energy, now they are asking why they aren't."

Fidelity Energy is staging an educational webinar alongside Comms Dealer on April 14th to help resellers learn how they can add energy to their product stack. To register go to: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JBZgqD8PTfyEmaYpnEkIsw

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Cloud strategy boost

TALKTALK Business has added Mitel's MiCloud Connect and MiCloud Flex solutions to its portfolio. The solution provides voice, video sharing and contact centre capabilities on desktop and mobile.

The addition of MiCloud Connect and MiCloud Flex builds on an existing relationship with Mitel which underpins TalkTalk Business' UC offering.

According to TalkTalk's Lockdown Lessons report, nearly 60% of workers in the UK said they had been more productive as a result of working from home.

Mitel's EU Cloud Survey, recorded just before the pandemic, also reported that 44%



Ian Cairns

of businesses were already prepared to migrate their contact centres to the cloud, and that lockdown was a catalyst.

Ian Cairns, Enterprise Director at TalkTalk Business, stated: "Working habits have shifted dramatically over the last year and many operational changes are here to stay.

"More than ever, organisations require a forward thinking IT strategy that drives productivity and enables collaboration.

"In an increasingly virtual world there is a clear need to combine reliable, fast connectivity with tools that facilitate better communication."

Richard Roberts, Mitel's VP for UK&I and Northern Europe, commented: "By combining TalkTalk Business' connectivity solutions with Mitel MiCloud we enable companies of all sizes to benefit from end-to-end secure, reliable and flexible communication and collaboration capabilities to smoothly run their day-to-day operations in a hybrid working model."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

WATFORD-based TiG's acquisition of Microsoft identity and cyber security solution firm ThirdSpace is its third deal since BGF's initial £6m investment in 2018. The transaction follows the purchase of MMRIT, a London-based MSP working in the financial services and legal sectors, and London-located financial services IT consultancy netConsult. The combined group now employs 210 people and provides Azure solutions, data analytics, Sentinel and SOC solutions.

A NEW card payment service (called ChargeSecure) developed in-house by SiPalto will ensure PCI compliance for agents working remotely by preventing them from hearing or seeing credit card details during telephone card payment transactions. SiPalto founder Ahmed Murad said: "Companies have been taking card payments over the phone for a long time which is not secure. Our platform restores PCI compliance and allows customers and agents to feel secure in remote card payment transactions." Murad noted that the platform is available to anyone using SiPalto's VoIP telephony and can be integrated into any existing payment platform or any CRM system.

Hot demand for security

THE work from home requirement instigated by Covid-19 will provide a security investment boost in a sector that perhaps needs it most, according to Richard Burke, CEO at Arrow Business Communications.

He said money spent on bricks and mortar by finance sector firms pre-pandemic is likely to be redirected into bolstering security across dispersed workforces, creating new opportunities for security resellers.

"The rise of online banking and secure customer portals means financial organisations no longer require expensive bricks and mortar branches," he said. "Companies will be able to invest more in cyber security, creating secure connections for their remote workers, robust mobile platforms for their customers and, on top of everything else, trying to maintain their competitive edge."

Rufus Grig, CSO at Maintel, says that now is the time to take a long-term view of security with highly sensitive data now being accessed from more locations than ever before.

"In recent months businesses have overcome many of the challenges posed by home working, utilising enter-



Richard Burke

prise-grade technology, connectivity and security to keep their employees online," he said.

"Going forward, employees must also be able to collaborate and share data across multiple locations in a secure manner, something that is of vital importance for companies in the finance sector. Security is paramount given the data that financial companies collect."

Rob Mukherjee, who is Director of Transformation at EveryCloud, is urging clients to shift from a mindset of working from home to working from anywhere securely.

He said: "Data is everywhere, people are everywhere, so companies need to adopt true cloud-based security solutions, regardless of where that data is stored and regardless of where a person is physically located."

Donohoe pushes for inclusivity

SALES trainer John Donohoe has alleged that some employers within the IT and telco industry still discount candidates on prejudicial grounds.

"I have been disturbed to see candidates precluded from our seminars based on their gender, their likely backgrounds and even their names," said the Believe Director.

"Our view is that anyone with the right passion and zest can make it in sales, irrespective of background."

Believe has partnered with AimHire Sales Training to leverage the government's Kickstart scheme and forge a pathway for those from under privileged backgrounds into sales roles.

AimHire's Founder Nova Arkney highlights that prejudicial recruitment can sometimes be the product of unconscious bias and cyclical behaviours.

"Due to an old fashioned perspective of sales, there is a tendency for people to hire in their own image and because sales floors are often dominated by white men, this perpetuates," she said. See page 37

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NEWS ROUNDUP

DUBLIN-based IT distributor DataSolutions has kicked off an ambitious campaign to be carbon neutral by 2022. The company has also launched a Techies Go Green initiative that connects like minded technology firms keen to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. DataSolutions has already moved its ERP system and other corporate applications to the cloud, deployed electric cars and charging points and reduced business travel. MD Michael O'Hara commented: "We are calling on businesses across the UK and Ireland technology sector to join us on this sustainability journey."

APSE Capital-owned Ultima's multi-cloud strategy received a boost with the acquisition of cloud specialist Just After Midnight, which will form a new cloud and application services division within Ultima. "By combining Just After Midnight's expertise in cloud support and consulting with our managed services and IA-cloud automation management platforms, we will have a global offering for all customers and partners looking to build and manage their hybrid cloud infrastructure and applications," commented CEO Scott Dodds.

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WebRTC And Why It Matters



Will Morey, Sales & Marketing Director, Pragma

FIRSTLY, let's make sure we're all clear about what WebRTC actually is. In simple terms, it's the underlying technology that allows you to use a browser for real-time communications like voice and video. It stands for Web Real-Time Communications.

Here's a quick bit of history about how WebRTC has arrived on your desktop and the hard work and unsung heroes who made it happen:

2010: Google acquires Global IP Solutions which had the building blocks for WebRTC - Google turns it into a standard and open-sourced technology

2011: Ericsson builds the first ever WebRTC implementation. Since then, the standard has been developed and used by various companies

2014: Google Hangouts (now Google Meet) built on WebRTC

2017: Ericsson-LG Enterprise engineers started working on how they could use WebRTC to deliver next generation UCaaS applications for the iPECS Cloud platform

2020 (November): Ericsson-LG Enterprise release a final trial version of the technology to Pragma. It was added to the iPECS Cloud platform for testing by Pragma's technical and product teams.



"The iPECS ONE product is a winner and delivers huge value to us and more importantly to our customers. Deployment is a breeze and end users just love it."

Paul Hallam, Managing Director at Berry

2021 (January): The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) certified WebRTC as a mature technology and changed its rating to "Recommendation".

2021 (February): After extensive testing and field trials, the iPECS ONE product was released to our reseller partners.

Now in March, it's already being used by more than 2,000 users across the UK as part of their iPECS Cloud UCaaS service.

It's another great example of partnership between technology vendors: Google's first development of the standard and core technology, to Ericsson Labs building the first-ever deployment. Ericsson-LG taking the technology and developing it into iPECS ONE allowing Pragma to embed it into iPECS Cloud, delivering it to our resellers and onto their end-users.

WebRTC is a game changer for our resellers and iPECS Cloud users. It enables easy deployment using QR codes meaning for the reseller or IT Manager it's easier than ever to roll out in a large scale and to support remote deployment. The support and total cost of ownership is lower than ever.

Most importantly though, the user experience is intuitive and simple. This means user adoption is high and they see real value in the tool especially in the working from home scenarios we have all adopted.

Berry Telecom have deployed to many of their customers and had a fantastic response. Paul Hallam, Managing Director at Berry commented "The iPECS ONE product is a winner and delivers huge value to us and more importantly to our customers. Deployment is a breeze and end users just love it."

WebRTC really is a game changer for both the channel and an increasingly mobile and remote workforce. Make sure iPECS ONE and WebRTC is part of your UCaaS proposition to

your customers and partner with Pragma.

For more information visit www.wearepragma.co.uk

Feeling OK? Why it's a key question to ask your staff

Mental Health Associates is now fully operational as the only charity working exclusively in the ICT industry to provide support to people in need of support with their mental health. This month, we asked founder Peter Orr how he and the charity's trustees and associates can help anyone struggling with stress, anxiety and self-worth in the ongoing lockdown and beyond, when the return to work could be as challenging for many.

As Covid-19 restrictions ease, do people still need help?

Absolutely. It has been a difficult year and our mental health and emotional wellbeing has been, and will continue to be, really tested. Even with the vaccine rollout we still have a long road ahead. For many, the roadmap back is as worrying and difficult as the previous year has been.

For people who may not know, what is MHA's key function?

When we established MHA it wasn't because of the pressures of Covid-19, but to help those struggling with their mental health by signposting help services and offering an industry-knowledgeable listening ear. By raising awareness of the signs and symptoms of poor mental health through our company workshops we aim to ensure that friends and colleagues can help by signposting others to MHA's listening service. We



Peter Orr

want to keep mental health awareness at the front of our minds. It's vital people remember to ask, How are you? Are you OK?.

What feedback have you had from the work you have done to date?

Our company awareness workshops have had good reviews, so if you would like to discuss arranging a workshop for your company then please contact me.

How are you intending to expand your outreach?

Through the workshops we want to encourage volunteers to join us as Associates, who will be trained to provide that listening and signposting support, so no one needs to wait for that important first step towards better mental health. As restrictions ease, Associates might be able to meet those they are helping face-to-face. Ultimately, we want an MHA network across the country so that there is local support available.

How are you funding the work you are doing?

Our biggest challenge has been fundraising. Jose

Sanchez from Weston-Comstor got us off to such a great start, but we need to continue to raise money to run MHA, train Associates and keep offering our services.

Why not plan a team building fundraising event – a month of counting your steps, or a virtual quiz night? Six people can meet outside, so perhaps a sponsored cycle ride or team picnic will let you check in on how staff are feeling as well as raising much needed funding for MHA.

We'll also be running our first MHA Industry Charity Golf Day at Brocket Hall Golf Club, Hertfordshire, on Monday 13th September which we hope will raise much needed funds. ■

For further information on Mental Health Associates workshops, the golf day fundraiser or becoming an Associate, email peter.orr@mentalhealthassociates.co.uk If you need help urgently please do not hesitate to visit www.mentalhealthassociates.co.uk or telephone 03301 244 338

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Setting a strategy for the

The comms channel passed its first critical Covid-19 test in its remarkable response to the lockdown emergency in March 2020. The second big test lies in establishing a long-term continuation of lockdown work practices which demands a full assessment of home workspaces and their efficacy. Last month's Comms Dealer Insight Session held in association with TalkTalk Business doubled down on these issues and spotlighted the company's new white paper which advocates positive action in a number of key areas.

Most offices cancelled out by lockdown are unlikely to be cranked back to life in their pre-Covid 19 capacity. The reality of home working in Britain is no longer exceptional, but we should not be so surprised, according to Pete Tomlinson, CEO, Windsor Telecom. "The pandemic hasn't changed anything," he said. "Everything that made sense a year ago makes 10 times more sense now. Look back over the last couple of years and you can see a trend towards more practical working, more hybrid working and more cloud technologies. Covid-19 has massively accelerated adoption.

"A year ago we saw a cobbled together comms phase, with people using

Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp groups and calls diverted to mobiles. Now we're seeing the professionalisation of solutions – something more structured and sustainable. And a lot of this is about simplification – simplifying processes, consolidating them onto two or three tools which are integrated, and putting shape and structure around how colleagues and customers use the tools."

The move to home working did not leave office and knowledge workers floundering. Instead, Covid-19 has shown that there is a better way. But that is not to say there are no office withdrawal symptoms. Paul Sinclair, Head of Marketing, Zen Internet, commented: "There's a need to adapt and change mindset because we're moving from connecting business sites to



Paul Smith

connecting people. Not all businesses will have sizeable HR teams to create, shape or evolve different workforce strategies. There's a real opportunity just to listen, to change mindsets and to share the insights that will help us to navigate through this new world of hybrid working."

Key observations

TalkTalk Business' white paper put a spotlight on current comms market dynamics and achieved much in crystallising the trends, challenges and opportunities for the channel. "Since Covid kicked in and the lockdowns began we've seen massive increases in usage on our network," stated Paul Smith, Head of Partners, TalkTalk Business. "We're keen to understand the true extent of the home

a permanent shift in working practices – a move towards either home working or hybrid working. "There is a shift happening and business leaders are thinking about the benefits of being able to reduce prime, often expensive, office space," added Smith. "There's a massive opportunity for partners to work with customers to help with connectivity requirements and really think through some of the challenges, whether that's employee wellbeing or ensuring productivity."

David Hatley, Head of Account Management, TalkTalk Business, cited a statistic that underscores the importance of releasing home workers from poor connectivity. "The white paper states that 80 per cent of the businesses interviewed said they would

working opportunity so we commissioned a white paper, via independent consultants Quadrangle, to investigate some of the changes in working patterns. The outcome was clear – that hybrid working is here to stay."

The survey found that two thirds of respondents expect



Pete Tomlinson



Paul Sinclair



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not go back to previous ways of working," he said. "And about a quarter of customers are looking for change. Our migrations team is busy supporting this transition. Having a dedicated line in a place where you're actually working is important so we are working with Openreach to ensure that we do that in a safe way. Furthermore, it's vital that a router's quality is there to deliver that overall experience to the customer working from home. Aside from technicalities, it's about HR teams listening to employees working dynamically and fully assessing what they need for their mental wellbeing."

Demand for office space is waning fast in the face of what is now an overwhelming shift to home working. The upsides are clear for all to see, but the case of home workers relying on poor broadband can no longer be justified. "The expectation from clients coming from an office environment and working from home is that it should be seamless," said Andy Craven, Managing Director, Merlin Telecommunications. "You should have the same ability and flexibility of services as you do in the office. It's an educational issue in trying to get users to understand that an

office environment is more controlled, secure and set up in a particular way that can't be replicated at home. The assumption is that if you have an Internet connection you should be able to do everything. But in the real world there's a big difference between consumer and business Internet.

Top drawer priorities

"Customers just want things to function properly wherever they choose to work. And the pandemic has made organisations think a little bit more about what they put in their bottom drawers – original DR plans for example. Now, something bad has

but the case is that people still don't know what home connectivity is, according to Tomlinson. "We went through a phase of everyone adopting the Internet to use as a semi-social tool, bonded with entertainment," he said. "You've got the FTTP challengers now disaggregating that. Is FTTP now more of a utility? Is it more of an entertainment service? Is it more of a business service? Our role is one of education and trying to help customers figure it out."

A failure to work things out means an organisation's reputational integrity could

There's an opportunity to figure out how businesses drive work streams, projects, processes and day-to-day operational challenges

happened and it's making people think more proactively about the way that they're working, and consider their ability to have the systems and flexibility to move people to different locations. That can only be a good thing."

There is clearly a strengthening drive to deliver business grade connectivity,

be under threat, along with company data, therefore informed resellers able to educate customers on all aspects and provide complete solutions are more likely to succeed. Louisa Clark, Head of Product Growth, TalkTalk Business, commented: "With many businesses downsizing the opportunity for partners is the pain point resolution. What are we trying to achieve by offering a home worker solution? Good connectivity becomes very important – with the applications we run we just wouldn't be as productive without fast, reliable connectivity. The opportunity is that bad connectivity is holding businesses back, therefore you've got to make sure that the connectivity is able



Andy Craven

to support the applications that the users need."

Fixing poor connectivity is quite separate from other issues where organisations and home workers have strong needs. The white paper stated that 85 per cent of people in the survey said home working has improved their work life balance, but the research also provided factual evidence of some frustrations, and that the change in work patterns has put pressure on older and outdated technologies. "It's a big topic for companies to ensure that productivity can be maintained and monitored," said Smith. "It isn't easy, especially on the creative side of things. Off the back of the study we've produced a homework toolkit that provides hints and tips on wellbeing guidance plus clear objective

setting to make sure that teams are productive and businesses are moving in the right direction."

With the huge migration to home working already complete there's a chance to perform a more granular root and branch reform of the new working environment. "There's an opportunity to figure out how businesses drive work streams, projects, processes and day-to-day operational challenges," added Smith. "The pandemic has been a catalyst to solve some of these challenges. The key is to use data from different sources such as the information in our white paper, to have those discussions where your customers look at how peoples' working patterns are changing. If we don't get those conversations

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David Hatley



Louisa Clark



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right we'll probably struggle to move to hybrid working environments."

Meanwhile, how well connected people are could influence their prospects of securing employment, according to Philip Lee, Head of Wholesale, ITS Technology Group. "When you look at the property sector and residential, there may be a time when you're selling a house that you'll be looking to advertise your broadband speed," he stated. "Will employers start looking at potential new employees and what their speeds are at home? We're at risk of creating a digital divide between somebody who can get fast Internet at home and someone with ADSL only. So there's a massive opportunity to get more fibre rolled out. For us, it's about how can we help a certain area increase the bandwidth that they can receive to improve productivity and the work-life balance."

Full fibre would be the shot in the arm the UK economy and home workers so badly needs, believes Smith. "The increased pace of FTTP roll out is something we're all working on," he added. "That's a massive opportunity. It alleviates a lot of problems. Some of the older technologies in place at home don't cut the

mustard now. There is still a lot of people out there sat on basic ADSL technologies."

All work tools are important, but perhaps none more so than full fibre connectivity, but end users' expectations of the network are, as usual, related to basic needs. Alex Fitzgerald, Founder and CEO, Cuckoo Broadband, added: "Ultimately, consumers don't know the difference between FTTP, FTTC or anything else. All they care about is what comes out of the pipe. People don't want to think about their broadband, they just want it to work.

"Simplicity is our watchword – one single deal offering the fastest speed for one price. We focus on our area of expertise by building consumer software such as VPNs and other security solutions to help people manage home Internet and simplify their lives. It's

The pandemic has made organisations think a little bit more about what they put in their bottom drawers

about offering more to consumers who are more security conscious."

Fitzgerald spotlighted that the danger in the drift of current market trends is to



Philip Lee

introduce complexity. Kevin Burgess, Product Manager Wide Area Networking, Maintel, also proposed key changes required to give end users what they want. "We've decided to create a differentiated capability, something we call secure home worker which is based on SD WAN technology," he said. "It's a simple plug-and-

of focus from the office to a worker's locality, and a far sharper focus on the nature of 'business grade' services. "A true business service come down to whether you can control security on the router, whether you can control what devices connect to it, whether can you manage business applications across it, whether you can plug into the router and have a SIP handset on your desk," said Tomlinson. "How does the ISP work with your support desk if colleagues have a service ticket? That wrap is the true business service. It's how you augment that connectivity service that becomes really important."

To call the shift to home working seismic, and to say that things will never be

the same again, perhaps understates the fact that the customer experience has also been greatly elevated. "There is a flight to quality and an increase in customer expectations around the home working mentality," observed Sinclair.

"We've had to think a little bit differently in terms of how we support channel partners and end users, and we communicate with them slightly differently. The education piece is important and we talk to customers about getting the most out of connectivity, less about speed and more about network prioritisation through the router. It's about thinking differently and taking it away from just basic connectivity." ■

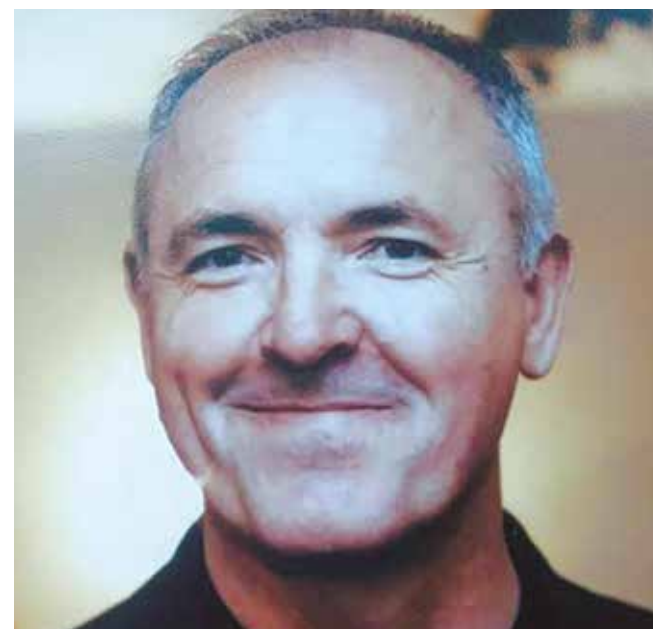


Alex Fitzgerald

play technology that runs on the employee's broadband line and provides visibility of the experience employees are getting from the service.

"When the pandemic first started, we spent a lot of effort working with our customers to provide technology to push their home workers out to their homes, be that VPN clients and security capabilities, firewalls, upgrades – that kind of thing. That's how the majority of our home workers are operating today, with secure VPNs and multi-factor authentication. That does present some challenges because you can't measure the experience the end user's getting."

This common scenario reflects a fundamental shift



Kevin Burgess



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Dunedin IT shifts into ex

With a comms arm positioned to flex its muscle Dunedin IT founding Director David Inglis outlines his plans for fivefold growth in as many years.

Dunedin IT is a fast grower: In 2020 it saw a 300 per cent hike in demand for voice and data connectivity solutions and staff numbers increased by 50 per cent over the past three years. The Edinburgh-based business is on track to grow from a £2 million to a £10 million business within the next five years and is sharply focused on the mid to enterprise market. "Our approach will be through acquisition or integrated partnering with other ICT businesses providing similar services in different parts of the UK," stated Inglis.

A business model change in 2018 provided a springboard for expansion into the comms sector, moving from a reseller model with various communications partners to become a wholesaler. "This allowed us to introduce new products such as our hosted VoIP platforms with unified communications, mobile networks and associated devices as well as Ethernet fibre products," added Inglis. "This transformed Dunedin IT into a true ICT business which offers customers a full range of end-to-end products and services."

The comms operation is spearheaded by newly appointed board Director Rory McEwan. He brings over 25 years telecoms industry experience and founded Aberdeenshire-based Orca Telecoms which was acquired by Arrow in August 2015. Other developments over the



David Inglis

We expect growth in experience level agreements that put customer experience at the centre of service performance

past year include Microsoft Gold designation and being named a City Champion by CityFibre. Dunedin IT's technology partners also include Gamma, Google, Amazon, 3CX and Acronis. Thus armed, the company targets SMEs in sectors such as professional services, construction, renewable energy, recycling and green technology manufacturing. "We are also looking to grow our client base

among scientific research organisations and large not-for-profit companies," stated Inglis. "The market for managed services is expected to see continued, albeit moderate growth over the next few years."

Growth drivers

Inglis has identified four propellants of growth and he plans to take full advantage of each. Clearly the cloud is a stimulus, enabling Dunedin

IT to build new platforms for customer engagements and deliver digital transformation. "Another growth driver is the increasing amount of automation in IT," he explained. "Even in areas that have not previously been automated, machine learning is having an impact and starting to replace a substantial amount of work for our customers. As core ticket activities become increasingly automated

we anticipate workloads will shrink, so we expect our ability to integrate automation solutions to be a key point of differentiation for our business."

An increasing reliance on outsourcing is a growth factor that Inglis says will result in ICT businesses like Dunedin IT reducing their reliance on traditional SLAs. "We expect growth in experience level agreements

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Expansion phase

which put customer experience at the centre of service performance, ensuring that all service interactions and touchpoints are considered when defining whether the service meets the agreed performance level," he added.

"The fourth growth catalyst is the imperative to evolve and keep pace with customer requirements. Over the past 11 years our managed services have evolved from supporting software, hardware and landline phones to providing full cloud services. We have moved

allowing us to grow our IT and admin teams. We originally planned to operate within the central belt of Scotland but have expanded our reach with projects in Northumberland."

Dunedin IT was established in 2009 by Inglis, Marion Smeal and Jamie Clague. Their first milestone was opening an Edinburgh office and putting a team together that fitted culturally. "This can be daunting and exciting in equal measures for any start-up," noted Inglis. "Once we had a stable operating platform in Edinburgh

We originally planned to operate within the central belt of Scotland but have expanded our reach

away from the antiquated ICT value added services and one-off sales strategy to target wide ranging subscription services and recurring revenue streams. This drives more value to our customers and increases customer retention."

Investment

All of this builds on a significant investment that Dunedin IT made in its own cloud-based platform in 2013, enabling the company to offer customers alternatives to the likes of Microsoft, AWS and Google. "The launch of our Dunedin IT in the Cloud hosting service provided a new revenue stream that accelerated our growth in terms of turnover and revenue performance," said Inglis. "In 2015 we expanded our presence and client base throughout Scotland and the north east of England,

and saw our client base increasing year-on-year we decided to open a Glasgow office. This was a turning point in terms of increased client base and revenues."

While the main strands of Dunedin IT's growth strategy are in the comms, business continuity and security streams, Inglis is also keeping his eye on a number of new technologies like IoT, blockchain, 5G, AI-based security, IT process automation and larger platforms for integrated UC. But amid all this change and technology evolution his core principles remain the same. "Improved communication and integration with customers are vital in today's market," he said. "I've also found that getting the right product information to the right person at the right time, and offering diverse products, are key." ■

Just a minute with David Inglis...

What do you fear most? Retirement. I've worked hard for so much of my life, I'm not sure what I'll do with myself.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: While doing consultancy work in Northumberland I was in a kitchen at a large country house having a nice chat with a man about the work. After he left I was informed it was Prince Harry!

One example of something you have overcome: A fear of heights.

The biggest risk you have taken? Starting Dunedin IT. I had a vision of how ICT services could be delivered in a cost-effective and reliable manner to SMBs and wanted to bring it to life.

Your main strength and what could you work on? I am driven by work and bringing my business visions to life; but I still need to pay more attention to mundane issues and being more patient.

What talent do you wish you had? To master the acoustic guitar.

If you weren't in IT what would you be doing? Property development.

Who do you admire most in the channel: Ricky Nicol, founder and former CEO of Commsworld.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Albert Einstein who was brilliant at explaining his theories in layman's terms; Nelson Mandela to talk about how to deliver democracy and social justice; and Captain Sir Tom Moore who had a fascinating life.

Industry wish: To simplify business systems by more automation and integration.

Top tip: Be open to all types of sourcing opportunities but make sure you choose the right products and complete proper due diligence.

Act now on Skype end-of-life opportunities

Just a few weeks remain until Microsoft 'retires' Skype for Business (S4B) Online on 31st July. Anyone intent on running after that date will find it unavailable. Not so much 'retired' as 'buried'!

Partners should be eyeing an opportunity here to ensure smooth transitions to another platform, mostly likely Teams. S4B has been coasting for several years with Microsoft adding very few new capabilities in that time and prioritising features for Teams instead.

So shifting across is a logical and essential step, but don't assume that implementing that change will be all plain sailing.

Get it right and it's a win-win all round, enabling partners to position themselves as coming to the rescue; bringing full-blown UC benefits to many for the first time.

But this is coupled with the risk of disrupting their customers' businesses at a time when fully-integrated remote comms has never been more critical.

Three months is still plenty of time but planning now is crucial because no migration is completely effortless.

Microsoft makes S4B/Teams migration sound very easy, but there are many human and technological factors to consider.

First is user adoption. Teams is superior, but it's a very complacent attitude to believe that this superiority will make S4B users enthusiastic about abandoning their familiar tool, particularly at short notice.

Wholehearted adoption is critical for the migration to deliver a good ROI. To ensure this you need a clear communications strategy coupled with an engaging training programme that champions adoption.

What if you aren't moving all users over? S4B Server on-premise doesn't go EOL until 2024/25 and some customers will want this portion of their S4B estate to co-exist with their Teams implementation for a while longer.

But Teams has more functionality than S4B; they aren't like-for-like. Many such



Tamsin Deutrom-Yue

hybrid setups suffer from inconsistencies with IM, calling and presence between migrated and non-migrated users.

The biggest issue is telephony integration. Microsoft's spin says very little about this. In short, customers have the choice between allowing features to overlap (and platforms to coexist) for a period before EOL, or to make a 'big bang' switch, but only the latter applies if you are trying to support Microsoft Direct Routing.

Teams/DR has become enormously popular, but going this route makes it all the more important to ensure you have a fully-fledged migration plan in place because it's literally "big bang or bust".

Other considerations include number porting and complex routing (some carriers are better than others at supporting this), integration with other third-party platforms, and leveraging the migration as part of a wider digital transformation opportunity.

Leaving migrations late risks increasing pressure, rushing important steps and failing to properly manage change with users. Why make unforced errors when you could plan ahead or – better still – let the experts take care of it for you?

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Managing the threats

The hybrid working trend across the UK is as clear as the growing market presence of industry giants, and according to this month's panel of experts channel resellers should be acutely aware that this is the season for them to ensure they are as relevant as ever to end users.

It may be the case that industry giants are a potential threat to channel players, but on the flip side they provide a market stimulus for the services provided by resellers. "The cloud giants are a growing threat, but at the same time they create momentum in the business community which can be harnessed by a switched-on reseller," said Iain Sinnott, Sales Director, Vanilla IP. "The key is adding value, and a lot of value resides in advice. Resellers just promoting the portfolio of the giants make it easy for them to become irrelevant as the buyer becomes more experienced and informed.

"Organisations like Microsoft can already reach directly into any size of organisation so resellers must be adding more, blending applications together to address the customer's challenges and become a constant part of their productivity review. You are selling Productivity as a Service, not telecoms,

not UC, not ICT, you need to be more than that."

The closeness of a reseller's customer relationship is an asset only if it relates to the present time, noted Sinnott. "But if it is based on the telecoms solutions of the past, the IT services of the past, the way things were done in the good old days before 2020, it may be a fragile advantage," added Sinnott. "If your customer is being approached by sales people painting a different picture that introduces them to new concepts such as selling productivity rather than technical tools, that bond starts to look dated. Every current relationship needs reinventing – 2021 is a different time."

Resellers need to sell their value as part of a continuous and evolutionary process, believes Sinnott. "Business communications technology will not stand still in the coming five years and a reseller hired as a guide as well as a supplier will



Iain Sinnott

You are selling Productivity as a Service, not telecoms, not UC, not ICT, you need to be more than that. 2021 is a different time

thrive, whereas resellers that pitch deals, close contracts and then sit back until renewal will be outflanked," he commented.

Decision time

"Resellers face tough choices and need to sit down with their sales and marketing teams to fully understand and plan for a very different marketplace. Sales people need to go to school on a much wider portfolio of applications and better understand the business challenges that technology can overcome for the customer. And marketeers

need to understand those challenges to be effective."

To ensure customer longevity, resellers need to educate customers on the full capability of their solutions, urged Matthew Worboys, Business Development Director for Channel, Gamma. "Especially at a time when businesses are adapting to this new hybrid reality," he said. "Resellers will play a huge role to encourage adoption and deliver the support businesses need. From my experience, resellers have a drive to deliver the best solutions

for their customers, and relationships enable them to open new doors in ways that industry giants can't. Choosing the right suppliers to place their trust in will be key in the coming months."

With the vaccine roll out underway and offices due to reopen in the next few months, the UK will see the rise of a hybrid workforce. This will pose a challenge for businesses that will need to find a way to integrate newly adopted working from home solutions into their business processes, observed Worboys. "In light of this, channel organisations have an opportunity to help customers continue to work collaboratively in this new hybrid set up," he added. "True integration and channel support will be key to this process.

"Having spent 15 years working with resellers in the channel at Gamma, I have seen first hand how reseller businesses understand their customers' needs more than any large corporate ever could or would. This is not to say they should rest on their laurels, but it would be naïve to underestimate the importance of the relationship, especially at a time where most customers demand a more personalised and human experience."

Industry giants such as Microsoft have witnessed huge growth in the past year, but this doesn't necessarily need to pose a threat for the channel, according to Worboys. "It can be a great opportunity for growth," he added. "While industry giants have done a great job of speeding up and normalising change, their

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solutions are not a fit-for-all and ICT resellers will still play a key role in providing the integration and support necessary to meet customers' demands.

"Microsoft's Direct Routing proposition is a clear example of how partners can continue to work and grow in this space. For important aspects like managing numbering and number porting, voice providers will retain the upper hand and continue to deliver the service end users need and require from these solutions."

The overarching theme of 2021 has been rapid and unexpected change, and this reflects the biggest threat to future channel growth – namely the speed at which customer needs and sentiment changes, says Simon Aldous, Global Head of Channels, Dropbox. "The key for the channel is to understand what businesses need, and deliver on that," he stated. "If channel partners are to truly show their worth in the coming year they need to be able to adjust rapidly to changing demands, and getting closer to the customer is the best way to do this."

"Resellers need to be honest with themselves and deeply understand their existing relationships and what



Matthew Worboys

While industry giants have done a great job of speeding up and normalising change, their solutions are not a fit-for-all and ICT resellers will still play a key role.

services they are based on. With the explosion of SaaS and cloud-first, it's much easier for customers to change suppliers. Instead of having to undergo a complete digital overhaul

resellers need to appreciate that their business needs to run differently."

It is clear for all to see that remote and distributed working environments will

thinking about whether their solutions come with the right level of customer service and how they address the needs of the moment."

According to Aldous the last year has shown us that cloud-focused businesses will make the best customers. They are the new target market as they look to streamline their business operations - without the need to uproot their whole digital ecosystem, or in the case of SMBs, hiring an entire IT department. "If channel partners are to show their worth and go from strength to strength they need to move with these changing demands," he said.

Jola CEO Andrew Dickinson urges resellers to focus on areas they know about and where the industry giants do badly, citing quality sales people and account management as a particular

for commodity products so avoid them if you can. "Your competitive advantage must be the whole organisation and the value you add through innovation and service. You cannot possibly scale the business if it relies upon a personal relationship between you and every customer. Furthermore, if you rely on your salespeople in this respect you risk them shopping their black book around your competitors for a job."

A good way to de-commoditise, add value and scale is through portals and software development to make the customer's experience easier and zero-touch, observed Dickinson. "Give them information that helps them manage your products in their business," he added. "Also, development cycles in large organisations are notoriously long. Find a way to constantly innovate and launch new products and product extensions. Or find a supplier that does this for you."

The channel has grown in size and influence every year since the mid '80s because we do things the big companies cannot do

they can simply switch with a click of a button. We are swiftly moving toward a consumption-based model in the channel, rather than the buy-sell world so many are used to and thrived in. With this subscription-focused model in mind,

become the norm. While there is still a place for in-person collaboration, people will want flexibility in their working week which will include more time at home. "This leaves a space for the channel to re-orientate itself towards a service-first approach focusing on customer need and fulfilling specific use cases," observed Aldous. "Partners that don't put this at the centre of their ethos are likely to struggle."

"The prevalence of one-click churn and a market now saturated with N-Sat scores and customer satisfaction metrics means that the partners that can quickly adapt and identify how they can best address their customers' business needs will be those that maintain their relationships. Crucial to this will be constantly

channel strength. "They can't afford to use direct sales below 250 employees because average order values don't cover their contribution to central overhead," he explained. "They will try and sell to this sector off-the-page but this only works

"The channel has grown in size and influence every year since the mid '80s because we do things the big companies cannot do. The smart ones understand this. They embrace the channel as a route to market and don't try to undermine it." ■



Simon Aldous

If channel partners are to show their worth in the coming year they need to adjust rapidly to changing demands.



Andrew Dickinson

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Flick switches Onecom in

The dust had barely settled on Onecom's acquisition of rival Olive when news broke of another major swoop – this time two 9 Group companies – giving the LDC-backed business an immediate and propitious channel presence that CEO Martin Flick rates as his 'biggest opportunity'.

On the back of two transformational acquisitions Flick unveiled a set of objectives and priorities that are as big as the organisation he now leads. The combined £165 million revenue business has circa 600 staff and added 5,000 more customers and 450 indirect partners with the acquisition of 9 Group companies. The Whiteley-based firm serves more than 500,000 business users with comms, connectivity and IT services and according to Flick the 9 deal means the best is yet to come. Here, he provides a step-by-step insight into his thinking, leadership priorities and post-acquisition strategy, and lays out plans to accelerate Onecom's rise as a major force in the channel...



Martin Flick

The biggest item on the agenda in the short-term is the integration of the Olive and Onecom businesses. We are keeping 9 Group as a separate entity under a separate brand

Why did you take the CEO role of the enlarged business?

Olive Communications was already on a journey of growth with an ambitious leadership team. The opportunity to bring that business together with our closest rival, Onecom, and to run the combined organisation was a compelling opportunity. It meant we could continue to develop our strategic vision, combining it with a business with much more scale, a much larger customer base and a new route to market via our 9 Group Partners community.

What have you been appointed to achieve?

I'm here to deliver a combined strategic plan that brings together Olive, Onecom and companies from the 9 Group acquisition – all very ambitious, high quality organisations that put customers at the heart of their proposition. Combined, they represent an opportunity that is far greater than the sum of their parts with clear routes to market that are now both direct and indirect. We are highly focused on delivering our services and solutions to a wide group of customer types and sizes.

We will do that through a large workforce and a set of supportive stakeholders who are committed to delivering unified communications services and technology that deliver real benefits. Flexible, agile and remote working are now much more prevalent than they ever were and that is certain to continue. Organisations are looking to technology companies to continue to drive them on that journey of productivity and efficiency. Onecom can do that through innovation, and with the combined talent pool and the expertise we possess.

What does leadership mean to you?

I see the job of the CEO as being two things. Firstly, it is to execute the strategy as determined by the board, delivering successful and predictable outcomes from that strategy. The second is to work with my leadership team to make sure every single person in our business is motivated to be the best they can, every day, in pursuit of their own personal career development and the success of the company. I'm very people oriented and hands on. I love to get my sleeves rolled

up, and love working with customers and our teams.

What is your first job to address as CEO of the combined group?

The biggest single item on the agenda for us in the short-term is the integration of the Olive and Onecom businesses. We are keeping 9 Group as a separate entity under a separate brand. Stage one of that process is to integrate the management teams. We've brought together two talented and ambitious teams at a senior management level and the first few weeks have been focused on creating an executive leadership team that is fully integrated and working in harmony, with commonly aligned goals and objectives and a shared sense of purpose.

Objective number two is to deliver that sense of purpose down through our respective teams of people and bring them together. People and their expertise are at the centre of our proposition and we need all of our people to be fully aligned with the purpose and vision we have agreed. So far, that process has been successful. I've been warmly welcomed, as have the inbound members of the legacy Olive management team. It feels natural already – the way we operate together, our peer-to-peer accountability and our shared objectives.

nto faster scale-up mode

I've always made it a mission to manage high performing teams, and I can already see that this combined team is more capable and has the potential to be more accomplished than any I've been part of before.

What are your longer-term objectives?

It's going to be about leveraging the ingredients that exist within the combined business to maximum effect. We want to continue to help UK PLC to be competitive in what is going to be a challenging economic period. We are seeing political change through Brexit and the economic impact of Covid is yet to play out fully. For many people the future outlook is uncertain and that fluidity requires agility and flexibility, attributes our services can deliver in abundance.

Our objective is for Onecom to continue to equip our half a million end users and 450 channel partners to overcome the challenges ahead and expand their own customer bases. That means deploying technology that they can grow and flex without being hamstrung by significant up-front investment in infrastructure or hardware, enabling organisations to shift and change shape in line with demands of their own. In uncertain times some people will need to downsize and take cost out to survive, and some will find

opportunity and will need to scale up quickly to meet that opportunity. Our objective is to provide solutions that enable that flexibility securely, cost effectively and quickly.

When did the notion of a deal first come to light?

Darren Ridge and I had known each other for a long time as friendly competitors. We have huge respect for the achievements of each other. Olive was focused on the mid-market, more complex cloud solutions, and Onecom had scale with a large base of diverse customers and strategic partnerships. Bringing the two together was an obvious thing to do. We had been talking about it informally for a long time but as businesses are leaning on digitalisation and transformation, it was the right time to bring our two very capable organisations together and harness the combined strength.

What were the main challenges in the transaction process?

If you'd asked me in April last year whether it would have been possible to bring two businesses of our size and complexity together, and make a third acquisition, all while working remotely in lockdown, I would have said probably not! Organising our respective teams of people – our M&A teams, advisors, consultants and lawyers – while working remotely were challenges but not enough

to stop us completing a landmark transaction.

How are you tackling cultural integration and home working?

All three organisations are well established into the habits of agile working. We've spent the last year saying we don't just want to survive, we want to thrive from all points of view, including productivity, profitability and the mental wellbeing of our teams. The similarities of culture and approach pre-deal have made the post-deal merging of teams effective already, and will no doubt continue. We are planning our response to the easing of restrictions and there will be a return to physical locations, wrapped up in an agile working policy, that of course follows government guidelines but also aids faster integration. Our philosophy is to use what we have all learned during the last year. We'll have a mix of remote working and physical locations, and people will work remotely when that makes sense, and go to the office to collaborate with others.

How will the post-deal transition process take shape?

That's an ongoing piece of work. We've got three businesses of scale so there are some quick and easy wins and there are some things that will take a bit longer. The transition is under

way but will be carefully planned and not rushed, and as mentioned 9 Group will operate as a separate entity under its established brand, but with the benefits of our combined buying power and scale of supply chain.

What is your biggest opportunity?

To expand our channel offering, which gives us a route to market that we didn't previously have. The channel is really important to us, and channel partners have got a crucial part to play in the market. That's why we acquired 9 Partners. We intend to keep that as a separate operating company within the group and empower partners in that community to benefit from our expanded capability and product portfolio but do that in their own way. Channel partners are in close proximity to customer need, often localised, working in their own communities – they've got their finger on the pulse of what businesses need and for us that is a route to market with enormous potential for scale.

If you could transform any area of the comms industry what would it be?

A transformation that expands socio-economic, gender and ethnic diversity. The IT, tech and communications sector have led many trends over the years and we have a responsibility to lead the diversification of talent for future generations. We are seeing great improvements across businesses like ours with a more diverse range of people. I am looking forward to that having a bigger impact, in particular at a senior leadership level. ■

What next for 9? See page 26

Just a minute with Martin Flick...

Role model: Toto Wolff, CEO and Team Principal, Mercedes Formula One team. He has the innate ability to continually succeed year after year and develop his business at a rate that is always faster than those around him.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I have a smallholding where I breed pigs, and I'm a qualified tree surgeon.

What do you fear most? Ill health in anyone I care about.

One example of something you have overcome: Lack of confidence as a child and teenager.

The biggest risk you have taken? Walking away from my investment in Azzurri. But it was a risk that paid off.

If you weren't in comms what would you be doing? Driving fast cars (probably into barriers!).

In hindsight: I would have started my own business earlier in life. I was 31 when I started and if I knew then what know now, I would have kicked it all off five years earlier at least.

Hardest decision you made: Not joining the RAF when I was 15. I was in the air cadets and wanted to be a fighter pilot until I left school at 15 and started working in a sweetshop. I realised I didn't have the aptitude for exams and my early taste for money outstripped my childhood dream.

Your main strength and what could you work on? My strengths are clarity of thought in a crisis, loyalty and empathy. I think I could work on my patience and attention span!

Biggest career achievement: Aside from being Onecom CEO, it's watching people I have worked with grow into successful business leaders in their own right.

Protagonists in profile

MARTIN Flick co-founded Axxent Voice & Data in 1998 which was acquired by Azzurri in 2004. In 2012 he joined Olive and grew the company from a £10 million turnover mobile-only business to a £32 million cloud and telephony organisation with 130 staff. Onecom was founded by Darren Ridge in 2013 and grew to become one of the UK's largest independent business comms providers. With funding from private equity firm LDC in 2019 Onecom kicked off an acquisition strategy. The combination of Onecom and Olive brought together two of Vodafone's most successful partners.



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9 Partners ascends after

It is a given that the spotlight would switch on and scrutiny descend on the whys and wherefores of Onecom's acquisition of 9 Partners. It is also a racing certainty that as Onecom steps forward as a fast expanding £165 million-plus channel player the industry's eyes cannot look the other way, according to 9 Partner Division Managing Director Adam Cathcart.

Onecom's rise as a major force in the channel received a rocket boost with the acquisition of 9 Group early last month. In a single swoop the deal added 450 indirect channel partners as well as 5,000 telephony, hosted voice and on-premise customers via 9 Retail. The acquisition came just weeks after Onecom pocketed close rival Olive Communications and is its fourth transaction since mid-market private equity firm LDC backed the business in July 2019.

Onecom has an established footprint in the enterprise and mid-market space and the 9 acquisition will enable it to drive into the SMB territory at scale. Onecom's acquisition of 9 Group's direct and partner business is a masterstroke for a number of synergistic reasons – and in this context it is worth recalling that in June 2019 Onecom signed a record partner deal with Vodafone and set out plans to become a channel powerhouse. The collaboration aims to deliver more than £100m annual revenue from mobile, fixed line, broadband and IT services.

Furthermore, Onecom intends to triple growth of fixed line services sales over the period and leverage Vodafone's roll out of 5G.



Adam Cathcart

The 9 Partners business will stay as a separate unit and every single member of staff has transferred to Onecom

According to Onecom's research at the time, 64 per cent of SMEs could upgrade to 5G within six months of it becoming available to them. It is logical to think that, in part, Onecom's acquisition of 9 is an early move in the race to provide 5G and other services to receptive SMBs – and an important element of cramming enough growth into the next few years to hit its ambitious multi-million target.

James Palmer, founder and CEO of 9 Group, is performing an advisory role while Cathcart becomes part of Onecom's executive leadership team. Former 9 Group company even Networks and the group's separate IT business are not part of the deal and will remain under their existing ownership. But as Onecom seeks to gain greater visibility and presence as an active force in SME

territory it identified 9 Partner as fitting the bill as a channel-ready route to growth, explained Cathcart.

Channel-ready

"There's not many other channel businesses that fit the spectrum of what Onecom was looking for – a ready-made partner business that it could get behind and scale up," he said. "The attraction was the scalability, the systems, the processes

and the relationships we have with partners. James was looking to sell to a business that wanted to move into the channel, one that not only saw the value in what our partners sell, but also the value in the people and what they do."

The clear reality is that Onecom is not a reseller masquerading as a channel organisation. The essence of the deal is to invest in the channel and support partners, otherwise it makes no sense. As such the 9 branded channel organisation will sustain its independence while broadening its strategic outlook and product portfolio, noted Cathcart.

"We're trading as a separate business unit and it's my job to make sure that the rest of the business understands how the channel works," he added. "The majority of large channel businesses have a direct arm and you could say that they would be coming up against each other quite often. Less so for Onecom because many of its customers are billed by the networks directly. Onecom made an investment to drive a partner channel. They see it as being something that we can strategically move forward and become a leading partner or channel player in the market based on the

Onecom deal

relationships that Onecom has with suppliers. The group wants to make something special in the channel."

The deal moves Onecom's product mix of mobile and non-mobile communications solutions to a broadly 50/50 split which includes a full range of broadband and data connectivity, cloud telephony, contact centre and collaboration services to complement its mobile heritage. An important element of the strategy is to harness the potency of Onecom's Vodafone relationship to

Not just as a traditional service provider model but also as a dealer model."

Winning formula

Onecom's acquisition formula for expansion in SME territory would have raised many eyebrows – and for partners the acquisition has proved a welcome eye opener, says Cathcart. "We're not planning any changes across the park," he said. "Onecom bought the partner business for the knowledge and expertise within the division. The 9 Partner Division will stay as a separate unit and every single member

take to the partner channel. This has opened the door to many kinds of supply discussions as we assess new opportunities, product roadmaps and how they relate to the channel."

The acquisition opens up other opportunities with potential for a combined 5G and full fibre proposition that all agree will provide a competitive edge as Onecom can leverage relationships with Vodafone and 9 partner CityFibre. "This is in addition to significant mobile upgrade opportunities and offerings that we can put through the channel," added Cathcart.

He also noted that the acquisition was completed at the right time to make the biggest impact, especially with 2025 on the horizon. "Exchanges are already being switched off and the fact that we have a strategy and are helping partners through the transition is key," he added. "Any later down the line would have made this more challenging."

The majority of 9's partners are sub-£3 million turnover businesses and what excites Cathcart most is helping them progress to many more millions. "We have referenceability from partners that have already taken that journey with us," he commented. "And with more investment in the partner channel and our capabilities this is the route we're going down. In my first meeting with Onecom CEO Martin Flick and founders Aaron Brown and Darren Ridge they asked what I need to take this forward. They were incredibly supportive. That is the direction and commitment I have from the leadership team." ■

There is a strategic review of the product portfolio, the relationships we have and how we can evolve the solutions we take to partners

enhance the propositions available to 9's partners.

There is a significant crossover with Onecom and 9's Partner Division as they share 12 key suppliers, which Cathcart says is a benefit to partners. "This enables us to get better deals due to the fact of our scale and then pushing the benefits through the channel," he explained. "It makes us more strategic in the deals that we do and enables us to come out to the channel with something different.

"For example, Onecom is renowned for its mobile background and has a strong relationship with Vodafone. We can enhance that relationship through our channel partners with new services such as 5G, the IoT and improving connectivity.

of staff has transferred to Onecom. We will maintain the same support, the same nurturing of partners, the same relationship and interaction with partners – and we'll support them with new propositions."

Onecom is now a £165 million player which creates significant opportunities and partners are excited about the prospects ahead, noted Cathcart. "Some partners may have been questioning whether they had outgrown 9, but we are now a major player," he commented. "We are already seeing new partners contact us with an appetite to work with Onecom in the channel. There's a strategic review of the product portfolio, the relationships we have and how we can evolve the products and solutions we

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As the UK lockdown eases we are waking up to the fact that remote working is here to stay, and businesses are looking for ways to fix some of the connectivity challenges still presented by remote working – and they are thinking longer-term when it comes to investing in communications technology. From transforming the experience of home workers, to enabling teams to collaborate and connect remotely with their customers, and to understanding the potential of upcoming 5G networks, no-one is better positioned to help these

The demand for better connectivity and hybrid working precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic presents some incredible opportunities for channel partners to seize. By adding cellular connectivity solutions into your portfolio with Cloudcell EQ you can help customers overcome poor broadband challenges, supporting them to make vital the digital step-changes needed to thrive and prosper in the post-pandemic world.

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customers while securing new revenue than comms resellers with cellular in their portfolio.

According to some of the latest research, fixing home broadband remains one of the major challenges with more than 40 per cent of businesses reporting problems with staff working from home caused by poor connectivity. Additionally, over 60 per cent of these businesses said they are ready to invest in technology to get their teams secure, reliable, businesses-grade connectivity at home.

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MBO boosts security play

An LDC-backed MBO at Bucks-based Phoenix Datacom in February put the security firm on the road to portfolio expansion and opens up the potential for acquisitions. Here, Managing Director John Carson lays out a strategic plan that reflects a market in growing need of cyber security solutions.

The MBO saw former UK President of BT Global Services and CEO of Alternative Networks Mark Quartermaine join as Non-Executive Chairman and the appointment is a clear sign of intent. "We are targeting double digit revenue growth and looking to complete strategic acquisitions," said Carson. "With the support of our investment partner LDC we can scale up at pace. We're seeing a high demand from organisations wanting cutting edge technology to scale their networks and protect against cyber threats. With LDC's support we will be able to maximise this opportunity to scale and enhance our product and service offering. The next five years will be exciting."



John Carson

Phoenix Datacom was formed in 1984 by Ian Farr and focused initially on the fast growing datacoms market testing kilostream and megastream circuits. The business now specialises in network security and offers a suite of hardware and software products and serves blue chip clients including financial institutions, network operators, media businesses, broadcasters and the public sector. "We play a key role in helping organisations to build, validate and optimise their networks and secure their most critical information," commented Carson.

We're seeing a high demand from organisations wanting to ensure they have cutting edge technology to scale their networks and protect against cyber threats

Over the past three years Phoenix Datacom's revenue has increased by 48 per cent to more than £20 million in the financial year ending March 2020. "In line with the growing pace of digital transformation we have expanded our portfolio to include a cloud SaaS offering which supports the performance monitoring and security of hybrid/ cloud infrastructures,"

added Carson. "It has been a growth driver for us and we've adapted our model to ensure we're evolving with the pace of change."

Strategic plan

Carson also plans to expand the sales team, build Phoenix Datacom's hosted Lab as a Service (LaaS) business and he wants to provide more network and security services to customers. He

says the recent Solarwinds Sunburst and Microsoft Exchange attacks show that cyber security has to be taken even more seriously if data and networks are to be sufficiently safe and resilient. "We see deception technologies which provide earlier detection of adversaries in customer networks, secure web browsing and managing information/data flows to

and from the cloud (CASB) as key growth areas," he added. "In addition, testing and monitoring security posture – sometimes referred to as breach and attack simulation – is a growing customer need. We also think that Zero Trust Network Access (ZTNA) could be a large accessible market."

Against this evolving backdrop the company



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...er at key time

operates in four areas: Visibility solutions for cloud and on-premise networks and large network infrastructure products, application and network performance monitoring, defence in-depth cyber security and network validation and testing. "Over the next few years we see our main growth areas in high speed leaf and spine routed networks, optical switching, security and high speed network testing," said Carson. "We have an experienced team of technical people and that gives us

and the market in general as more comprehensive security solutions will be required by organisations."

Carson graduated with a degree in Electronic and Electrical Engineering at UCL in 1983 and during his studies focused on high speed communications and fibre optics, an area that has always interested him. So much so that he began his career at GEC and moved to Anritsu, working in the European sales team and eventually becoming General

Even with lockdown measures lifting it's likely remote working is here to stay

the ability to spot these new market opportunities and act fast to give us a first mover advantage."

This fleet footed approach to embracing new market opportunities can be traced back through the company's history, with two notable developments in particular cited by Carson: The arrival of Ethernet technology and securing exclusive distribution rights for Network General Sniffer Ethernet protocol analysis. "Both turbocharged our growth in the nineties," said Carson. "Now, the growth of home working as a result of the pandemic has sparked a similar noise in the market. With companies worldwide working remotely we've seen an increase in highly sophisticated cyber attacks.

"Even with lockdown measures lifting it's likely remote working is here to stay in some shape or form, which provides a real opportunity for us

Manager. This led Carson to Phoenix Datacom where he has been Managing Director for 21 years. "I have driven our presence in the market considerably during that time," he said. "We successfully navigated the dotcom bust, the 2008 financial crisis, the pandemic and completed a MBO during Covid-19. Now, the MBO enables Phoenix Datacom to expand its service offering and identify acquisitions.

"We are also fortunate enough to have longstanding customer relationships which have evolved and driven the success of the business. VARs must also evolve into highly competent trusted advisors that provide fully supported solutions with a combination of vendor products while providing first class responsive local support. The latter has become even more important due to international travel limitations associated with the pandemic and we expect this to be even more prolific moving forward." ■

Just a minute with John Carson...

Role models? Steve Jobs for his innovation, Agilent Technologies CEO Ned Barnholt for his clarity of vision, and Bill Gates for the proportion of his wealth he has donated to good causes.

What talent do you wish you had? To sing! And to predict the future accurately. I should have bought those bitcoins!

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I am a fan of 1970s Triumph cars.

The biggest risk you have taken? Investing in Phoenix Datacom at the height of the dotcom bust, one of the worst industry-specific recessions ever.

Your main strength and what could you work on?

My greatest strength is my natural clarity and understanding of what has to be done to meet customer needs. I could definitely work on delegation.

Industry wish? Increasing the efficiency and energy utilisation of data centres.

If you weren't in IT what would you be doing? I'd be an architect or airline pilot.

How do you relax? Playing tennis, repairing my 1977 Triumph Stag and travelling.

Your biggest opportunities: High speed routing solutions, optical switching and zero trust network access (ZTNA).

Industry wish: To simplify business systems by more automation and integration.

Best piece of advice you have been given: Establish a commitment culture, where people invariably do what they say they will do.

What could you not do without in your job? Technical experience.

Top tip: Make yourself unique by building expertise, combining solutions, and adding complimentary services.

Energy provision is the key to new orders for Rubix VT

ADDING unified utility solutions to its expanding list of customer services has opened new doors for hosted telephony, mobile and broadband specialist, Rubix VT.

By teaming up with Fidelity Energy, the Brighton-based company has boosted new business across its portfolio, as Managing Director Nick Poyner explained.

"Business energy and gas, whilst being a new offering from Rubix VT, has enabled us to engage with clients that we may not have been able to onboard in the past and has allowed us to promote the rest of our portfolio," he said.

Fidelity Energy's seamless customer on-boarding processes and clear pricing were key factors in Poyner's decision to strike up a partnership.

"During early conversations what made this attractive was the simplicity of the Fidelity Energy portal, the clear pricing and the ability to onboard both current and new clients quickly and easily.

"I saw synergies between the two businesses that are both transparent and jargon free in their language and offering."

This came to the fore when talking through the processes involved in helping customers transfer their energy supplier.

"From our first video conference and training session that Zack Wootton and Ryan Gilmour presented, I felt very

comfortable and assured that our clients would receive a great all-round experience."

Under the guidance and leadership of Poyner, Rubix VT currently serves businesses in Sussex, Surrey, Kent, Hampshire and London, helping small and large businesses, as well as call centres, to maximise their available resources and to optimise their working day capacity.

"We have a raft of tailored solutions at our fingertips, and we now deliver a complete range of commercial telecoms services to exceptional standards," stressed Poyner.

"We offer impartial and independent advice, system set up and integration, plus customer support on a complete range of business broadband connectivity, hosted VoIP solutions, on-premises phone systems and CCTV, through to mobile communications. And of course, energy now fits seamlessly within our existing product set."

When asked what he would say to other companies considering integrating energy into their portfolio, Poyner added: "Energy was new to us and a very different addition to our portfolio. It something that we have not offered before, so it made it an easy decision to engage.

"I'd highly recommend other businesses who are thinking about adding utilities to their portfolio to speak to Zack and Ryan at Fidelity Energy."



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INCA Chair aims to accel

CityFibre’s Director of Regulatory Affairs Alex Blowers has spent the last 30 years working on telecoms policy and regulation and in January this year he was appointed Chair of the Independent Networks Cooperative Association (INCA). With his INCA hat firmly on his head, Blowers explains how the industry body plans to influence policy with Government and Ofcom in the context of the Government’s ambitious targets for national coverage of gigabit-capable networks.

The common thread throughout my career is basically the title of the Duopoly Review White Paper of 1991 – ‘Competition & Choice’. Telecoms is a hugely important sector, not just in its own right but for the health and wellbeing of the wider economy and society. A service-based economy needs world class digital infrastructure. And as individual consumers and citizens, more than ever we need reliable, unconstrained connectivity to fully participate in the economy and society.

I’ve always been clear that the best way to secure that outcome is through a competitive market. Both economy theory and bitter experience tells us that relying on the incumbent to do all the heavy lifting is a guarantee that we, as a society, will be slow to invest and innovate. Specifically, as we all now recognise, we are playing catch-up on the deployment of full fibre technology. Having started earlier than everyone else on the path to liberalisation back in the 90s, our poor performance in rolling out full fibre can only be described as a policy and a market failure.



Alex Blowers

Having started earlier than everyone else on the path to liberalisation in the ‘90s, our poor performance in rolling out full fibre can only be described as a policy and a market failure

Right now, alternative fibre builders are the tip of the spear when it comes to driving investment and competition. It is the alternative full fibre builders

who have challenged the complacency of the incumbents and forced them to respond with their own network investment plans. INCA’s membership

has stepped up and raised enormous amounts of money in a short space of time to make what are genuinely transformative investments. I want to be

as closely involved as I can be as this plays out, hence my delight to be offered the chance to Chair INCA.

Networking
INCA was founded in 2009 to bring together operators, suppliers, community organisations, local authorities and others who were keen to see the development of new broadband services based on full fibre and wireless services. In other words, networks not dependent on the existing copper phone network. It was created by a small team associated with the Community Broadband Network led by Malcolm Corbett. INCA now has more than 160 organisations in membership from across the value chain.

The fundamental story is that the UK is now playing catch-up. The Government’s targets are hugely ambitious, but it is right to set a stretch-target to get as much of the country fibred up as fast as is humanly possible. But the public debate continues to be dominated by a ‘will they, won’t they’ dialogue around Openreach’s plans. Ofcom’s current market review rightly recognises that investors need some





Accelerate full fibre agenda

degree of certainty about the regulatory treatment of their investments. Obviously we need BT to play a role, but the most important thing for Ofcom to get right is a regulatory level playing field that allows the altnets – who are ready, willing and able to commit their capital without any special favours from Ofcom or the Government – to get on with their ambitious plans. If we can make the market genuinely competitive, achieving the Government's targets will be a heck of a lot easier than if we are solely reliant on BT.

Altnets are currently being under valued and their importance to the overall policy objectives of Government and Ofcom not given as much weight and priority as they should. Having spent time in both the Government and Ofcom, I want to see if we can find a way to address this. It is basically about proselytising the scale of the inbound investments and why only a competitive market will deliver what the Government wants to achieve. It helps that this is all the stuff that I passionately believe in!

Collaboration

Encouraging closer collaboration between the altnets themselves is key. Generally speaking, the altnets are not competing directly with each other, so we are able to collaborate pretty freely. I think for example that there is scope to work much more closely on common approaches to wholesaling our networks to ISPs. And we can all learn from each other as we address the range of gnarly problems created by what is collectively a massive national civil engineering programme.

Also key is securing a supportive framework from Government. There are two big things here: Making sure that the Government spends the money it has set aside to fund rural full fibre deployments in a way that gets maximum 'bang for its buck'. No surprises that my view is that this will be achieved by making the awards process as open to altnet participation as possible.

We also need to bust barriers. What will slow us down is unjustified impediments to building at speed. The

members. Particularly in its treatment of altnet competition in rural areas it highlighted concerns that Ofcom still seems to see the altnets' role as being just enough of a threat to goad Openreach into responding with its own investment plans. That's fundamentally wrong, in my opinion.

Competition

The goal should be to pave the way to a genuinely competitive market throughout the whole country, not just urban areas. Without that competition in all parts of the market

executive team and pool of specialist contractors on a shared cost basis.

We aim to foster a common understanding of the sector's role and potential in meeting Government objectives in a way that makes a strength of the sector's diversity, operators' ability to respond effectively to local needs, plus of course the altnets' impressive track record in attracting more than £8 billion of new investment in a very short space of time.

When we look beyond the immediate challenges

best in class. When someone gets a marketing message that an FTTC product is 'the ultimate fibre broadband' it's understandable that they will be sceptical about claims that full fibre will be 'beyond ultimate'. There is a huge effort required to increase awareness of the differences between full and part-fibre products and the superiority of the former. INCA has made a start on this with its kitemarking initiative, but for me this is something that Ofcom in particular needs to get to grips with.

One other issue that we need to be aware of, even if it some way in the future, is eventual industry consolidation. I don't want to set any hares running, but it seems to me an obvious and probably a necessary development in the medium term. When the cable industry went through its consolidation phase in the late 1990s it suffered from the absence of collaboration beforehand which created huge practical problems with consolidation of different networks and systems. I think INCA can be a useful forum to collaborate, not just because this is a good thing in its own right, but because it may increase our collective value proposition if consolidation does take place.

INCA's key priority for the next period is to support the independent operators – the altnets – as they scale up to meet the challenges of delivering gigabit capable, full fibre networks throughout the UK, playing a full role in the government's ambitious agenda. That includes working hard to ensure Government policy and Ofcom regulation recognise the vital role of the sector. ■

We can all learn from each other as we address the range of gnarly problems created by what is collectively a massive national civil engineering programme

Government is consulting on reform of the rules on obtaining access to buildings to connect them to full fibre – this for me is a huge issue. More generally, we need to work in partnership with Government and other key stakeholders to make the positive case for this huge infrastructure upgrade. There is still a large amount of confusion about what full fibre is, and why we need it.

INCA can exert a greater influence on Government and Ofcom by speaking with one voice wherever we can, and we need to emphasise the scale of the investments now on the table. I'm optimistic that the Government gets this. I still think we have some work to do with Ofcom.

The recent publication of Ofcom's market review disappointed many INCA

including more challenging rural areas, there is a risk that deployment is delayed and the Government's targets are undermined.

The key for a body like INCA is to remain relevant to the membership. We can provide a unified voice in policy and regulatory debates that presents a collective view as opposed to a myriad of 'special interests'. INCA can also do a lot of the donkey work on topics that are not a top priority for smaller, growing organisations, but will become very important.

For instance, INCA's work with the OTA and industry planners on GPL Switching. Another example is the development of industry standards for full fibre and fixed wireless networks. These activities need to be clearly member-led, supported by a dedicated

– Ofcom's market review, the Government rural programme, barrier busting – I see an important goal as being to drive take-up and adoption of the full fibre networks we are building. There is a lot of stakeholder and consumer confusion, and this is not helped by the Government adopting 'gigabit capable networks' language in its own target. Let's be clear about this: For all practical purposes, the achievement of its target will be via the building out of full fibre networks, for the very good reason that full fibre networks are the gold standard for a modern digital communications platform.

It's also a long-standing concern of mine that a lot of consumers already think they have the gold standard, because they have been told that part-fibre products are

The player that went into

By anyone's account, Christian Bleakley's spell as a semi-professional rugby league player, who was also unbeaten as an amateur boxer and later beat cancer, tells of a man intent on winning – and as Firstcom Europe Chief Executive the same determination to succeed applies in spades.

Firstcom Europe has grown from annual revenues of £2.5 million in 2013 to £31 million in 2020 and now has 13 offices, 190-plus staff and more than 14,000 customers. "We expect to reach £35 million this year," said Bleakley. "Expansion has mainly been driven by acquisitions with some organic growth through the conversion of on-premises PBXs to cloud-based unified comms. For the foreseeable future this is how we will continue to grow. Our biggest opportunity is to win in the SME market as the ISDN switch-off approaches."

Bleakley is ramping up his conversion strategy and plans to work with more reseller partners as the market shifts to the cloud. "We will strengthen our positions in the UK, Germany and Scandinavia which has been made possible by the investment placed with us by Kartesia," he added. "We have a good story to tell so brand promotion is one of our key priorities as we sharpen our focus on cloud migration and enhancing our product to be more suitable for home workers."

Bleakley pays particular attention to Scandinavian companies as a signpost to help forecast the future of other markets, as they tend to be more developed. "The growth of collaboration,



Christian Bleakley

Our biggest opportunity is to win in the SME market as the ISDN switch-off approaches

the role of mobile and the need for remote working are three of key trends we are keeping an eye on," added Bleakley. "This will impact all parts of the channel, but for us this means that we need to develop products and features that are ready for these developments. The conversion of our customers

from on-premises to cloud has become a major focus and Universe, our unified comms platform, has been developed in-house in Denmark to offer a wider range of services."

Firstcom Europe started life in 2004 with the belief that there would be a shift

toward IP-based telephony and communications in the future. It was early days for VoIP, SIP and even broadband. "Our thinking developed and we saw opportunities in cloud-based unified communications," explained Bleakley. "In 2013 Firstcom in Denmark was purchased. It had been

operating a unified comms platform since 2005. In 2014 and 2016 we purchased two German companies, Teleforte and Citec. Telesis in the UK was purchased in 2018.

Investment

"This expansion was only possible as a result of the investments made by Oakfield Capital Partners and Beechbrook Capital. We also secured funding from Kartesia during 2020. Each of these events were turning points for the company. We have become more integrated over the past two years as a group, both in terms of branding and the way our country operations work together. Our ownership structure has become simpler and we have restructured our workforce."

Firstcom Europe acquired Telesis in December 2018. The company was established in 2008 by Bleakley and was significantly boosted by its transformational acquisition of Digital Telecom Airtime in 2018. The rationale behind Telesis' acquisition of the Bolton-based comms provider was that the market is moving more towards subscription-based cloud services such as hosted PABX and SIP channels and that by joining forces the service proposition would be expanded and enhanced.

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International

communication solutions to the business market in five European countries – the UK, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Poland. “Our target market is the SME sector to whom we provide cloud-based unified comms products and other services that allow customers to communicate by the device of their choice – mobile, computer or fixed line,” said Bleakley. “The product allows communication via voice, video, screen sharing or messaging.

“We also have to be mindful of the impact of 5G and the love affair we all have with mobile phones. Therefore I expect unified comms to be increasingly driven by mobile devices. New ways of collaborating will develop which will make remote working more convenient and productive.

“We are always looking for opportunities in this area. Our industry is in an exciting period. The nature and location of work is being transformed, the way that people communicate is changing, and new products are being developed that will alter our lives forever.

“Therefore my advice to resellers is to become the one-stop-shop for customers. At one time it was possible to be the telecoms company, the internal comms provider or the computer supply company. Those days are long gone. So make sure you are able to provide solutions right across the telecoms, internal comms and hardware supply space. Become the reliable partner who sells solutions, not commodities, and who listens to their customers. This is how I see the market evolving.” ■

Just a minute with Christian Bleakley...

Role models: My parents. They taught me to work harder than anyone else.

What talent do you wish you had? To speak multiple languages.

What was your first job in comms? At Britannia Communications as a telesales executive. I then developed a maintenance subscription model and a sales plan. Eight years later I became Operations Director.

What do you fear most? Running out of time. Life is short.

Best piece of advice you have been given: Don't be the smartest person in the room, be the hardest working.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing? A role in sport: Coaching or running a network of gyms.

Your main strength and what could you work on? I am determined and read people well, but tend to be over critical of myself and could be more patient at times.

One example of something you have overcome: Beating cancer.

Biggest career achievement: To raise funds in a pandemic, restructure the company ownership and organisation, increase EBITDA and employ extra staff.

The hardest decision you made last year: Furloughing staff during the pandemic.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Muhammad Ali, Robert De Niro, Princess Diana.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I played semi-professional rugby league and was unbeaten as an amateur boxer.

Top tip for resellers: Have a plan, constantly review it, believe in yourself, go for it.

Viscito turns up the volume as PortaOne beats channel drum

In January this year PortaOne recruited Enzo Viscito as Managing Director of its UCaaS division with a remit to ‘empower’ the channel to purchase or rent their own softswitch and billing solution, dictate their own pricing and control their own integrations. Viscito's previous roles include leadership positions at Inclarity Communications, Nice Systems and Avaya.

“When I saw the technical capabilities and commercial model of PortaOne I realised there was a gap in the market for a UCaaS vendor that could really shake things up,” he commented. “I grasped the opportunity to introduce PortaOne to the UK channel. This is a young, agile company that has been flying under the radar.”

Viscito noted that PortaOne's engineering focus has made it a household name in the technical entrepreneurial communities, and that the time is right to turn up the volume on the company's hosted PBX solution and make the message loud and clear. “My current priorities are to create a new go-to-market model, and to increase brand awareness,” he added.

PortaOne was founded in 2001 by former Telenor colleagues who decided to create a VoIP platform based on perpetual licences, giving their customers unlimited capacity in terms of subscribers or calls,



Enzo Viscito

and providing access to all features and modules. An operator using in-house resources can do integrations with third party applications or customisations through API, and the source code is supplied as a manifestation of an ‘open and fair’ policy toward customers. The company now has over 250 employees and services customers in 90 countries.

Proposition

“Our proposition is a fully integrated cloud PBX and billing platform, managed through one portal,” explained Viscito. “Our target markets are ISPs, MVNOs, VARs, SIs, telcos and service providers. They need a resilient programmable voice platform where they can rapidly create vertical niche solutions to convert the value, added to a specific customer segment, into profit.

“They need workflow automation and auto provisioning to reduce human-related operating costs. They need gradual software updates to maintain their position in the market

while keeping end users satisfied. The market demands a one-stop-shop experience with a long-term technology partner.”

PortaOne also offers an iPaaS where CSPs can pick VAS modules (such as CRM, MS Teams, WebRTC and video conferencing) from a marketplace and add that service to their portfolio in a few clicks. “This is our biggest opportunity to grow PortaOne UCaaS sales globally,” added Viscito. ■

Just a minute with Enzo Viscito...

Role model: Richard Branson. He proved that by hiring the best people and building the right teams you can achieve anything.

What talent do you wish you had? To play the piano.

What do you fear most? Failure.

Biggest career achievement: Taking a company that was losing huge amounts of revenue per month and turning it around to making a substantial profit.

If you weren't in the ICT industry what would you be doing? Ideally a DJ on the global circuit.

Your main strength and what could you work on? I believe in myself, have boundless energy and a glass half-full mentality. But I am still working on getting my work-life balance right.

Industry wish: Strengthen the power of Ofcom to deal with the vast number of rogue traders in the industry, and to create a level playing field for all.

Hybrid working puts tele



"As part of our commitment to our partners, we have introduced a range of digital initiatives which aim to adapt to the changing demands around customer experience. We've created support videos which partners can share with their customers, following an increased demand for digital media. Traditional face-to-face workshops have been digitalised and the uptake has been phenomenal. We also observed a reduction in inbound calls and an increase in cases raised through our support portals. We have responded by introducing portal enhancements, which aim to make this experience even easier. Our teams are equipped to adapt and respond, based on changing demands. We hold open conversations with partners, so that we can clearly understand their current priorities and serve their needs, in order to help them achieve their goals. By having a considered and customer centric digital strategy, which looks beyond lockdown, Partners can be prepared for whatever comes next."

VICKIE COWPERTHWAIT
9 GROUP



"We're building an e-commerce site for purchasing additional lines, hardware and Office 365 licenses, alongside a broadband checker to inform prospects of their available options and reduce time to sale. Once sales are placed online, we leverage RPA (Robotic Process Automation) to order, add to systems, send updates and organise billing, which significantly reduces administrative overheads and the risk of incorrect data entry. Our self-service portal supplies real-time network analytics and reporting to end-users as well as the ability to raise tickets for faults. And when updates are available, we can automatically inform customers via text and email, which is saving a considerable amount of time and stress. Though an automation platform isn't enough, you need to optimise its capabilities too. That's why we're leveraging our aggressive acquisition strategy to bring the right people into BDR with the expertise to elevate our services to the next level."

PAUL MCCAFFERTY
BDR

There was a time when comms resellers would sell organisations a telephone system, add in a maintenance plan, put the whole deal on a lease and simply react to any requests for moves and changes. Customer service amounted to a phone call every now and then.

How things have changed, thankfully for the better. Tech integration and the march to digital has created a new breed of resellers and a much closer, almost personal, relationship between clients and their ICT providers. Their 'trusted advisor' status means resellers become intertwined and crucial to the successful functioning of an organisation, its staff and the technology it uses every day.

The need to provide a holistic Customer Experience – now known as CX – has become a fundamental component of a reseller's armoury and has been intensified as the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent work from home directives have transformed living rooms into makeshift offices, classrooms, and gyms.

The return to workplaces will be slow and, as TalkTalk Business learned from its research into the impact of the virus on hybrid working, more than half of 739 business surveyed said they are thinking about downsizing their main place of work in response to the rise of homeworking, which increases to 61% amongst



"At Charterhouse, we believe delivering an exceptional digital customer experience is the currency of modern business. Over the last year hosting virtual meetings, roundtable events and conferences became a necessity. We approached the challenges this posed by training our business development team on how to maximise the effectiveness of the virtual medium. At the core was ensuring the team interacted in an appropriate, friendly and engaging manner. Delivering an enhanced, improved digital customer experience to our customers is incredibly important to us, which is why we've just launched our new Charterhouse Service Portal as a gateway to our business, offering more effective and seamless interaction. As we look to the future of office working, we prepare for our workforce to utilise our buildings in a safe and flexible manner, ensuring the right secure collaboration technology is available for meetings so that employees can seamlessly engage from any location."

RICHARD BETTS
CHARTERHOUSE GROUP



"Customer experience, already digitalising pre-COVID, underwent a massive acceleration towards omni-channel and intelligent automation last year. Pressure came from both sides, with staff sent home or furloughed, just as customers appeared en masse, demanding service. Now, almost any organisation is expected to offer a consistent customer experience online, on app, on social and on the phone. A great experience has to be personalised, fast, easy and secure. Otherwise, consumers will go elsewhere, probably never to return. Fortunately for businesses, the democratising effects of cloud mean almost any organisation can now provide this world-class service and deliver a more enjoyable and flexible workplace for its own staff as well. Best of all, and whisper this, it is probably cheaper than how they were doing it before. So, in short, an omni-channel digital customer experience, delivered via friendly technology sourced from a knowledgeable cloud-based provider, is the key to competitive differentiation."

ED WINFIELD
CONTENT GURU



"Customer experience is of the upmost importance, so much so that we have identified this as a key goal for 2021 and beyond. Our customer experience strategy is essential in ensuring our customers are prepared for the different challenges that businesses are facing because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this shouldn't stop them from reaching their goals. It's crucial that we help our customers to react quickly to the changing market and to do this, we've ensured we have the right structure and people in place internally. We've adopted a digital strategy that provides customers with a supportive partnership as, despite being digital, customers still want traditional contact. It is becoming increasingly important for both new and existing customers to know they're partnering with the right supplier who is willing to invest in their business by providing the right customer experience that meets their changing needs."

DUNCAN WARD
ENREACH



"The fundamental question we asked ourselves was: 'can our customers contact us using the method of their choice?' Hybrid working and a boom in e-commerce has totally changed the service landscape. We recognised that we needed to embrace digitalisation to not only support 'hybrid working' for our teams but to also deliver a new 'hybrid CX' solution for our customers. Our systems needed to be seamless, effortless and immediate with self-serve options wherever possible. At the same time, we could not afford to leave behind our more traditional customers who value an interpersonal experience and the sound of a human voice. WebRTC for remote onboarding and open API's for application integration have been invaluable in delivering our digital CX and customer success strategies. However, the real key has been in truly understanding our customers and helping them to effectively deliver efficiencies and their business goals."

DAVID WARDELL
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Voice Calling



Screen Sharing



Video Conferencing



Attachments

ecomms in the CX fast lane

businesses with more than 20 employees (see hybrid working Round Table report on pages 14,15,16).

According to Jordi Ferrer, Vice President and General Manager UK&I at workflow specialist Servicenow, telecommunications providers have become the "backbone of our new normal" and must transform operations and remove friction points to deliver seamless work experiences as transmission loads and reliance on networks skyrocket.

"By applying intelligence to everyday processes—prioritising, categorising, routing workflows, and predicting anomalies — employees get more work done more easily. Data can be quickly and accurately correlated to identify common errors. Remediations can be predicted, freeing up employees to personalise the customer experience.

Ferrer argues that happy customers mean greater retention and, ideally, a greater adoption of new products and services.

"For SME customers, getting services right lays the foundation for long-term profitable relationships as those businesses continue to grow and place greater demand on telecom infrastructure and services," he added.



NIKI FOOTE
FIDELITY GROUP

"We found that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the need for our digital strategy to be taken to new levels. We have spent the past nine months working behind the scenes on our website to enhance the user experience. We implemented live chat as it became relevant to enhance our response times to customer queries. It has been encouraging to see a lot more engagement via our website from our customers, new and old. We have been building stronger digital connections with our customers, which ties in nicely with our mantra: creators, communicators, and connectors. In employing a third-party digital agency, they have implemented Pay-Per-Click, SEO and display adverts, which has led to new digital leads for our team. The way we communicate has never been more digital, which has led to our team members upskilling for the new digital workplace."



ANDREW ROBINSON
GAMMA

"We have always placed great importance on delivering a digital customer experience. This is defined through embracing a digital approach in the way we support our partners and customers, from offering multi-media options to communicate with our support and customer services teams, to extensive elearning facilities, but critically focusing on delivering products and services that evolve with the channel and user behaviour. Our new cloud-based omnichannel contact centre solution Horizon Contact is a clear example of our expertise in CX and evolving customer demands. It creates a real opportunity for partners to deliver the right solution for their customers to overcome the next wave of CX challenges. Furthermore, our single line replacement solution, Phoneline+, will offer new ways for the micro market to take a digital-first approach for themselves and their customers, in addition to or totally replacing their traditional analogue phone systems in that drive towards the 2025 switch-off date."



CHRIS MORRISSEY
LILY COMMS

"At Lily, we've always proudly called ourselves 'The Home of Digital Transformation'. We believe that adopting the latest digital technologies can deliver benefits for businesses based around our four goals of revenue, profit, cash and efficiency. We've seen major efficiencies in the last 12 months in delivering meetings remotely, which have reduced time and physical travel costs, helping to improve our bottom line. We believe the adoption of video conferencing, live chat and working anywhere is here to stay, and our teams are fully prepared to deliver the same level of customer experience whether it is digital or face-to-face. The resellers' biggest decision now is which platforms to support as the race for increase in market share is now clearly on. Digital customer experience is just customer experience; it shouldn't be defined by the technology you use to deliver it. This is, after all, the new normal now."



MICHELE ANWAR
QCONTACT

"As a remote first company we have had to have a digital strategy from the start, so we really understand some of the challenges facing businesses right now. It's important to deliver a strong digital experience to your customers and that often comes with a lot of trial and error to find out what works and what doesn't. But as a result, we now have the correct tools in place to ensure we deliver the best possible digital experience to our both our channel customers and our direct customers. Customer Experience will be the most important area to focus on with customers getting increasingly frustrated with the pandemic being used as an excuse for unsatisfactory service. Companies need to address this by delivering ongoing digital training to all employees with a big focus on overall customer experience. Any products that can help support this are a big win."



PAUL TAYLOR
VOICEFLEX

"Covid has been a learning curve across all market sectors. It has amazed me how quickly we have adapted our lives to new working environments. How would we achieve a level of communication without MS Teams or Zoom? Does the technology need to radically change, or has the technology always been there but never utilised to the full extent? UC&C has been available for years, yet there has never been a need to use it. The footprint moving forward will be UC&C and connectivity, and companies that delivers the total experience will win. Organisations will be spending more money per head on total work experience as there will be huge savings in rent alone. Applications that enhance the UC experience and support staff welfare will have the ear of HR. Underpinning it all is connectivity and UC, which as a channel we are more than capable of delivering."



BARRY WARD
WAVENET

"Customer experience is front and centre of the changing business landscape. Digital processes, automation, integration and emerging AI technologies all need to be considered when looking at customer interaction. Resellers need to ensure the ease of transaction and make themselves easy to do business with. Streamlining processes to deliver enhanced automation and experiences is key. Resellers not only need to deliver fast, responsive processes and service delivery, but also choose vendor partners who can offer both the technology and the integration. Wavenet has been investing heavily in development teams and business analysts to ensure process, services and delivery are all synchronised with long-term strategic goals. This ensures Wavenet can offer the channel an outstanding experience alongside market-leading technologies, as well as delivering increased agility and adoption to the changing markets and business environments."

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Reasons to be holistic

Digital marketing strategies can be a minefield unless all online activities are linked to create a single scalable platform that attracts prospects through education and support, as opposed to the hard sell, writes David Sparrow, Managing Director at Blabbermouth Marketing.



David Sparrow

Any channel players seeking to construct a joined up digital campaign to target potential prospects across multiple media types must consider and answer four vital questions before a first email is written, let alone sent! Quite simply, these are: What are you looking to achieve? Who are you marketing to? How will you educate your targets? How will prospects find your content?

Establishing where you want to get to with your campaign is easy to define using SMART goals. Be Specific and define what you need to achieve as clearly as possible. Make sure the goal is Measurable via trackable mechanisms. Set Attainable targets to ensure staff are on board. Determine whether your goal is Relevant and will really benefit your business. And, finally, set a Time limit, otherwise, you and your team will always look to tomorrow.

Defining your audience is all about creating buyer personas, which may be

easier for smaller channel businesses. Consider catering to one industry vertical, focusing solely on SMEs with under 50 employees, or specialising in a particular technology like full fibre. Even within these boundaries, the target audience can be quite disparate (there wouldn't be much use in marketing SD-WAN products to businesses under 10 employees for example). Therefore, it's important to create multiple personas that capture the differences in your customers' priorities, outlook and challenges.

Tailored approach

When it comes to educating your targets, your goals and buyer personas will guide the information you include in your content. Websites and landing pages are the best vector to deliver content as your online presence is essentially the digital face of your business and where most enquires will originate from.

A recent study conducted by PWC's Digital Services group shows that 94 per

cent of senior level executives believe personalised content is 'critical or important' to reaching customers. So, make sure you're addressing your prospects by name.

In the channel, blogs are an excellent way to demonstrate your knowledge of a particular vertical market such as retail, professional services or public sector. Remember, every page of your blog increases the chances of finding a new customer because it proves your knowledge and experience and gives prospects an idea of your credibility and ability to add value to their operation.

According to Forrester, 59 per cent of smartphone users expect websites to be mobile-friendly. So, triple check your site is responsive and bug-free when viewed on a mobile. And don't forget to provide ample opportunities to your prospect to get in touch. Engaging call to actions, free trials and demos, as well as limited time offers will increase click-through rates.

With social media campaigns, try directing prospects to a landing page that offers something valuable in exchange for their contact information. It's a great way to create new connections, increase the volume of leads promote your brand and, ultimately, drive sales.

Accessibility

Lastly, it's important to give prospects easy routes to your content to increase brand awareness and establish your reputation as a thought leader in your field. Remember, 93 per cent of B2B buying processes begin with an online search, 57 per cent of the purchasing process is done before contacting a sales team and a twofold increase in website conversion rates can be achieved with landing page-based content marketing.

Of course, there are other channels to consider. With an expected 51 million UK users by 2025, social media is now the most effective way to market products and services. Also, getting your website as close to the top

of Google's search results is a must. Not only will it increase your credibility, but most researchers always start researching from the top of the list. Depending on your buyer personas, display advertising such as billboards also remains a highly effective method of reaching a specific target audience.

Once you've initiated your marketing campaigns and collated the results, you can assess the numbers and explore ways to make further improvement in your planning and execution, so that your next campaign is even more effective than the last. For example, with the help of tools like HubSpot you can measure the effectiveness and engagement of your content and heatmaps will show what sections of your web content are drawing the most attention.

Considering the challenges of 2021, channel businesses keen to thrive rather than stand still need to optimise their marketing for the digital world. ■

www.channel-champions.com

AimHire is just the job

The ICT industry has an old fashioned, dyed in the wool approach to recruiting new sales personnel and must look beyond the traditional employment of university graduates and invest in diverse, smart, and 'risk free' young people hungry to find their way in the world, says Nova Arkney.

Arkney is the brains behind AimHire, a new social enterprise that has teamed up with training company Believe to encourage ICT employers to embrace the government's Kickstart scheme, which provides funds to create job placements for 16 to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit. The company's key role is to help participants with their application to the Department of Work and Pensions and connect recruits to businesses looking for new sales staff.

Once approved, the government pays the recruits' salary for six months or 25 hours per week. Importantly, during that time AimHire and Believe provide training to assist the employee's transition into a business. "By leveraging the skills and experience of Believe and the funding of Kickstart, AimHire is providing employees with a risk-free way of bringing in new sales staff from underprivileged backgrounds," said Arkney.

"There is a large fountain of untapped talent across the UK. We understand the difficulties of hiring good people that can really sell. We can find ambitious young people that are perfect for a career in sales and then equip them with Believe's training to ultimately provide businesses with skilled, retainable and highly motivated sales people."

Arkney was inspired to set up AimHire while working at PR company Vuelio where she underwent sales training with Believe, but the core foundation of her idea began at a school in East London where she worked as a Pupil Achievement Coach. There she witnessed at first hand the potential in young people clearly disenfranchised with traditional education. "There were many really smart guys and girls, who were just not paying any attention in their classes and were messing about, but when I had conversations with them they were super smart, really charming and really charismatic," she



Kevin Moorhouse, Nova Arkney and John Donohoe

said. "My instinct was that all of these young people would make absolutely incredible sales people."

Arkney reconnected with her old mentors John Donohoe and Kevin Moorhouse, the founders of Believe. They shared a desire to 'give something back' by providing the training expertise needed to prepare recruits for work on the sales frontline and AimHire was born. According to Donohoe, convincing recruiters to look at this opportunity has been a significant challenge.

Low risk

"One of our phrases is, if you think you can or you think you cannot, you are probably right," he said. "Employers have got no risk in this other than a little bit of involvement. We help manage the young people recruited and ensure they come out with the requisite skill sets. You have an absolutely free hit at this."

Arkney is convinced that ICT recruiters for many entry level roles are looking for graduates, excluding those from less privileged backgrounds, and are unaware they can take on non-graduates at zero cost. "Statistics show that young people from less privileged backgrounds are half as likely to make it into university and 33 per cent are more likely to drop out," she commented. "We are finding people that have got a great aptitude for sales, a real interest in tech, and all of the things that people look for in graduates. We are giving them the sales training they need to make them specifically good at that role."

"The scheme means that companies get to take someone on for free. The government pays for the training costs and then pays for you to employ them for six months. It gives employers a really long run of time to test someone and to make

sure that they are the right fit. And for the young people it gives them six months to prove themselves, hone their skills and feel secure in what they are doing."

Donohoe believes employees, particularly small ICT businesses, often have a fixed idea of how the role is going to play out and worryingly, often discard candidates based on racial stereotyping. "Invariably they go for graduates, preferably with a good degree, who have all the right attributes they ordain a sales person to have," he said. "It's disturbing that CVs we have sent in have been discounted because of gender, background and even names, which have been deemed to be too long and complicated for customers to understand. Anyone can make it in sales irrespective of background. Recruitment should not be based on old fashioned blueprints founded on prejudices from the past." ■

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CHANNEL CHAMPIONS

1st July 2021, Regents Park, London

After lockdown let's toast our champions!

Channel Champions, the new event borne out of the Comms Dealer Sales & Marketing Awards, has been re-located to Regent's Park, London and re-launched as an 'outdoor' extravaganza on July 1st.

This exciting event will recognise the impressive achievements across all functions of channel businesses, namely:

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

In line with Covid-19 restrictions, finalists will now gather at a celebratory summer garden party with the awards ceremony staged in an open marquee followed by networking in the glorious surroundings of London's most elegant Royal park.

Terry O'Brien, CEO of Channel Champions headline sponsor DWS, commented: "We are so pleased the Comms Dealer team is determined to give people in our industry the event they deserve after working so hard during the pandemic and helping millions of key workers to keep Britain working.

"As headline sponsor of both this event and the Comms National Awards later in the year, we are delighted to play our part in paying tribute to the amazing professionals in our fantastic industry. Staging Channel Champions in the open air with a festival atmosphere will make this an event to remember and I can't wait," he added.

Channel Champions Event co-ordinator Nigel Sergent confirmed that entries will be based on work and activities carried out between March 1st, 2020 and March 1st, 2021.

"This has been 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 relocate to their homes," he said.

"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 in Regent's Park, which promises to be a very different but very exciting day for our industry.

"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 and with the entry deadline extended to May 5th, there's plenty of time to get submissions completed," added Sergent.

Terry O'Brien urges all channel businesses to get involved in the process to recognise teams which do not always get the credit they deserve.

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

To enter go to www.channel-champions.com

AWARD CATEGORIES

RESELLER AWARDS

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

VENDOR AWARDS

Vendor Sales & Account Management Team
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

DISTRIBUTION AWARDS

Distributor Sales & Account Management Team
Distributor Marketing Team
Distributor Technical Support & Engineering Team
Distributor Sales Support Team
Distributor Executive Leadership Team
Distributor People and Culture Team

GENERAL AWARDS

Apprenticeship Champions
Event Champions
Charity Champions

Event Details

Thursday July 1st, Regents Park, London
For sponsorship and place booking details please contact:
Simon Turton on 07759 731134
email: sturton@bpl-business.com
Register now at:
www.channel-champions.com

SPONSORS LINE UP TO RECOGNISE THE CHANNEL'S AMAZING TEAMS



GAMMA

"It's an honour and a pleasure for Gamma to sponsor the 'People and Culture Team' category at the Channel Champions Awards. These awards celebrate many of those teams that don't often receive enough recognition for their hard work. People and culture teams have played an integral part within their business, particularly throughout the past year, and we're pleased to be able to celebrate their accomplishments at this important event. We wish all nominees, especially those within the Gamma partner community, the best of luck."

Daryl Pile, Managing Director- Channel



MITEL

"This year, channel awards will mean so much more to many in our industry. It gives us all the chance to acknowledge what partners and vendors have achieved in what has been one of the toughest years for everyone."

At Mitel we didn't hesitate when we were approached to support the Channel Champions Awards in 2021. We are really looking forward to celebrating the success of everyone involved and being part of what promises to be a fantastic occasion. Best of luck to all the finalists!"

Nick Riggott, Country Sales Director, UK & Ireland



MYPHONES

"MyPhones is delighted to be sponsoring the Sales Support Team categories and celebrating the fantastic work they do across the Reseller, Service Provider and Distributor channels, at the first year of the Channel Champions Awards. The awards ceremony promises to be a great event with recognition for those teams that work tirelessly behind the scenes, alongside those more prominent roles more regularly featured. Well done to everybody in this category. You all do a fantastic job and are essential in the effective delivery of products and solutions."

Paul Gibbs, Sales Director, MyPhones



VOICEFLEX

"Without the people in the Channel our businesses wouldn't deliver outstanding products and services and flourish. COVID-19 has brought unprecedented change and many unanswered questions. It has been a truly challenging year and so we are delighted to be sponsoring an event that recognises the hard work, dedication, and commitment of all teams in the Channel. We are looking forward to this fantastic opportunity to say thank you and celebrate the achievements of our valued teams and wish the finalists the very best of luck."

Paul Taylor, Sales and Marketing Director



TALKTALK BUSINESS

"TalkTalk Business Wholesale is delighted to be the sponsor for the Sales and Account Management Team category for Resellers, Service Providers and Distributors at Channel Champions 2021. Comms Dealer does an amazing job at bringing the channel community together to recognise and celebrate success. We can't wait for the event as it will be an opportunity to meet old and new friends, after what has been a challenging year for us all."

Richard Thompson, Managing Director, TalkTalk Business Wholesale



UNION STREET

"In an industry as competitive as the channel, effective billing strategies are essential for success. As the channel's leading provider of billing solutions, we know this better than most, and 2020 was a particularly challenging year. It's therefore a great pleasure to be able to recognise the channel's top performers in this critical area of expertise, as sponsor of the Channel Champions' Billing and Finance categories. We're greatly look forward to meeting with our friends and colleagues when we attend this spectacular event in July."

Vincent Disneur, Managing Director, Union Street Technologies



VIRTUAL 1

"As a wholesale provider, the channel is the lifeblood of Virtual1 so we are keen and excited to support Comms Dealers' recognition of the Channel Champions. The decision to embrace all of the teams that contribute to the channel's success is a great step forward, and something we very much wanted to be a part of. I'm very much looking forward to seeing everyone at Regents Park in July and to toast to all of the hard work and dedication of the teams across the Channel."

Neil Wilson, Head of Products and Marketing

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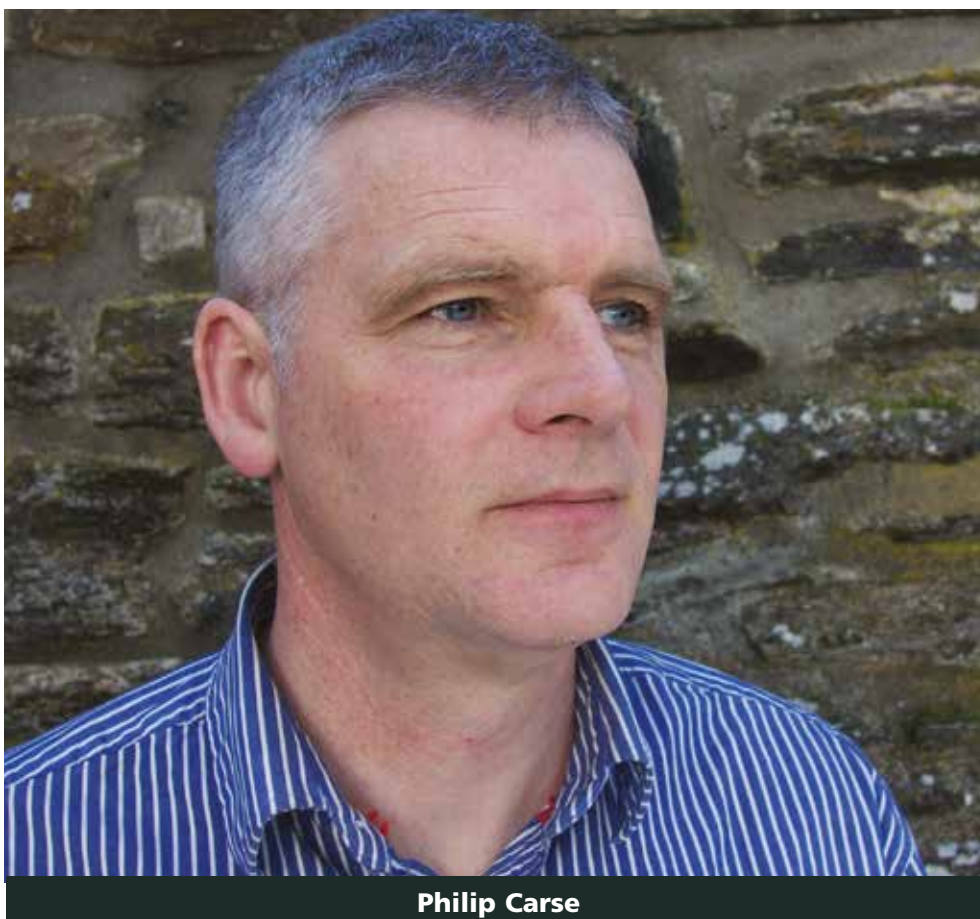
Industry set for change

The accelerating pace of industry change is perhaps most obvious in how the market structure and ownership is being reshaped by the larger players, writes Philip Carse, Analyst at Megabuyte.com.

Early last year, before Covid-19 impacted the UK, the telecoms market was entering a period of stability with the December 2019 General Election result removing the threat of Labour's Free Broadband policy. The first tangible sign was a flurry of infrastructure deals, including CityFibre's £200 million acquisition of TalkTalk's FTTP business FibreNation, enabling it to up its FTTP target from five million to eight million premises (out of circa 32 million UK premises). This was followed by BT increasing its own target from 15 million to 20 million premises, subject to appropriate regulatory support, and now confirmed following Ofcom's decision on fibre pricing, copper network switch off and other measures.

The fibre opportunity has continued to attract a flood of start ups and follow on funding with new investors, including Gigaclear, Hyperoptic, Community Fibre, G.Network, toob and Zzoomm. We've identified over 30 fibre network builders with a combined new build target of 23 million premises, suggesting a high degree of overbuild (Ofcom estimates that 70 per cent of premises will have a choice of FTTP provider).

Last month Ofcom gave the effective regulatory green light to BT's 20 million premises FTTP roll out, a



Philip Carse

We've identified over 30 fibre network builders with a combined new build target of 23 million premises, suggesting a high degree of overbuild

week after CityFibre revealed full details of its eight million premises roll out targeted for completion by 2025, with potential extensions. And TalkTalk is close to completing its Tosca-backed take private. Meanwhile, 5G spectrum auctions will boost capacity by 18 per cent; and with the CMA narrowing its concerns on the Virgin Media/O2

merger to just a couple of areas the deal should close this year, establishing a clear equal competitor to BT.

CityFibre rises

While BT and Virgin Media account for the bulk of next-gen premises (with their 20 million premises FTTP and 16 million Gigabit network upgrade and Project

Lightning respectively) CityFibre will become the third national network. The company last month published all 285 UK towns and villages to be fibred by 2025, comprising up to eight million homes, 800,000 businesses, 400,000 public sector sites and 250,000 5G access points, at a cost of £4 billion. It currently passes

650,000 premises. CityFibre also hinted at an expanded roll out with press reports suggesting support from additional investors alongside Antin and West Street. The company's warm welcome of the Ofcom announcement presumably paves the way to an expanded roll out.

Market consolidation
In May last year, Liberty Global and Telefonica announced the £31.4 billion merger of their respective Virgin Media and O2UK operations. This planned deal took a big step forward in January this year when the UK Competition and Markets Authority announced a focus on two relatively narrow areas – O2's supply of wholesale mobile services to MVNOs, particularly those that are also fixed line players (for example, Sky); and Virgin's supply of wholesale leased lines – both active and passive (dark fibre) to mobile network operators for backhaul. In contrast, the CMA found no issues at the all-important retail level suggesting that, even if remedies are required on one or both of the identified issues, the merger will go ahead largely as planned.

According to Telefonica, based on 2019 numbers the combined entity would have 32.6 million mobile, 5.3 million broadband, 4.9 million fixed voice and 3.7 million pay TV subscribers. As such it would vie with

Continued on page 42

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Enter cloud chief



Phil Bindley

INTERCITY Technology's incoming MD for Cloud and Security Phil Bindley aims to leverage his 20 years tech experience to boost the Birmingham-based firm's business transformation capabilities. His previous experience includes stints at The Bunker, BlueChip and Anix Group where he delivered security solutions and network transformation projects. "It is important that we look to become the enabler for our customers, maintaining and delivering confidentiality, integrity and availability of data," stated Bindley. "Cloud and security are major growth

areas for Intercity and I will use my knowledge and insight to help customers during this challenging period." CEO Andrew Jackson added: "There is much work to do to support organisations as they face further periods of change and transition. Our Cloud and Security Division will develop and grow under Phil's stewardship."

Also on the move...

FORMER Atos sales chief Andy Bannister has joined Tollring as Global Head of Sales. His prior roles also include stints at Mitel and Cisco BroadSoft. Tollring CEO Tony Martino said: "Andy brings extensive industry knowledge and experience in business communications and cloud services. We've known him since his time at Mitel where he was instrumental in helping us to secure our ongoing partnership and the delivery of our business analytics across Mitel's UCaaS portfolio." Bannister added: "The explosion of Microsoft Teams has opened up significant opportunities for Tollring and our partners in collaboration analytics. It's exciting to be joining at such a dynamic period."



Andy Bannister

EXERTIS Pro AV's appointment of Patrick Young as a Microsoft Teams Specialist brings a sharper focus on the distributor's Teams Room proposition. "As part of Microsoft's new



Patrick Young

distribution and channel programme for Teams Room systems, we've been given an opportunity to deliver certified hardware, a suite of services, as well as the Teams Room and Teams Room Premium licences to the channel," said Young. Greg Bennett, Head of AV Solutions, added: "As a distribution partner for Microsoft, recruiting Patrick into the team with his knowledge and experience will provide customers with a resource to support them on the design, deployment and adoption of Microsoft Teams Rooms solutions."

distribution and channel programme for Teams Room systems, we've been given an opportunity to deliver certified hardware, a suite of services, as well as the Teams Room and Teams Room Premium licences to the channel," said Young. Greg Bennett, Head of AV Solutions,

BLUEWATER-backed Optilan has pulled in Adrian Bannister as Chief Financial Officer. He brings 25 years experience in similar roles and moves from energy tech business Ardyne where he was CFO. Coventry-based Optilan has a particular focus on the energy, infrastructure, pipeline and rail sectors. CEO Bill Bayliss stated: "Adrian knows the energy sector like the back of his hand and has helped PE backed high growth companies like us navigate the industry and achieve, manage and sustain long-term growth."

THE role of workplace data analytics in the decision making process is strengthening and Tiger's appointment of Richard Burt as Head of Service Management is reflective of this trend (and the Hampshire-based firm's strategy to optimise its SaaS and managed service proposition), according to COO Ben Nicklen. "Richard will be integral to leading our migration towards a multi-skilled unified services team," he said.

Continued from page 40

BT for leadership of the UK comms and pay TV market in terms of subscribers (46.5 million versus 46.3 million for BT), revenues (£11.3 billion versus £13.5 billion), EBITDA (£4.1 billion versus £4.2 billion) and FCF (£2.1 billion versus £2.6 billion).

In fairness, this is a bit tough on BT: The numbers are based on BT's Consumer and Enterprise divisions, whereas one could also include the UK element of Global Services (last published UK share of 42 per cent, of £4.4 billion, so £1.9 billion revenues on top of the £13.5 billion). BT is also much larger overall at £23 billion revenues (and £7.9 billion EBITDA) including Openreach and non-UK Global Services.

On Telefonica's definition, Sky is the clear number three because of its pay TV operations (22.7 million

are substantially higher (we estimate £57.2 billion), including BT's total revenues and the UK telecoms channel, reflecting the fact that £1 of end user spend can be reported two or more times given the UK market's well developed reseller/wholesale channel structure.

Disruption

Looking ahead, these developments lay the foundations for a period of considerable change for the UK telecoms market, led by an element of disruption as Virgin Media and O2UK consummate their marriage. Meanwhile, the accelerating roll out of fibre by all parties, and particularly CityFibre and BT, and the associated phased closing of the BT copper network and PSTN switch-off by 2025 will trigger an unprecedented amount of service change by end customers (14 million of 31 million lines need

The pace of change should play to the strengths of the smaller resellers rather than the bigger network operators

subscribers, £9.4 billion revenue), with Vodafone a distant fourth (20.2 million subscribers, £5.5 billion revenues), followed by 3UK (11.6 million subscribers, £2.4 billion revenue) and TalkTalk (nine million subscribers, £1.6 billion revenue). In total, these seven players in 2019 generated £43.7 billion revenues, £12.9 billion EBITDA and £7.4 billion FCF (implying £5.5 billion capex) from 156.3 million revenue generating units.

Industry revenues

Excluding Sky, the £34.7 billion of revenues is close to Ofcom's £31.5 billion estimate of the UK telecoms market size, with the former also including Virgin, BT and TalkTalk Pay TV revenues and mobile hardware sales. In reality, total industry revenues

migrating to all-IP services), further exacerbated by post Covid-19 accelerated digital transformation/adoption of digital technologies.

Looking slightly further out, 5G adds more change to the mix with (as mentioned) the spectrum auction set to boost capacity by 18 per cent, albeit with the Huawei issue delaying roll outs. Although the market backdrop remains one of constant price pressure – and continued Covid-19 impacts on revenues such as mobile roaming and business fixed line calls – the increasing pace of change should play to the strengths of the smaller resellers rather than the bigger network operators, who can help their customers navigate the new world. ■

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