



Why prioritising the quest for people parity is key p22

Finalists shortlisted for Comms National Awards night p34



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This month's movers and shakers



Channel urged to deliver net zero

THE net zero revolution is accelerating and according to Zen Internet founder and Chairman Richard Tang there is an imperative for all channel organisations to act now and start delivering on climate change.

SPECIAL REPORT

According to Tang there is a growing urgency to accelerate the journey towards a net zero channel and he urged all firms to take responsibility and make achieving net zero central to decision making.

“As businesses, we absolutely cannot hand our responsibilities to the Government and expect it to do all the work,” he commented. “It will be down to each organisation to

look at their entire operations. A big factor with net zero is that you’ve got to consider your entire end-to-end supply chain and companies will choose partners based increasingly on their sustainability. We are seeing this already. Our goal is to become net zero by 2028.”

Tang also believes that consumers, as well as B2B customers, will increasingly put a greater weighting on sustainability credentials when choosing their suppliers.

“Awareness is growing and we are seeing people choose Zen as their broadband provider on ethical grounds,” said Tang.

Zen is a B Corp, which means that its directors have a legal responsibility to consider a wider purpose beyond profit.

“We want to create a sustainable future for our children and future generations,” added Tang. “Businesses have a huge role to play in that.”

Sustainability Channel Forecast Report – page 28

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EDITOR'S COMMENT



Stuart Gilroy

IT IS NOW clear for all eyes to see that future success will be linked to a solid and proven commitment to reducing carbon emissions. And if you're not feeling the green squeeze right now the likelihood is that it won't be long

before your net zero strategies come under scrutiny. Not just from the supply chain side but also from environmentally concerned end user buyers.

On top of that, a big Government push towards net zero is bound to introduce legislation to ensure businesses drive forward the green agenda. Some channel players are stealing a march while others risk being left standing. Yes it's early days, but sustainability has burst into general industry discourse as fast as resellers need to react and pursue green goals. There is already evidence to show that the motivations underpinning channel partnerships are tipping towards a new set of people and planet focused considerations.

Upstream channel partners with net zero in their sights must of course audit their entire supply chain, top to bottom, including resellers. Meanwhile, more end users are seeking suppliers that value a greater 'purpose' ahead of short-term profits.

This is a time for long-termism, making plans that will sustain your business over time and letting the market know what you're doing to help save the world and meet today's priorities. These include diversity and inclusion, and achieving the desired balance between advancing the betterment of people and the planet while making a profit.

To help you think about a plan, this month's issue in part focuses on these major issues, providing practical insights and strategies that will help you to move forward with strategic confidence (see pages 18-25, and 28-31).

Stuart Gilroy, Editor

- Comms sector review: Resilient trading continues nonstop – p40
- Business matters: What can we learn from start-up firms? – p48

Pair of deals for Windsor



Pete Tomlinson

A KEY phase in Camberley-based Windsor Telecom's expansion plan has been completed with the acquisitions of Redstar Telecom and Reefstream.

The transactions add 25% to Windsor's run rate P&L and delivers a boost to the firm's scale up and cross selling strategy as well as unlocking larger sales opportunities.

"Reefstream adds a good quality customer base and brings further scale across our growing cloud telephony and connectivity portfolios," commented CEO Pete Tomlinson.

"Redstar diversifies our product mix and has credentials in addressing slightly larger opportunities. For example, it is

currently deploying a 300 seat cloud contact centre with a further 500 seats of Teams-based telephony into a major retailer."

Tomlinson noted that Windsor Telecom's strategy is to maintain a balanced approach to organic and acquisitive growth.

"One area we've become particularly good at is cross selling into the existing customer bases, so opportunities that allow us to acquire customers and cross sell to them are especially attractive," he said.


Tomlinson also confirmed that Redstar CEO Graham Wignall and Reefstream MD Jeff Highfield are working with Windsor to ensure a smooth post-acquisition transition.

NEWS ROUNDUP

DAISY Communications has bolstered its play in the health, education and charity verticals with the acquisition of Premier Choice Telecom. The transaction brings around 1,500 customers and 40 employees to Nelson-based Daisy Comms which now has a 465 strong workforce. CEO Dave McGinn said: "We have looked at Premier Choice Telecom as being a target for some time. It strengthens our proposition to SME businesses, especially those within health."

AN ALLIANCE led by security firm Blue Cube Security brings together former rivals Next Generation Security (NGS) and storage reseller Epaton to establish a new group operating under the Blue Cube Solutions banner. "Blue Cube Security, NGS and Epaton have been sparring with one another for many years, but now is the time to work on the same side," commented Gary Haycock-West, CEO and founder at Blue Cube Security. Phil Dick, founder and Director at NGS and Epaton, added: "We are joining forces and scaling up to become stronger, not just in numbers, but in our ability to execute."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

JURASSIC Fibre's plans to cut its carbon footprint by 50% before 2030 have been recognised with Future Net Zero accreditation. The firm's proposals include building a Jurassic Fibre Forest. CEO Michael Maltby stated: "Our green goals include the use of electric vehicles, using HVO fuel in non-electric vehicles, ensuring all gas and electric supply contracts are from 100 per cent renewable and low carbon sources, and onsite generation through solar panels."

THE Scottish Government has ploughed an additional £25m into the DigitalBoost Fund, designed to drive digital transformation among SMEs. The fund was set up by Business Gateway and the Scottish Government in January to help companies invest in hardware, business management software, e-commerce and data analytics through grants worth up to £25k. Economy Secretary Kate Forbes commented: "This investment will help businesses to improve their digital skills and technologies to ensure they can help drive forward our economic recovery and support net zero." The scheme has so far aided the DX ambitions of over 2,200 Scottish businesses.

Soda IT in WiFi firm rescue bid

JUST days after Leeds-based Soda IT Support was acquired by local telco Northern Telecom it boosted its hospitality industry play with the purchase of struggling WalkinWiFi, which went into administration on 30th July.

WalkinWiFi provides WiFi hotspot solutions to household names including Roadchef service station and hotel sites.

It has over 1.7 million registered users and also functions as a marketing platform for hospitality providers.

"WalkinWiFi has struggled through the pandemic and it's unfortunate that the reopening of the hospitality sector came too late to save it from administration," stated Soda IT Support MD Jon Graves.

"However, we have completed a deal to acquire the assets of the business and deliver continuity of supply to WalkinWiFi's customer base."



Jon Graves

Rising altnet boxes clever

LONDON altnet Community Fibre has extended its reach into Surrey and west Sussex with the acquisition of fellow full fibre network operator Box Broadband (based in Cranleigh).

Box Broadband will continue to trade under the Box brand in the south of England; and its CEO Graham Sargood will still lead the operation which has so far passed 7,000 homes.

The majority investment from Community Fibre will support an accelerated network roll out to 200,000 homes across the region by 2024.

Community Fibre CEO Graeme Oxby said: "This is an exciting opportunity for us to invest in a company that shares our vision and to expand across the south."

"With our backing from Warburg Pincus, DTCP, Amber Infrastructure and Railpen we will be able to support Box Broadband's ambitious growth plans and provide the operational experience, as well as technical and commercial knowledge and purchasing scale to build quickly and efficiently."

Sargood added: "With Community Fibre's investment and operational scale we will be able to quickly ramp up our



Graeme Oxby

build to many more customers in our target areas."

Community Fibre is committed to having one million homes in the capital customer ready with its 100% full fibre multi-gigabit capable broadband by 2023.

NEWS ROUNDUP

FORMER Masergy EMEA chief Steve Harrington is to lead security firm Aryaka as EMEA MD, taking over from Ian McEwan who is now global CRO. Prior to joining Ayaka, Harrington's experience also includes a stint as Director of Next Generation Voice at TalkTalk Business. "The market for enterprise connectivity and secured enterprise applications has changed during lockdown," he said. "Many EMEA enterprises grew dissatisfied with being tied into inflexible long-term contracts. Today, as economic activity returns, businesses require maximum flexibility to adapt to new working models, rising online traffic and never before seen cyber security channels."

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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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Highbridge House, 93-96 Oxford Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 1LU, United Kingdom
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Modern bags brace of buys



Matt Reeve

MODERN Networks has pocketed Bridge Fibre and Response IT in a bid to augment its ISP and MSP services.

The deals boost Horizon Capital-backed Modern Networks' revenues to £20m-plus and lift headcount to 150 across offices in Hitchin, Manchester, Cambridge and Guildford.

Simon Hitchcock, who is a Managing Partner at Horizon, commented on the deal: "These are the first two of a planned series of acquisitions as we look

to scale the business and extend its capabilities."

Bridge Fibre, which is located in Cambridgeshire, bolsters Modern Networks' IT and telecoms proposition for the property management sector; while Response IT adds tech expertise and geographical reach.

Modern Networks CEO Matt Reeve said: "Joining forces with Bridge Fibre and Response IT provides us with additional breadth and capability across our key service lines."

NEWS ROUNDUP

PETERBOROUGH-based Rydal Group's acquisition of Agenda IT's customer base adds strength to its IT Support team. Agenda IT's Market Harborough offices remain open and operational with the existing management team and employees in place. "Agenda IT will integrate into our group structure with a primary focus on helping us expand our IT managed service to our clients," commented MD Steffan Dancy.

A £16M funding boost from NatWest will spur Convergence Group towards more acquisitions and scale up activities. The Birmingham-based firm received an initial £8m facility earlier this year which enabled the acquisition of network specialist LAN3. MD Danny Masters said: "The support of NatWest helps us to continue enabling our customers to decide what they need for their business. In the current climate our reliance on connectivity is critical and businesses are looking for secure and efficient connectivity services to support their hybrid working models."

Comcast bolsters enterprise play via Masergy purchase

COMCAST Business' acquisition of Masergy significantly boosts its global enterprise opportunities, mainly among US-based organisations with multi-site global operations.

Bill Stemper, who is the President at Comcast Business, commented: "Masergy serves more than 1,400 customers in nearly 100 countries.

"The combination of Comcast Business's fibre network and Masergy's services will enable our customers to manage their international operations and networks more efficiently and securely.



Bill Stemper

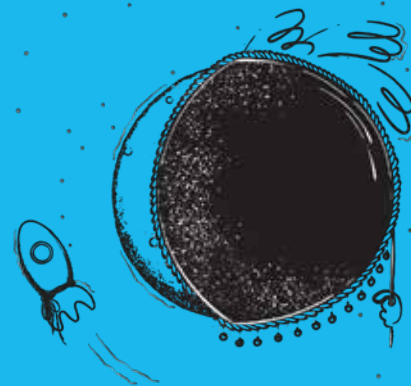
"Masergy will allow us to instantly and dramatically amplify our growth in the global enterprise market."

Masergy provides managed SD-WAN, UCaaS, CCaaS and managed security solutions.

Gary Barton, Principal Enterprise Technology and Services Analyst at GlobalData, observed: "Comcast's more than \$100bn annual revenues will allow it to invest in Masergy's platforms in a significant way.

"Comcast has already invested more than \$15bn since 2017 in its telecoms assets. Bringing that level of spend to Masergy will create a potent force in the global telecoms market with a strong local presence in the US and the UK."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

CHESSESS has acquired Stevenage-based penetration test provider Armadillo to beef up its cybersecurity offering, which now makes up 20% of the company's sales. Armadillo is a CREST approved Penetration Testing, Vulnerability Assessment and a STAR and GBEST Attack Simulation testing company. Chess founder and Executive Chairman David Pollock said: "Business leaders need to make informed decisions about securing their data, and penetration testing is the first step to establishing what needs to be done. Armadillo's expertise strengthens our capability to deliver end to end services to our enterprise customers."

INFRACAPITAL-backed Ogi's headcount now numbers 100 as it advances phase one of its £200m full fibre roll out in Wales. The business aims to reach 150,000 premises in Wales by 2025. CEO Ben Allwright said: "By attracting investment and creating jobs our local economic impact travels across south Wales and beyond, along with our full fibre network." People Experience Director Lisa Hand added: "Our growth is important, but it's perhaps even more important that we're able to retain and develop our people."

Babble does double deal



Matt Parker

BABBLE'S presence across the south coast and north west is strengthened following the acquisitions of 5 Rings Telecom and Concert Networks, taking the Graphite Capital-backed buy and builder's tally to six this year.

Cheshire-based Concert Networks bolsters Babble's UC capabilities while Lancashire-located 5 Rings Telecom adds cyber security expertise.

Matt Parker, CEO of Babble, stated: "We have completed a number of acquisitions aimed at expanding, deepening and strengthening our offering, allowing us to serve more customers across the UK and beyond."

Babble now has five UK hubs: London, the north west, the midlands, the north east and the south coast, with 200 staff located nationwide.

Parker added: "Seeking out the UK's most exciting, innovative tech businesses that utilise local talent to bring a local touch from local bases is valuable to us."

Babble's buy and build strategy has brought in 25,000 UCaaS, 24,000 mobile and 4,000 CCaaS users, as well as a growing cyber, IT and MSP customer base.

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Period of expansion for Halpin

THE acquisition of Assurance Systems signals a new phase of growth for Warrington-based CloudCoCo following a period of preparation.

CloudCoCo has spent the last two years in what it says were Get Well and Get Fit phases to shake off the financial frailties of the legacy Adept4 business, but according to CEO Mark Halpin, the Assurance Systems deal signals the start of phase 3 – Get Bigger.

System Assurance adds £8m turnover and is made up of a B2B VAR, an automated cloud-based VAR and an IT MSP.

"This acquisition moves us into the next step of our development, to scale the business while winning larger and longer contracts," stated Halpin. "A key focus in the short-term is to explore more M&A activity."



Mark Halpin

NEWS ROUNDUP

FLOW Communications has bolstered its capabilities with the acquisition of Capital Network Solutions (CNS), an accredited managed IT services and consultancy provider specialising in cloud, cybersecurity and infrastructure. "The acquisition brings the combination of cloud, networking, data centre and cybersecurity skills together," commented CEO Etienne Greeff. "This is just the start of our buy and build strategy." CNS MD Sarah Edwards will oversee the unification of the two companies; while Mark Edwards, Director of Cybersecurity and Networks, joins Flow Communications as Group CTO.

CYBER criminals are narrowing their focus on SMBs according to the Acronis Cyberthreats Report mid-year update. Despite the perception they are too small to target, SMBs are increasingly vulnerable due to supply chain attacks and greater use of automation by ransomware groups. The report says that during the first half of 2021, four out of five organisations experienced a cybersecurity breach originating from a vulnerability in their third party vendor ecosystem.

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Nasstar bags KCOM IT biz



Wayne Churchill

NASSTAR has completed the acquisition of the National ICT services business of KCOM.

The deal creates one of the largest independent providers of managed services in the UK with over 1,200 employees.

The existing KCOM National ICT services business will fall under the Nasstar brand within three months.

The transaction was previously announced on the 25th June 2021 and increases the scale, propositions and presence of Nasstar, enabling it to address large enterprises and public sector organisations

across a broader product and services portfolio.

The deal also sees Nasstar become part of the NHS Health and Social Care Network accredited to provide network services to the health and care sector across the UK.

Nasstar CEO Wayne Churchill said: "We now look forward to realising the value and opportunities that the combination of KCOM's people, capabilities and customers represents combined with Nasstar."

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

New PE deal boosts North

NORTH has been acquired from Aliter by mid-market PE firm Livingbridge in a deal that also saw the IoT firm expanded its UK footprint with the acquisition of network infrastructure company Data Techniques.

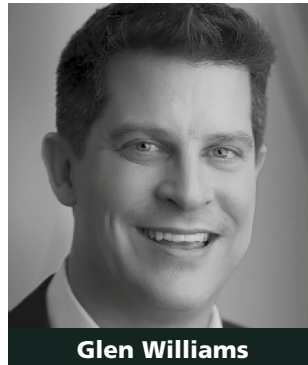
North currently employs over 270 staff and is focused on regional expansion, strengthening its service lines such as IoT and 5G and continuing to build partnerships with the likes of Aruba, Cisco and Nokia.

Data Techniques has 90 employees across three offices in Camberley, Southampton and Basingstoke. The acquisition reinforces North's presence in the south east.

North CEO Glen Williams said: "The last year has seen tremendous change and growth for North and saw five businesses brought together to form an established player well positioned to take advantage of growth opportunities."

"The Data Techniques acquisition demonstrates our focus on building our client base and services through smart expansion and acquisitions."

Livingbridge Partner Matthew Caffrey said: "North has expertise across IoT, networking and connectivity, safety and



Glen Williams

security, and has clear potential for growth."

See page 12 for the full story

NEWS ROUNDUP

A FIVE year £25m deal has put Avonline Networks at the centre of south east Wales' digital transformation. The contract with broadband firm Ogi sees Avonline play a key role in building a network that will deliver full fibre connectivity to 52,000 homes and businesses. The move is part of a £200m project to deploy full fibre to 150,000 premises in south Wales by 2026. MD Rich Hale said: "These works will bring a range of benefits including an enhanced broadband service and new digital opportunities for work, learning, leisure, wellbeing and considerable environmental benefits."



DISTRIBUTOR Exertis has taken headline sponsorship of Basingstoke Town Community Football Club, which celebrates its 125th year this year and became a not-for-profit community football club in 2018. The club is run by volunteers, supporters and members and is made up of a first team, a women's team and a full-time academy (16-19), as well as a number of junior boys and girls teams, comprising of over 200 players. Exertis UK&I MD Paul Bryan said: "This is a great time to partner with the community club as fans are looking to support more locally since the pandemic." Jack Miller, Chairman, Basingstoke Town Community Football Club, added: "We're a community club so partnering with one of the largest technology distributors in the UK is a great opportunity for us."

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NEWS ROUNDUP

UK BUSINESSES are facing a monthly risk ratio of 11% of getting attacked by any type of PC malware, according to Avast's latest Global Risk Report. The study shows that the overall chance of business users encountering a cyber threat has increased worldwide year over year by 24%, from 11.25% to 13.9%. The report looks at PC threats blocked by Avast in March and April 2021, and the same timeframe in 2020. "During the pandemic, enabling staff to work from home at such short notice has posed serious challenges to business security," stated Michal Salat, Director of Threat Intelligence at Avast.

NEOS Networks is to bring connectivity to nine more UK cities following an extension of its partnership with CityFibre. The cities set to gain access to business grade Ethernet connectivity are Cambridge, Cheltenham, Coventry, Derby, Gloucester, Huddersfield, Peterborough, Southend and Swindon. They join the 15 CityFibre regions made available in 2019. In addition to the CityFibre agreement Neos Networks is on the way to delivering its target of more than doubling the number of exchanges on its own network, up to 550 exchanges by the end of 2021.

TelcoSwitch in Scots buy



Russell Lux

TELCOSWITCH'S influence in the SoHo and SME space will be more strongly felt following its acquisition of Scottish IP telephony provider SureVoIP, its third deal this year.

The transaction also bolsters TelcoSwitch's network capabilities with new infrastructure to strengthen its play as an enterprise network carrier while boosting resilience via data centres in London and Edinburgh.

The acquisition follows an additional growth capital funding round with Boost&Co and also creates the potential for more residential based services in the future as the UK moves towards the PSTN switch-off in 2025.

The deal means TelcoSwitch has a third UK regional office in Aberdeen, extending the com-

pany's presence and reach in northern UK regions.

SureVoIP founder and MD Gavin Henry will join the TelcoSwitch Group as CIO.

TelcoSwitch CEO Russell Lux said: "SureVoIP is a company we've paid close attention to for the last couple of years, and I've known Gavin for much longer. His team has built a product set we see as valuable to TelcoSwitch, and a network that will enhance the existing infrastructure within our group of companies."

Henry added: "TelcoSwitch has grown significantly over the last three years, not just in terms of partners and end users but also across its product suite. Both companies share the same outlook on where our industry is heading."

Westcon gets more analytical

A SHARPER focus on operations and data insights is set to help Westcon-Comstor shape its future channel strategy – and to ensure ongoing alignment with key determining factors in the market the distributor has joined the Technology & Services Industry Association (TSIA).

TSIA is known for providing frameworks for best practices and performance benchmarking. It has 40,000-plus members in 96 countries.

Westcon-Comstor is also joining the Association's XaaS Channel Optimisation Advisory Board, which provides insights into XaaS models.

According to Westcon-Comstor it will be able to access independent and data-driven research to 'help advance partner models and find new avenues for growth'.

David Grant, CEO, said: "As vendors move towards XaaS models and partners navigate a future where recurring revenues play an increasingly key role, having a seat on the XaaS Channel Optimisation Advisory Board puts us at the centre of this evolution."

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

NEWS ROUNDUP

HATS off to Comms Connect for gaining Technical Alliance Partner status with Gamma. The Herts-based comms provider has been a Gamma partner since 2014. Comms Connect MD Den Aziz stated: "Technical knowledge is key to the growth of our business." Louise Fairley, Partner Programme Manager at Gamma, added: "Partners should be rewarded for their commitment and given extra support."

TELEFÓNICA Tech's UK cloud and cybersecurity division has been significantly boosted with the 398m euro acquisition of Cancom UK&I. The deal adds 155m euros revenues and 600 heads with capabilities in professional and managed services in IT, cybersecurity and multi-cloud solutions. Cancom UK&I is a certified Microsoft Gold Partner for nine competencies.

COMMSWORLD has secured a new contract to provide enhanced connectivity to SEEMIS Group LLP, the education management information system provider to all 32 of Scotland's local authorities. The contract will provide Lanarkshire-based SEEMIS Group with access to Commsworld's ultrafast UK-wide Optical Core Network.

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There's no slow-down in the adoption rate for digital services. During the COVID-19 pandemic consumers have shifted toward online channels and experiences, with companies and industries responding by accelerating their rate of digital transformation. In many cases innovation and progress that would have previously taken years, have been achieved within months.

And this isn't just happening with consumers. Business habits are changing too, with many more people working from home now than ever before. Businesses are turning to cloud-based connectivity and collaboration solutions for their staff, and this shift in work tools and habits means organisations now demand more dependability and speed from connectivity products.

Digital transformation supports business growth

For small and medium enterprises (SMEs) there's a direct correlation between digital adoption and business growth. A survey by the Welsh Economy Research Unit on digital maturity revealed that 66% of SMEs which integrate digital technologies into their work see increases in turnover. A quarter of these businesses see an increase in turnover of greater than 50%.*

The challenge for these businesses is moving on from traditional products and stop-gap solutions that served a purpose during the pandemic, to a new generation of fully integrated connectivity solutions.

For Vodafone for Business Partners, this presents a huge opportunity – and it's a journey we can take together. We're excited to work with our Partners to build a new frontier in connectivity. Our technology portfolio is at the forefront of what's possible and the migration to next generation solutions has begun...

Future-proof broadband with SOGEA and FTTP

Vodafone is continuing to expand its broadband portfolio. Single Order Generic Ethernet Access (SOGEA) is a new way to connect to fibre that's simple to order, install and maintain. It offers SMEs lower in-life running costs than Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC), and can be combined with voice IP services.

Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) is Vodafone's fastest broadband yet. Unlike copper wires, fibre is far less susceptible to interference and signal degradation. For your customers, that means less buffering, service loss and bandwidth limitations.

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The phone network as we've known it is fast approaching 'end-of-life'. In 2025 traditional phone and ISDN lines are going to be switched off. Vodafone Partners are positioned to offer customers the opportunity get ahead of this fundamental technology change by transforming calling with SIP.

SIP turns the physical phone lines of a business into virtual lines using an internet connection. Powered by Vodafone Evolved Voice over Public Internet, it's our innovative, business grade solution that unlocks value for SMEs and guarantees an easy transition to IP voice. Your customers will benefit from lower calling costs, without having to compromise on quality.

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For businesses looking to expand or standardise their capabilities at home or globally, Vodafone Ethernet Service is the key to receiving multiple voice, video and data services over the same access connection.

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Business Evolve is our ground-breaking approach to mobile services for business customers offering flexible contract lengths and data plans, along with customised device bundles. It puts your customer in control of choosing what's best for their business right now, and makes it easy to scale as their business grows.

And you'll be providing your customers with the power of our best ever network. Vodafone's best ever 4G network, and growing 5G network, will ensure that customer mobile plans keeps pace with their business growth.

The next generation of connectivity solutions is here SMEs need their connectivity services to be working as hard as they do. As we enter a new world where remote productivity is non-negotiable, new connectivity solutions can help businesses cut costs and say goodbye to outages.

We're working with our Partners to make this the reality and we're investing in our team, our products and our services. By supporting Partners in winning customers, achieving growth and offering connectivity solutions for the new era, we can become better together.

If you're working to build a better business and take advantage of the new frontier in connectivity, get in touch today and speak to our Partner team..:

<https://www.vodafone.co.uk/business/vodafone-partners/connectivity-solutions-campaign>



'Channel partners play an important role in the strength of British businesses. Their industry knowledge positions them to help companies digitise operations and adapt to new market conditions and opportunities. Businesses are looking to work with specialist partners to guide them on how to integrate technology into business strategy.'

Kathy Quashie
Head of Indirect Business at Vodafone UK



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North heads for growth

North CEO Glen Williams is clear on his direction of travel: To become the leading IoT and private 5G services and solutions provider in the UK.

North emerged as a single entity following the amalgamation of five businesses in October last year. The series of acquisitions and mergers formed part of Aliter Capital's strategy to build an IoT and connectivity specialist, bringing together Glasgow-based Boston Networks, Welsh business Pinacl and Pinacl GDA, North Shields and Birmingham firm 2020 Vision Systems and London operator PEL Services.

"Our inception was around bringing five businesses together and how we develop and hone the offering we take to market based on that integration," explained Williams. "We take more of a holistic approach than we did at the beginning and each of the solutions we offer are North solutions rather than individual technologies from various businesses. That transition into North has been seamless and our staff have adapted quickly. Now we can offer and deliver end-to-end services and solutions."

Last month North was acquired from Aliter by mid-market PE firm Livingbridge in a deal that also saw the IoT firm expand its UK footprint and influence with the acquisition of network infrastructure company Data Techniques, which has 90 employees located across three UK offices in Camberley, Southampton and Basingstoke. Camberley will become



Glen Williams

Any critical environment where you need to collect data is a growth space for us

North's new headquarters. "Data Techniques plays in sectors North doesn't currently operate in and the acquisition will help us scale our capabilities across new areas such as central government and defence," stated Williams.

Regional influence

"The acquisition also reinforces our presence in the south east and allows us to operate a national network of technical engineers, covering the design, build, maintenance and

monitoring of end-to-end IoT solutions and services."

Livingbridge has an impressive track record operating within the technology sector and made the investment through its £1.2 billion Livingbridge 7 fund. "The investment comes at the right time for us, for Aliter and our investment journey," commented Williams. "In terms of future investment we have the opportunity to look at further acquisitions with Livingbridge."

Williams' strategic planning is supported by the strength of his prior experience: As CEO of Damovo he brought six international businesses together. He was also Sales Director at Dell and did stints at Lenovo, Computacenter and Daisy Group in various senior roles. "My previous CEO experience mixed with my background in IT and communications has been highly influential in my role at North, and the time spent building that experience from the ground up is important in understanding the day-to-day challenges as well as the strategic overview," commented Williams.

The enlarged North group is now 362 strong with a turnover of £63 million. Its customer base spans the length and breadth of the UK, from the Scottish Highlands to the south of England and Wales. "We work with many mid-market and large enterprise companies, as well as the public sector where we service the majority of our clients across local authorities, universities and NHS trusts – and more recently through the Data Techniques acquisition across defence and central government," explained Williams. "We also operate in other industries such as manufacturing, construction, financial services and utilities."

"We are creating smart, secure, safe and connected spaces and places across the UK, working with our customers to integrate

technology within data centres, buildings, campuses and cities, and in complex and critical environments. We are doing this through our solutions in IoT, CCTV, fire and safety, networks and WiFi. We can deliver all of these services end-to-end. For us, the key for growth isn't around the number of opportunities, it's about focusing on winning the right ones at the right time and on delivering for our customers."

Williams sees private 5G and IoT as a strong growth area for North and he pointed to sustainability as a significant driver as the company seeks to support customers in their race to net zero. "We are working with numerous local authorities and businesses on sensor and IoT-based solutions that transform the ways we live and work through smart technology, while creating a more sustainable practice that supports our environment," he added.

"Smart data will play a key role in the race to net zero. We can monitor anything from air quality and CO2 levels to electricity consumption and light levels, and we have been shortlisted for a sustainable award through our work with Highland and Islands Council using sensors to reduce carbon emissions across its buildings. There is plenty of room to expand and any critical environment where you need to collect data is a growth space. The opportunities are endless." ■



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Nuvias UC and Logitech partners

Joining forces with workspace specialist opens up

Nuvias UC partners have gained access to an expanded UC&C stack following a linkup between the distributor and Logitech. The Swiss vendor's business portfolio of video conferencing solutions will help Nuvias UC's partners leverage the opportunities presented by hybrid working, and the growing demand the pandemic has created for a seamless video conferencing (VC) experience.

Comms Dealer spoke to Nuvias CEO Jeremy Keefe and Logitech VC Channel Account Manager Matt Lucas, to understand how their joint video conferencing offering could lead to rich pickings for channel partners.

Q. What is the channel opportunity for those looking to onboard Logitech through Nuvias UC?

A. "The market is growing quarter on quarter as people embrace video technology and the pandemic has only accelerated this trend," said Logitech's Matt Lucas.

"We are helping partners capitalise on this opportunity, regardless of their level of VC expertise, by offering simplicity. Partners can roll out our range and engage with us and Nuvias UC with ease.

"We are here to help at every step of adoption, from training, product knowledge, marketing, and utilising new VCs, to pre and post sales expertise that will help partners sell the solutions and most importantly make money," he continued.

Simplicity

"We want people to walk into a room, use our solutions, and get on with their lives without



Jeremy Keefe

"One of the key skills in this industry is being able to choose the right vendor for the right situation."

technology getting in the way. Simplicity is the design ethos behind the whole range," said Lucas.

Keefe added: "Being on a single vendor platform in an office will soon no longer be a reality, people will have a choice of how to communicate. We work with a wide range of vendors to offer a very simple solution, orientated for our channel partners, that they can take to market tomorrow."

Q. What makes Nuvias UC's Logitech offering unique?

A. "At Nuvias UC we are focussed on being a solution-based distributor that enables its channel community to go to market. Logitech were looking for a partner which does not follow a broadline 'one size fits all' approach and we fit that mould for them very well," said Keefe.

Support

"We have a pre-sales team that has come from the

industry, which means they understand the complexities and how to simplify them. This places them perfectly to help channel partners put leading solutions together.

"We also offer install services that will support our channel community when they need it. We are not looking to take that away from them, but to add resources that will beef up their offering. Maintenance and support services are available

thereafter," added Keefe.

Q. How does Logitech complement Nuvias UC's existing portfolio?

A. Keefe continued: "Logitech's solutions-led portfolio aligns with our focus on providing the channel with an end-to-end experience. We can now provide a wider range of room solutions, due to Logitech complementing our existing Poly offering."

"Logitech's interoperability with our other vendors – such as Pexip and Zoom – and their compatibility with Microsoft Teams, will create a wealth of new opportunities for our partners.

Symbiosis

"One of the key skills in this industry is being able to choose the right vendor for the right situation. Logitech provides key elements of the solution, which we can combine with our other vendors to make up eco-partnerships for our partners to go and put a complete solution together."

Q. What encouraged Logitech to onboard Nuvias UC as a trusted distribution partner?

A. "Nuvias UC is seen as a safe pair of hands amongst the VC and UC community," said Lucas. "The compatibility of Logitech and many other vendors,

Put focus on the channel

New VC opportunities for reseller partners

NUVIAS UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS

including Nuvias UC, allows us to serve a wider range of customers and meet a vast number of challenges."

Keefe said: "Our Zoom relationship was also appealing to Logitech. We picked up a Master Agent and Wholesale agreement for Europe this year and Logitech saw it as an opportunity to move into markets that they were not previously in. "Zoom flourished in the pandemic as people could just download it onto their device, but as employees return to the offices, its focus will move to enterprise licensing, which means companies need the right solution in the office to enable simple use."

Q. Are there any specific verticals that are demanding a higher quality of VC equipment

A. Lucas said: "The demand for higher quality video conferencing experiences is universal across any business.

logitech®

sort of engagement you cannot have with low quality equipment," he added.

Q. Are there 'easy sell' opportunities for resellers out there?

A. Keefe said: "Logitech offers a range of products that are either plug and play such as USB devices, or a suite of room-based devices that require some form of screen to drive them.

Sellable

"It is so easy today to buy VC for a small office, that is why so many channel partners are getting involved in this. It is very easy for people to get involved in this opportunity.

"There are no hoops to jump through. If a reseller wants to get involved with this, just pick up the phone to Nuvias UC and we can arrange some training, enablement and talk to marketing departments to drive some lead generation," he concluded.

Early in the pandemic, a lot of businesses jumped to buy the first solutions they could get their hands on that were cheap and many have regretted this decision and have now upgraded to solutions that meet their needs.

"Everyone wants a good camera experience. When you are talking to someone pixelated, it can be tiring, just like talking to someone with a bad audio connection. It forces you to work harder just to focus."

Sought-after

"There is a big health and wellbeing side to this as well," said Lucas.

"On a high-quality call, you can see if someone is struggling and tell if they are not engaged. For example, we started this call by comparing the guitars in the background of our rooms. With bad video they would just be blurred shapes, so it allows for a human element and the



Logitech Brio Ultra HD Webcam

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Logitech Zone True Wireless Earbuds

Partnership widens hybrid working offering

A compelling VC offering must provide the same seamless experience indiscriminate of location, and this is particularly potent in the dawn of hybrid working.

"Over the course of the pandemic, businesses have been opening up budget to help homeworkers kit out their home offices with

quality VC equipment," said Logitech's Matt Lucas.

"Now that employees are venturing back into offices, they will expect a superior VC experience to their home set up, and companies will need to provide this if they want to encourage staff back in."

Lucas emphasised that the

partnership widens Nuvias UC's remote working and return to work offering into a full hybrid-working suite. He added: "The Logitech offering means that partners can help business leaders create a connected VC experience for their employees that is easy to adjust as they swap between the office and home environment."



Matt Lucas

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Brightsolid expansion

Scotland-based Brightsolid wasted no time in harnessing demand for public cloud services and CEO Elaine Maddison is set to extend the MSP's strong presence in this space south of the border.

Dundee headquartered Brightsolid aims to become a UK-wide force in hybrid cloud provision and is riding the wave of fast growth. The company was established in 1995 and now employs approximately 60 staff. Its customer base is mainly Scottish-based medium to large organisations, especially in the oil and gas and public sectors – but Maddison has big ambitions to extend Brightsolid's influence. In serving its customers Brightsolid designs, manages and builds secure and scalable hybrid cloud environments. The company owns two tier III data centres, one in Dundee and one in Aberdeen, and specialises in managed private and Amazon Web Services (AWS) public cloud.

"Our core target market continues to be SMEs in Scotland, although we are seeing increasing demand from the north of England, especially for our AWS expertise," commented Maddison. "As demand for public cloud and associated services increases, our products and services continue to grow and evolve.

My priorities are to continue to grow our cloud practice and be a leading hybrid cloud provider not just in Scotland, but the UK. We have a talented bunch of people at Brightsolid, but the skills shortage in the UK IT industry is definitely a challenge for all of us with growth plans."

Before joining Brightsolid at the start of 2019, Maddison spent 20 years in the UK financial services industry. "I worked across a wide range of disciplines including technology and change, operations, risk management, marketing and product development," she explained. "I was heavily involved in M&A activities, leading various business functions through transformational change – something I am passionate about and have been able to bring into my role at Brightsolid by leading the ongoing transformation of the company's technology and service delivery offerings."

Maddison had previously experienced Brightsolid as a customer during her time working with Alliance Trust Savings. "This gave me insight from the end user perspective, which



Elaine Maddison

is valuable to have as we work day-to-day with our customers," she added. "Stepping into my first CEO role with Brightsolid has been the most challenging

"I walked away from a senior role without a back-up plan in place because it had been challenging my integrity on a regular basis," stated Maddison.

Stepping into my first CEO role with Brightsolid has been the most challenging and rewarding achievement of my career to date

and rewarding achievement of my career to date."

Determination

That Maddison plays to her strengths and lives by her determination to do the right thing was also evident when she grabbed the bull by the horns and changed career – a decision that was perhaps made more challenging for a female business leader.

"It worked out well, but it was one of the hardest decisions I have made. As a female in a leadership role, I've faced many challenges along the way and have too often felt the need to prove myself or shout louder to be heard. Nowadays I'm more confident in who I am and I always just try to be myself, which is sometimes harder than it sounds."

Just a minute with Elaine Maddison...

Role model: My main inspiration comes from my smallish circle of family and friends who are grounded, genuine and fun to be with.

What do you fear most? Lost time: The last 18 months have served as a sharp reminder of the need to spend your time wisely and with the people who matter.

Your strengths and what could you work on? I've been told my intuition is my superpower. I love data, but when it comes to people, the ability to look beyond what is being said and join the dots is incredibly helpful. The area I'm always working on is not to be so hard on myself when things don't go to plan.

What talent do you wish you had? To be musical.

The hardest decision you made last year: Sending our whole team home to work remotely ahead of the mandated lockdown. With the benefit of hindsight it was a great decision, but one I toiled over at the time.

Best advice you've been given: To always be myself.

Name three ideal dinner guests: Michelle Obama (as she can do no wrong), Olivia Coleman (who wouldn't want to be her friend?), and Micky Flanagan (he is absolutely hilarious).

If you weren't in ICT what would you be doing? Executive coaching.

What possession could you not live without? Mascara.

How do you relax? I've incorporated daily walks into my life since the start of the pandemic and I'm a huge advocate of the mental and physical health benefits of getting your 10,000 steps a day in! Hanging out with family and friends over a nice lunch and a glass of wine is my ideal way to spend the weekend.



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Dealing with discrimination

A root and branch review of the diversity within BT Wholesale and the wider group set the wheels in motion to introduce many new initiatives that encourage positive change. This remedial project is undeniably effective and to some extent ground breaking. Here, BT Wholesale Managing Director Alex Tempest provides an honest insight into how the company is addressing key issues that impact all businesses.

The purpose and value driven nature of BT's diversity and inclusion campaign is already yielding much in terms of identifying human behaviours around group differences and how to better understand them to create a fairer workplace. The company now has various diversity networking groups spanning gender, ethnicity, LGBT+, ability, faith, carers and more, which are crucial to ensuring that all issues faced by the workforce can be brought to light and engaged. The number of groups jumped from 10 to 16 last year alone. And BT's first Diversity and Inclusion Report, which includes a Gender Pay Gap and Ethnicity Pay Gap Report, enabled it to formulate clear objectives to be reached by at least 2030, including an aggregate gender (50 per cent), ethnicity (25 per cent) and disability (17 per cent) target.



Alex Tempest

In June 2020, BT Group launched the BT Ethnicity Rapid Action Plan centred around four pillars: Educating and empowering; leading by example; building transparency and accelerating diversity. As part of this, Tempest herself undertook race training and reverse mentoring. "The last year

We are working hard to put in place initiatives that make sure we stamp out discrimination completely

has shone a powerful light on issues of systemic racism, prejudice and discrimination – it was a wake-up call," stated Tempest. "We are unapologetic that much of the year's most important

work has been focused on ethnicity as we've opened our eyes, ears and minds to the experiences of our black, Asian and ethnic minority colleagues, which is where we sometimes fell short.

Like others, BT Wholesale has been forced to hold the mirror up to ourselves, as individuals and as a business, and ask what more we can do and to commit to being bolder in our approach.

In two years time, the BT Ethnicity Rapid Action Plan will be running like clockwork. We'll still be educating our employees through training sessions and mentoring, and



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on and group differences

our employees will have support through our various networking groups. We'll also continue with campaigns like Hope United, an initiative that mobilised the entire nation in the fight against hate speech. We brought together footballers from the home nations to provide advice on how to tackle online abuse. Our overarching goal is to support our employees in the best possible way while inspiring other organisations and the channel."

Leadership matters

BT is also focused on supporting the diversity of its most senior leadership. Many studies have shown that there is still a disparity in the number of diverse groups present in more senior roles. "We are working hard to reflect and put in place initiatives to make sure we stamp out discrimination completely," emphasised Tempest.

BT Wholesale's approach to D&I can be broken down into these key areas: The BT Ethnicity Rapid Action Plan, an apprenticeship scheme, supporting women in tech and revamping the hiring process. "Tackling unconscious bias in recruitment will truly allow businesses to diversify their workforce, commented Tempest. "There are a number of things to consider like anonymous applications, meaning names are not important, or reducing the list of mandatory requirements on applications so that women are more likely to apply.

"Recognising biases is absolutely fundamental. It can be a hard pill to swallow, but we all have them. Taking

part in the reverse mentoring on diversity opened my eyes and it's something I'd recommend to every channel organisation. This format could also work for tackling gender, disability or socio-economic imbalance. We all have unconscious biases, so we have to think hard if we're employing in our own shadow because it's easy to do so, or if we're genuinely embracing diversity."

Tempest cited a well known stat that men apply for a job when they meet only 60 per cent of the qualifications, whereas women will only apply if they meet 100 per cent of them. Tempest also quoted leadership expert Tara Mohr, who wrote, 'most of the time, women don't

To make any progress at all, channel organisations need to address pre-existing biases and make women feel like they are good enough

know their brilliance. They are more attuned to the ways they aren't qualified than to the ways that they are'. "This is something that really resonates with me," added Tempest. "To make any progress at all, channel organisations need to address these pre-existing biases and make women feel like they are good enough."

All of the above efforts are feeding into BT's hiring practices and making conscious decisions to ensure application processes are inclusive. "For example, with the BT Ethnicity Action plan we have created a new fast-stream for high potential people from ethnic

minority backgrounds and implemented shortlists for every senior management role," explained Tempest.

Supporting women in tech and the channel is also close to Tempest's heart. "Throughout my career I've been lucky enough to get involved in some great projects which have helped change experiences for women in their careers," she commented. "In previous roles within the tech industry I oversaw coding classes and was part of Light Reading's Women in Comms group. At BT, we are similarly creating an environment where women feel supported and can envision a career path. For example, our TechWomen programme continues to help

we're responding to," added Tempest. "And we're really clear about one thing – we're not fixing people, we're addressing any bias that may exist in processes and in our decision making.

"That said, we need to continue our efforts and we need more women represented at the top so our young employees have role models to look up to. Currently 31 per cent of leadership positions at BT are held by women, our aim is to up this to 50% by 2030, if not before."

Opening doors

Furthermore, BT Wholesale continues to support diversity in the channel through its apprenticeship scheme. "Our objective is to ensure that a larger variety of people have the chance to work in tech," added Tempest. "Giving young people who don't fit the traditional university mould the opportunity to enter the working world means they can see where they belong. At BT, thousands of apprentices from a range of backgrounds have benefitted, with almost 80 per cent of apprentices that qualified over five years ago still with us."

Change doesn't happen overnight and sometimes progress can be slow, especially for smaller businesses and in the channel, which is a historically white and male dominated industry. "It's important that you measure your impact and are accountable for your decisions," stated Tempest. "Offering more accessible routes into work via apprenticeship schemes, shaking up recruitment policies or undertaking

unconscious bias training, as well as dedicated forums to support a diverse workforce and plans for concrete action, not just discussion, will keep you honest."

Tempest advises leaders to start with their own understanding of the diversity of their business and the inherent biases. Instead of looking top-down, taking a step back and looking bottom-up means that leaders will have a full picture of their organisation. "Practically, this involves talking to a range of employees, varying in seniority, gender, race, age, ability – to name a few," she commented. "This can be in the form of one-to-one conversations or collecting information through an anonymous poll, for example, both of which provide a valuable way to gain insights. It's only by collecting information that the channel will be able to gain a deeper understanding and implement effective D&I initiatives that work for their business and people.

"Businesses that put D&I at the forefront of their operations cement their position in their industry as a supportive and understanding employer, which makes it easier to retain staff and build relationships with key stakeholders. Now is the time for individuals and brands to lead by example and use their influence to create initiatives that make a lasting impact." ■

This month's D&I focus continues as follows:
A blueprint for greater workplace D&I – page 20
Prioritising the quest for people parity – page 22
Tackling D&I with a ground-up approach – page 24



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A blueprint for greater v

Before embarking on a diversity and inclusion journey it's vital to understand what that truly means and how to approach the task. Here, Zen Internet HR Director Ayshea Robertson offers practical insights and strategies that provide a D&I blueprint for all organisations.

Industry research and discussion alone will not solve the channel's diversity and inclusion (D&I) deficit, it needs a stimulus from shining examples of D&I champions such as Zen Internet. Here's how the company has been leading the charge towards a more diverse workplace...

How did Zen initiate its D&I journey?

Zen began by developing a people strategy that incorporated D&I as a key area of focus. We identified that an effective internal communications programme would be crucial for getting company wide buy-in as we worked towards ensuring a more inclusive environment. In parallel we reviewed our existing policies, while also reviewing our relevant training programmes from a D&I perspective.

The next step was to form a number of D&I network groups to focus on key areas of our strategy and take action. Our founding groups were Pride, Women in Tech, BAME, Faith and Pause (Menopause). The groups are all led by various people from across the company who have a particular passion for their area. Volunteers from across the business are members of these groups and together everyone helps to deliver the actions. It was important that each group had a vision and set of objectives in



Ayshea Robertson

A business that is not progressing or thinking about its D&I development risks having a narrow, one minded view of the world, as well as losing out on top talent and potentially underperforming

order to take positive action and make a difference.

Then we created a Steering Group that closely monitored the strategy and ensured that the activity from all of the network groups was aligned.

How did you break the strategy into manageable chunks?

We looked at it from a three year planning perspective and defined what we wanted to achieve each year. Zen's

initial three year strategy followed these lines...

Year 1: Develop the People Strategy and introduce internal communications. Review the current diversity landscape and establish a plan for how to move D&I forward.

Year 2: Launch D&I network groups and create a vision and objectives for each one. Create a D&I steering group and start raising awareness.

Year 3: Concentrate on the delivery of objectives. Continue to raise awareness and start benchmarking against other companies. Plan for year four and five actions, then measure and celebrate your achievements.

Where are you on your D&I journey?

We have made significant strides in recent years. It is an integral part of our People Strategy. Much of what we have achieved

to date has been from an internal perspective. Our D&I networks have been raising awareness, tackling issues, providing support and delivering initiatives. Company wide data ensures that we have an understanding of the diversity make up at Zen. From this we can benchmark, monitor and track our progress.

Over the next two years we will continue to deliver against our objectives in part by establishing relationships with external people and organisations, such as local schools, colleges, universities, diversity groups, companies, customers and competitors, in order to share best practice and work together to make a difference.

What were the biggest stumbling blocks to becoming a more diverse and inclusive organisation?

The tech and telecoms sectors are heavily male dominated, therefore a key barrier from a women in tech perspective has been simply attracting women in the first place. There are a number of reasons for this, including role/gender stereotyping, lack of awareness and perceived lack of flexibility. We have seen a big shift on flexibility since the pandemic outbreak due to flexible and remote working becoming the norm. This has opened up opportunities for women who were seeking a more flexible working arrangement,



workplace D&I

and has already started to help us attract more women to apply for roles.

The women in tech agenda is only one part of the diversity journey. When it comes to having a well rounded D&I strategy, every group has to be considered. And this was one of the main reasons we set up a number of D&I networks so we could ensure progress in all areas of D&I. There have, however, been challenges in each of the groups that we've had to tackle along the way.

One of the biggest challenges to becoming a more diverse and inclusive organisation has been around changing mindsets (both internally and externally): Getting people to think differently, to understand unconscious bias, to realise that proactive action is what is required to move the needle, to have uncomfortable conversations when required, and be brave enough to call issues out. This is a process which takes time and involves awareness and development. It is ongoing.

How did you gain a deeper understanding of diversity within Zen?

This is an area that we have found challenging, and I would recommend you get into the practice of asking for diversity data into your organisation as soon as possible, so that you can start to build a good picture of what your challenges are and what your profile looks like.

There are various ways to collate the data, but the most important step in this process is to communicate to your people why you want this data in the first place. Establishing trust upfront is a

critical step to be successful. You may need to use a number of methods to collate the data you're after, such as D&I labelled surveys, or on appointment of a new starter.

The main thing to stress is you must ensure this data is only used for the purpose it was gathered, to help you deliver the right D&I initiatives and measure the progress of your D&I objectives. Remember that when getting involved in any sensitive data

Increased diversity brings a broader range of skills

capture it is important to be aware of, and considerate to, the rules around employee consent and how you are allowed to use that data. Seek advice from an expert if you're unsure.

Once you have some meaningful D&I data you will be able to analyse this and answer questions such as – do salary divides exist between male and female employees doing similar roles? How many people of a BAME background were promoted in the year? And so on. Once you understand what your diversity data is telling you, you will be able to focus your attention on areas of priority and set some realistic targets to work towards.

What do you see as the biggest opportunity for businesses that have a D&I edge?

As we know, increased diversity brings a broader

range of skills and experience, and consequently drives innovation and creativity. In fact, there are many reasons having a focus on D&I will create a competitive edge. Diversity allows different perspectives, and this helps develop more relevant products or solutions for customers.

A McKinsey study found that ethnically diverse workforces are more financially successful, and that companies with a better gender balance are more likely to outperform those that do not. Along with all this, companies that proactively embrace D&I have a greater talent pool to fish from, create a far better employer brand and are able to retain top talent.

A business that is not progressing or thinking about its D&I development risks having a narrow, one minded view of the world, as well as losing out on top talent and potentially underperforming.

What is your top tip for leaders looking to embark on their own D&I journey?

The first and most important thing is proactive and visible commitment from the top. You should develop a clear understanding of your D&I goals. If that vision is not clear for you as a leader, it will be really hard to make progress on that journey and get the buy-in from your people. Another critical point is getting your people involved in the journey – let them take ownership to generate ideas and deliver. The D&I agenda should be owned and supported by business leaders. Making a difference lies in bringing your people along with you. ■

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Prioritising the quest for

Committed leaders can make a difference by doubling down on their critical diversity and inclusion (D&I) priorities and backing up their aspirations with solid initiatives and resources. Here, Louisa Gregory, VP – Culture, Change & Diversity at Colt Technology Services, shares insights into how the company is creating an environment where all people are celebrated and can thrive.

COLT has made great strides since kicking off its D&I strategy, introducing new policies and improvements that earned it a high position in the Financial Times annual Diversity Leaders ranking, coming in at number 44 of the top 850 employers in Europe, and in the top tier for the telecoms sector...

How does COLT underpin its inclusive culture and leadership behaviours?

Since creating Colt's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) strategy we've invested in D&I with a full-time team to manage and oversee its implementation. Having the right organisational foundations in place is the starting point of an effective D&I strategy. There's no silver bullet and we believe a combination of organisational foundations, initiatives and programmes are needed to move the needle. We have five pillars which outline our approach in building an inclusive culture. These are:

- Gender balance – looking at attracting and developing talent to build a balanced workforce.
- Pride – a focus on LGBTQ+ inclusion and creating an environment where anyone can flourish regardless of their gender expression or sexual orientation.
- Cultural awareness – making sure Colt is a



Louisa Gregory

Authenticity and transparency are vital if you truly want to build an open culture

great place to work for anyone regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or cultural background.

- Enablement – it's not always apparent, but many colleagues experience physical or mental challenges at work. We want to ensure Colt welcomes and treats everyone fairly, irrespective of any disability or long-term health condition.
- Multi-generations – today, most companies will have four or five generations working side by side. Colt is no different. We're looking at how to make the most of each generation's unique experiences.

How do you progress your D&I journey?

For important initiatives to be impactful, the right support policies need to be in place, all systems and people processes must be reviewed for bias and adjusted accordingly, and you need an understanding of the current employee demographics. Writing policies to support the organisation isn't always as exciting as developing programmes and building capability, but it's important to have policies in place first. Without them, you can't create an environment where people recognise that they are safe to speak up to ask

for support and therefore are enabled to thrive.

How do you tackle unconscious bias?

You never stop learning in this space and the process of identifying and addressing D&I issues that are less obvious to detect is an interesting one. Unconscious bias is a good example. The nature of bias and its impact in the workplace is wide ranging and comes in a multitude of different forms. And most obviously – the name says it all – it's easy for unconscious biases to go unrecognised by those that hold them.

How do you engage employees and help them to challenge themselves?

Educating and equipping employees with the right tools to address D&I issues is essential. Colt conducts mandatory Understanding Unconscious Bias training that takes an in-depth look at the nature of bias and its impact in the workplace. It provides insight into how our behaviour might be affected by bias and what we can do to reduce and eliminate its influence on our working relationships and the decisions we make.

In 2020, we also trained all our people managers in inclusive leadership so inclusive behaviours becomes part of our day-to-day behaviours. This top down approach to D&I enforces these sorts of trainings and underpins them with leadership messaging that inclusive behaviour is important.

How do you overcome the challenge of collecting diversity information?

Gathering qualitative diversity data can be a challenge. Aside from the legal and regulatory compliance challenges, there are lots of reasons why individuals may not feel comfortable sharing their information. They might be afraid of the impact on their career by

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r people parity

sharing personal details, might not understand its importance, or simply might not be aware of why it's central to driving D&I.

We ask our employees to voluntarily and anonymously share information on their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and disability status, where we are legally allowed. This helps to build a clear picture of how Colt is made up. Alongside the request, we give clear and easily accessible information on what exactly it is we're asking them to do, why we collect the data, what will happen to it and how it is protected.

This gives employees peace of mind and aims to encourage engagement. Importantly, it also educates the business on the value of the data and ties into our wider D&I internal messaging that is built on being open and transparent about our diversity journey. Authenticity and transparency are vital if you truly want to build an open culture that D&I strategies are designed to create.

What first steps should business leaders take when starting their own D&I journey?

One of the most fundamental elements is that you can't make meaningful changes in D&I without budget. If it's someone's second job, other things will always get in the way. It is a business priority and you need people dedicated to it in the form of an official role or team.

Building inclusivity can take many years to achieve and needs continuous commitment from the top. That means leadership that dedicates budget and links inclusion to the

growth of the business and the development of an inclusive company culture.

What are some of the positive business benefits of developing a D&I culture?

Diversity means businesses can benefit from different perspectives and draw from the widest possible pool of talent. Innovation is driven by diversity of thought and it's well known and studied that more diverse companies outperform less diverse companies. Diversity brings many benefits, and at the end of the day it makes companies more financially successful.

It's a business imperative and here lies the threat to organisations that do not work to become more diverse and inclusive. Without a range of perspectives and experiences around the table, businesses will fall behind – lacking in innovation and the ability to keep pace with competitors or deliver the right solutions for their customers.

To what extent will having a D&I culture be key to securing long-term talent?

The telco industry is at a retirement cliff and our sector needs to attract and retain both women and younger generations that are more driven by social activism. Future leaders are more drawn to work for companies that align with their personal values – diversity, inclusion, sustainability, ethics etc. We need to drive real actions and positive change if we're to be an industry that future talent wants to join.

There cannot be diversity without inclusion. Organisations must work

on both at the same time. Research shows that homogenous teams will actually perform better than diverse teams that exist without an inclusive culture. However, when teams are built with an inclusive culture thriving on diversity, these teams will usually outperform others.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted issues around D&I?

Since the start of the pandemic, D&I strategies and programmes have gained prominence with more work being done to support areas such as mental health, family needs or neurodiversity needs. We've been more open in conversations about topics like domestic abuse and what companies can do to support employees experiencing this.

We've seen a shift in the willingness of our employees to talk about more personal topics and gain a better understanding of what they can improve. The fact that people are embracing D&I issues means that we are moving forward faster.

From an employer point of view, by removing the barriers of being in an office they may find they're able to tap into more diverse talent pools and create new opportunities for those currently under represented in the workforce. But whatever happens going forward, companies need to be hyper-vigilant to ensure that the work and investment made to move D&I programmes forward – and in opening up conversations around D&I – don't go to waste. We need to maintain the momentum and continue to drive positive change. ■

Winning the Lead Generation Challenge

Winning new business is increasingly challenging, but equally more opportunity exists than ever before. As end-user organisations seek to understand a rapidly moving technology landscape and identify how they can adopt new technologies, the role of the reseller has never been more important.

The process for lead generation has been evolving at a fast pace as prospects engage increasingly online, and meetings have shifted to virtual platforms. While many see more meetings in their diary, it is unlikely this will retain to pre-pandemic levels, and we will all need to adapt to new ways of working and securing the leads and opportunities we need.

Pragma work as an integral part of a resellers sales and marketing machine. Our marketing function develop and deliver content across multiple platforms to cater to reseller marketing challenges. The Pragma sales team will support the reseller in every aspect of new business, from supporting lead generation teams with product and marketing knowledge to directly providing digital marketing training and content.

Alex Green, Marketing lead at Pragma, has seen the complexity and capability of resellers marketing teams change significantly: "Video is more important than ever as resellers recognise the shift in people's desire to consume content in this way. Our resellers work hard to deliver fresh and insightful content to help end-users understand complex technology and see how it can make a difference in their business. Having a good video content strategy is key, and our team supports resellers with hundreds of branded videos available to get the right messaging across."



Alex Green,
Marketing
Lead at Pragma

A great example is Pragma reseller Chrome Telecom who experimented with the premise of how a business can work efficiently from anywhere using Ericsson-LG technology. They organised to temporarily move their 'office' to the sunny beach of Hengistbury Head in Dorset for the afternoon, demonstrating that they can process orders, host virtual meetings with their customers and deal with support enquiries all from a hotspot signal.

Dan Woodham, Managing Director at Chrome, commented: "You have to stand out from the crowd, but we also wanted to demonstrate that we use our technology. Showing customers how they can use technology and demonstrating to an end-user the benefits they can get is critical. It's about changing customers' perception and showing what can sometimes be perceived as complex technology concepts are simple and used in the right way can really help businesses succeed."



Richard
Knight,
Founder &
Director at
GetCrisp

Chrome used this as an opportunity to work with GetCrisp to create a series of engaging videos and deliver significant coverage across social media channels. Sharing this information with prospects shows just how easy remote working can be with the right technology.

Speaking about reseller marketing activity is Richard Knight, the Founder and Director of GetCrisp Digital Marketing agency: "We've seen a significant increase in companies embracing digital marketing strategies to drive additional leads to their business. A remote sales approach has also heightened the need for tech companies to make the quoting process slicker using engaging video content and proposals. This often gives our clients the edge over their competitors. The use of tech like the Pragma Hub, designed for easily quoting clients and with the potential of integrating with CRM and billing systems, reduces the chance of human error, improves the customer experience, reduces admin time and significantly increases ROI."

As well as content-driven marketing, the traditional telemarketing approach remains a vital part of most resellers lead generation programmes, and Pragma sees this continuing. The change is around integrating telemarketing processes into a content-driven approach. Through social media, email marketing, SEO and organic search, you can create multiple touchpoints with a prospect.

The Pragma team can help resellers find the right approach for winning new business with Ericsson-LG iPECS technology and ensure the reseller stays as the trusted technology advisor.

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Wavenet takes ground u

The focus on diversity and inclusion is becoming more widespread across the channel and prime movers continue to create initiatives that advance their D&I programmes. Here, Johnathan Zemlik, Co-Chair of Wavenet's LGBTQ* Employee and Allies Group and Member of the company's Great Place to Work Group, discusses the motivations and strategies that led Wavenet towards creating and maturing its fast developing D&I programme.

As a volunteer for an HIV/AIDS support prevention charity in Yorkshire, Zemlik supported the digitisation of service provision. This gave him insight into the service users' experience and contact centre operation which propelled him towards a career in CX technology at Wavenet. He since supported the company's evolving diversity and inclusion strategy as part of the Great Place to Work Group (a committee of proactive and enthusiastic individuals from across the Wavenet Group).

Wavenet recently completed what is often the most difficult part of the diversity and inclusion journey – the initial stage from planning into deployment, bringing to life the Great Place to Work Group which created Wavenet's LGBTQ* Employees and Allies Group (an internal Microsoft Teams group) launched during Pride Month.

"Wavenet is keen to support LGBTQ* colleagues by providing a safe space for LGBT employees and Allies to feel they can authentically express themselves at work and ensure they can be at their best," stated Zemlik. "It allows them to connect with colleagues who understand



Johnathan Zemlik

There are many opportunities for businesses that embrace diversity and inclusion. For a technology firm like Wavenet it's disruptive thinking

the challenges they face and find role models to show them that it's empowering to be out at work. This helps to enhance colleagues' wellbeing, enhance innovation and builds a foundation on which we will

retain and attract the best talent in the industry. This in turn helps Wavenet retain a competitive advantage."

Perspectives

Zemlik emphasised that a focus on diversity and

inclusion is central to finding candidates with different perspectives, pointing out that companies that actively signpost their support for LGBTQ*, gender diversity, BAME, neuro-diverse and disability inclusion will be

more agile, more empathetic and able to stay on the leading edge of technology. This is especially reflective of younger employees who now expect proactive diversity and inclusion within the workplace.



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Top approach to drive D&I

"There are many opportunities for businesses that embrace diversity and inclusion," commented Zemlik. "For a technology firm like Wavenet it's disruptive thinking. This is central in identifying and adopting the next generation of disruptive technologies; and provides companies with a strategic advantage based on the ability to think differently with diverse perspectives.

"This delivers benefits through all parts of the business from sales, marketing, operations and support as it empowers staff to be their authentic selves and deliver the best they can do. Some of our most diverse staff are also the most talented and make excellent role models for new people entering the company. Sharing their stories internally and nominating them for awards where possible would be a great step forward."

Digital-first

The biggest stumbling block was working out how to take those first steps, noted Zemlik. But the pandemic made that easier. "As we were all working from home in lockdown it made us shift our thinking to a digital-first strategy for diversity and inclusion," said Zemlik. "A Teams group was the ideal place to start. The question was, how to make that group meaningful and relevant. The internal wiki contains links to national and local resources, so regardless of where our colleagues are based they are signposted to accessible and relevant LGBTQ* resources to help feel part of their community both in and outside the business. These include everything from Stonewall and the Terrance

Higgins Trust to local Pride and Sports Groups. We are also working to launch a series of monthly meet-ups as the lockdown eases.

"Entering diversity and inclusion schemes like the Stonewall UK Workplace Equality Index is also an ambition. However, for now we're focusing on empowering our staff,

Diversity and inclusion are all about empowering the workforce, and it starts with involving them in the process and understanding the small easy things that can help you take the first steps

understanding their needs and undertaking the basics to ensure the stakeholders within our business have the maximum amount of input and control over the direction of our diversity and inclusion policies. We're hoping to empower staff from other groups across the business to copy the model of the LGBTQ* Employee and Allies Group and build other groups such as Women in Tech, Wavenet BAME and groups to support staff with disabilities.

"Furthermore, we have sponsored the Yorkshire based Leeds Hunters RUFC to enhance opportunities for LGBTQ* people to get involved with sport. Wavenet will become a gold sponsor for the 2021-22 season. Our support will not only focus on sport but also enable the Hunters' regular focus sessions on subjects such as health and wellbeing, mental

health, hate crime, substance abuse and Trans* rights."

Awareness

In terms of dealing with existing bias, Zemlik says it's all about encouraging self-awareness. "When I was volunteering after university we were always taught to be allies, not adversaries," he stated. "You will get dissenting points

and inclusion, but Wavenet captures its data in two ways as part of its wider focus on employee empowerment and wellbeing. The company showcases its diversity and inclusion strategy on induction to make new starters more comfortable about sharing information; and at yearly or bi-yearly intervals it carries out a wider colleague wellbeing survey.

"This helps those who may not be able to engage," added Zemlik. "Surveys should be anonymous to account for those who may want to express their sexuality, gender identity, neurodiversity, or disability openly."

These approaches to advancing Wavenet's D&I programme enable it to account for those who are confident to self-identify as well as those who aren't ready to be open with their colleagues. "This needs to be interconnected to a wider focus on employee health and wellbeing, with positive actions off the back of data documented followed up," commented Zemlik. "This gives surveys credibility and leads to a virtuous circle of improvement. It also allows businesses to pick up on issues before they start to affect the workforce and risk losing their best talent."

According to Zemlik it's best to start bottom-up rather than top-down. "Some people are under the impression you need an extensive plan and a large budget to do diversity and inclusion properly," he commented. "And there is a view that diversity and inclusion needs to come from the C-Level down.

"However, I feel that is the wrong approach. Diversity and inclusion are all about empowering the workforce and that starts with involving them in the process and understanding the small easy things that can help you take the first steps. Empower and showcase diversity and inclusion champions across the business. They will be central in pushing forward the diversity and inclusion strategy."

Wavenet's Great Place to Work Forum provides this platform, bringing together a diverse group of people from across its UK offices. "This group isn't a talking shop, it allows us to put forward initiatives such as the LGBTQ* Employee and Allies Group which can then be shaped and put into action," added Zemlik. "By focusing on the initial small and easy steps you can create a wider platform for future success." ■

Zemlik's six ways to create a D&I strategy...

- 1. Listen to your employees: Conduct anonymous feedback surveys and create action points.**
- 2. Place the community at the heart of the strategy: Diversity and inclusion are best done from the ground up with maximum input from the communities it seeks to empower.**
- 3. Create a plan but don't dwell on it: The hardest part of any D&I plan is the starting point. Create a list of everything you want to achieve then prioritise the steps that are easiest to take.**
- 4. Set a deadline: Too many initiatives never get past planning for want of a perfect business case.**
- 5. Start small and be agile: Once the initial steps are approved – get stuck in.**
- 6. Innovate: From those first steps and successes you can demonstrate the effectiveness of your initiatives. This will build a platform for larger tasks such as reviewing your company's existing policies and taking direct action within the community.**



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Analysts predict the global IoT market will reach \$520 billion this year and 43% of devices will be mobile connected.

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AGENDA

- 9:25 – Introduction – Nigel Sergent, Editorial Director, Comms Dealer
- 9:30 – Making margin in IoT has never been simpler – Dan Cunliffe, Managing Director, Pangea
- 10:00 – Optimising opportunities in 5G – Mark Lomas, Head of New Business and Rob Kittler, Head of Connectivity Practice, Gamma
- 10:30 – Coffee break
- 11:00 – Dispelling the myths around mobile data and IoT – Adrian Sunderland, Chief Technical Officer and Lee Broxson, Sales Director, Jola
- 11:30 – Open your mind to new mobile opportunities – Anton Le Saux, Head of M2M and IoT and Rob Foster, Sales Director, Zest4
- 12:00 – Guest speaker
- 12:30 – Lunch
- 14:00 – One-to-one meetings forum
- 17:00 – Delegate check-in
- 17:30 – Pre-dinner drinks
- 16:00 – Networking dinner and bar

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Mark Lomas, Head of New Business – Channel at Gamma

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"Channel partners looking to add mobile data to their propositions should focus on working with an aggregator who has tools in place to help them overcome all the pitfalls and generate profitable recurring revenues quickly and easily with no additional resource."

Adrian Sunderland, CTO, Jola

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"Mobile data is the biggest opportunity in the Channel right now—between IoT connectivity, broadband outages and recovering from the pandemic, every industry needs it. Margin in Mobile is the go-to platform for resellers to get a head start on winning those opportunities."

Dan Cunliffe, Managing Director – Pangea

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"We will be advising the channel of the key changes we are making to continue to support partners and ensure they maximise the IoT opportunity and highlighting the access tools and portals required to scale in Wholesale."

Mandy Fazelynia, Managing Director – Zest Group

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"At a time where it is key to add true value and differentiate yourself in the market, Margin in Mobile gives us a great opportunity to learn as well as educate the channel in how to achieve exactly that."

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Defining a sustainability

An Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report published last month signalled a red warning for humanity. Extreme climate change means big trouble and the IPCC says an urgent reduction of fossil fuel emissions to ease global warming is the only answer. These are issues for all businesses to hammer out as a matter of urgency, but you may be wondering if you are up to the task. So last month's Sustainability Channel Forecast Session unravelled the challenge into a clear strategy for all to follow, led by two of the channel's leading Green champions – Gamma and Zen Internet. In the first of two reports, Zen founder and Chairman Richard Tang provides insights into his trail blazing sustainability strategy.

The climate change crisis now requires a deep reappraisal of business approaches and policies, and according to Tang the obligation is on business owners to do everything in their power to move forward on sustainability. "Our goal is to become net zero by 2028," he stated. "Not just reduce carbon by buying carbon offsets, we will actually remove carbon from the atmosphere. We are already carbon neutral plus. I would encourage all businesses, big and small, to seriously consider becoming a B Corp. It's the gold standard in terms of the next generation of businesses."

Zen is a B Corp, meaning its directors have a legal responsibility to consider a wider purpose beyond profit. "Awareness is growing, and more recently we are seeing people choose Zen as their broadband provider based on ethical grounds," he added. "We want to make an ethical choice for climate change and the planet. As businesses, we



Richard Tang

We will support partner organisations in becoming more sustainable, more environmentally conscious and also potentially certified

absolutely cannot simply just hand our responsibilities to the Government and expect it to do all the work. For example, Covid-19 has brought a fundamental change to the way of work that will permanently reduce the amount of commuting

as people want to work flexibly. That reduces the carbon footprint and gives us an indication of what can be achieved."

Short-termism

The B Corp movement was started in the US with

the idea that too many businesses just focus on profit at the expense of the environment, their people, their customers and always setting short-term goals that involve taking gambles. "These are factors that created the financial crisis of

2008," commented Tang. "The impact was worldwide and millions of people lost their homes, their businesses and their savings. There was a real human impact. Yet here we've got a system that would have prevented that from happening. People now recognise that this is not sustainable and that having a wider purpose is vital."

There's about 3,500 B Corps in the world across circa 70 countries. In the UK there's 400-plus. "The founders said, let's create a business model that actually writes into the articles of association that the directors have an equal responsibility to their people, to their environment, to their customers, to all stakeholders," explained Tang. "It's a great structure for our business. It's something that fitted very well into the culture we already had at Zen. So it was a natural choice.

"People ask us about the certification process and what it's like being a B Corp. We want to talk to our partners on how to go about it. My

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advice is to carve out time and visit the B Corp website. All of the resources that you need are right there. We will support partner organisations in becoming more sustainable, more environmentally conscious and also potentially certified."

Carbon neutrality

Zen's decision to declare its goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2028 was also driven by Tang's people-first view of the world. "The capitalist system, as it is today, is too focused on money and profit for the few at the expense of the majority, and at the expense of the environment," he stated. "There are many examples of that. I've been

shipped? Then there is the shipment to the customer. What happens when that router becomes end of life? All of this has to be taken into account. So we've got a big team working on it. Although our published goal is 2028, hopefully we can achieve it even sooner."

Only a full engagement with the issues will change anything, and the reach for sustainable policies requires a root and branch review. "It will be down to each individual organisation to look at their entire operations," added Tang. "When you start on this journey the team will be passionate but they won't have all the expertise initially.

Channel companies will choose partners based increasingly on their sustainability

asked, how do you balance the people focus and doing the right thing with growing and making a profit? But it's not a simple choice because one supports the other. We've grown every year for 26 years with this policy."

The challenge of stemming the tide of climate change for companies such as Zen is a vast undertaking that will take a lot more than simply buying carbon credits. "A big factor with net zero is that you've got to consider your entire end-to-end supply chain," said Tang.

"For example, every month we buy and ship thousands of routers. This has a carbon footprint attached it. Where do the components come from? From where were they

We had external help. Businesses are complex beasts and you need to understand all that complexity."

Culture matters

According to Tang, all engagement with staff, customers and channel partners must sustain the conversation of carbon neutrality – which inevitably becomes a defining culture. "I know for sure that a lot of people choose to join Zen, and stay, because of our priorities and what we're about as a business – people first, money second," he said. "I'm proud that over a quarter of our workforce have been with us for over 10 years. And with the increasing awareness of the environment, and the need for businesses

to make changes, we will continue to attract people.

"We have also seen bigger corporates choose Zen based on our culture. Technologically, we're all quite similar, we all provide similar technologies and similar levels of expertise. The price of the solution is more or less the same. Going forwards, consumers and B2B customers will increasingly put a greater weighting on a wider purpose when choosing their suppliers."

Part of becoming net zero also requires an assessment of partnerships and suppliers, upstream and downstream. "I think channel relationships will be similar to other B2B relationships in that companies will choose partners based increasingly on their sustainability," said Tang. "We see this to an extent already, where we are in close alignment with some of our channel partners based on more than just the technology, the people and the pricing.

"The new generation are more conscious about sustainability. So a partner looking at channel relationships, who has kids telling them about the environment etc, whose own conscience is telling them – and they have a choice between one partner just focused on profit, the other on a wider purpose – which one are you going to choose? Our ultimate driver is that we want to create a sustainable future for our children and future generations. Businesses have a huge role to play in that. So let's get started. We need to act quickly." ■

Channel Forecast: Gamma talks sustainability – page 26

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Preparing for the ESG tr

True, it's early days for most channel companies to have executed a strategic reinvention with ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) at the core, but the message is crystal clear – leaders need to quickly establish ESG priorities and connect them to their organisation's overall direction, according to Matt Worboys, Business Development Director Channel at Gamma.

As the climate change crisis deepens it creates a rapidly changing context in which channel organisations operate, making it a critical priority for leaders to implement ESG initiatives that align with growing environmental concerns among whole populations. "We are absolutely seeing this, and it's coming from a variety of areas," stated Worboys. "We're seeing a real drive towards environmental, social and governance aspects – from our customers, our own board, our investors, our senior leadership team and employees."

Gamma has established an ESG Committee and ESG Steering Group to evaluate its positive impacts. "Things have moved forward at speed and are now reflected in the priorities of these teams," stated Worboys. "Gamma has put a stake in the ground about our intent to understand the true environmental impact of the services that we deliver. That applies across the whole value chain. It's about understanding that impact and then setting out our objectives to drive down some of those consequences on the environment."

The pressure for businesses to address ESG challenges is also



Matt Worboys

Gamma has put a stake in the ground about our intent to understand the true environmental impact of the services that we deliver. That applies across the whole value chain

reflected in new demands from end users, observed Worboys. "In terms of the tenders we receive there is a significant weighting around how you're going to support them around

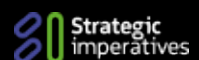
environmental impacts," he commented. "Gone are the days where you copied and pasted the text across a number of different tenders. Now, they need to be tailored to particular organisations.

We're currently seeing this mostly in the public sector, but the private sector will undoubtedly catch up. The focus around these issues has sharpened over the last two to three years

and ESG is creeping into the private sector. Change is in the air and it is likely that new legislation will ensure that businesses are acting in an environmentally responsible way."



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Transformation

Adopting a responsible sustainability approach may prompt business leaders to consider buying carbon credits to become carbon neutral, but this approach is becoming less of an attractive option and may prove costly, emphasised Worboys. "It's not just about offsetting," he commented. "People now expect more from businesses in reducing their carbon footprint. It's important to act now."

The fundamental shift towards an ESG strategy will take stakeholder scrutiny into full account to reflect their view of the future business. "We've spent a lot of time talking with stakeholders within our organisation,"

To target the buyer successfully channel partners need to demonstrate responsibility around ESG

explained Worboys. "It's about understanding the values that they consider to be important. They represent Gamma as a company, and they need to believe in the organisation. So we talk to our staff and customers to ensure we meet their expectations. We've also seen it around staffing. When you're interviewing for new staff, candidates are asking challenging questions around the diversity of the board, your strategy around pay and diversity, and environmental considerations. For us, this year is around putting that stake in the ground and identifying where our priorities are for 2022 and beyond."

Gamma's heavy bias towards ESG-based

strategic reinvention is also reflected in the outlooks of a growing number of investors. "Companies attract investment from various funds, and some are particularly targeted at a subset of businesses," said Worboys. "Organisations that don't meet their criteria around delivering on environmental credentials may not appear in certain funds."

Carbon transparency

This year Gamma is taking part in the Carbon Disclosure Project, an initiative that drives environmental action through transparent reporting, identifying environmental risks and opportunities and tracking

progress. Worboys believes that as organisations such as Gamma become more transparent in the way that they represent themselves, others will follow. "We'll start to see people wanting to do this as opposed to being forced," he commented. "We're happy to help our partners to achieve that."

"Responsible channel partnerships will be key. ESG is about partnerships and identifying opportunities. The consumer has never been more environmentally aware around the products and services they're purchasing. To ignore that would be foolish. We have an opportunity to present products and services that meet those requirements. That's the real take away."

A reseller's ESG journey will start with a reappraisal of operations which will also create opportunities to form stronger channel partnerships. "In terms of an audit of partners, there will be a need to discuss those topics as we come under pressure to disclose our whole supply chain from sourcing right through to the end customer," said Worboys.

"But it's also about ensuring that there is a balance between allowing businesses to thrive without burdening them in red tape. Over time, we will see legislation come in. Yet many resellers will probably leave it relatively late to become fully compliant. Taking steps towards that now is the right course of action."

What the channel now needs is to deploy that ability to be flexible, exemplified by the industry's Covid-19 lockdown response, and establish ESG initiatives. "To target the buyer successfully channel partners need to demonstrate responsibility around ESG," reiterated Worboys. "Partners operating in the public sector will really start to see this – and it will soon also come into the private sector. Channel partners must consider how they are going to respond. By articulating their sustainability message they will develop a competitive advantage."

"There's a lot of learning to be done. Understand your company, understand your suppliers, understand your customers and your staff. Establish processes now to ensure that you're on the front foot and ESG legislation does not come out of the blue." ■

Turning the Tables

It was a busy summer for our Group of companies. Other than working some very interesting deals, we launched Knight Transaction Services as a separate business to provide due diligence to acquirers. However, the big news for us arrived in June, when we received an offer from K3 Capital to acquire the entire Knight Group.

The deal completed in early July and was a genuine opportunity to walk a mile in our clients' shoes. We appreciate that selling a business you have started from scratch is a very personal journey and so have set out a summary of our own experiences and thought processes from the deal.

Knight is a diverse group comprising our Knight CF business, Knight R&D and the newly launched Knight TS. In terms of identifying parties that would place value on all three components together would probably be a very limited pool. Clearly we could sell all businesses separately but felt there was a genuine value and benefit in keeping everyone together.

From a shareholder perspective, Paul and I had discussed our Exit plans and felt that the deal suited us personally. We were keen to realise some value for the business but felt there was still some work left to do in terms of our growth plans. The deal allows us to keep running Knight as an independent business backed by the significant resources of a PLC. We committed to a 5 year earn-out – not something we would advise most of our clients to accept – but we are confident in our business and satisfied that we had negotiated sufficient protections. Most importantly we do want to continue building Knight for at least another 5 years and believe it will prosper as part of K3.

The other key consideration for us was our team. As a small professional services organisation, we are only



Adam Zoldan

as good as our group of incredibly talented and committed people. We wanted to ensure they would view the deal as positively as us and K3 were very supportive of this. We had put in place a package of benefits for the team but were still unsure of how everyone would react. We need not have worried as the deal has been embraced, particularly the career prospects of being part of a larger organisation

Post deal, not much has changed and, as agreed, we continue to operate independently. There have been a number of other positive factors for us. We have access to new expertise in areas such as tax which we know will be of value to our clients. Importantly K3 is top of the league table in terms of the number of deals completed per year in the UK and we now have access to its deals which means if you are looking at acquisitions, we may be able to introduce you to a range of deals.

In summary, there was much soul searching over the course of the transaction, something that we know we share with many of our clients, but after 130 deals, it was special to experience the completion feeling for ourselves.

Enough about us... We have written the first chapter of our whitepaper looking at how to value your business. Its available at bit.ly/valuefactors and we will host a webinar where we will discuss in detail – we look forward to seeing you soon.

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Pulsant takes edge comp

Antin Infrastructure Partners' acquisition of Pulsant in July enabled CEO Rob Coupland to fully gear up and capitalise on the shift to hybrid cloud solutions driven by the pandemic, while accelerating his five year plan to create the UK's leading edge computing platform.

The Antin deal enables Pulsant to sharpen its focus on its core portfolio of colocation and hybrid cloud while also bringing scalable and high capacity coverage to businesses across the UK through the build out of a nationwide edge computing platform. The demand for hybrid and multi-cloud strategies is rising as businesses look to reduce the costs of storing everything in public cloud. At the same time, the rapid growth in IoT and connected devices is significantly increasing data volumes, driving a need for robust edge strategies. New technologies such as 5G and 6G will also increase demand for seamless, high speed connectivity from remote devices, making latency and the flow of data increasingly critical.

"Every platform that supports business connected applications will have to be more widely distributed to deal with the growing demand," commented Coupland. "We have been early adopters of this mindset and the ongoing evolution of our edge network is already differentiating us against other players in our space."

"Our nationwide network of data centres, hybrid cloud capabilities and our heritage of serving regional businesses puts us in a strong



Rob Coupland

The ongoing evolution of our edge network is already differentiating us against other players in our space

position to deliver on market demand as it grows."

With a strong portfolio of colocation, cloud and networking solutions, Pulsant has long prepared to capitalise on the opportunity, and is already building a UK-wide edge computing platform, a grid-like architecture that will deliver data across data centre locations that are close to edge devices. "Our regional data centres will

play a key role in bridging the gap between centralised platforms and micro-edge locations such as base stations and masts, delivering services to the edge for UK businesses," said Coupland.

Strong pedigree

His past experience will no doubt help him to accelerate his strategy with confidence. Previous roles have taught him how to build commercial and sales oriented teams to capture opportunities,

lead operational teams and quickly scale capacity. "This has enabled me to rapidly strengthen Pulsant's proposition for regional enterprises, providing edge networking opportunities and driving change across the industry," he stated.

Coupland joined Pulsant as CEO in 2019 with almost 30 years experience in the IT industry. He began his career with Cable&Wireless where he became Product Group

Manager for Applications and then spent 10 years at Telecity Group in a variety of roles, including Managing Director and COO. This was followed by a stint at Digital Realty as Managing Director EMEA.

"The industry has seen a digital shift over the last decade as businesses leverage new technologies to improve operational efficiency and agility," stated Coupland. "This has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic which forced businesses to rapidly undergo digital transformation and is driving demand for hybrid infrastructure."

"Similarly, 5G adoption is increasing and driving growth in more complex and mission critical IoT solutions, which in turn is resulting in a growing number of devices, applications and volume of data. To be successful, organisations need faster access to data, regardless of location and are shifting towards a distributed multi-cloud model over the traditional centralised model."

Pulsant was established in 1995 and has grown both organically and through acquisitions. It started as an ISP called EdNET, which then rebranded as Lumison in 2004 before being acquired by Bridgepoint



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Computing lead

Development Capital in 2010. A year later, Lumison integrated with Dedipower, a managed hosting company and Bluesquare Data, a data centre operator – that's when the Pulsant brand was born.

Pulsant acquired Scotland-based colocation company ScoLocate in 2012 and was refinanced by Oak Hill Capital in 2014. In 2015, Pulsant acquired the consulting arm of Spinnaker Red, followed by IT infrastructure services company Onyx in 2016 and LayerV in 2017.

Funding boost

As mentioned, in July this year Pulsant was acquired by private equity firm Antin Infrastructure Partners, which will support it on the next phase of growth and the building of a nationwide edge computing platform, while it continues to grow the core portfolio of colocation and hybrid cloud. The company has over 1,500 clients and its technology partners include Microsoft, VMWare, Citrix, HPE, Dell EMC, Cisco and Alert Logic.

"Over the past few years, Pulsant has made significant investments in both people and infrastructure," added Coupland. "Earlier this year we announced an £8 million investment with Zayo to develop a national network for edge computing. The partnership will see our 10 UK data centres connected using Zayo's fibre network to deliver a national high capacity, low latency network. Today we operate 10 enterprise class data centres which stretch from London to Scotland, providing 95 per cent coverage of the population with sub-five millisecond latency."

Pulsant's client portfolio encompasses the public sector, SMEs and mid-to-large regional businesses, the latter being its core focus. The company has a particular strength in legal, professional and financial services, alongside service providers and ISVs. "As demand for hybrid and multi-cloud strategies rises, channel partners will need to evolve their offerings to deliver end-to-end cloud solutions," noted Coupland.

"The rapid growth of data from connected devices means they will also need to be ready to accommodate the market's growing edge networking requirements. They need to think about building their infrastructure network sooner rather than later."

Attending to urgent industry matters is par for the course at the moment, but nobody could predict the swift and sudden onset of Covid-19 and lockdown challenges. "When we entered lockdown in early 2020, I was still 'the new CEO' learning about our clients and people," commented Coupland. "There was no precedent to show the path forward and that was quite daunting."

"But the response from the Pulsant team was fantastic and enabled us to be agile in helping our clients, and supportive in looking after each other. That was a great leveller as we all dealt with the shared challenges of lockdown. We are emerging from the lockdown without having furloughed anyone and with an even stronger sense of team spirit. There is great energy and optimism in the team for the next stage of our growth." ■

Just a minute with Rob Coupland...

Role model: My dad. He was a successful small business owner before he retired. He built his business on doing right by his customers and looking after his people.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: When I left school, my original plan was to join the RAF as an engineer and I was accepted for officer training. I ultimately decided not to take that route.

Your strengths and what could you work on? I am an optimist and see that as a strength. Even in challenging situations I'm focused on the way forward, rather than dwelling on what happened. But I am an introvert and at times that can make me seem aloof. I've got more comfortable with how to reveal more of my personality.

What could you not do without in your job? A team of independent thinkers.

Lesson learnt: Hindsight has taught me not to be scared of failing. Learning to be comfortable with that has probably been my greatest lesson.

One example of something you have overcome: My introverted nature meant that for many years I found it very difficult to reveal much about myself. I've got more comfortable doing that over the last five years. I'm more myself.

What do you fear most? Frogs.

Best advice you've been given: When I first became an MD, a colleague told me to seek out the people in my business that would tell me what was really going on, rather than the things I wanted to hear. Great advice.

How do you relax? I took up cycling. It's a great way to get exercise, get out in the fresh air and disconnect for a while.

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With entries now closed and another record number of entries received, the Comms National Awards judges are now determining who will be declared winners of these highly coveted prizes at the glittering finals night to be staged at the Hilton on Park Lane in London's Mayfair on October 7th.

Sponsored for the second time this year by Digital Wholesale Solutions and independently judged by a panel of distinguished industry experts, the Comms National Awards recognises quality across the channel spectrum with awards in both reseller (customer solutions) and vendor (service to the channel) categories.

This year, we will salute the efforts made by channel businesses in the supply of collaboration solutions, which have been so vital during the

Covid crisis and the success of the Altnets, who are helping to connect Britain to high bandwidth full fibre. And, as ever, one individual will be presented with the illustrious Entrepreneur of the Year Award to recognise his or her efforts in growing a highly successful channel business. Channel efforts to improve Diversity and Sustainability will also be recognised along with innovation and business transformation.

"The Comms National Awards is the UK's leading awards process for the ICT channel and whether



companies are winners or finalists, the prestige and PR they can gain from participating is huge. In these challenging times it will be even more important to acknowledge the amazing work channel teams have undertaken to keep Britain connected," said Comms Dealer Editorial Director Nigel Sergent.

The CN Awards is the ultimate channel celebration. Be part of it. Book your place at www.cnawards.com



DWS PROUD TO HONOUR THE CHANNEL'S BEST OF THE BEST

"This is a fantastic awards process and the awards night itself is always the highlight of the year, bringing together everyone in the Channel for a night of celebration," said Digital Wholesale Solutions Chief Executive Officer, Terry O'Brien.

"The effort entrants put into these awards is exemplary and we know the value our teams place on being shortlisted. Our industry has done some amazing things during the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping the NHS and other key organisations communicating effectively, and the CNAs gives channel companies a wonderful opportunity to reward and recognise those efforts. It is amazing to see more organisations than

ever have entered this year to show the country what we are made of and what we have achieved during this challenging time.

"We were delighted to sponsor the awards for the first-time last year and, although it had to be run virtually, it was still great to see how the industry pulled together to celebrate our achievements. This year we're so looking forward to a fully live event and I'm sure the atmosphere at finals night will be extra special. We can't wait to celebrate and congratulate everyone in the channel at this very special occasion."

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A WORD FROM OUR SPONSORS...



"It's great to see one of the highlights of the events calendar back to recognise the exceptional talent within the ICT channel. As part of our work, we see the incredible amount of effort and creativity

that has continued in the most challenging environments and it's important to recognise and celebrate this success. We are proud to, once again, sponsor the Entrepreneur of the Year Award at this year's CNAs and congratulate all the finalists."

Adam Zoldan
Director, Knight Corporate Finance



"The SI team are proud to sponsor the Intelligent Networking and Connectivity category at the 2021 CNAs, including the hotly contested Best AltNet and Best Network awards. Connectivity is the

backbone of digital transformation, and we look forward to celebrating the achievements of the businesses accelerating the Channel's journey towards Digital Britain. Congratulations to all the finalists, and best of luck on the night!"

Wail Sabbagh
Managing Director
Strategic Imperatives



"TalkTalk Wholesale Services are delighted to be a key sponsor at Comms National Awards 2021. As always, it will be an incredible night to bring the channel together to recognise and celebrate all the

hard work in the industry. I would like to wish all of the finalists the best of luck and we look forward to congratulating you all at the event!"

Richard Thompson
Managing Director
TalkTalk Wholesale Services



"This year's CNAs is perhaps the most highly anticipated ever, as the industry's top performers can finally meet in person to celebrate the achievements of the past year. Union Street is delighted

to once again sponsor the Vertical Market Customer Solution award, and we're looking forward to hear of the innovative ways in which resellers have positively impacted their customers' businesses, something we all desire to achieve. On behalf of myself and all at Union Street, I would like to wish the best of luck to all finalists."

Vincent Disneur
Managing Director, Union Street



"At Virgin Media O2 Business we're committed to using the power of connectivity to benefit communities across the UK, taking action to close the digital divide and help build an inclusive,

resilient, and low carbon economy. That's why we're proud to sponsor the 'Positive Impact' category at this year's Comms National Awards and recognise the organisations leading the way in diversity and sustainability in our sector."

Dale Parkinson
Wholesale Sales Director
Virgin Media O2 Business
Wholesale (fixed)



"Voiceflex is delighted to be sponsoring the Distribution Category at the Comms National Awards. This event is one of the best night outs in the industry calendar. Voiceflex is one hundred percent

channel focused and if you haven't explored our applications in a while, it's worth a taking a look! We are leading the market with our SoGEA and SoGEA Voice solutions as well as simple and effective WebRTC applications such as click to call and click to call me."

Paul Taylor
Sales Director, Voiceflex



To book your place at the CN Awards finals night go to www.cnawards.com

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Supercharged Transparency

Transparency Solutions has stormed into the premier league of Microsoft partners in short time, fuelled by 80 per cent year-on-year growth. Here, CEO David Jobbins shares his strategic and personal insights into the various stages of his remarkable supercharged journey.

Jobbins founded Microsoft-only Transparency with Colin Macandrew in February 2015. Already, the Ferndown-based business has 150 staff (set to rise to 200 by Christmas) and is on target for £26 million revenues this year, an increase of £11 million on the previous year. "Starting a business with a little savings and no financial backing other than a few credit cards was a risk," said Jobbins. "Life was expensive and we enjoyed lots of holidays with the kids, so having zero really grounded me. We had the confidence we would be successful, and worked hard to make sure we were."



David Jobbins

Transparency now has circa 300 customers across most verticals, from 30 user SMBs to 46,000 user enterprise organisations. "Going from a turnover of zero to £26m in less than seven years creates lots of transformations," stated Jobbins. "But the highlights include a heavy investment in our Security Operations Centre, expanding into New Zealand to create 24x7 support and security monitoring, and most recently our acquisition of AMT Evolve to enhance our Teams, SharePoint and Power Platform offerings."

The big ambition is for Transparency to become the best Microsoft partner

The biggest lesson I've learned is to not forget those around you, the families they have and challenges they face at home as well as at work

in the UK with 300-plus employees. It's already set to become the most accredited partner in the UK. "We offer Microsoft cloud services, which is a continually growing proposition," commented Jobbins. "We help people who aren't using Microsoft tools and those that want to further leverage the Microsoft cloud. And as Microsoft develops its product set, we also

adapt quickly to offer these solutions for our customers."

Cloud migration

Business requirements for technology have changed significantly, particularly since Covid and the subsequent lockdowns, and has contributed to the growth at Transparency as organisations look to move to the cloud and enable remote and hybrid working, streamline

processes and tighten up security. "Most importantly, Transparency continues to evolve as we grow our team," added Jobbins. "We couldn't do any of this without our 150-plus staff."

Jobbins also wanted to build an honest, open and transparent company for staff, suppliers and customers – hence the name Transparency. "We wanted a culture where

everyone is valued equally and has a voice," explained Jobbins. "From me as the CEO all the way through the business, everyone is equal and plays an important part. Too many resellers in this industry don't put enough focus on their staff or value the people around them. Value the team around you, and they will value you and your business so much more than you think they will."



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"The biggest lesson I've learned is to not forget those around you, the families they have and challenges they face at home as well as at work. Through the many pressures of growth, the times I've forgotten this have been the times I've failed and had problems. If you respect everyone in the team, you get a mutual respect that delivers a performance that words and money cannot buy."

Customer focus

According to Jobbins, the customer has also been forgotten for too long and organisations in our field have been too focused on their own agendas, not what the customer needs. "Cloud technologies help break through this with firm standards that cannot be altered for profiteering," he added. "The market needs to focus more on the customer's customer through driving a better engagement and utilising advanced cloud technologies, such as Teams with Voice and bespoke applications."

Jobbins' objective is for Transpary to become the UK's leading Microsoft partner in all areas, also emerging in Europe and beyond. To achieve this happy state he is focused on five growth areas across Azure DevOps, Security, Enterprise Voice, Data and AI, and the Power Platform.

"DevOps is important as many organisations are moving to Azure, but most of the market migrations are just lift and shift," he said. "Where's the value in that? The true value of Azure is seen when our customers' environments are built specifically for

them on platform, rather than just copied to Azure. With Enterprise Voice often a forgotten part of cloud migrations, there is a real opportunity to mature customers' Teams experiences by taking voice into the platform and away from ageing PBX systems. This gives a holistic communications experience for staff and customers. Then there's Power Platform, Power BI and the Power Apps toolset that helps businesses transform the way they work.

"There are a lot of changes and development within the Microsoft stack, meaning that we have to keep on our toes to be ahead of our competitors and give the best value for our customers. Furthermore, technology needs to be secure and reliable – more so now than ever – and the security tool set is advancing at an incredible rate."

Transpary's accelerating rate of growth is reflected in a number of milestones quickly reached on its journey. "The first milestone was month five: I was able to pay myself and Colin £1,000 each," said Jobbins. "It was the best £1,000 I have ever earned! More recently came two of our ultimate milestones – getting funding from Beech Tree Private Equity which helped to expand the business, including our 24x7 operation in New Zealand and the first Microsoft-only Security Operations Centre. Selling part of my business and getting investment, as well as choosing the right PE partner which shares our company values, was the hardest decision last year. It has been a massive benefit for the company and we're just getting started." ■

Just a minute with David Jobbins...

Role model: People like Richard Branson inspire me. Outside of business I always take my inspiration from my parents, family and faith.

Tell us something about yourself we don't know: I have struggled with dyslexia since a child which didn't help my education. Now I encourage the use of technologies to help hidden disabilities such as dyslexia. Over the years I've done well with few qualifications, and today I like to inspire others with disabilities and few qualifications to go for their dreams.

Your strengths and what could you work on? I'm a man of great empathy. But I need to work on my patience and perfectionism.

What do you fear most? I've always feared failure, but I shouldn't.

What talent do you wish you had? To touch type and do more than one thing at the same time.

Industry wish: To make it an honest and equal place for everyone. Sadly, there's an industry-wide problem where the words diversity, integrity and honesty are used in marketing but not acted out in real life. Get this right and success speaks for itself.

Best advice you've been given: Make sure that everyone you hire is better than you, and don't be uncomfortable being the weakest in the boardroom.

One example of something you have overcome? Lockdown. We went into it with 45 staff, weathered the storm and emerged with over 150 employees.

Who do you admire most in the channel? All the people that have started businesses from nothing. And business leaders that value their staff more than they do their profits.

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Where are the candidates?



Darrol Stevens and Ollie Benn

It was recently reported that UK job vacancies jumped above 1 million for the first time on record in July 2021. For most recruiters, it no doubt feels like they are trying to fill half of that number by themselves!

As a recruitment business in the ICT sector, we are extremely busy with more vacancies than ever before, but finding talent is proving to be a real challenge. Tech and telco is booming right now, everyone is hiring. It really is a great time for a move, but where are all of the candidates?

Applications for our job adverts have never been so low, with roles that are usually very popular only attracting a handful of applicants. We are also seeing more counteroffers than usual, with companies fighting to keep hold of their staff, especially if they chose to save them from redundancies last year.

It really is a candidate driven market right now. We are seeing employers bending over backwards to attract great people and we are even seeing signs of an increase in salaries offered, something which many would agree is long overdue. However, a lot of people still feel a move would be too risky right now, it seems that there is still a bit of a hangover from the global pandemic.

Where we are seeing the most success in attracting great candidates is hiring for companies that have embraced

work from home, or hybrid options. If a company is open to their staff working from home, they are not limited by location when hiring, meaning there is much more chance of us finding them people that more closely match the job spec.

Incredibly, there are still a lot of companies in ICT that won't allow staff to work from home. What surprises us most, as an outsider looking in, is that the industry is providing technology that champions flexible working, so why the resistance to change? The majority of the workforce in ICT worked from home during the pandemic, so we realised that working from home doesn't have a negative effect on productivity. Many people we speak to tell us that they are more productive at home, however, most prefer to spend some time in the office, interacting with colleagues face to face. Whether it is a lack of trust or a concern that the office will lose the buzz of a full house, one thing it does impact on is recruitment.

All businesses want the best possible candidates to join them and take it to the next level. If companies want to hire great people, they need to adjust to how people want to work. If they don't, their competitors will.

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M&A drivers accelerate

High transaction values and rising deal volumes, combined with plentiful private equity funding are all positive signs for business leaders in the tech sector considering an exit. But these exciting trends also signal an increasingly competitive M&A market. And according to Christian Craggs, Director of M&A and Strategy at Onecom, the Covid-19 environment could act as a catalyst for even greater levels of activity.

Reseller business models are attracting ever more investment and deal activity, and competition for targets is certain to intensify as the conditions for accelerating M&A seem well aligned. "For resellers who managed to survive and grow during Covid and have an exit in mind, now is the time to sell or consider retirement," stated Craggs. "Covid has made people more reflective about when to start enjoying life."

He emphasised that M&A trends continue to be strong, not only in the channel but across the whole telco market with the number of transactions reaching historic highs. "Deals are characterised by a mix of trade buyers and PE, or trade

buyers backed by PE, all keen to invest in a market that's mission critical and Covid resilient," added Craggs. "The telco sector has done well. There remains a desire to digitally transform business critical services enabling flexible working, from high quality data connections to voice and collaboration tools. The new hybrid approach to work will continue to present opportunities for resellers."

Conditions suggest that these trends will ultimately drive deals that will be executed quicker, with buyers especially attracted to the recurring revenue model and professional services, pointed out Craggs. "Furthermore, scale up deals are accelerating and customers are starting to invest in new telco services,



Christian Craggs

with acquirers looking for a strong business and good customer base," he added.

Scale up businesses have a strategic desire to consolidate, so the ICT channel will continue to be a magnet for deals. What's more, investors are also looking for businesses that display resilience against disruption. "With most

While PE isn't always an option for smaller businesses there will be opportunities for low cost debt to drive growth and do acquisitions. But whether your organisation is large or small, Craggs' advice applies across the board. "It is difficult to run and sell the business at the same time, so prepare properly and make sure everything is in good shape," he said. "Give

Give yourself time to nurture and care for customers while you're doing the deal

resellers back to their pre-Covid trading levels, and the market generating a high volume of cash, it is an interesting place for M&A activity with buyers looking to drive scale and add more resilience," stated Craggs. "For many PE firms, the focus is on larger opportunities. That's not to say that PE won't do a smaller deal, but most of the PE backed businesses are of a meaningful scale – £2 million EBITDA to £10 million-plus."

yourself time to nurture and care for customers while you're doing the deal."

Complex process

M&A transactions can be complex and take time, and resellers may require advice on areas ranging from due diligence to long-term business strategy. "Many business leaders underestimate the complexity of preparing for a sale," noted Craggs. "Most buyers require high quality detail –

financial, tax and legal – and the data needs to reflect the vendor's particular story."

For resellers embarking on their exit journey, Craggs says it is key for them to show strong organic growth across revenue, GP and EBITDA, as this delivers the best possible value. "If you can demonstrate historical growth and a clear strategy for future growth that will give you the best possible return," he said. "Demonstrate a capability to up-sell existing and new products. Customer retention is also key, so make sure they are in contract and want to buy from you. Focus on the customer, focus on growth and driving recurring revenue streams. Develop a culture of customer service and customer experience. Data quality should also be well managed. And have a clear strategy for the analogue switch off by 2025."

It is also important to ensure that the sales and customer relationships do not just reside with the founder who wants to exit. "A strong sales and operations leadership team focused on growing the business is key," stated Craggs. "The buyer also needs to be flexible and support the seller through the process. Choose a buyer you know and trust who can support your business and your people. Find the expertise to assist with due diligence, negotiating legals and completing the deal. You need support from experts to get the best possible opportunity with the right buyer. Don't short change yourself with the cheapest lawyer and accountant. It's better if both sides have good advice to ensure that all parties get to a win-win position quicker." ■



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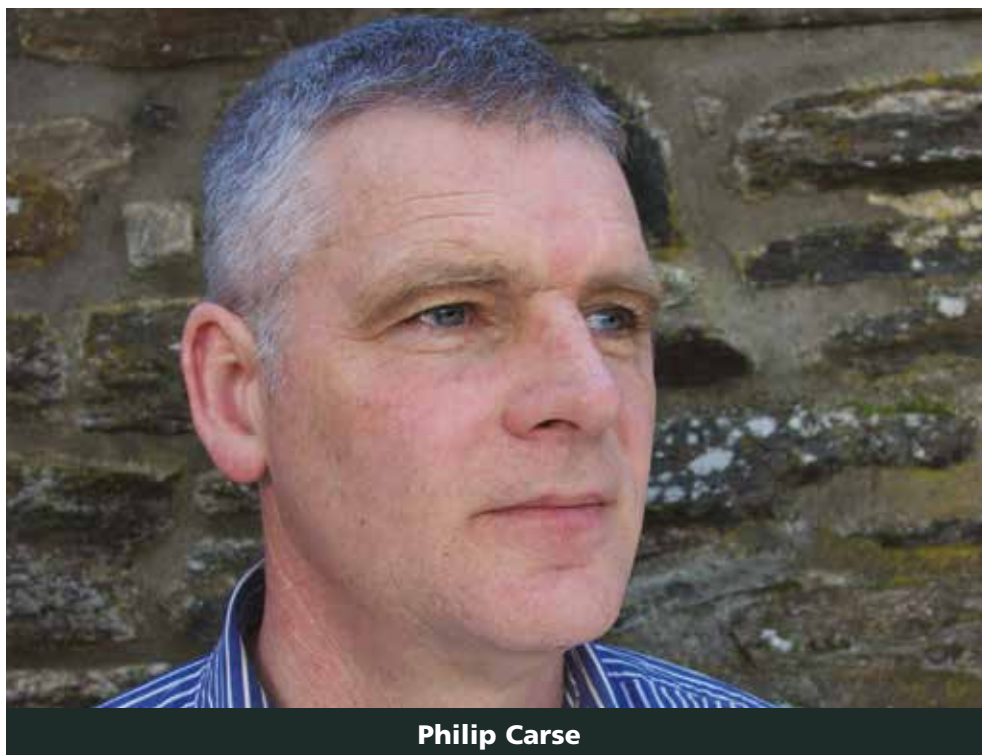
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Resilient trading continues

Despite the Covid-19 crisis, Q2 2021 displayed continued telecoms resilience, bumper corporate activity and ongoing FTTP momentum, writes Philip Carse, Analyst at Megabuyte.com.

When describing the financial performance of most of the companies we track the word 'resilient' has been well used by Megabuyte analysts over the last 16 months, including the Telecoms Services peer group. Consumers have kept their mobile and broadband packages, the private sector has continued to pay for services, with furlough and other government support measures helping those in hard hit verticals, and public sector organisations have continued spending. It helps that telecoms services are broadly mission critical and contracted. But the negative impact on the telecoms sector included (in the early part of the crisis) lower TV sports revenues, deferred projects and constraints in on-premise work. Some impacts remain, such as much reduced mobile roaming revenues.

Although B2B has taken most of the Covid brunt, the picture remains mixed for B2B-focused resellers. Some are doing very well. Channel bellwether Gamma reported that first half 2021 trading was in the top half of analyst expectations for the full year (revenues of £442-460m and EBITDA of £86-95m, up 14-15% at the mid points, estimated 9% organic growth), with outperformance driven by its UK direct business. Meanwhile, Xalient and MLL have both grown



Philip Carse

Private equity backed reseller buy-and-builds have led the way, typically wholly or predominantly using debt

strongly through Covid (123% and 73% organic growth respectively), driven by connectivity demand from MNCs and UK public sector respectively.

The worst performance has probably come from LoopUp, where a Covid-driven spike in its paid for conferencing services last year masked long-term declines from IP-based competitors such as Microsoft Teams. Its last four half year revenues have been £20.1m (second half of 2019, pre-Covid) then £31.9m, £18.3m and now £11.5m,

with even more variability in EBITDA. For other broader based comms and IT players, the worst impacts have been teens declines in revenues and/or EBITDA, but all have remained profitable and cash generative. While many private resellers have yet to report trading across the Covid-impacted period, we have not seen any signs of corporate failure from Companies House filings.

Bumper corporate activity

The resilience of the sector combined with broader corporate activity drivers

(the need for growth capital, plenty of available equity and debt, low interest rates, strong balance sheets etc) led to a resumption in M&A in the fourth quarter of 2020 and this has continued into 2021. Potential Capital Gains Tax changes boosted first quarter volumes (45 Telecoms Services deals), compared with 16 in the second quarter.

While volume was lower, it included the most significant in revenue terms for some time: Nasstar's acquisition of KCOM's National Business

Unit more than doubled 2020 revenues of £114m.

As highlighted by the Nasstar deal, private equity backed reseller buy-and-builds have led the way, typically wholly or predominantly using debt. The usual suspects in recent M&A include Wireless Logic, Focus, Babble, Firstcom, Connect and Arrow, while new PE-backed buyers included North (coinciding with an SBO). Also of note are owner managed buyers using debt. Serial acquirers include TelcoSwitch and Croft Communications. Another trend has been consolidation of telecoms support services business driven by heavy fixed (FTTP) and mobile (4G and 5G) network capex programmes. This has involved both consolidation by existing players (eg WHP, M Group) and market entry by strategic buyers (including Mitie and Starlite).

We have also seen continued direct private equity activity, most notably SBOs for Wireless Logic (Montagu recap), Fournet (from YFM to Palatine), North (from Aliter to Livingbridge) and Wavenet (from Beech Tree to Macquarie). As usual, Capital Markets activity has been sparse (certainly in contrast to numerous software IPOs), with excitement limited to the proposed DBAY take-private of Telit and Altice buying 12% of BT.

We anticipate continued strong corporate activity



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(and associated healthy valuations) given the aforementioned corporate activity drivers and continued telecoms sector resilience.

FTTP momentum

Last quarter's round up focused on FTTP clarity, marked by new Ofcom regulations which supported BT increasing its FTTP target from 20m to 25m premises, potentially accessing external funding (possibly explaining Altice's interest). This quarter's theme is around continuing FTTP momentum, marked by several new entrants/upgraded FTTP plans.

Before going on to those, the main new news is that the newly merged Virgin Media O2's (VMO2) 15.5m premises cable network is to be upgraded to full FTTP over the next seven years at an average cost of circa £100 per premise (implying around £1.4bn over seven years versus circa £2bn annual capex), with customer install costs on top of this.

Strategic rationales for the upgrade include providing a potential opportunity to enter the fixed wholesale market and broaden the B2B appeal, and opex savings, while the FTTP £100 per premises cost compares with £60 being spent on DOCSIS upgrades to Gigabit-enable the cable network. We also assume FTTP is an easier sell to new investors as the company also mulls a potential 7m premises extension.

New FTTP entrants recently include Upp (LetterOne backing a 1m premises rollout), while additional funding has been raised by Grain Connect (300k premises/£175m, new investor Equitix), Telcom

Group (£63m from Gresham House), Orbital (Mobeus) and Giganet (Octopus, £250m plan).

We estimate that there are now 47 companies targeting 70m UK premises with FTTP/Gigabit versus 32m UK premises, with the bulk coming from BT (25m), VMO2 (18.3m mainly cable network recently announced to be switched to FTTP plus potentially 7m more), CityFibre (8m) and Hyperoptic (5m).

Major players

For calendar 2020 we estimated that the seven major market players (BT Consumer and Enterprise, Vodafone, O2UK, Sky, Virgin Media, 3UK and TalkTalk) suffered only mid-single digit declines in revenues, EBITDA, capex and FCF (excluding Sky's investment-driven 38% EBITDA decline), with a circa nine months contribution from Covid.

For the just published quarter to June 2021 (the first to overlap a full Covid-19 period) the three major listed players (BT, VMO2 and Vodafone UK) reported combined revenues of £8,700m, which is down 7% versus the almost Covid-free first quarter of 2020. Adjusting for BT Global M&A and forex, the decline is more like 6%, and just 4% excluding BT Global entirely.

Using BT as a proxy, around two thirds of the decline is due to B2B and one third consumer, reflecting both lower roaming revenues, and for B2B lower call volumes and projects. Given that market revenues have been in decline anyway, one could argue that Covid has had no real impact on the market. ■

Grain Connects with Equitix for 300k FTTP premises roll out

Carlisle-based fibre builder to new builds Grain Connect has significantly increased its ambitions supported by backing from new investor Equitix alongside existing investor Albion Capital. The company has announced a minimum 300k premises/£175m rollout starting in the north of England, with £75m coming from Equitix and £100m planned to come by way of debt, with founding shareholder Pinnacle Group retaining an interest.

Mitie dials into telco infrastructure services with DAEL Ventures

LSE-listed facilities management business Mitie (£3.6bn revenues expected this year) has acquired DAEL Ventures, a UK focused provider of mobile telecoms infrastructure support services, for £15m, to form the basis of a new telecoms unit in its Technical Services division. Mitie has revealed updated financials for DAEL, with calendar 2020 pre-tax profits of £0.2m (after a £0.42m one-off charge) on revenues of £18.3m (so a 0.8x revenue multiple). Revenues were up 10% on 2019 but profits are well down on the £1.0-1.8m of 2017-18. This deal follows similar telecoms network support service acquisitions for WHP, M Group and Starlite triggered by the FTTP, 4G and 5G infrastructure spending boom.

Three UK splashes cash on 5G

Three UK's results for the six months to June 2021 show EBITDA flat at £252m on revenues up 5% to £1,176m. Revenue growth came mainly from a 28% increase in handset revenue to £358m, while net customer service revenues fell 2.3% to £734m. Active customers fell

1% to 9.449m while gross ARPU rose 3% to £18.24, the latter reflecting a shift from pre-paid to contract. There was a 154% increase in Smarty revenues (its low cost MVNO) reflecting higher data plans during lockdowns, as well as a 33% increase in home broadband customers and a doubling in business customers (all to unspecified levels). Capex was up 60% to £307m due to increased investment in the network, while the company also forked out £280m on 5G spectrum.

Community Fibre acquires next-gen Box Broadband

London-focused FTTP network operator Community Fibre has acquired FTTP peer Box Broadband on undisclosed terms. The deal adds modest scale and capability (circa 3% to network investments based on 2019 accounts and perhaps 5% to headcount based on current totals), but expands the geographic horizons of Community Fibre (and its major backers Warburg Pincus and Deutsche Telekom Capital) into Surrey and West Sussex.

BT confirms Crozier as Chairman

BT has confirmed the appointment of Adam Crozier as Chairman from 1st December 2021, replacing Jan du Plessis, who reportedly lost a power struggle with CEO Philip Jansen (who was been in the role since February 2019). Crozier has extensive CEO experience (including ITV, Royal Mail, Football Association, Saatchi & Saatchi) and Chairman experience (currently including Whitbread, ASOS, Kantar Group – he will step down from the ASOS role as well as a Sony NED position). He joins as BT's fortunes appear to be improving, with the company guiding for fiscal 2022 (to March) broadly flat revenues (FY20:

£21.3bn), EBITDA of £7.5-7.7bn (up 1-4%), capex of £4.9bn (up 17%, reflecting increased FTTP rollout) and FCF of £1.1-1.3bn (down 11-25%), and a return to revenue growth thereafter.

Telco deals arrive like buses

Four acquisitions by three telecoms firms signalled strong M&A activity. Two were conventional PE-backed buy-and-builds – with Graphite-backed Babble acquiring 5 Rings and Concert Networks, adding circa 10% to its estimated £36m revenues; and Livingbridge-backed Southern Communications completing the acquisition of TIC, adding circa £3m revenues to its estimated current run rate of £92-93m (and £26-27m EBITDA). Meanwhile, Peterborough-based owner managed comms and IT reseller Rydal Communications (estimated £7-8m revenues) announced the acquisition of Leicestershire-based Agenda IT on undisclosed terms. In reality, this looks to be a rescue situation, with Agenda IT appointing a liquidator.

More M&A from TelcoSwitch

TelcoSwitch has announced its third acquisition of 2021, in the form of Aberdeen-based SureVoIP on undisclosed terms, bringing additional network and data centre infrastructure (including SS7 interconnects), products and IP (including a mobile app), the latter potentially supporting a move into consumer markets coinciding with the PSTN switch-off. Based on headcount and trade debtors, we estimate that SureVoIP adds around £1.2m revenues to TelcoSwitch's current £14-15m run rate, which has more than doubled this year due to M&A and organic growth. ■ philip.carse@megabuyte.com

COMPANY NEWS ROUND UP



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Reducing anxiety is vital as h

Freedom Day is in our rear-view mirrors and the furlough scheme's September deadline is looming.

That means homeworkers returning to the office and furloughed employees returning to work for the first time in several months. This gradual process will require plenty of readjustment and presents a set of health and wellbeing challenges that employers must be wise to.

According to the CIPD's 2021 Health and Wellbeing at Work Report, 44 per cent of employees were anxious about returning to the workplace with 23 per cent citing fear of contagion as the main concern.

The report reads: "Some employees will be fearful about contracting the

virus, others will be anxious about family and friends. Many will have suffered bereavements during this time, often without the chance to say goodbye or attend funerals.

"There will also be fears about job security, returning to the workplace (including using public transport for commuting) and financial concerns. Some employees are working longer or more irregular hours and many are combining work with other family responsibilities, leading to a poor work-life balance."

This leaves business leaders with a tricky puzzle to solve. They must be attentive to the needs of a workforce, all facing unique and unprecedented risk factors, now spread across home, office and hybrid locations.



CHRIS MORRISEY
LILY COMMS

"Ensuring employees are engaged, supported and growing is the utmost importance to achieving high productivity. Since the health crisis, organisations have developed great wellbeing offerings; the key now is consistency. Leaders should continue to invest in wellbeing programmes and infrastructure that supports inclusion. Hybrid working is now the future; businesses have recognised that stepping back into the office environment full time for most employees isn't required. A hybrid workforce brings new challenges but so does having five generations in the workplace. Why? Because each generation's wants and needs are different. However, a common theme amongst all ages is communication. Transforming office space into video conference hubs, allows better workplace collaboration and in turn better relationships. Engaged people radiate and create a positive culture and this in turn supports creating an unforgettable employee workplace experience."



PETER ORR
MENTAL HEALTH
ASSOCIATES

"Many of our colleagues in the telecoms industry will be anxious about returning to the office, face to face meetings and having targets to hit. Their anxiety is real and can be all-consuming. Most people will be feeling uncertain about what office working is now like – do we need to wear masks in the office, or take Lateral Flow tests? Will we be sitting at the same desks, and will there be additional cleaning in place? Will I be in the office on the same days as my team? You must send out clear, detailed information to try and reassure your staff of what to expect. Sales staff will be particularly anxious – the pressure of targets in a new working environment adds another layer of pressure. By giving staff the opportunity to talk about their concerns you can retain your staff and ensure their performance returns to pre-COVID levels."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"Improving the health and wellbeing of our employees is front and centre at Jola, as it is our people and their passion that drives our growth. We put our efforts into training and motivating our team to help them grow with us. It starts with our culture. We are can-do people who strive not only to achieve but exceed our KPIs. We put our customers first and do what we say we are going to do. We recruit against these values. We reward our team for demonstrating these values and we lead by example. We encourage our team to take part in vitality health challenges such as, 'get a free smart watch by exceeding 10,000 steps a day'. We offer discounted gym memberships and share discounts for healthy meal kits. We also provide free access to meditation apps and tools to support positive mental health."



LISA HEWITT
VIRTUAL1

"Organisations have largely focused on providing reactive support to employees, particularly in recent times. However, to maintain and improve upon the momentum we have gained in workplace wellbeing, organisations must flip their focus to preventative measures, such as workload management and identifying burnout. Research shows that creating a listening culture has the biggest impact on engagement and overall business performance. Facilitating holistic one on ones that enable employees to feedback on all elements of workplace wellness and their perceived challenges helps both the employee and the manager understand where attention may need to be redirected before it is too late. Additionally, revisiting leadership behaviours is a must; not only to build on their skills and confidence in having discussions around health and wellbeing, but also to give them confidence in their ability to focus on the new principles of leadership such as empathy, flexibility and more human-centred leadership."



ANTHONY BUXTON
PROMPT VOICE

"Back in February, before the second lock-down, we conducted a survey of all staff to ask how many days a week they wanted to return to the office. 30% said none, 35% said one, 33% said two, and 2% said five days... I was one of those! Consequently, we are completely reconfiguring our offices to be a more welcoming place to come back to, with sofas and coffee machines and we have created better collaboration spaces such as pods and huddle zones. Staff like the flexibility homeworking offers, but it's too early to evaluate the long-term effects on teamwork, mental health, and corporate culture. We feel staff will need to experience the new environment for many months before we decide on the optimum balance. Teams video calls have been brilliant for maintaining working relationships and encouraging staff to video call rather than text chat, has really helped maintain positive morale."



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CAROLINE BAKER
CITYFIBRE

"The health and wellbeing of employees should be a top priority for any organisation. As a business it is so important to ensure we look after the mental and physical wellbeing of all our employees ahead of anything else, and our CEO, Greg Mesch, frequently reminds employees to look after themselves and their families first. At CityFibre, we train Mental Health First Aiders, run lunchtime activities/yoga, promote work/life balance and communicate frequently on this subject. We have also adopted a hybrid approach to working and are flexible on employees either working from home or the office. Business leaders should work closely with their HR and Learning teams to provide relevant skills training, whilst also constantly collecting feedback from employees. By listening and acting with your employees' best interests at heart, positive change and productivity will increase."



ADAM CATHCART
9 GROUP

"Business leaders can support positive mental health within their teams through well timed and considerate communications, management education and by creating clear signposts to professional support. We believe that mental and physical health should be treated with equal importance and aim to create a safe and understanding environment where people can speak openly. We never shy away from the subject. We enjoy a special and unique culture. Our partners often acknowledge this and say that they feel part of it, which is something we're hugely proud of. A positive culture can't be forced or bought, it must be authentic and should be felt right across every area of the business. It can be built through trust, communication and recognition. Our company culture hasn't been diluted by the pandemic, in fact it feels stronger than ever, as we're working more closely and with a common sense of purpose."



AIDAN PIPER
WELCOMM
COMMUNICATIONS

"Throughout the pandemic, something that's remained massively important to us is making sure that we keep connected with our people and our team is engaged in the business. When we talk to our staff, we understand that the meaning of 'wellbeing' and 'connection' is different to each individual – there's no one-size-fits-all approach. That's why we invite mental health experts to speak to our people, plan a staff wellness calendar of events and regularly communicate via a weekly company meeting to ensure updates reach everyone. We recognise that keeping in touch and remaining strong as a team helps us to grow and work together better. We've hosted a number of employee wellbeing events for our staff, customers and social followers to attend. Sharing the insights and knowledge that we learn along the way is something I believe we should all be doing. Don't be afraid to start the conversation!"



DUNCAN WARD
ENREACH

"At Enreach we've focused on improving health and wellbeing even more since the COVID-19 pandemic. We've brought in regular catchups for employees, presented mental health awareness campaigns and asked for complete collaboration from employees when it comes to whether they would be comfortable returning to the office full time. We believe that each employee should be a brand ambassador and that only comes from a positive and healthy workplace environment. By utilising our own technology, we've been able to listen to what our employees want and put a hybrid working policy in place. Communicating with a hybrid workforce has been easy and we've been able to send out regular business updates thanks to our video conferencing platform and instant messaging functions. We put an emphasis on work/life balance and actively encourage employees to use the presence functions on their phones to ensure they're not disturbed when on a break."



AYSHEA ROBERTSON
ZEN INTERNET

"It is essential to recognise the multitude of influences on employee health and wellbeing from both inside and outside the organisation. Boards and business leaders are increasingly aware that fostering healthy wellbeing, can not only help deliver increased productivity, but is also crucial to any talent attraction and retention strategy. Zen takes a holistic approach to health and wellbeing and its strategy addresses six key factors that may affect employee wellbeing: safety, personal health – physical and mental, life factors, working environment, resilience and giving back. Demonstrate a supportive and collaborative approach from the top down so your people understand they have the full support of their colleagues and management, whatever the health or wellbeing challenge is that they may be facing. This type of positive and supportive company culture, with supporting colleagues and managers, leads to engaged people and high performance."



ADAM BINKS
SYSGROUP

"Creating a positive employee culture is what makes SysGroup different. We adopt a holistic approach to health and wellbeing by focusing on employee physical, mental, financial, and social aspects. We've introduced initiatives such as providing access to wellness education support tools, family-friendly policies and enhanced health insurance, pension and life insurance benefits; ensuring our teams are educated to make informed decisions. Throughout the pandemic we listened to our teams and made changes to provide the workplaces they wanted. This saw significant investment in our offices, creating sociable and safe spaces, promoting collaboration and positivity. We're constantly looking at ways to engage and delight our teams, introducing quizzes, competitions, team socials, lunch and learns and book clubs."

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Business model change a

Covid-19 rebound

This year's Comms Vision gold standard conference charts the course of mega market disruptions and against this backdrop you would be wise to focus your strategic priorities on flexibility and evolving business models, writes Diego Tedesco, Commercial and Marketing Director at Comms Vision Platinum sponsor Virgin Media O2 Business.

The last 18 months brought profound change for every business. New needs emerged around remote and hybrid working, as well as the digitalisation of services. Businesses acted boldly to survive and stabilise, investing in cloud services to keep employees together, projects moving and customers served. Now, with the national lockdown behind us, organisations can begin to think about the rebound. They have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build on the extraordinary digital progress achieved, as our study with the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) shows. It found that if UK PLC continues the pace of digital investment, it could add £232 billion to UK GDP. That's roughly equivalent to the current size of Finland or South Africa's economy. Channel partners will be pivotal in enabling businesses to take the bold decisions necessary to grasp this chance to make our economy more prosperous than before the crisis.

But to do so, they need to help customers overcome their agility problems. Fifty seven per cent told us they don't believe that they are currently agile and capable of flexing infrastructure up and down. And 36 say that being locked in protracted contractual discussions with their connectivity partner prevents them from taking bold, swift action in response to market conditions. To give businesses what they need to recover, the channel needs to embed flexibility at the heart of its commercial model and become more strategic in its approach to end customers. Here's how.

Rethink current business models

Ninety four per cent of senior IT managers want to invest in digital services that will boost their operational

flexibility. The appetite is clearly there. Another reason for optimism is the positivity among the channel community. More than 95 per cent of decision makers feel that the channel has maintained its relevance through the pandemic, according to the State of the Channel report. But 56 per cent of respondents rightly feel that the situation is 'rapidly changing'.

And our research suggests channel partners could do more to keep up with the pace of this change, especially when it comes to the way they're setting up their commercial offerings. These simply aren't working for end customers anymore. Forty four per cent of senior IT managers are paying for services they don't need.

And 36 per cent say renegotiating fixed term contracts is preventing them from working more flexibly. The amount of time spent on renewals is also proving problematic. Senior IT managers spend six days every year on negotiations - valuable hours they simply can't afford to give away.

This is worrying because research shows that agile companies - those able to respond quickly to market developments - have outperformed others over the last 18 months, according to McKinsey. So, the channel urgently needs to reconsider its contractual arrangements with end customers, looking specifically at cancellation terms, renewal processes and upfront fees. This is something we've been doing at Virgin Media O2 Business.

We listened to what channel partners and end customers were telling us and concluded it was time to rip up the rulebook. We recently launched

The channel needs to embed flexibility at the heart of its commercial model and become more strategic in its approach to customers

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UltimateFlex, a new contracting mechanism designed to provide the channel community with maximum flexibility. It introduces anytime cancellation, abolishes all installation charges and excess construction costs, and offers benchmarked pricing on installed services, so partners never pay above the market rate.

This involves considerable risk on our part. But we decided the move was necessary to give our partners and their end customers the freedom to take bold, agile decisions. We hope this will inspire our partners to take similar steps and pass on the benefits to end customers. This is an exciting opportunity to free up UK PLCs – letting them take risks and accelerate their digital transformation journey.

Shaking things up can create goodwill among end customers, too. It will allow channel partners to play a more strategic role and turn transactional relationships into long-term partnerships. But what does this strategic role entail?

The strategic role

Fifteen percent say that their channel partner rarely offers strategic consultancy on business issues. And nearly four in ten (39 per cent) would like more advice on the best digital services for their organisations. So, there's room for channel partners to use their expertise and help customers enhance their digital strategies by filling in any knowledge gaps.

To do that, IT solutions providers can help end-customers better understand their requirements when implementing solutions like SD-WAN, IPVPN and DIA. And help them draw on the solutions like optical high

capacity services or 10G National Ethernet services to give them the bandwidth and performance they require.

It can be critically important to select the right underlying connectivity technology that will guarantee performance and longevity - ideally one that can flex as usage and traffic profiles change. As bandwidth requirements grow exponentially and IT environments become increasingly complex, customers need more support understanding and planning their networks.

For example, remote and hybrid working has meant a 148 per cent increase in virtual meetings, a 40 billion rise in emails, and a 66 per cent surge in people working on live documents, according to Microsoft. And online purchases rose by 74 per cent year-on-year in January 2021, reported Capgemini. Business leaders need assurances that their connectivity infrastructure will cope with these changing demands over the long-term. By establishing themselves as strategic consultants and pairing businesses with the right technologies, channel partners can equip their customers for ongoing success.

Looking ahead

We have come through a period of unprecedented uncertainty. In helping end customers survive and stabilise, partners have stepped up to the challenge. But now is the time to help UK PLC recover and prosper, and that requires the channel community to change. By rethinking conventional business models and becoming more strategic in its approach, the channel can play a critical role in adding £232 billion to our economy – and they can set themselves up for success by unlocking new commercial opportunities. ■

It can be critically important to select the right underlying connectivity technology that will guarantee performance and longevity – ideally one that can flex as usage and traffic profiles change

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Climate change: Why it's

step up and adapt

Last month's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report convinces us all that there is an industry debate to be had about climate shifts and how to steer the whole channel towards taking positive remedial steps. Here, Steve Warburton, Managing Director for the Partner Division at Comms Vision Platinum sponsor Zen Internet, challenges the channel and wholesale providers to up their game and grasp the green agenda.

Consumer behaviours are changing, and what's great to see is that they are shifting to brands that are more aligned with their own beliefs and values

The latest IPCC report was damning to say the least. But there was nothing surprising in there. Everyone knows that human impact has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land, but are we as individuals, and as an industry honestly taking this seriously enough? Is there something more our industry needs to understand before we are going to start seeing some real action?

From where I am sitting, the answer is clear. If you think this is not something to be concerned with from a business perspective, or if you are simply too busy to build sustainability into your organisation's strategic objectives, then you really are missing a huge trick. I am calling for the industry to collectively face up to our responsibilities to the environment.

Let us just consider a simple fact from the IPCC report: We will not be able to limit global warming to even 2° Celsius unless there are immediate, rapid and large scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Just take a moment to think about that. Yes, 'large-scale' refers to that huge onus on member nations and the renewable energy policies they put in place and subsequent action to lead the charge. But let's face it, the IPCC has been releasing reports like this since 2007, billions of pounds have been ploughed into efforts and yet the rate of carbonisation has just continued to accelerate. How on earth can that be? And more importantly, what does that mean for our future generations?

Let's forget the 'large scale' reference for now and think in small, tangible, achievable steps. Because humanity needs to step up to this mountainous challenge and it needs our collective help. Can you confidently say that your business is playing its part?

Taking action

At Zen we are investing to ensure that not only can we keep up with required change, but that we can lead the way in our industry by declaring our commitment to becoming Net Zero by 2028. That means not only reducing our own carbon footprint, but also looking at more than just the emissions we're directly responsible for – those created throughout our supply chain such as the manufacture and transport of our routers and the electricity needed to use our broadband.

In our own small way we feel it's our responsibility to set an example. We want to demonstrate we are listening by taking our environmental responsibilities seriously, by doing our part to have a positive impact on people and the planet, showing the industry that there is a better way of doing business. This triple bottom line approach isn't a new concept – it was first introduced by John Elkington back in 1994, whom in 1995 also introduced the 3P formulation of 'people, planet, profits'. It's a tried and tested formula that we are proud to stand behind.

But we're not naïve, this is a big step (granted, a very little one in the grand scheme of things), which

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It's time for the channel to



might not be feasible for many businesses. But let's explore other ways the channel can contribute and why it can also make a lot of business sense.

The prosumer

It's not just our responsibility, but as an organisation it demonstrates leadership and will have an impact on customer engagement and retention. Recent research from the Institute of Customer Service (ICS) found that 'a core group of customers are highly motivated by environmental sustainability in their buying decisions and relationships with organisations'. Consumer behaviours are changing and what's great to see is that they are shifting to brands that are more aligned with their own beliefs and values.

Covid has, if anything, accelerated this with a realisation that reduced travel, for example, can only be a good thing for the environment. According to the ICS research, 18 per cent of customers say the environment is the most important factor in their purchasing decisions, with another 50 per cent stating it is part of the purchasing decision alongside other factors.

In the business world, the green agenda has become a cornerstone of the bid process. When it comes down to two suppliers of equal merit, how do you make that choice? Today, the one that can truly demonstrate real progress towards sustainability will win every time. Every business now has a responsibility to consider sustainability in their procurement process – at Zen as part of our B Corp status our Board of Directors has a legal obligation to!

We are acutely aware that time, budget and resource can be inhibitors to embracing the green agenda. However, small changes can help at least make a start on the journey. We all have to start somewhere. Our own

environmental journey started back in 2008 when we first introduced recycling on site. Since then, we have continued our journey with more achievements each year, from making efforts to reduce our CO₂ emissions (by eight per cent from energy in 2010, for example) to reducing paper usage (by nine per cent in 2010) and increasing our waste recycling targets to 95 per cent back in 2009.

We initiated an LED lighting project in 2011 and made data centre efficiency improvements in 2013. That same year we also signed up to the Government's Ride to Work scheme and reduced paper usage further by introducing electronic payslips. More recently we succeeded in eliminating single use plastic from site and the numbers around that alone are incredible (and not so difficult to implement once you make the commitment). For example, 30,000 plastic water cups were replaced by glasses; plastic drink bottles were replaced with cans and boxes; and we changed our teabag supplier to one that doesn't use plastic in their seal.

While all this hype about reducing your carbon footprint may sound intimidating or a mammoth ask, there are small steps that every business can take today that will make a difference. And in doing so will demonstrate that you too can be aligned with a changing consumer landscape.

Other initiatives we have executed at Zen, for example, that are both cost-effective and attainable include:

- Recycling: Are you doing as much as you can?
- Reduce office paper usage
- Evaluate your office's energy provider and consider switching to green energy tariffs (100 per cent of Zen's electricity has been powered by renewable energy since 2018)
- Replace any traditional light bulbs with LED fittings throughout the office (LEDs now cover approximately 70 per cent of our HQ)
- Carry out an energy efficient assessment of your office
- Review your supply chain – are there any opportunities to partner with an organisation already on that journey?

There is a paradigm shift in consumer behaviours and a real propensity to align with forward thinking, sustainable businesses. For many in the channel and wholesale business, we are not seeing enough of the right behaviour change to address this. While our journey started in 2008 and we have taken many steps, we also recognise that like any business we still have a long way to go to make an even bigger contribution to reducing our impact on the planet.

As an industry, we can surely commit to playing our part by taking small steps towards doing the right thing. Ignore the trends at your peril. If your channel or wholesale business is not demonstrating real action, you will get left behind. And fast. ■

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As an industry, we can surely commit to playing our part by taking small steps towards doing the right thing. Ignore the trends at your peril

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What can we learn from

No matter how large, small or long in the tooth, to thrive in today's fast moving business environment organisations need the flexibility to turn on a sixpence. Here, Peter Proud, founder and CEO of Microsoft tech partner Forrit (who is also a professor of entrepreneurship and an ambassador), discusses how harnessing innovation and agility, and other aspects of start-up operations, can breathe new life into your entrepreneurial spirit.

Just as small businesses can learn from big companies, the reverse is also true. There are many lessons larger businesses can learn from their smaller counterparts which can help with both strategic development and employee retention. Agility is one of the most commonly cited benefits of a start-up. The idea of lean operations and a fast, adaptable work environment makes sense for businesses of all sizes and ages. Lean operations mean trimming the fat and not spending unnecessarily. A fast work environment is one that isn't bogged down by endless meetings and which encourages people to get things done. All businesses should strive for this.



Peter Proud

Agility is also closely tied to flexibility, something that businesses should embrace in all aspects of their operations. For example, we recently hired a graduate apprentice to work as a software developer but found his skills were better suited to processes and procedure. A larger company may have kept him in the developer position, but we adapted his career path based on skill set. He has become a fantastic addition to our security team, but we wouldn't have known that if we kept him in

Staying relevant in a constantly changing business environment requires adapting and learning lessons from even the most unexpected of teachers

his original role. By treating people as individuals, rather than a cog in a machine, you're giving them room to grow. In other words, know the value of your employees, not just their cost.

Develop leaders, not managers

Big companies tend to have managers, not leaders.

Where leaders inspire and make people want to do the best job they can, managers follow blueprints and focus on hitting their own objectives. Start-ups tend to be more collaborative and encourage input from the whole team in the decision making process. This has a number of business benefits, such as increasing employee

engagement and gaining buy-in from those who will be implementing the solution. Questioning management also helps senior staff become more aware of their own limitations and avoids groupthink.

Employees at bigger companies are often scared to question their bosses'

approach, worried it might put their job at risk. However, a transparent, collaborative work environment builds trust among colleagues and should be celebrated.

While some people might be unsure whether they can question the CEO, or any senior manager, I'm always happy to hear opposing



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start-up firms?

viewpoints. After all, leaders have the confidence to be wrong, whereas managers often feel they need to be right in front of everyone.

Tear down the siloes

Similarly, many big companies operate in siloes, with each department focused on their own objectives. While it may seem like it makes sense to let the experts do their jobs without outside influence, it actually isn't ideal for most businesses. When working in siloes, each department will have its own business objectives, and their goals won't necessarily be aligned. Start-ups don't work like this – nor should any business. Talent acquisition is a prime example of why.

Leaders inspire and make people want to do the best job they can, whereas managers follow blueprints

Hiring practices should be driven by the needs of the business, both now and in the future.

Apprenticeships, for instance, are a long-term investment in the company's future and the next generation of talent. I'm a huge champion of apprentices and believe they are a driving force towards closing skills gaps and helping businesses develop a competitive edge.

However, Human Resource and finance departments are more likely to seek a quick turnaround on their investment in people and thus discourage hiring apprentices. The long-term benefits to the business should be weighed against short-term financial gain, but

that's less likely to happen at larger companies.

Look at the bigger picture

Running a business is a long-term initiative, not one that can be broken down into quarters. Yet, many larger companies focus heavily on quarterly reports. This is in part because they need to satisfy shareholders and investors, but also because bigger businesses often fall into a pattern of conservatism and tying their spend and income plans together. For example, if you're having a bad quarter, cutting travel might make sense from a financial perspective. However, on the flip side, spending more face time with clients might be just the

thing you need for business to pick up next quarter. Start-ups will often take this approach. This is because they are fighting for survival rather than focused on their budgets, but their willingness to take risks means they will reap the rewards.

Think small

Business leaders at larger companies may think their

experience means they don't have lessons to learn from newcomers – or that their size means they can't put the lessons into practice. But that's not always true. You don't need massive numbers of employees to come up with great things. You just need the right team. This is especially true when developing new products. The risk of cannibalisation is real, and many businesses find it difficult to put work into creating something new that could go against their existing business model. The original legacy teams might stifle new product development, so setting up a new, small and discreet team would reduce that risk. This is the exception to my aforementioned view on siloed work practices!

Start-ups are less likely to need this approach, as they don't have legacy teams or a long-standing investment in a particular product line. It's a lesson for bigger businesses to look forward rather than focus on how they've spent their time in the past.

It's easy for large companies to maintain the status quo – after all, it's worked for them so far. But staying relevant in a constantly changing business environment requires adapting and learning lessons from even the most unexpected of teachers. ■

Peter Proud in profile...

PRIOR to founding Forrit (a global software business headquartered in Edinburgh), Proud was Managing Director of Strategic Accounts and Partnerships for Accenture Interactive Digital Practice, providing integrated marketing, technology and analytics solutions. Before Accenture he worked at Microsoft for 14 years managing accounts for some of the world's leading household names and played a key role in establishing the One Microsoft initiative. Proud is also an entrepreneurial ambassador for Young Enterprise Scotland and a visiting professor at the University of Strathclyde's Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship.



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Mills leads in cloud



Mike Mills

GAMMA'S Mike Mills has been promoted to Director of Cloud and Infrastructure, a new role within the channel team. Mills joined Gamma in 2007 and has held a variety of sales and leadership roles across its channel and wholesale business units. He was previously Head of the Cloud & Infrastructure Channel responsible for the transformation of Gamma's Carrier Services business unit, and now has overall sales responsibility for Gamma's Cloud and Infrastructure partners as well as Telsis, its contact centre Software business.

Mills said: "When I was

given the opportunity to continue the growth and progression of our interconnect, carrier and service provider partners on a wider scale, it was something that I couldn't turn down. Our relationship with these types of businesses is as important today as it was when we started out in comms nearly 20 years ago. Furthermore, they will prove pivotal as we continue our evolution and growth trajectory over the next five years."

Also on the move...

CITRIX worldwide channel COO Daren Finney has joined Mitel as SVP of Global Channel Sales. At Citrix he was responsible for managing all indirect routes to market while delivering leadership and transformation strategies. His experience also includes leadership positions at Symantec, Lenovo and CA Technologies. Mitel also appointed Carlton Geckler as SVP Global Cloud Operations, Marina de la Torre as VP Customer Success, Mohammed Kasmi as VP Research & Development – Service Delivery, and Virve Virtanen who becomes VP Analyst Relations & Competitive Intelligence. CEO Mary McDowell said: "The addition of such leaders across our organisation is a key part of the strategic investments Mitel is making to elevate our portfolio and position."



Daren Finney

PURE Broadband COO Tony Jopling has stepped into the MD role and aims to double the ISP's growth over the next three years. His prior experience includes a stint at KCOM



Tony Jopling

after spending ten years in the financial sector with NatWest Bank and GE Capital. "Pure Broadband has transformed from being a traditional wireless network provider into a fibre Internet service provider in recent years," he said. "We now aim to extend the reach of our customer base and become a true alternative service provider in Hull." Over the past year Pure Broadband has moved into new offices and kicked off its fibre roll out across nine Yorkshire cities with CityFibre.

TAMWORTH-based Pure Cloud Solutions Managing Director Jamie Lake has taken the CEO role. He joined the business as an apprentice nine years ago. "My journey has been all-encompassing. I have worked my way up through all parts of the business which has given me the foundations to get to where I am today. There are two main objectives: To standardise processes and drive growth to become a recognised MSP within the midlands." The move sees Darren Lake become Group Chairman.

ECI Telecom President and CEO Darryl Edwards has joined LivingBridge-backed M247 as chief executive, taking over from Jenny Davies. Edwards is credited with leading the transformation of ECI Telecom and subsequent sale to Ribbon Communications. Andy Leitch, CFO and Interim CEO, said: "Darryl has a strong executive background in international telecoms and has been working for the last 10 years at executive level within private equity owned businesses."

Commsworld pulls in Wood

COMMSWORLD'S sales focus has sharpened and broadened with the appointment of Steve Wood as Group Sales Manager. He brings over 27 years experience working in the UK and European markets



Steve Wood

across many sectors including IT and telecoms, corporate enterprise, utilities, finance and the public sector. His previous roles include 13 years at SSE Enterprise Telecoms where he became Head of Energy and Utility Sales, and senior positions at Bottomline Technologies and AGFA Photo.

Wood said: "Commsworld is now a recognised name across the UK and has an impressive client list in the public and private sectors. I aim to grow its presence throughout the country and across a wider range of markets and sectors."

CEO Charles Quinn added: "Steve's experience and acumen will be a huge asset to our sales team as we look to turn our UK-wide growth and development plans into reality."

Zen completes line up of top directors

ZEN Internet's bid to double revenues to £200m over the next five years received a boost following a revamp of its senior executive team that sees Partner Division MD Steve Warburton also assume responsibility for Zen Retail. Former TalkTalk Director of Customer Service Dean Burdon takes the newly created role of Customer Experience Director; while two more new roles have been filled by the promotion of employees Dave Barber and Paul Sinclair to Portfolio Management Director and Marketing Director respectively.

CEO Paul Stobart said: "We have a five year plan to drive growth across ultrafast, cloud and communications, and promoting two senior managers to the Executive Committee demonstrates the emphasis we place on developing internal talent. Where appropriate we will continue to bring in fresh talent to give the team additional bench strength."



Steve Warburton

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